My wife and I began working with Professor Ou Chaoquan in the year 1998, after we had entered an agreement to co-author a book about the Kam people of China, together with three other Kam professors. We found Professor Ou to be meticulous, accurate and enthusiastic.

Only after the book had been published in 2003, did the subject of Professor Ou’s personal history begin to emerge in the course of private conversation. I remember a sense of astonishment upon hearing that his academic career had been interrupted for 14 years while he served a term of hard physical labour. At the time of writing he is 77 years of age and still making up for those lost years.

Three years ago Professor Ou embarked on this project to ‘tell the truth’ about 1930s and 1940s life in Xiangye, while omitting to retell certain aspects of the Kam culture story that had been sufficiently detailed in our earlier book.

Such a commitment to ‘the whole story’ has usually not been embraced here in China. To some here it still feels threatening, for example, to discuss in writing the exploitation of the Kam by the Han in the 1930s and 1940s. Most people in China understand that such exploitation occurred,¹ but the thought is that discussing it in print will only serve to endanger relations between nationalities.

¹ Blum (2001, pp. 61–62), commenting on the relations between Han and minorities, throws some light on typical perceptions among the Han: “A saying attributed to the Miao is this: ‘Shi bu neng dang zhentou, Han ren bu neng zuo pengyou’ (A stone can’t be a pillow, a Han can’t be a friend) (Dreyer 1976:108). Han hearing such an expression explain it as having arisen during periods of harsh policy and excessive da Hanzu zhuyi ([great] Han chauvinism). In general, all Han I spoke with, except a few who work exclusively with minorities, expressed incredulity at the ingratitude of minorities toward Han or certainty that the minorities admire the Han. Yet people were aware of ‘hatred’ and the need to ‘maintain distance’ between Han and other nationalities,
In writing this book, Professor Ou has adopted a mainly objective stance, endeavouring to write with the integrity he learned in the discipline of anthropology. In doing so, he has described in writing some of the injustices that happened in Xiangye two or three generations ago. It is hoped that such description will help rather than hinder nationality relations, by frankly acknowledging tensions in the past with the hope that such tensions will not persist or be repeated. Indirectly the book points away from the discord and towards the relative harmony that currently characterizes the relations between the Kam and the Han, and has traditionally prevailed within the Kam nationality itself.

The book leaves one with a sense of the special staying power, dignity and grace of the Kam people. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, the tsunami of globalization is surging over paddy fields into the Kam villages. Cultural foundations are being tested to the limit. Three generations from now, will the people of Xiangye still speak in Kam? Maybe it was because we arrived safely before sunset, thereby accomplishing our first goal and feeling a corresponding sense of satisfaction. We had travelled 12 hours that day—13th August 2006—to reach our destination, having set off from Rongjiang county town. (I was accompanied on the trip by a Kam colleague from the standard Kam speaking area, Mr Wei Peilei.) The sun was still shining when we arrived. A few people were already sitting around at the entrances to their homes, in anticipation of an evening at home, having finished their work in the fields. Most were busy with routine early evening activities. My feet were sore where the wet plastic sandals rubbed against the ankles and toes, after crossing through rivers and streams 20 times to reach the village.

even though they knew the official line about all fifty-six nationalities belonging to a happy family.”

Writing of the impact on Chinese nationalities of globalisation in general and tourism in particular, Mackerras (2003, p. 180) observes: ‘Tourism is likely to increase in the ethnic areas, as more and more of them become alive to the potential profits Han or foreign visitors bring. At least some ethnic societies will become more modern, undergoing the wide-ranging and sometimes contradictory social, cultural and economic implications of modernisation. Some ethnic cultures will weaken or even die under this impact. However, the stronger ones will survive or even get stronger as people turn to their own traditions as a way of demonstrating difference.’