

Language and Culture: A Mien Refugee Perspective

by Eric Crystal

Tribal Cultures of Southeast Asia

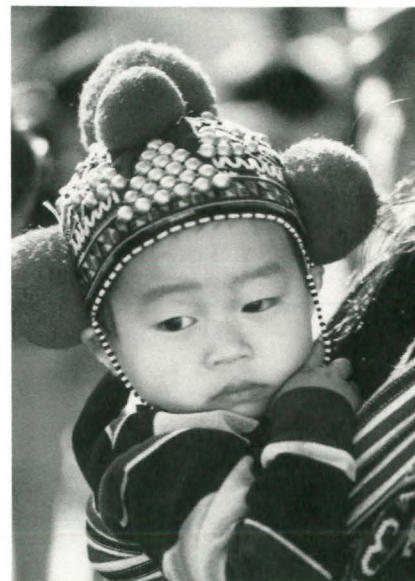
Throughout Southeast Asia the coasts and fertile plains are peopled by large ethnic groups that make up the majority populations of the nation states. These lowland peoples have been influenced by the world religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity and have been connected by trade, cultural exchange, and political relationships with distant nations and cultures for many centuries. By contrast, the peoples in the mountain hinterlands are divided into many distinct ethnic groups, who speak a plethora of mutually unintelligible languages and must struggle to preserve their ethnic identity in the face of cultural and political pressures from the more powerful and numerous peoples of the plains. One of the hundred-plus minority peoples of mainland Southeast Asia are the Iu Mien, 8,000 of whom have come to settle in the western United States in recent years. The Mien must confront language issues and challenges as they look toward a new future in the United States.

Mien Odyssey

Known in ethnographic literature as the Yao or Man, more than 2.5 million Mien currently live in East and Southeast Asia. Mien communities on the periphery of Han Chinese civilization have been noted in Chinese annals for more than a thousand years, and today they are a major minority in China. Mien villagers were pushed into northern Laos, Burma, and Vietnam in the last decades of the Ching dynasty as imperial forces dislodged them from their fertile fields in the vicinity of Mengla in Yunnan province. Mien communities of considerable size grew up in Nam Tha and Muong Sing in northwestern Laos as forced migrations from southern China increased with unsettled conditions at the turn of the century. The Mien population of Laos has been estimated at 50,000 in 1975.

For most of their existence, the Mien have selectively absorbed certain aspects of Chinese culture while successfully maintaining their own distinct ethnic identity. The Mien are the only tribal group in Southeast Asia to have absorbed Chinese writing into their ritual system. Mien religion consists of a complex system of beliefs and ritual practices termed *Ley Nyey*. The Mien priest or *sai kung* must be able to read Mien sacred books written in Chinese characters. Composing with brush and inkstone, Mien priests oftentimes dispatch letters to the spirit world, burning them together with bundles of ersatz paper money in the belief that the essence of such offerings will be absorbed by attentive ancestral spirits.

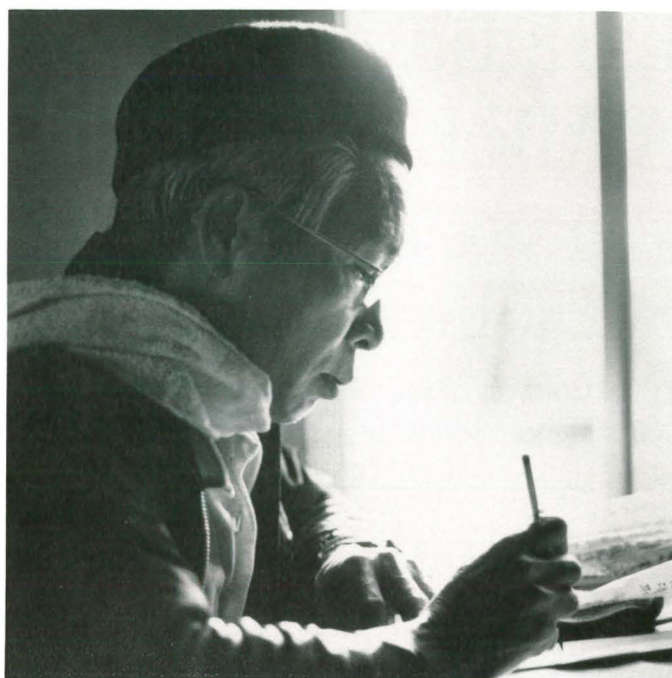
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Infant Ey Choy Saepan is photographed with traditional baby cap in mother's traditional baby carrier. Oakland, California. Photo by Eric Crystal, 1983



A first generation of Mien female literacy in the United States. Fuey Sio Sae Chao reviews her English language homework shortly after completing a year of study in Oakland, California. Photo by Eric Crystal, 1981



A Mien priest reviews a ritual text shortly before commencing a funeral ceremony in Oakland, California. Photo by Eric Crystal, 1982

In traditional Mien society only a limited number of the brightest and most privileged young men were admitted to Chinese language classes. Their fathers would pool resources to invite a Chinese language teacher to live in the village and instruct in a school specially built for him. Mien women were never included among the Mien literati. Indeed, the patrilineal structure of Mien society reinforced an extraordinarily rigid bifurcation of male and female roles, competencies, and world views. The world of Mien women in traditional society was very much a pre-literate world. The community thus trained and nurtured a restricted core of priests and village leaders able to write Mien language with Chinese characters. The majority of adult males and all of the women in Mien society remained illiterate through the centuries, exposed neither to formal Chinese literacy training nor to vernacular language instruction in distant government schools.

Unique among the highland peoples of northern Laos, the Mien nurtured a written tradition, one that they turned to their own ethnic advantage. The Mien indeed aver that one of their ancestors invented Chinese characters, only to have the precious gift stolen by an evil Chinese nobleman who then exiled them to the hills and badlands bordering the empire. The Mien made great efforts to ensure that the tradition of writing would never be lost, and sacred books and some vernacular texts have played a significant role in their traditional village life.

Between 1890 and 1963 the Mien developed prosperous village farming communities in northwestern Laos. Meticulous gardeners and farmers, Mien soon became renowned as successful entrepreneurs, traders, and dealers in agricultural produce. Mien communities became relatively wealthy judged by the standards of living and accomplishments of other surrounding ethnic minority groups. Yet, access to schools, hospitals, and other government services was highly restricted for most Mien. Mien villages were economically vital, largely self-sufficient in foodstuffs and insular in terms of the

maintenance of ethnic written, spoken, and sung language arts.

Mien and the War in Southeast Asia

In the late 1950s, as competing forces sought control over the newly independent nation of Laos, American agents contacted the Mien and trained them to carry out reconnaissance missions to the Chinese border and on into Yunnan. Employed first to monitor communications and troop movements, the Mien were later armed by the U.S., and engagements with Pathet Lao and Chinese troops became commonplace, as the Mien sought to defend their new homeland. In 1963 scores of helicopters arrived to escort infants and older people in what was to be a temporary evacuation of the Mien homeland in Nam Tha. Able-bodied adults and children walked for weeks to relocation sites in the foothills. Allied forces promised their loyal Mien irregulars that the evacuation would be short lived, that they would be able to return to their fields and homes in a few short months, and that the offensive of the communist forces in the area would be blunted and finally defeated. As events would have it, the Mien were forced to live in foothills near the banks of the Mekong River in the vicinity of Hwei Oh and Houei Sai for another decade as the war in Laos raged on through 1973.

Mien Language and Culture in America

Today more than half of the Mien who lived in Laos before 1975 have fled, with nearly twenty percent resettling in America. Only one Mien village remains in Nam Tha, wracked by malaria and other diseases. Pathet Lao soldiers currently block the few Mien remaining in their mountain homeland from leaving for more hospitable regions. Between eight and nine thousand Mien have been resettled in the United States; almost all live on the West Coast, primarily in northern California. Perhaps the most traditional Indochinese group to have resettled in America, the Mien continue to practice their indigenous religion, sustain their rich written and oral traditions, and maintain daily vernacular language use within their homes. Among those here are priests, herbal doctors, massage experts, bards, and storytellers. Oftentimes Mien women will record stories of life in America in rhymed verse (*pao dzung*) and send such sung messages back to friends and relatives in Thai refugee camps via audio cassette.

The Mien are a small, little-known minority within the larger Southeast Asian refugee minority community in America. Their rich ceremonial, textual, and oral traditions continue to flourish within individual households, persisting in almost total isolation from the host society, nearby schools, and social service institutions. California school districts oftentimes ignore linguistic fact and promote the fiction that Mien is but a dialect of Lao, a totally unrelated language. Yet their new homeland offers opportunities as well: Mien females have gained access to literacy almost overnight thanks to the dedicated efforts of adult educators and equal access to public education.

Mien religion continues to be practiced by most Mien families in California. An aging generation of unacculturated religious and community leaders is concerned about the recruitment of a new

generation of Mien boys to master the Chinese writing and ritual performance skills required if Mien religion is to survive. Elders are also concerned about the social changes their families face: Mien youngsters growing up in America share little of the mountain village tradition in which their parents have been immersed. Parents can give little direction to their children and oftentimes must depend on them to serve as translators and cultural brokers in an alien American urban society. In such circumstances the belief systems, values, and aspirations of parents, whose world view was shaped by life in remote mountain villages, differ sharply from those of their children growing up in an urban American environment.

In the mountains of Laos, language is the most important ethnic marker maintained by tribal peoples such as the Mien. Among Mien in the U.S., language identifies and solidifies the group, strengthens an ancient ceremonial system, and flourishes as a refined oral literature. Verbal dueling between representatives of the bride and groom continues to enliven Mien weddings in the United States. Yet the persistence of these traditions also reflects the current cultural isolation of the Mien from the larger communities in which they have come to settle.

That isolation can best be bridged by education, both of Mien and of their American neighbors. The Mien language merits recognition as a separate language, especially in California districts where Mien students with limited English proficiency form a sizable classroom minority. Schools and academic research institutions can be of immeasurable value in encouraging a new generation of Mien youth to value and respect their cultural traditions. Unique opportunities exist for non-Mien students of Southeast Asian language and culture to collaborate in research with Mien community members. Possibly the time will not be too distant when Mien youngsters educated in the United States will be able to visit, converse, and work together on research and community development projects with relatives and friends in the mountains of Southeast Asia.

There is every indication that Mien vernacular language (*Mien-wa*) will continue to be used for several generations in America. A new element in multi-cultural American life, the Mien contribute ancient craft skills in embroidery and silver jewelry fabrication, a rich religious tradition, and a complex language replete with refined oral literature and singular written sacred texts. Only time will tell whether this small, isolated, proud group of migrants from the mountain hinterlands of Southeast Asia will be able to preserve its distinct cultural heritage in the context of late 20th century American life.

Suggested readings

- Butler Diaz, Jacqueline. *Yao Design of Northern Thailand*. Bangkok: Siam Society, 1981.
 Campbell, Margaret. *From the Hands of the Hills*. Hong Kong: Media Transasia, 1981.
 Knoll, Patricia. *Becoming American*. Portland: Coast to Coast Books, 1982.
 Lemoine, Jacques. *Yao Ceremonial Paintings*. Bangkok: White Lotus Ltd., 1984.
 Lewis, P. and E. *Hill Tribes of the Golden Triangle*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.

Suggested videotape

- A Hill Tribe in West Oakland*, by A. Nomura and E. and C. Crystal. Video/film. 4106 West Jefferson Blvd., Los Angeles, California 90016.