Xiangye was located at the heart of a ‘green zone’. All kinds of edible plants and fruits grew in the wild and all kinds of vegetables grew in the gardens, all year round. The surrounding hillsides and valleys were covered with terraced rice paddies, which in turn were full of fish, like the nearby Langdong river. All over the village there were clusters of barns for storing rice. Compared with neighbouring settlements, life in Xiangye was relatively comfortable. No one worried about the basic necessities of food and clothing.

Orphans and widows were cared for, the poor had their needs provided and any who had fallen on difficult times were supported by others. Although there were differences in wealth, these were not glaring. Although there was exploitation by landlords, the villagers were not compelled to work the landlords’ fields. Individual rights were honoured, irrespective of status in the village. People were slow to offend one another and instead there was a mutual respect, as people depended on one another for survival. One consequence of this caring community was that no one from Xiangye made a living by begging. Indeed, beggars were referred to as ‘Gax goul’, where ‘Gax’ is the word for ‘Han person’ and ‘goul’ is the word for ‘beg’.

In those days an old Han woman frequently came to Xiangye to beg for food. At Chinese New Year, outsiders often came to beg for glutinous rice cakes. They were all called ‘Gax goul’. Only people from other nationalities begged for food.

The Kam people of Xiangye used to say that no matter what happened they would not allow people from their own families to beg. This was a strong taboo inherited from previous generations. If any family chose to ignore or violate it, others looked down on them and they were stigmatized. The young men from their households were not able to marry anyone from the village and their young women were not chosen as brides.
Cloth hanging out to dry around an unsupervised fish pond.