

THE MONG (GREEN MIAO) AND THEIR LANGUAGE: A BRIEF COMPENDIUM

THOMAS AMIS LYMAN

PROFESSOR EMERITUS, CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY, BANGKOK

Ethnos and tribe. The Mong Njua (Green Mong)¹ people are also known as the "Green Miao" or "Green Meo." The name Miao is derived from Chinese, while the Thai, Yon (Kam Myang), Lao, and Vietnamese equivalent is Meo. The group under study, however, now prefers to use its own ethnic name Mong to which a descriptive term is added to designate the particular branch of the Mong population. The foregoing statement is to be taken as also referring to the cognate tribal name Hmong ("White Miao") by which the more newsworthy linguistic cousins of the Mong are known. For the sake of convenience, the term Mong will usually be employed in the present description as a shortening for Green Mong. Note: The Mong Njua in China are referred to by the Chinese as the "Hong T'ou Miao" (Red-Headed Miao).

The Mong/Hmong constitute a sub-division of the overall ethnic and linguistic stock known in anthropological and sinological circles as Miao. This group numbers over three million persons and inhabits the mountainous regions of south-western China, northern Vietnam, the Shan State of Burma, northern Thailand, and Laos. The Miao are divided by linguistic and cultural differences into a number of sub-groups (or "tribes") whose names often derive from the color or pattern of their women's garments, e.g. Black Miao, Striped Miao, Banded-Sleeve Miao, etc. (Cf. also Green Miao and White Miao above.) The Mong Njua sub-group may be found in any of the countries and areas mentioned above.

Mong linguistic relationships. The Mong Njua (Mong Leng), otherwise known simply as *Mong*, constitute a Southeast Asian minority population linguistically akin to but distinct from the Hmong Daw or *Hmong*. The languages of these two groups are as closely related as Spanish to Portuguese. Most lexical items in Mong and Hmong exhibit a workable cognate resemblance. Phrases and idioms in the two languages follow the same structural order. Mong (as a sub-classification of Miao) is—in the author's opinion—not related to either Chinese or Tai. In 1954, Haudricourt established the Miao-Yao family of languages. The linguistic position of Miao-Yao is, however, a bit puzzling. Strecker (1986), using the label Hmong-Mien, opines that the solution to the puzzle depends on either

(1) Benedict's view that Hmong-Mien is a branch of the Austro-Tai family so that the similarities to Chinese are due to borrowing (Benedict 1975), or (2) the traditional view that Hmong-Mien is a branch of the Sino-Tibetan family and thus genetically related to Chinese (Chen and Li 1981, Wang 1986).

Description of the Mong language. When I first began field-work with the Mong,² what struck me as of extreme linguistic interest were:

- (1) The seven phonemic tones, e.g. high "wailing" [453]; high rising [35]; middle level [33:]; lower level [22]; full falling [51]; low "breathy" [11: +f]; falling-rising glottalized [214: + ?]. (I use the numerical system of Dr. Y.R. Chao.)
- (2) Prenasalization of all voiced stops and at times of aspirate unvoiced stops, e.g. [mbua] 'pig'; [mphlai] 'finger-ring'.
- (3) Phonemic contrast between aspiration and unaspiration of unvoiced stops, e.g. *khaab* 'to be immense' versus *kaab*³ 'insect'.

The minimum words of Mong are predominantly monosyllabic, but unanalyzable polysyllabic words also occur. Monosyllabic roots conform to set canonical forms: basically CV roots where C is taken to include consonant clusters and final-*ng* as nasalization of V. Morphology is restricted to derivation by compounding, reduplication, phonetic modification (consonantic, vocalic, and tonal), and prefixation (only *two* noun prefixes, however, having been observed). The Mong language is non-inflective. Syntax is like English with the favorite sentence type running as follows: subject—verb—object. In Mong attributive constructions, on the other hand, the head always precedes the attribute with the exception of "genitive" groupings.

Examples of the foregoing are given below.

- (1) Compounding:

tsev muv bee-hive. (<tsev 'house' + muv 'bee')

(2) Reduplication:

ab.ab red-breasted parakeet.

ntxub. ntxaug to hate with a passion. (<ntxub 'to dislike')

(3) Phonetic modification:

a. consonantic

txhuam to rub, brush, clean (by brushing).

ntxhua to scrub (clothing only).

ntxuav to wash (anything except clothing).

b. vocalic

ntxuaj to fan.

ntxaij (a) fan.

c. tonal

tua to kill.

tuag to die; be dead.

(4) Prefixation:

nam-dlaav eagle. (<nam- 'augmentative prefix' + *dlaav* 'generic term for birds belonging to the Order *Falconiformes*')

miv-havtixv lake. (< *miv*- 'diminutive prefix' + *havtixiv* 'large expanse of water')

(5) Favorite sentence type:

tshws noj nqaj The cat eats meat. (< *tshws* 'cat'—noj 'to eat'—*nqaj* 'meat')

(6) Attributive construction:

dlev dlub black dog. (< *dlev* 'dog', head + *dlub* 'black', attribute)

(7) "Genitive" groupings:

(These allow for the potential insertion of a classifier⁴ or the particle *le*⁵.)

hluas.nkauj dlev the girl's dog. (<*hluas.nkauj* 'young unmarried girl' + *dlev* 'dog')

hluas.nkauj tug dlev id. (<*tug* 'classifier')

hluas.nkauj le dlev id. (<*le* 'possessive particle')

(8) Contrast examples between (6.) and (7.):

nyaj melika American silver. (<*nyaj* 'silver; money' + *melika* 'American; American person')

melika nyaj American money. (lit. "the Americans' money")

The seven tones in Mong very probably hark back to the eight tones of Ancient Chinese but note that the phonetic realizations within the Mong tonal system are "hit-or-miss" when compared to those of any modern Chinese dialect. Furthermore, the tonal system of Mong cannot be readily classified as either REGISTER or CONTOUR. (See Kenneth L. Pike, *Tone Languages*, University of Michigan Press, 1957, pp. 5-11.) It should be pointed out as contrast that Cantonese has basically six (phonemic) tones, Yon (Kam Myang) six, Thai (Siamese) five, Bangkok Swatow (Taechiu) five (reckoned phonemi-

cally), Peking Mandarin four, Mazatec four (four levels), Mixtec three (three levels), and Navaho and Apache only two (two levels).

A minimal contrastive series for the seven Mong tones is here given.⁶ (The consonants and vowels are held constant.) See the top of column two, p. 63.

naab	snake. [*53]
naav	to put on (clothing). [35]
-naa	(in <i>tswnaa</i> tattered and torn (of cloth or paper). [33 :])
naas	purse, wallet. [22]
naaj	Naan, name of a Thai city. [51]
naag	rain. [11: +ʔ]
naam	rat, mouse. [214 : +ʔ]

The metaphors in Mong are of particular interest.

Examples:

- (1) nam-dlej river (lit. "mother of waters").
- (2) paaj tawg flame (lit. "fire-flower").
- (3) zaaj haus dlej rainbow (lit. "The Great Serpent is drinking water.").

Mong demography. Population figures for Mong/Hmong speakers are here given: Thailand: 60,000; Laos: 200,000; Vietnam: 500,000; Burma: circa 70,000; Mainland China: 800,000; USA: 100,000. Of these, almost half are monolinguals.

History of the Mong. In extremely ancient times when the Han people came down from Siberia, they found the ancestors of the Mong, i.e. the Miao, as the inhabitants of the area now known as China. Gradually, throughout the centuries, the Han forced the Miao—constantly fighting—ever southward and ever up into isolated mountain areas. Oftentimes the Miao non-combatants and prisoners were slaughtered wholesale by the Han in an early attempt at "genocide." It is said that the major reason for the initial military successes of the Chinese was that they alone possessed the *horse*. Finally, in comparatively recent times, the various tribes belonging to the Miao stock (including the Mong) had to retreat into the countries of mainland Southeast Asia. Of course, they always lived in the mountains, thus keeping themselves from being culturally absorbed. It should be emphasized that, although better off than in China, the Mong/Hmong tribesmen were not treated very nicely by the people of the Southeast Asian host nations who regarded them as "lesser breeds without the law."⁷

The Mong/Hmong population in Laos was at one time estimated at about 300,000. The combined ethnic group helped the United States during the Indo-China War and was welded into a loyal and brave fighting force. It became known as "America's Secret Army." When the communist Pathet Lao won in 1975, the Mong/Hmong people had to flee for their lives. There are now over 100,000 Mong/Hmong refugees in the United States.

The majority of published works convey a biased picture of the Mong/Hmong people, giving the impression that they are merely simple mountain folk living on a comparatively low cultural level. In reality, however, Mong/Hmong culture

is highly complex, since these two groups have great adaptability and readily assimilate foreign cultural elements depending upon the environment and surrounding ethnic contacts.

ENDNOTES

1. I am indebted to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the American Philosophical Society for generous research grants which enabled me to carry out field-work in the Mong Njua (Green Miao) areas of Naan Province, Thailand from 1962-1965 and 1966-1967.

There is some argument among South-east Asian specialists as to whether to translate the ethnic label Mong Njua as "Green Miao" or "Blue Miao". The American missionaries adopted the latter name. Actually the word for 'blue' in Mong is *yimlaaj* (*yilang*) while *ntsuaab* (*njúa*) very definitely means 'green' in contrast to 'blue'. For lengthy comments on this, see T.A. Lyman, 1988, THE "FREE MONG": AN END TO A CONTROVERSY, *Anthropological Linguistics*, 30.1 Spring: 128-132, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

2. Among my many Mong Njua informants, the most important and the man to

whom I owe the most thanks is Mr. Djoua X. Xiong (Xeev Nruag Xyooj) who prefers the alternate ethnic name Mong Leng (moob leeg). Mr. Xiong graduated from a French lycée in Laos, speaks fluent English, and now resides in Illinois where he is head of Mong Volunteer Literacy, Inc., P. O. Box 56, Winfield, Illinois 60190. Djoua Xiong has rendered me invaluable assistance in the matter of Mong-English translation. He is also the co-author of an English-Mong-English dictionary. (See Bibliography.)

3. The Mong Njua (Green Miao) orthography used in this paper is that employed by the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF). It was invented by Dr. J. Linwood Barney during field-work in Laos in the 1950's. Examples of this usage as applied to Hmong (White Miao) are presented in Ernest E. Heimbach's dictionary. (See Bibliography.)

4. For a linguistic description of the Mong word-class here referred to as "classifier," see

the definition of "selector" given by T.A. Lyman, *Grammar of Mong Njua (Green Miao): A Descriptive Linguistic Study*, The Blue Oak Press, Sattley, California, 1979, pp. 20-22 and 94-100.

5. For a detailed analysis of the structural and semantic uses of this Mong particle, see T.A. Lyman, "The Particle *le* In Green Miao," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 133, Heft 2: 353-362, Wiesbaden, 1983.

6. For further examples of tonal contrast, see T.A. Lyman, *Dictionary of Mong Njua: A Miao (Meo) Language of Southeast Asia*, Mouton and Company, The Hague and Paris, 1974, pp. 38-39.

7. See F.M. Savina, *Histoire des Miao*, Imprimerie de la Société des Missions Etrangères, Hong Kong, 1930.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BENEDICT, PAUL K. 1975.

Austro-Thai Language and Culture. HRAF Press.

CHEN QIGUANG and LI YONGSUI. 1981.

"Hanyu Miao-Yaoyu Tongyuan Lizheng (Some Examples of the Genetic Affinity Between Han and Miao-Yao)." *Minzu Yuwen* 1981: 2: 13-26.

HAUDRICOURT, ANDRÉ G. 1954.

"Introduction à la phonologie historique des langues miao-yao." *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 44: 555-576.

HEIMBACH, ERNEST E. 1979.

White Hmong-English Dictionary. Revised edition, Data Paper: Number 75, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

SAVINA, F.M. 1917.

Dictionnaire miao-tseu-français, précédé d'un précis de grammaire miao-tseu et suivi d'un vocabulaire français-miao-tseu. *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême Orient*, 16, 2. Hanoi.

STRECKER, DAVID. 1986.

Proto-Hmongic Finals. Unpublished paper presented to the XIX th Conference

on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, Columbus, Ohio, September 12-12th, 1986.

WANG, FUSHI. 1986.

"Miao-Yaoyu-de xi shu wenti chu tan (A Preliminary Investigation of the Genetic Affiliation of the Miao-Yao Languages)." *Minzu Yuwen* 1986: 1: 1-18, 79.

XIONG, LANG; DJOUA XIONG; and LENG XIONG. 1983.

English-Mong-English Dictionary. Mong Volunteer Literacy, Winfield, Illinois.

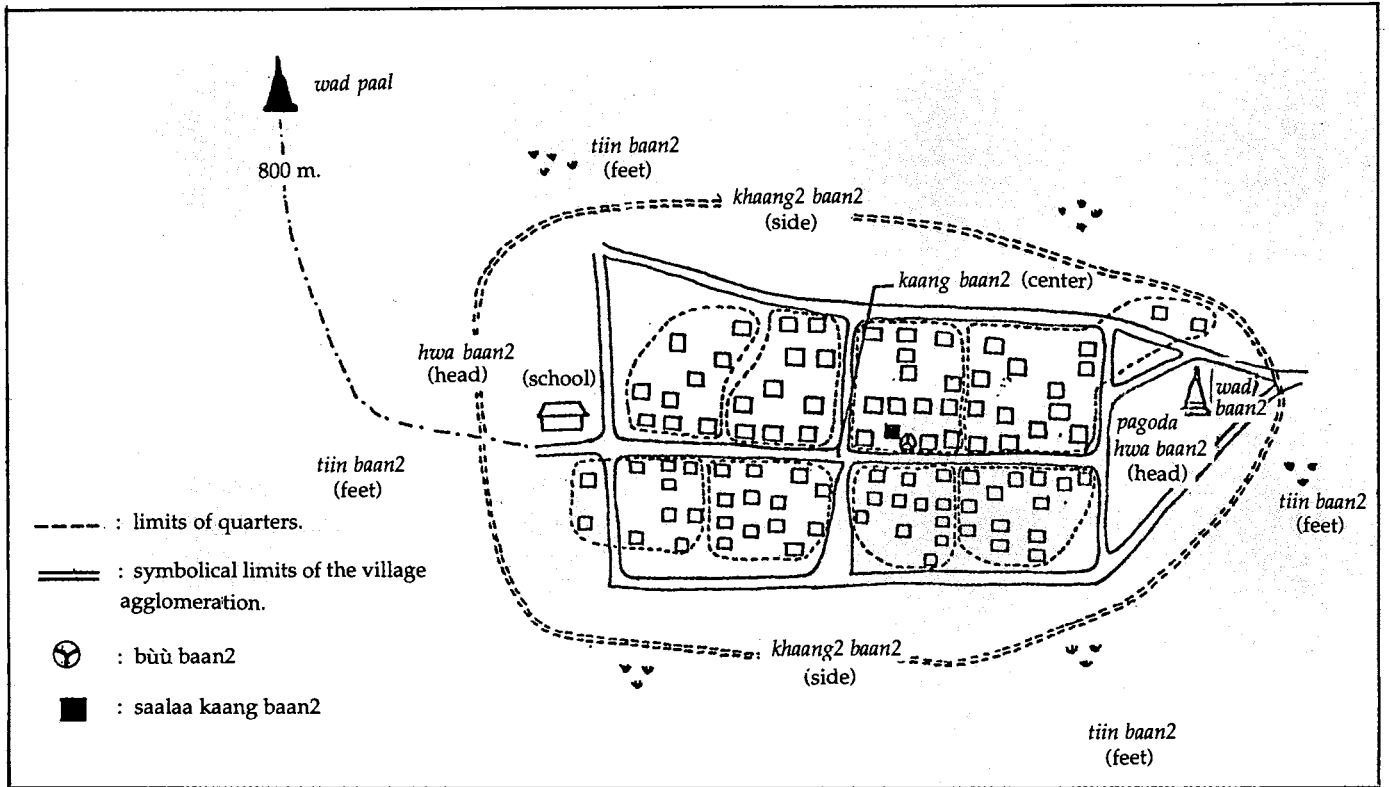


Fig. 2 System of representation of space (Ban Amphawan)

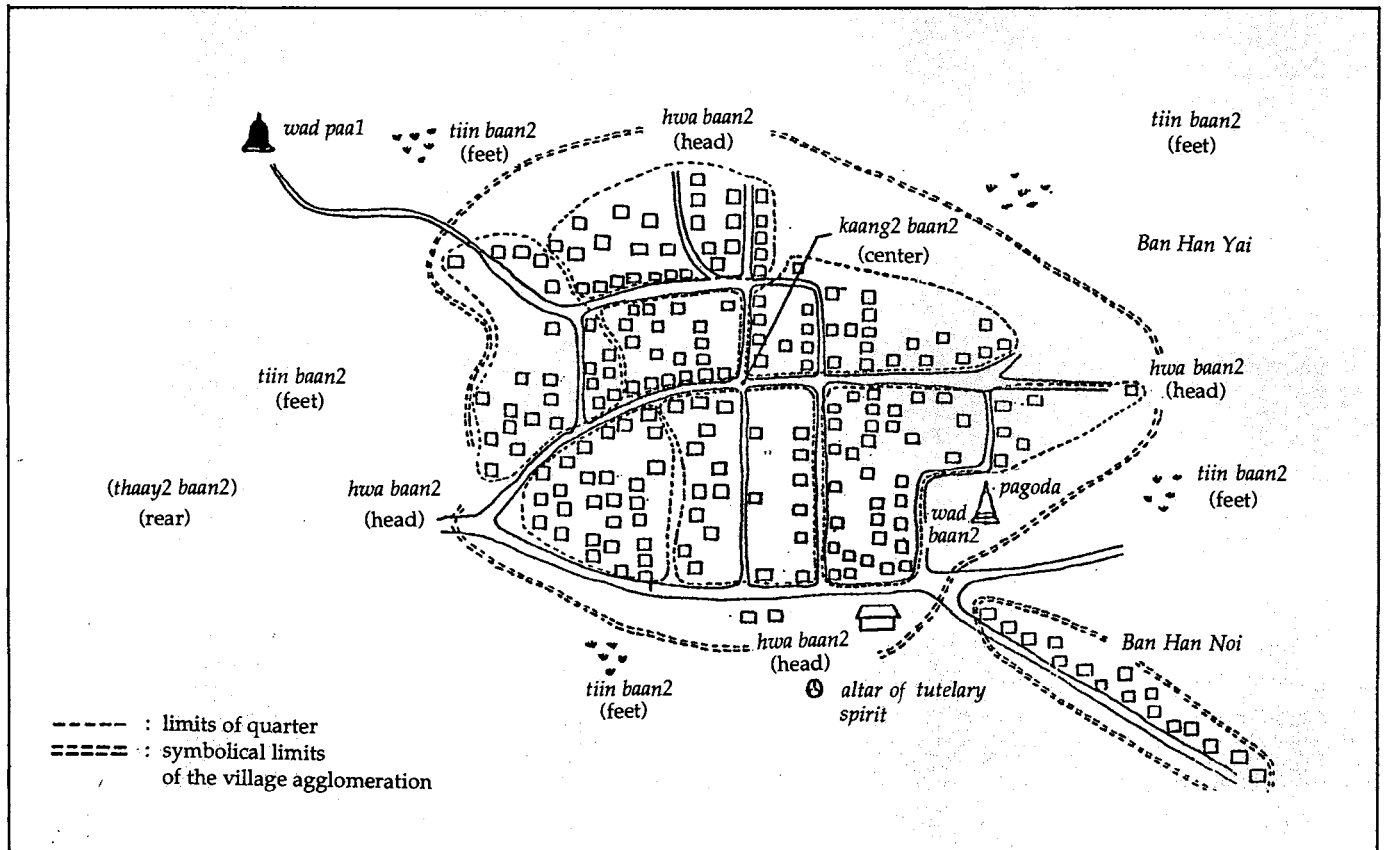


Fig. 4. System of representation of space (Ban Han)