

# From Southwest China into Upper Indochina: an overview of Hmong (Miao) migrations<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *From southern China through mountainous Vietnam, Laos and eventually as far south as the Chao Phraya basin in Thailand, groups of Hmong swiddeners were seen migrating during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. When, and under what circumstances did large chunks of this sub-group of the Miao from Guizhou and its periphery move their settlements to the southern part of the continental Southeast Asia Massif? Who were they? What was their history before these migrations? This paper makes use of early evidence to shed some light on the main causes of that march into the mountain ranges of the Peninsula.*

**Keywords:** *Hmong, Miao, ethno-history, highland minorities, South-East Asia.*

Over several centuries, even millenaries in certain cases, multi shaped human migrations have occurred in the Peninsula. Majorities of the Mon and Burmese groups have gradually settled in Burma, as did the Thai in Thailand, the Lao in Laos and the Kinh in Vietnam. In doing so, these stronger groups have pushed more ancient settlers like remnants of the first indigenous, or the later Proto- and Deutero-Malays, most of whom are members of the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family, further away or higher in the continental South-East Asian Massif. At this point, it is useful to keep in mind that all these early highland settlers, precisely because of their earlier arrival, formed societies quite distinct from the Hmong, the one we will be discussing here.

For more than a century now, and since the establishment of modern national borders in the Peninsula, only tiny, mostly fragmented migrations from southern China continue to occur. Micro-societies of swiddeners, following mostly hill top paths, have arrived in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma to establish more or less permanent settlements in the higher parts of the Massif, away from lowland societies with which they share almost no cultural characteristics.

These societies, it must be recognised, also have major cultural differences

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amongst themselves, in particular in the fields of linguistic, religion, and social organisation. Among these, the Hmong are probably the most recent migrants in the Peninsula. Essentially, they have arrived over the last two centuries, through several migrations that have occurred for a number of reasons. As an example of the continuous historical connection between populations from both sides of the border separating China from its southern neighbours – both before the Communist takeovers in the region from 1945, during decades of socialist power, and still since its softening in recent years – I would like to present a review of the causes and the forms taken by this particular migratory cycle.

## THE MIAO IN CHINA

We know through linguistic indications that the ancient history of the Hmong is intimately linked to that of today's Miao of southwest China, although it is quite another story to pretend that Hmong earlier history is also linked to that of the historical 'Miao' as they appear in ancient Chinese texts. The Chinese term 'Miao' was for a long time broadly generic and referred to many non-Han groups. These included other minority peoples considered marginals compared to Civilisation, that is to the Han. Moréchand (1968: 69) and Lombard Salmon (1972: 111) have noted several related appellations. Chinese texts often distinguish between *shu Miao*, or cooked Miao, and *sheng Miao*, or raw Miao, between subjugated and independent Miao (ibid: 117).

When discussing the first contacts with Westerners (particularly since the 15th century) and the following production of various reports and observations in Western languages on the highland minorities in the region, no definitive conclusions can be made to ascertain the real identity of the groups called Miao by the earliest Western writers. To reach such conclusions, we would need more linguistic indications or, at least, reliable drawings. Such work would require the collaboration of historians and ethnologists and still waits to be conducted. Today however, there is no doubt that the term Miao as it is used in China and abroad designates a specific, although large set of ethnic groups, all from the same linguistic family from which the Hmong of the Indochina Peninsula originate and to which they are intimately related. Since 1953, the Chinese term 'Miao' applies to the whole of the population from the Miao (*Miáo zú*) national minority group. According to Chinese linguists, this group comprises four linguistically and culturally related subgroups – although their languages are not mutually intelligible – named the Hmong, the Hmu, the Qoxiong and the Hmau (note that the transcriptions from Chinese varies from one author to the other).

On the exact geographical origin of the Miao there exist more speculations than certitudes. Several Chinese texts from time of the first legendary dynasty, the Xia (2207–1766 BC.) and the historic Zhou dynasty (1121–256 BC.) mention armed conflicts with some 'Miao' in several of the major watersheds in today's Guizhou (Savina 1924:115–170). Lin (1940) mentions the same phenomenon during the first Han dynasty (in particular 140–87 BC.) and

during the Five Dynasties (907–960 AD.). For several centuries, the Chinese ideogram standing for ‘Miao’ disappeared from historical texts. It seems to have been rehabilitated only under the Song dynasties (960–1279 AD.) and it is during the Ming (1368–1644 AD.), after the Yuan had succeeded in overtaking the Massif, that the term is regularly mentioned (Lombard-Salmon 1972: 111; Jenks 1985: 39). However, in those accounts, there is still confusion about the exact identity of the populations the term Miao designates and we must remain careful about the historic value of these early associations.

Between the 17th and the 19th centuries, China experienced an important demographic increase from one hundred million to more than three hundred million. With the help of maize imported from America by the Spanish, which does not require rich soils nor irrigation, the Han majority in the lowlands were able to cope with the demographic pressure by climbing higher in the less fertile mountain ranges and plateaux of the Massif and settling where, prior to that, only Montagnard<sup>2</sup> populations had been living (Cooper 1976: 30–31). Coupled with excessive taxation, this ‘invasion’ constituted one of the most important causes of conflict, with highland minorities trying to retain access to the land against the Han centralised administration and regional rulers. Some minorities responded by simply migrating higher into the mountain ranges of Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan. Others took up arms. A small number left the Chinese Empire to find shelter in the vacant ranges further to the South which were later to become incorporated into several modern States in the Peninsula. ‘In the major campaigns in the uprisings of 1698, 1732, 1794 and 1855, the Miao scattered in all directions, initiating the migratory movements of the modern period.’ (Wiens 1954: 90)<sup>3</sup>

It is certain that a number of Miao have been completely assimilated into the Han majority. Among those who have remained independent, a certain degree of sinization occurred depending on the intensity of contacts and the degree of cultural resistance. Geddes comments:

Miao groups in China today do present gradation of similarities to Chinese in economic and, to a lesser extent, in cultural practices. But even in cases where the resemblance is closest there appears to be strong sense of separate identity reinforced particularly by a lack of intermarriage. (1976: 11)

During those centuries of contact with the Han, it is plausible that at least some Miao groups practised sedentary agriculture (Haudricourt 1974). In the 17th century, observers in China reported seeing some permanent settlements, even cities, inhabited by people that could have been assimilated to the Miao. There are stories about local princes, territorial resistance to the Han, and cultural differences with the lowland majority. However, it is again possible that the term ‘Miao’ has been used in its former generic meaning and referred to a number of non-Han minorities of the South. Other non-Han groups still exist in Southern China which have been settled there for centuries, notably in Yunnan (cf. Chiao & Tapp 1989: §4). Some of these groups present some striking similarities with Miao subgroups but a serious examination of their

religious rituals and linguistic characteristics for instance quickly reveals the non-Miao identity.

## REVOLTS AND REBELLIONS IN SOUTHERN CHINA

Over the centuries, Han, Mongols and Manchus have sent war parties to the Southern frontier highlands. These expeditions were generally sent to pacify, subordinate, extort or tax, or simply suppress recalcitrant populations. Local resistance was frequent and revolts numerous.

One of the first recorded upheavals of the 19th century occurred in 1818 when Muslims violently opposed the Peking armies in the South. However, it was not before 1850 and the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1872), supported by a messianic ideology partly borrowed from Christian religion, that the imperial troops were actually defeated and most of the large cities in the South were subdued by the rebels. In 1854, during that same period of intense social and political turmoil, another important rebellion flared up, wrongly named after the Miao and centred in Southeast Guizhou (Jenks 1994). Rebels, entrenched in ‘their’ mountains, attacked Manchu garrisons, mandarins, Chinese merchants and landlords, and allied themselves with local Secret Societies, in particular that of the White Lotus. Then,

The Muslim Rebellion (1855–1873) began as a dispute over mining concessions between Chinese Muslims and Han Chinese in Yunnan. It was roughly coincident with other rebellions which broke out as the central authority of the Manchus declined, e.g., the Taiping, and Miao rebellions. (Maxwell Hill 1983: 125)

The Muslim (called Panthai or Hui) insurrection in the southwest took on such important proportions that within a few years it led the rebels to proclaim an independent Sultanate in Dali (Yunnan). Rebels were provided with arms by the British through Burma, while the imperial representative in Yunnan and Guizhou obtained his from the French via Shanghai and, later, Haiphong.

We can therefore see that among the set of factors contributing to the confrontation between the Han State and the minorities in the Massif in the late 19th century is the presence of European colonial powers South of the Massif. From the beginning of the 1860s, the French and the British were competing to find and secure a way into South China and its lucrative resources and markets. During that same period, treaties allowed Christian missionaries into inner China and guaranteed the safety of both missionaries and converts (between 1723 and 1844 Christian activities were illegal). However, the Manchu dynasty barely tolerated this religious and commercial infiltration from the south by foreign powers and was seriously annoyed that minorities on its own territory were connected in one way or another to that movement. Strategically speaking, there was no other choice for Peking but to increase its administrative and military presence on the southern frontier: a clash became inevitable. After a few decades of fighting, the overall losses in material and human lives were colossal.

This turmoil affected the whole of Southern China. With a number of famines and epidemics in the region during most of the second half of the 19th century, it contributed significantly to pushing a number of Montagnards from various origins to look for better opportunities further south into the Indochina Peninsula. Among those who had to move were members of the Mien minority, the Lahu, Akha and Muslim Chinese from Yunnan, and a large number of the Hmong subgroup of the Miao (De Beauclair 1960).

## THE HMONG IN THE PENINSULA

‘[T]he movement which took [the Miao] beyond the borders of China was a continuation of a process occurring within China.’ (Geddes 1976: 25–26). Successive waves contributed to install growing numbers of Miao/Hmong in several southern Chinese provinces as well as in sparsely populated parts of the Southeast Asian Massif that are shared today by Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

If we are to believe the figures available on the demography of the Miao in China and the Hmong in Indochina, we must conclude that only a fraction of the original group wanted or was able to go south. Jean Mottin remarks that ‘*Parmi les Miao en général, ce sont seulement les Hmong que nous trouvons dans les autres pays [que la Chine]*’ (1980: 37). Mottin estimates that 85 percent of the Miao did not leave China. Supporting this observation is the decreasing density of Miao/Hmong as one leaves Guizhou and moves down to central Thailand through northern Vietnam and Laos (Michaud & Culas 1997: Tables 1 and 2).

The first arrival of the Hmong in Indochina is sometimes said to date as far back as four centuries (in Bigot 1938 or Geddes 1976: 27 for instance), particularly in Tonkin for the most ancient cases. But there are neither witnesses nor written records from northern Indochina to confirm their presence before the late 18th century. In fact, there was lasting confusion due to the term *Mán-Méo* used in North Tonkin. The term *Mán* normally refers only to the Yao ethnic group in that area whereas *Méo* should apply only to the Hmong, two different though linguistically related groups. Bonifacy (1904a: 825; 1904b: 4) justifiably noted that some Yao groups were already settled in the *Rivière Claire* (Lô River) upper valley in North Tonkin in the early 18th century.

It was in the second half of the 19th century that large numbers of Hmong settlers migrating from Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan, penetrated the Peninsula and went as far south as the 17th parallel near Tak in Thailand, following roughly a North-East/South-West route from Tonkin. Father Savina, from the *Société des Missions . . . étrangères de Paris*, who was among the first scholars of the Hmong, mentioned that in the early 20th century, at the time when he was studying the Hmong in Tonkin, ‘*Les Miao [Hmong] du Tonkin sont tous originaires du Yun-Nan, et ceux du Laos sont originaires du Tonkin. Ces derniers poursuivent toujours leur marche vers le sud, et ils ont atteint aujourd’hui le 20e parallèle, sur la chaîne annamitique.*’ (1924: VIII). Except

when fleeing en masse from specific dangers in China, these migrations took the form of pioneering households grouping together to clear the forest and grow dry rice, maize and often, opium. When social and ritual problems appeared, or when the soil was not capable of sustaining good crops anymore, usually only after a few years, the local group disbanded and individual households went looking for others to accompany them and clear new patches of vacant forest.

The first reliable Western records to confirm a Hmong presence in the Indochina Peninsula are from 1860 when several thousand Hei Miao (Black Miao) 'soldiers' were seen entering North Vietnam from Yunnan. Annamites remembered and told Bonifacy (1904b: 8) about the violence of the clashes with earlier settlers in the upper *Rivière Claire* valley. Then in Laos, Xieng Kouang province inhabitants saw Chinese Muslims – belonging to the Black, Yellow, White and Red Flag sects – fighting their way through the mountain ranges fleeing from Han soldiers in the north. With these rebel troops came several different Montagnard ethnic groups, including some Hmong. Among the latter many chose to settle in this fertile plateau and by the early 20th century, French census figures showed several thousand of them living around Xieng Khouang.

Yang (1975: 7) estimated that the Hmong first moved into Laos in 1810–20. However, he used oral information gathered in the 1970s in Hmong villages and these estimates vary noticeably depending on the informant. The Hmong are not concerned with precise time estimations. Such a variation can be noticed in a report from the Lyfoung lineage in Laos. The father of the well-known Hmong leader in Laos, Touby Lyfoung, is said to have arrived in Nong Het (Xieng Khouang Province) in 1875 when he joined his aunt who had already been living there 'for several years'. Another informant is the White Tai traditional leader in Tonkin, Deo Van Tri, who declared in 1903 that he witnessed the passage of the Hmong through his territory on their way to Laos:

Vers 1848, alors que j'avais 15 ans, je me rappelle avoir vu mon pays envahi par les Méos (dits Pavillons Blancs) venant du Setchuen (Chine). Ils troublèrent la tranquillité du pays ; mais mon honorable père Déo Van Sinh ou Cam Sinh finit par s'entendre avec eux et leur donner la liberté de s'établir où ils le voulaient sur les hauts plateaux de la région [of Sip Song Chau Tai]. (Raquez & Cam 1904: 257)

In Siam, the presence of Hmong settlements was not documented before the last years of the 19th century. An English geographer wrote what he saw in 1880 in Nan Province: 'There are thousands of emigrants from Sip Sawng Panna [Yunnan, China], and Khamus from Luang Prabang, and a growing population of Meo and Yao.' (McCarthy 1895: 71) Another source suggests that the Hmong arrival in Northern Siam dates from 1885 (Geddes 1976: 29). Thereafter their dispersal in that region was confirmed in Phitsanulok and Lomsak regions by Robbins (1928), who saw two such settlements in those mountains in January 1928. In 1929, Hmong settlements were also seen in Tak

region, 300 km north-west of Bangkok (Credner 1935: 289, in Crooker 1986). In 1992, I personally gathered information from several Hmong elders in a settlement in Chiang Dao area (Chiang Mai Province) who stated in 1993 that their fathers had already been in the region 85 years ago, dating their arrival as far back as 1908.

Jacques Lemoine (1972: 18) pointed out that there is a very close linguistic similarity between two Hmong dialects spoken in Thailand (White and Green Hmong) – the furthest point from the original source of Hmong migration in Guizhou – and *Tch'ouan Ts'ien Tien*, a southern China dialect. More recently, Ratliff (1992) details the analogies between Hmong language and modern and ancient Chinese languages in Yunnan. Thus, whilst examining the geographical spread of Hmong languages in the region, it can be seen that between the Miao/Hmong source region in Guizhou and the ultimate outreach in Central Thailand, the migratory paths cross Eastern Yunnan, Northern Vietnam, Northern Laos and then, highland Thailand.<sup>4</sup>

## OTHER INCENTIVES TO MIGRATE

We have seen that political causes were a major catalyst to the migration south. The 19th and early 20th centuries was an era of trouble in China and South-East Asia. However, when noting that ‘... if a new territory appears before [the Miao] their migration speeds up according to its potentialities’ (Geddes 1976 : 29), Geddes emphasised that pull factors were also a major incentive for the Hmong to come into the Peninsula. In this regard, the case of the Hmong in Thailand is particularly enlightening. This group came from Laos where it was believed that no specific danger was threatening them, at least not great enough to explain them moving so far into Siamese territory. The general causes for this particular migration to promising and barely inhabited land are to be found in the search for new swiddens.

It also seems relevant to mention another factor that contributed to the Hmong migration, although this one is rarely referred to in historical studies on the minorities in the region. This factor was directly linked to the growing and selling of opium, an activity that commanded a fair share of the group's energy and production focused labour force until very recently. Let us first examine the roots of the problem. Due to the marketing of large quantities of opium in China, first by the Portuguese in the 18th century and then by the British and the French who were willing to raise profits to support the colonial effort locally, a high level of opium consumption was reached in China in the 19th century (15 million of Chinese opium addicts in 1870 according to McCoy 1989: 63). This trend was significantly stimulated and skilfully maintained by the British who could have the poppies grown in Bengal and then distributed through the East India Company network developed throughout Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries (McCoy 1989: 60). As early as the 18th century, Chinese leaders were worried by this growing trade and the huge loss in revenue this net importation of thousands of tons of raw opium implied. Gradually, as a result of such high stakes, the main opponents came to clash in

what was called the Opium Wars (1838–1842 and 1856–1858). Following the treaty of Nanking in 1842, China was forced to allow the Europeans and the Americans to install trade posts at a number of locations on the Chinese coast and trade almost freely with the huge Chinese market. The option left to the Chinese to compete with the intruders was then to promote and support the production of opium within its own territory, which the central authorities quickly managed to do. The populations inhabiting the areas suitable for this production, basically the mountains and plateaux of the south, were then pressured into growing poppies and producing raw opium to be sold to government agents, to be processed and sold on the interior market. Ironically, many of these same producers were also pushed into that same activity by the French and the British, who were able to reach the southern parts of the Massif through the valleys leading north from Burma and French Indochina. Highland minorities in southern China were then caught in fierce competition the stakes of which lay outside their experience, their political understanding and their military capacities. Locally, having understood the lucrative potential of this new trade and having noticed the competition between China and the Europeans, the Hmong tried to make the most of it and went rapidly down the road leading to economic war with the Chinese administration. The violent revolts and rebellions that shook the southern part of the country during the second half of the 19th century and the following waves of migration, can then be linked, at least in part, to the strong will to keep control over the production and sale of opium.

Moreover, recent ethnographic and historical studies have highlighted that a significant factor in the decision to migrate and the choice of the territory to pioneer was the particular relationship between the Hmong and the Muslim Chinese caravaneers, the Haw (Hui). Originally from Yunnan, the Haw were for a long time the only providers of salt and metals to the Hmong as well as some consumer goods. These were exchanged for medicinal plants and Chinese pharmaceuticals. This traditional relationship came to include the most lucrative item, opium, that could thus find an easy way out of the villages. The itinerant trade, about which very little is known, followed classical routes which for centuries had linked hinterland cities of China like Kunming, Dali, Jinghong and Chengdu, to maritime trading posts and capitals like Moulmein, Ayutthaya and Bangkok, as well as Vinh and Hanoi in northern Vietnam. Thirty years ago in Laos, as in Vietnam, old Hmong still remembered their travels with the Haw caravaneers in the late 19th century, quite often as caretakers for the horses and mules loaded with cloth, salt or opium. Some say that they explored new fertile and vacant regions like the Tran Ninh plateau in Laos and the mountains north of Nan in Thailand. There were thus possibilities offered to those who wanted to move, and the Hmong migration towards the southwest was not made blindly. A blend of fertile and available forest land with proximity to a Haw caravan route was perfectly suited both to escape Han wrath or to simply try one's luck further away.



## SCHOLARLY INTEREST IN THE MIAO/HMONG (UP TO THE 1970s)

Only Christian missionaries and a few British and French explorers, when searching for ways to penetrate the Chinese hinterland, were able to visit the Miao/Hmong in China. In continental Southeast Asia, from as early as the late 19th century, the Hmong were subjects of marked interest from European soldiers, missionaries, administrators, explorers and, later, from researchers. This marked interest on the part of Westerners for Montagnard societies in the region, coincides with the first steps of anthropology and ethnology as scientific disciplines and definitely served the preoccupation with exoticism.

Books, articles and notes written on the Montagnards are numerous from the early 20th century. Western observers were then realising the sheer cultural and linguistic specificity of these minorities embedded in larger social spaces, such as in Vietnam and China. In the case of the Miao/Hmong, the first studies on customs and languages were published in the 1870s (Edkins 1870), 1880s (Broumton 1881) and 1890s (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1892). These were the first steps of the general ethnography and the systematic collection of data on Hmong culture, while the study and analysis of the social organisation, religion and mythology had to wait until the 1960s before beginning to really expand.

It was after the Second World War that an international interest in the Hmong of Southeast Asia began to arise, and field research was conducted on an ever increasing scale, principally in Laos and Thailand and, in different circumstances, in northern Vietnam up to 1954. Tonkin, under Viet Minh influence, broke from French Indochina and declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam an independent country in 1945, closing its border to most foreign observers after the Geneva conference in 1954. China, after the advent of Communist rule in 1949, reacted similarly towards the West. On the other hand, Thailand clearly welcomed the First World's 'help' and its researchers. Over this period Laos remained torn between the ideals of monarchy and communism for several years, and large portions of its territory were not safe for Western scholars. With the Indochina Wars, between 1946 and 1975, and the Sino-Vietnamese conflict of 1979, it became clear that international events were impacting upon forest dwellers in their mountains, forcing them to take sides and, depending on who won the national struggle, to suffer the consequences if they made the wrong choice.

In the 1960s, several Western researchers found themselves interested in specifically studying the highland minorities. Several Western institutions provided these researches with considerable financial backing although, it must be said, not always with the purest intentions (see Wakin 1992). It was at the end of the 1960s that Lebar, Hickey and Musgrave, with the help of Hanks and Smalley among others, published the impressive *Ethnic Groups of Mainland of Southeast Asia* (1964) published by the *American Human Relations Area Files*, and that Peter Kunstadter, helped notably by Moerman, Mandorff, Hickey, Geddes and Barney, edited the two volumes of the equally impressive *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations* (1967) published by the

Princeton University Press. To these researchers interested in the region as a whole, others can be added who were specifically investigating one particular region, like Moréchand (1968), Lemoine (1972), Yang (1975), Bertrais (1977) and Mottin (1978) in the former French Indochina, or Keen (1966), Binney (1968), Walker (1970) and Dessaint (1971) in Thailand.

After years of self seclusion and refusal to grant foreign scholars the right to walk their mountains – while Thailand was kept open almost without restrictions – Vietnam and Laos have at present entered the post-socialist age and turned more willing to initiate collaborative research with foreigners on the Montagnards. This opportunity must be seized. It means a unique chance at last, to investigate in the field the ethno-history of the Hmong and of all the Montagnard societies in this part of the Massif. With the present pace of modernisation and acculturation of highlanders along lowlanders' lines, with the forced sedentarisation process taking place in the last decades, this task is urgent if we want to gather what is left of the tradition of these long-lived and at the same time, extremely vulnerable late migrants from the Chinese frontier.

## NOTES

- 1 This paper was originally presented at the annual conference of the Association for South-East Asian Studies in the United Kingdom, at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, in April 1996.
- 2 Despite historical and largely unjustified association of the French word 'montagnard' with very specific highland minorities in Central Vietnam, it is voluntarily that the term is given here its original meaning of 'mountain people', without further specification.
- 3 See also the historical analysis of these revolts in Lombard-Salmon (1972: § IV).
- 4 Lemoine (1972: 18) and Michaud (1994: § 4) both met Hmong who said they came from Burma in Chiang Mai Province in Thailand. Young (1962: 37) also mentioned the same thing. Bernatzik (1970) referred in 1947 to a 1931 census stating that 830 Hmong then lived on Burmese territory. However, statistics on the Hmong in Burma today are not available.

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