

## **Miao or Hmong?**

**by Joakim Enwall**

Professor of Chinese, Department of Linguistics and Philology, Uppsala University

### **Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter, Number 17, June 1992**

---

*This NEWSLETTER is edited by Scott Bamber and published in the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies. Material in this NEWSLETTER may be freely reproduced with due acknowledgement. Correspondence is welcome and contributions will be given sympathetic consideration. (All correspondence to The Editor, Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, ANU, PO Box 4, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia.)*

---

Two terms, Miao and Hmong, are both currently used to refer to one of the aboriginal peoples of China. They live mainly in southern China, in the provinces of Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Sichuan, Guangxi and Hubei. According to the 1989 census, their number in China was estimated to be about 7 million. Outside China they live in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Burma, due to migrations starting in the 18th century, and also in the United States, French Guyana and Australia, as a result of recent migrations in the aftermath of the Indochinese wars. Altogether there are approximately 8 million speakers of the language. This language, which consists of 30-40 mutually unintelligible dialects, belongs, together with the Bunu language, to the Miao branch of the Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien) language family.

The term Miao was first used by the Chinese in pre-Qin times, i.e. before 221 B.C., for designating non-Chinese groups in the south. It was often used in the combinations 'miaomin', 'youmiao' and 'sanmiao'. At that time the people lived in the Yangtze valley, but later they were forced by the Chinese to move further southwards. During the Tang (613-907 A.D.) and Song dynasties (960-1279 A.C.) the term 'nanman' was used for the same peoples. However, the name 'miao' reappeared in Fan Chuo's book on the southern tribes, Manshu (862 A.D.). During the

Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911) 'miao' and 'man' were both used, the second possibly to designate the Yao people.<sup>1</sup>

Western researchers do not treat the terminological problems in a uniform way. Early writers used Chinese-based names in various transcriptions: Miao, Miao-tse, Miao-tsze, Meau, Meo, mo, miao-tseu etc., but due to the influence of the Hmong of Laos (a sub-group of the Miao people) some contemporary researchers have adopted another terminology. Judith Wheaton Fuller, in her Ph.D. dissertation, defines the Miao language as 'the hmongic (Miao) branch of the Miao-Yao language family'.<sup>2</sup> William A. Smalley uses the term Miao for the Miao of China, while using the term Hmong (1) as a general term for the entire people, and (2) as a specific term for the speakers of the Hmong dialect spoken by one part of the Miao in China and by almost all Miao outside China.<sup>3</sup> This results in statements like 'In the eighteenth century antagonism between the Miao peoples and ethnic Chinese came to a head as some Hmong revolted against steady Chinese incursion into the areas where they lived,...'. I, at least, find this a bit confusing.

The Miao themselves use various self-designations and the Chinese traditionally classified them according to the most characteristic colour of the women's clothes. The list below contains the self-designations, the colour designations and the main regions inhabited by the four major groups of Miao in China:

- 🌺 Ghao Xong, Red Miao west Hunan.
- 🌺 Hmu, Gha Ne (Ka Nao), Black Miao southeast Guizhou.
- 🌺 A Hmao, Big Flowery Miao northwest Guizhou and northeast Yunnan.
- 🌺 Hmong, White Miao, Green (Blue) Miao, Small Flowery Miao south Sichuan, west Guizhou and south Yunnan.

Thus only one group out of four uses the term Hmong. Furthermore, it is only this group which has speakers living outside China. It is these non-Chinese Hmong who advocate that the term Hmong be used not only for designating their dialect group, but also for the other groups living in China. They generally claim that the word Miao is a derogatory term which should not be used at all. Instead the term Hmong is to be used to designate all groups of the people.<sup>4</sup> I do not agree, however, and maintain that this is a result of confusing denotation with connotation. Dr Yang

Dao writes: 'These [Chinese] invaders gave to the Hmong the appellation "Miao", which later became "Meo" and which means "barbarian" - an expression formerly used, in Europe, by the Romans to designate other peoples.'<sup>5</sup> This meaning is not found in any dictionary available to me. The word 'miao' has been taken over by other peoples in southeast Asia, Vietnamese, Lao, Thai etc. in the form Meo. Though many of the speakers of those languages (and of Chinese) undoubtedly consider the Miao to be barbarians, this by no means proves that the word itself has that denotation. It is, of course, also possible that the speakers of Lao, Thai and Vietnamese, who have taken over the word 'miao' from Chinese, have lost the original meaning 'seedling' and use it only to designate a people whom they consider to be barbarian. If pronounced with the wrong tone in Thai the word means 'cat'. This might explain the strong resentment against the term 'miao' among the Hmong groups in southeast Asia.

In China, however, the situation is different for two main reasons. The Miao groups have different self-designations and only a small proportion use the word Hmong. The rest have no feeling that Hmong is in any way preferable to Miao as a common designator. Since the official classification of the minorities in the 1950s some minority groups have complained about the word used in Chinese to designate them and have asked for the government to change the official usage. The Miao groups of China have, to my knowledge, voiced no such concern. The second reason is purely pragmatic: it is impossible to introduce the word 'hmong' into Chinese as this syllable does not exist in the Chinese language. As a matter of fact, this is also the case for the English language, as few speakers are able to pronounce an unvoiced nasal. However, in English, unlike Chinese, it is at least possible to write the word Hmong.

Many Hmong living in the West believe that every people should have the right to choose their own self-designation in other languages. At first this policy might seem reasonable, but it would result in numerous problems of spelling and pronunciation if implemented universally. What about 'Kartveli' for 'Georgian', 'Shqiptar' for 'Albanian', 'Euskaldun' for 'Basque', 'Deutsch' for 'German' etc. etc.?

I propose that the term Hmong be used only for designating the Miao groups speaking the Hmong dialect in China and for the Miao outside China. This usage is by now well established in Western literature. However, I think that it is best to use Miao as a general term, especially as

this is in accord with tradition and is also practical for making the situation clear to persons not specialising in Miaology. Many persons have already been confused by the present terminological state and see no connection between the Hmong and the Miao. There is perhaps not much that can be done about this now, but I hope that some people will understand the relation between the words Miao and Hmong better, if they are used in a more logical way.

To my Miao friends I just want to say that the basic meaning of the word 'miao' in Chinese is 'young plant', which in an agrarian culture is certainly a more positive concept than that of a 'swede' in the western world.

1 For a detailed discussion on the terminology see Ruey Yih-fu, 'A Study of the Miao People', in Historical, Archaeological and Linguistic Studies on Southern China, South-East Asia and the Hong Kong Region, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 1967, (p. 49-58) [Chinese in original omitted.ed.]

2 Fuller, Judith Wheaton, Topic and Comment in Hmong, Indiana University Linguistics Club, May 1988 [Ph.D. diss. 1985]. This usage also appears in David Strecker's preface to vol. 10.2 of Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area, Fall 1987, a volume dedicated entirely to the Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao) language family.

3 Smalley, William A., Chia Koua Vang and Gnia Yee Yang, Mother of Writing, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1990. (p.3).

4 Yang Dao, personal communication.

5 Yang Dao, 'Why did the Hmong Leave Laos?' in: Bruce T. Downing and Douglas P. Olney (eds.), The Hmong in the West, University of Minnesota, 1982. (p.6).

[http://www.miaoupg.com/miao\\_or\\_hmong.htm](http://www.miaoupg.com/miao_or_hmong.htm)