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ABSTRACT

The term "Mien" is used to describe several mountain peoples of Southeast Asia, who migrated from China in the 18th and 19th centuries. Their strong family structure serves their agricultural way of life. The language, though tonal, exhibits many similarities to English. Religious beliefs are animistic, centering around spirits of ancestors, the home, and nature. Mythological designs find their way into artwork, which is predominantly bodily adornments. The several names given to boys include a spirit name. Having been forced to move from place to place for centuries, the Mien are in general uneducated, though a few are conversant with Chinese and with the special knowledge needed by shamans. Recent contacts with other indigenous Southeast Asians, and with Americans, have resulted in a slight broadening of the educational base. Mien customs, many centering around fear of evil spirits, should be known and respected by Americans responsible for their orientation in this country. Conversational customs are especially important to those who want to communicate with the Mien. Teachers of English as a second language should bear in mind certain characteristics of the Mien language, such as the small number of final consonants. (JB)

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# The Mien

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Language and Orientation Resource Center  
Center for Applied Linguistics  
3520 Prospect Street, NW  
Washington DC 20007  
(800) 424-3750 (toll-free)  
(800) 424-3701 (toll-free)  
(202) 298-9292 (in Washington, D.C.)  
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## Fact Sheet Series #2: The Mien

The purpose of the Refugee Fact Sheet Series is to provide background information on certain refugee groups that have recently arrived, and are still arriving, in the United States. Unlike the other refugee groups from Indochina and the entrants from the Caribbean, these refugees have arrived in much smaller numbers: however, they still face many of the same problems with language, education, employment, and cultural adjustment.

Each Fact Sheet is divided into approximately five sections:

- (1) General Introduction
- (2) Cultural Background
- (3) Educational Background
- (4) Implications for Learning English as a Second Language (ESL)
- (5) Implications for Orientation.

The cultural background section of each Fact Sheet is the most inclusive; it contains information on the history, geography, language, religion, food, values, and customs of the specific refugee group.

We wish to thank all of those without whose research and assistance we would not have been able to put together this Fact Sheet on the Mien. We are especially indebted to Sylvia Lombard, Saelee Aychoy and others for reading and commenting on the preliminary drafts. We would also like to thank Mrs. Bounsou Sananikone for the cover illustration.

## I. Introduction

The Mien are one of several ethnic groups that have for centuries been called "Yao" by the Chinese, Southeast Asians and others. Some westerners have innocently adopted this term, which to the Mien themselves means "barbarian". For this reason, the tribe strongly prefers the name "Mien", which to them means "the people -- and all others are outsiders."

As early as 1963, the Mien in Namtha, a northernmost province of Laos and a center for United States' CIA mercenary forces, were engaged in CIA activities. They were gradually forced to abandon their villages as the Pathet Lao, the Lao communist force supported by North Vietnam, gained more and more territory. "The long-standing family cooperation with the Royal Lao, French and U.S. governments (the U.S. in particular) naturally means that they and their followers would be marked for execution in the Communist takeover."<sup>1</sup>

Escaping persecution and seeking freedom, most of the Mien in Laos moved south and then west. In Thailand they are confined in refugee camps in the northern provinces of Chiangrai and Nan. The total number of Mien refugees from Laos who are now in various camps in Thailand is about 6,000, while those resettled in the United States number around 4,000. Most of them are located in California, Oregon, and Washington state. Others have resettled in Alabama, North Carolina, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, Kansas, Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Utah.

## II. Cultural Background

### A. Brief History

The Mien originated in China. Some records indicate these people were known as early as 1500 B.C. in central China. Others say that their existence became known in 500 B.C.

With the increasing dominance of Chinese populations, the Mien were gradually forced into mountain areas. For various reasons, including a resistance to levies imposed by Chinese government, a search for freedom and an escape from famine, a number of Mien moved from the Shantung and central areas of China into Southeast Asia. The majority remains in the Kwangtung and Kwansi provinces of southern China. Some sources have estimated them to number between two and four million, but others say there are only one million.

The Mien emigration from China was made in two different stages. The first group of Mien migrated into northern Vietnam in the 1700's. There have been between

150,000 and 200,000 Mien there since World War II. These people are called "Man", another Chinese term meaning "barbarian." The migration of the Mien into Thailand and Laos did not occur until the mid-nineteenth century. Their population in these two countries is estimated at 40-50,000.

The Mien ethnic group has two main branches, the Iu Mien (Yew Mien) and the Kim Mun. Many clans in northern Vietnam are Kim Mun, while the majority of Mien in northern Laos and Thailand belongs to the Iu Mien branch. Each branch has sub-divisions with various names, distinctive dress and clan ritual customs. There are some differences in their dialects as well, due to geographical separation and varying influences over many generations from other dominant groups in their localities.

#### B. Geography and Climate

The Mien live in the extreme northern provinces of Chiengrai and Nan in Thailand and in the northern provinces of Phongsaly, Namtha, Sayaboury, and Luangprabang in Laos. Their villages are generally located on hillsides at elevations of about 3,000 feet.

Usually these regions have a mild climate. Although Laos and Thailand are in the tropical zone, the climatic conditions in the hills are always cool. In winter, the temperature in these areas can drop below the freezing point. Snow is never seen, but thick fog is very common on winter days. During the monsoon season, from June to September, the temperature ranges from 60° to 70°.

#### C. Socio-Economic Background and Employment

Mien social structure consists of patrilineal clans, their sub-clans and lineage groups. Although there are more clans, they call themselves 'the twelve clans'.<sup>2</sup>

In the Mien society, each mountain village is comprised of ten to thirty houses. A house may accommodate the whole family or just some of its members, while the rest live close by. Some houses are made of planks and logs, others of bamboo. The roof is thatched, and the earth is the floor. The main family house consists of two major divisions. The first is the "guest area," where the ancestral shelf, or altar, is located. On the other side of a partition is the "women's area", where household chores take place and meals are prepared and served. In the upper part (the house is usually built on a hillside) are the private sleeping quarters for the family, where partitioned bamboo cubicles and raised platforms are provided for the parents, married sons, grandparents and unmarried older children. Outside the

building, on the lower slope, are the horses, pigs and chickens, which find shelter under the overhanging thatch of the roof.

The economy of a Mien family is comprised of three interlocking forces. The parents may perform light tasks around the house such as taking care of the children, looking after the household animals, and tending the vegetable or family garden. The major part of the production unit is the married sons. These men and their wives take great responsibility in producing rice, the basic staple food, for the family. The young unmarried children (which could include some grandchildren) indirectly help bring in cash income through their own labor and household responsibilities.

The Mien economy is built on simple agricultural products. The main crop is a glutinous, short grain or sticky rice, which is essential for their basic diet. Opium poppies traditionally produce the largest part of the cash income. Other crops include corn, potatoes, yams and other edible tubers. All these, including other vegetables such as mustard greens, cabbages, cucumbers, tomatoes, string beans and red peppers, can be grown either in the family garden near the house or on the slash-and-burn farm on the far-away mountain slopes or hillsides where rice and opium are grown. Chickens and pigs are raised for consumption, but they are also used for ritual purposes. Mien hunt wild game and birds to supplement their daily proteins.

The Mien are skillful at metal work. Some make their own silver ornaments and forge their own firearms, kitchen utensils and farming tools.

#### D. Language Background\*

"In general, the Yao and the Hmong are geographically and linguistically distinct at present. However, at some distant point in the past, perhaps two thousand years or more, the two language groups were one single Meo-Yao stock, based on evidence from comparative historical linguistic studies".<sup>1</sup>

Like many languages in Southeast Asia, Mien (or Yao) has a tonal system in addition to its sound system.

Western missionaries devised a Romanized alphabet for Mien; its original script is Chinese-based. Similarly, certain Mien have adapted the Thai and Lao

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\* More detailed information about the Mien (Yao) language -- alphabet, tones, classifiers, vocabulary, as well as naming and numbering systems and kinship terminology -- can be provided if any person needs such material. Staff from the Language and Orientation Resource Center will be able to assist you or put you in touch with others who can help you.

alphabet to write their language. If Mien are illiterate, a Romanized script may be easier to learn and less cumbersome to write, especially if the Mien are resettled in countries that use the Roman alphabet like the U.S. A Mien person already literate in the Thai language can usually learn to read and write the Mien language in the Thai script fairly easily.

Mien refugees are former residents of Laos, with some fluency in the Lao dialect, yet some have become literate in Thai (while in refugee camps), and some have learned the Thai script for writing their own language.

As in English, the Mien sentence structure is of four basic types: statement, negative, question, and imperative or command. To form a statement, Mien follows the same pattern as does English: subject, verb, and object or complement. For the negative, the structure is closer to both Lao and Hmong sentence patterns than to English. For example, in the sentence "I am not a teacher," Mien, like Lao and Hmong, will simply say, "I not be teacher." There is no need for an auxiliary verb in a sentence such as "I do not study English." This sentence in Mien would be "I not study English." Yes/no questions are formed in several ways, basically through the addition of a question word (particle) fai, which often comes at the end of the question; for example, "You go town fai" is equivalent to "Did you go to town?"

As in Lao, there is nothing to indicate plurality in a word itself (no endings are used). Instead, we know whether the thing mentioned is singular or plural only when either a definite or indefinite number (a classifier) modifies it.

Likewise, tenses are not expressed as they are in English. The verbs are not inflected. Instead, particles are used here as well. To say "I went to the market yesterday," or "He came here last week," a Mien will simply say "I yesterday go market," and "I the other day come here."

There are 47 letters in the Mien alphabet: nine vowels, 33 consonants and five tone symbols (the sixth tone is left unmarked).

Those Mien consonants that are the same as some found in English are:

Initial: p b t d k g ch\* j\* f sh l m n ng w y

Final: p t k (these are unvoiced, so are "softer" sounds than in English)

m n ng

w y (semi-vowels).

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\* These are not exactly the same sound as in English.

Mien vowels are similar to English vowels, although some have a slightly different quality, depending on whether they occur before consonants and the glottal stop or are in final position. Diphthongs are also found in Mien, as in English.

The six Mien tones are:

/ high rise-fall	mai' "not" (negative)
mid-high level (unmarked)	mai "téak" (type of wood)
^ mid fall	ma:i^ "to have; there is"
v mid-low rise	ma:i^v "lopsided"
^ low rise-fall	ma:i^v "to buy"
\ low level	ma:i\ "to sell"

Final consonants p, t, and k, as well as a glottal stop, create two other tones -- one a little lower than the highest tone, and one a little higher than the lowest tone.

#### E. Religion

One of the most important aspects of Mien culture is their religion. The Mien place a high value on their spiritual beliefs, which are based on natural phenomena.

The Mien are animists. They worship the spirits of nature as well as those of their departed ancestors. They also believe in reincarnation or rebirth and that through merit-making they can improve their position in the heavenly world. It is assumed that after nine generations in the spirit world, an ancestor has been reborn into the world of the living, so that generation is dropped from the group of ancestors to be fed and provided for.

Once a year, the whole village joins in a ceremony for various spirits. The spirits of the sleeping tiger and the stalking tiger, the knife spirit, the spirits of the wind and thunder -- each deserves its own day for being honored. It is thought that anyone who does not observe this tradition will be retaliated against; e.g., by losing livestock to the tiger, being cut by a knife, or being bitten by a snake.

The head of each household assumes all responsibility for dealing with the family spirits. On the spirit platform or altar he places offerings of wine and uncooked rice and calls his ancestors' names. If a child is ill, an egg is added to the regular offerings. In more serious cases, such as severe illness or calamity, or if someone in the family has been imprisoned, a shaman is summoned to determine how many chickens or pigs must be sacrificed to ensure the help of the family spirits. Sometimes help is needed from the spirits of nature as well.

As there are no religious community centers such as churches, temples or pagodas, the focal point for spirit ritual is the home. There are no clergy, priests or monks as in most major religions, but shamans will officiate at all major ritual duties. They are highly respected members of the community, since they are considered the best educated and the guardians of tradition. One of the most important functions of the shaman is to conduct ceremonies that ritually incorporate 15-16 year old boys into the clan lineage roll.

#### F. Art

Artistic expression appears to predominate in bodily adornments, decorative costumes and jewelry. Mien design draws heavily upon mythology in order to explain the significance of a particular motif -- a tiger, flower, umbrella, snake, etc. Many of the needlework designs are shared with their Hmong neighbors. Some of these designs are called Celestial Crown, or the crowns worn by the three brothers, and Celestial Hearts. These designs represent the triplets, or the three Pure Ones who were rulers of the ancient spirits. Other designs known as Sunray and Star symbolize the male-female dichotomy. Another called Python Skin suggests a connection to the mythological Dragon-King, the gatekeeper of heaven who once predicted a drought. A flood occurred instead, and he was punished and exiled to earth for his error. The rainbow symbolizes his struggle to return to heaven.

These are just a few examples of the many Mien mythological designs. Several designs are flower motifs; small children are believed to be flower spirits under the guardianship of sponsoring ancestor spirits to whom they are presented at birth. The hats -- covered with bright red-plush-pompons, as well as beads, bells and embroidery of several traditional designs -- worn by Mien babies, symbolize different kinds of flowers.<sup>3</sup>

#### G. Names

The Mien naming system distinguishes between male and female. According to his position in the family -- from oldest to youngest -- a boy is given a Chinese number and his father's name. (For example, Sarn Ching means the third son of Mr. Ching.) Later, when he grows up, he receives his "generation" name, which he shares with all his brothers and paternal male cousins. With this name he is also given his individual or official name, which later becomes his children's family name. Boys also receive "spirit names" because they feature in the family worship and ancestor ritual. The spirit name is only used for ritual ceremonies and is the

name by which the boy will be called when he joins his ancestors in the spirit world.

<u>First (clan)</u>	<u>Second (generation)</u>	<u>Third (personal, given)</u>
Phan (or Pien)*	Gway	Ching
Lee	Dzan	Choy

Girls are given a Mien number, indicating their position in relation to other daughters, and their father's individual name. For example, a girl is called Fay Ching because she is the fourth daughter of Mr. Ching. Other than an honorific title given to her when she joins her ancestors in the spirit world, a girl does not receive another name. "Sometimes a child is named after some event or circumstance which takes place at the time of his or her birth. Kae Choy, for example, would be Mr. Choy's son, born when guests were in the home. Tseng Gwang is Mr. Gwang's daughter, born with the umbilical cord around her neck. Nicknames and terms of endearment are used, and sometimes uncomplimentary names are given in order to deceive the spirits by concealing the true value of the child."<sup>2</sup>

### III. Educational Background

As mentioned earlier, the Mien people now living in the United States have been forced to move from place to place for many centuries — from the central part to the south of China to the hilltops of northern Laos and eventually to the United States. As a result, the majority of the Mien people could receive no steady or formal education.

Traditionally, those young Mien (only men) who could have access to some type of education studied several hundred Chinese characters and the ritual ceremonies and responsibilities of their particular clan. The educated young men could also understand and write many of the clan's own lyrics delineating their history and family genealogy. Another form of education given to some groups of Mien was provided by missionaries 28 years ago. In Chiengrai Province in northern Thailand, the Mien were given a romanized alphabet to write their everyday speech, some literacy primers, health books, portions of the Bible, etc.

\* The Thai, Lao and American naming pattern provides that the given name comes first, followed by the surname. For registration purposes, Thai and Lao officials often transpose Mien names to fit the pattern used in countries of resettlement. (Phan Gway Ching would therefore become Gway Ching Phan.) In doing this, the Thai word "sae" (indicating Chinese, Hmong or Mien clan names) became listed as part of the official Mien name. Unfortunately, it is not possible to have it removed from their recorded names in the United States. Therefore, Mien living in the U.S. will probably have these names (as in saeLee, saeChao, saePhan).

After World War II, many Mien began buying manufactured goods and trading in lowland villages and markets. This brought them into closer contact with Lao people. Experience in trading with Lao and Chinese has given them a good grasp of those languages. A few of the Mien children were educated in the national schools. In recent years, village elders have been less able to obtain the traditional Chinese training for the young men, so younger generations (in some cases) do not have the same background in the ritual responsibility as do their elders. "More became conversant in Lao, with more mingling in that society. Some were involved in working in towns, or making rice paddy fields instead of the traditional slash-and-burn rice fields. Some were becoming more conscious of belonging to a nation, rather than just a clan or tribal society."<sup>1</sup>

#### IV. Implications for Cultural Orientation

In order to avoid misunderstanding or offending the Mien guests and to achieve the goal of successful resettlement, the American hosts or sponsors should take into consideration the differences between their guests' culture and their own. There are some important taboos to be aware of.

A Mien woman is reluctant to talk of being pregnant, nor does her husband or family talk about it. Much of this is due to fear of evil spirits harming the baby or the mother.

A Mien mother is embarrassed and ill at ease if someone compliments her baby by saying it is "cute" or "pretty", for this will draw the attention of harmful spirits. Her reaction would normally be to say that the baby is ugly, hoping to distract any harmful spirit who may have heard the compliment.

During the first month following the delivery a new mother will remain at home, will not perform hard work, and will refrain from eating several types of food. Because all children are wanted, abortion is abhorrent to the Mien. Since the head is where the soul can slip out of the body easily, it needs protection; children's heads are well protected by pretty and colorful hats. When a child is sick, home remedies are used that can cause black-and-blue areas or blisters, which may appear to Americans as child abuse.

A white armband is a sign of mourning. Death is announced by firing a gun, and various noisy activities help drive off evil spirits. The family of the dead person will offer food and money for the deceased to use in the spirit world.

Shaking hands is not a Mien custom. However, having had association with missionaries and military men, many Mien have become accustomed to it.

Affection is not demonstrated in public. Holding hands or kissing in public between the opposite sexes is never done. Such behavior looks "silly" or "stupid" to Mien people. Parents do not kiss their children, but tiny babies are cuddled and fondled.

It is important to show respect to elders by greeting them before acknowledging any young people or children who are present. Extreme individualism or selfishness are considered unworthy of the family and a dishonor to the ancestors. Restraint and self control are admired in Mien society.

In conversation:

- Mien do not use a greeting which matches "hello" in English. A traditional greeting in Mien is more apt to be:

Where are you going? -- if you meet someone on the road.

What are you doing? -- if you see someone doing something.

Have you eaten rice yet? -- if you think you may be arriving at an inconvenient time.

Sometimes friends might ask "are you peaceful?" ("everything OK?")

- Mien do not normally talk about the weather in casual conversation. They do not normally inquire about health as Americans do.

- If Mien meet a strange group of Mien in town, or in a village, they would say, "This group of respected (older brothers, older sisters) people are from what area, or village?" or "What is your clan name?" Distant clan connections would set the stage for more conversation and questions. If there are no clan connections, further conversation or association would not usually continue beyond a polite cut-off point.

- Mien would not hesitate to ask "How old are you?" Age is honorable and knowing the other person's age is a cue as to how he or she should be treated.

#### V. Implications for Learning English as a Second Language (ESL)

While there are more similarities than differences between the Mien and English sound systems, there are a number of problem areas that can be anticipated.

- As we know, Mien is a monosyllabic tonal language, and only tones distinguish one word from another when they have exactly the same combinations of vowel and consonant sounds. In comparison, English uses word and sentence stress and intonation

patterns. In turn, these components involve linkage, or liaison, and rhythm. ESL teachers have to be aware of these aspects so that they will find a way to help their students become accustomed to English.

- Of all the Mien consonant sounds that are equivalent to those in English, only six (p, t, k, m, n, and ng) are allowed to take the final position. We can therefore assume that other English final consonant sounds will be problematic. Furthermore, these six Mien final consonant sounds are not pronounced exactly as they would be in English when they take this position.

- Naturally, ESL teachers will need to help Mien learn the differences in English such as those for tense, negation, and forming questions. This is true for many other ethnic groups from Southeast Asia as well. Teachers who have worked with Lao, Vietnamese and other ethnic groups from SEAsia will find some of the grammatical differences also apply to Mien.

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2. Lombard, Sylvia J. The Mien (Yao) of Laos: Who Are the Mien?
3. Butler, Jacqueline, Yao Design.

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