

HO NE (SHE) IS HMONGIC: ONE FINAL ARGUMENT¹

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Although the genetic relationship of languages referred to as Hmong-Mien is not controversial, there are still subgrouping issues left to be resolved.² “Ho Ne” [hɔ²² ne⁵³] (language of the “mountain people”) known more widely by the Chinese name “She” [ʂə⁵⁵], is a Hmong-Mien language spoken by only about 1,000 people in Guangdong province, just a little bit north and northeast of Hong Kong. There are 368,000 people identified as “She” living in the Southeast provinces of China to the north of Guangdong, but like the Manchu and Moslem minorities of China, these people have been almost fully assimilated, and speak a variety of Kejia (Hakka) even at home (Mao 1988).

Three views on the position of Ho Ne within Hmong-Mien have been published (Figures 1a, 1b, and 1c):

- 1a. HmM is a 3-branch family (Encyclopedia of China 1957, [repeated in Strecker 1987a, 1987b and Ratliff 1994], Pan Chengqian 1991, Wang and Mao 1995)
- 1b. HmM is a 2-branch family; Ho Ne is Mienic (Chen 1984)³
- 1c. HmM is a 2-branch family; Ho Ne is Hmongic (Mao and Meng 1982, 1984, 1986, Mao 1988, Meng 1993).

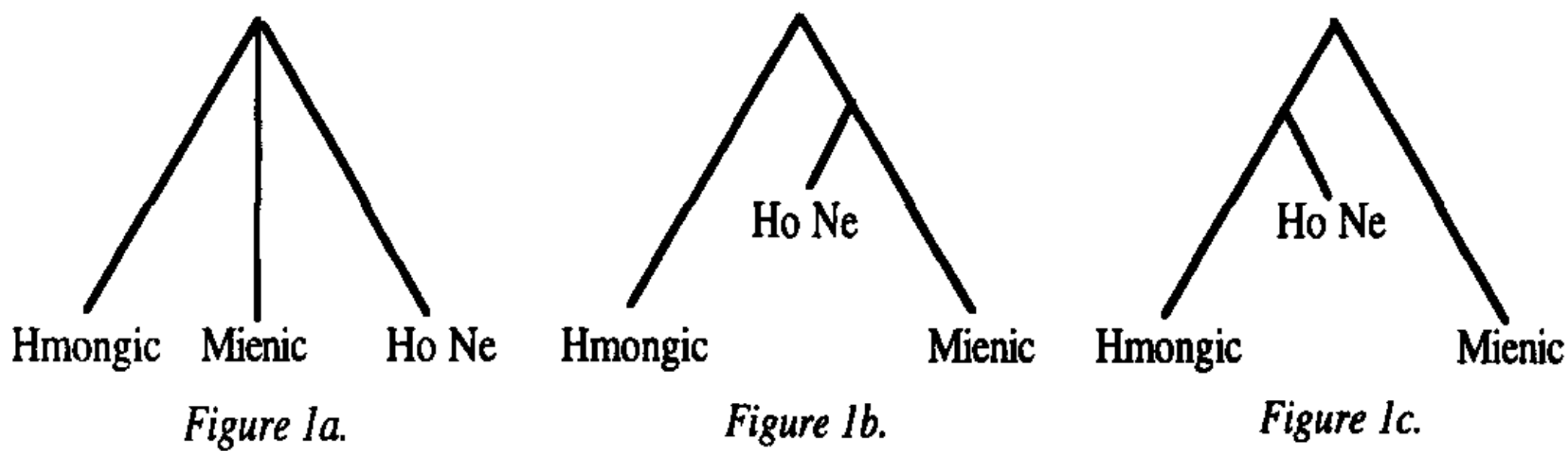
It is clear that Mao and Meng, who did fieldwork in the 1950s and 1970s on Ho Ne, and have published a number of solid reports on their findings (1982,

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were given at the Third Annual Workshop on Comparative Linguistics at Purdue University—Subgrouping, November 12-13, 1994, and at the Twelfth International Conference on Historical Linguistics at The University of Manchester, August 13-18, 1995.

² The question of the position of Na-e/Pa Hng prompted a published exchange in LTBA (Benedict 1986 and Strecker 1987b, 1987c) and a recent article by Niederer (1997).

³ Downer (1971) speculated that the She who now speak Chinese spoke Yao in the past based on cultural similarities to Yao, and tied them to a reconstruction of Yao migration eastward into Guangdong. This is not a linguistic classification, however, since it seems that at the time he wrote this early paper he was unaware of the existence of the She people who still speak a Hmong-Mien language.

1984, 1986, 1988, 1993), have it right: Ho Ne is indeed a Hmongic language, and tree (c) is the right tree. The case they make is in no particular need of further support; it stands on the twin pillars of shared core vocabulary and common phonological developments. I nonetheless would like to report here a finding of my own, which strengthens their position even further. The relative chronology of tone changes in the development of the languages of the Hmongic branch, including Ho Ne, leaves the question of the position of Ho Ne within the Hmong-Mien family beyond any doubt. I present this new evidence in section 5 below. For the sake of completeness, however, I will first review the reasons why people have supported the other two subgroupings.



2.0. HO NE CONSTITUTES A SEPARATE BRANCH

The reasons for assigning Ho Ne to a third main branch of the Hmong-Mien family were chiefly pragmatic rather than linguistic. For those of us who have commented on the family tree, the acceptance of a Ho Ne branch represented a conservative “wait-and-see” position: Ho Ne is considered a separate language (*yǔ*) in China, and is studied as such.⁴ Furthermore, it is spoken in an area far to the east and separated from the southwest province homelands of the Hmong-Mien people.

One may adduce two linguistic reasons for this subgrouping as well. First, Ho Ne occupies a middle ground between Hmongic and Mienic in terms of syllable structure: whereas Hmongic finals are simple in comparison with Mienic finals and Mienic initials are simple in comparison with Hmongic initials, Ho Ne initials and finals are both fairly simple. Far more important than this superficial typological difference, one may point to a number of important native lexical items unique to Ho Ne, such as the ‘mountain’ term of

⁴ In the “Brief Survey” (*Jiǎnzhi*) monograph series from the Beijing Nationalities Press, there is a volume for the Miao languages, a volume for the Yao languages, and a volume for the She language.

their ethnonym **hɔ̃¹**, ‘house’ **ni²**, ‘big’ **vɔ̃ŋ²**, ‘small’ **sɔ̃ŋ¹**, ‘soft’ **zɔ̃⁴**, ‘eagle/hawk’ **phu⁴**, and ‘eye’ **khɔ̃³** (Mao and Meng 1982, Meng 1993).

3.0. HO NE IS MIENIC: ARGUMENTS FROM CHEN 1984

In Chen’s defense, it is clear that one would want to examine evidence for a Mienic link first, for two reasons. First, the Mienic peoples separate Ho Ne speakers from Hmongic speakers geographically; the Hmongic peoples inhabit the north and west, while the Mienic peoples are in the middle, in the east and south. Ho Ne speakers live beyond the Mienic, even further to the east. Second, cultural resemblances between Ho Ne and Mienic peoples have been noted. They have been referred to in Chinese historical documents as the “She-Yao people”, their own migration legends have them following the path of the Mien, and they share with the Mien the myth that their ancestor was an imperial dog who wedded three daughters of the Emperor and was given dominion over the mountain forests.

Although suggestive, these geographical and cultural clues are no more than “circumstantial evidence”, even according to Chen. But it is of even less use than he believes: it is well known that in this family linguistic affiliation and cultural markers such as dress, ritual, and folk history are not neatly correlated. For example, the Bunu “Yao” (so-called because of their cultural practices) speak dialects of “Miao” and the “Miao” of Hainan Island speak Min, a “Yao” language. So this type of “evidence” is practically useless.

But more significantly, the linguistic evidence of an intermediate unity of Ho Ne and Mienic is superficial, and this is what finally dooms Chen’s argument that Ho Ne is Mienic. His arguments involve grammar, cultural vocabulary, and typological features which, as Chen acknowledges, are not individually restricted to one branch of the family. But even taking the features he identifies in the aggregate, as he would have us do, the case fails, because each individual feature fails to convince. Briefly, they include the following, among others:

- Facts about relative word order of classifier, noun, and demonstrative, and the structure of the numeral system. These only show that both Mienic languages and Ho Ne have been more influenced by Chinese than the other Hmongic languages.
- The presence of final stop consonants in Ho Ne which Chen believes to be historical retentions, as they are in Mienic. These are evidenced only in words borrowed from Kejia, according to Mao and Meng. Even if these finals were native and ancient, one cannot argue for subgrouping on the basis of a shared retention.

- The presence of a two-way spatial demonstrative contrast in Mien and Ho Ne as opposed to a three-way contrast in Hmongic languages. This is neither safe to use as a diagnostic nor is it correct, given an important source on Mien which Chen did not use (Court 1986), which shows that Mien has a robust three-way system.
- Aspects of the structure and use of reduplicative phrases in Ho Ne. Reduplication type is highly untrustworthy as a family marker since it is iconic in nature. Furthermore, the differences between Hmongic reduplication on the one hand and Mienic/Ho Ne reduplication on the other are not great, but rather subtle and gradient (and would seem even more so, I suspect, were reduplication more fully described in the sources at our disposal).
- Tone sandhi proceeds from right to left (the changed word precedes the word which triggers the change) as in Mienic. Yet this is also a feature of the North Hmongic language, one of the major branches of Hmongic, and one of the major languages of Mienic, Dzaio Min, has both right to left and left to right tone sandhi.

Chen discusses one feature shared by Mien and Ho Ne that could be significant: the development of **ʔl-* to *n-* which took place, according to Chen, only in Mien and Ho Ne. Wang and Mao (1995) reconstruct the only two words which pattern this way, ‘classifier-bowl’ and ‘short’, with a **ʔnl-*. But this, too, becomes murkier upon further examination. First, Mao and Meng (1986) state that *l-* and *n-* are in free variation in Ho Ne. And the interchangeability of *n-* and *l-* is not limited to Ho Ne. For ‘classifier-bowl’ Wang and Mao record *n-* for four Hmongic dialects as well as for Ho Ne and Mienic. The different correspondences reported may be explained as independent innovations, especially since Chen’s postulated change of **ʔl- > *ʔn- > n-* could be attributed to the work of “rhinoglottophilia”, Matisoff’s (1975) term for the natural affiliation of nasals and glottal stops.

4.0. HO NE IS HMONGIC: A REVIEW OF THE LEXICAL, PHONOLOGICAL, AND MORPHOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

What follows is a review of some of the lexical, phonological, and morphological evidence from Mao and Meng 1982, Meng 1993, and from my own research which helps establish Ho Ne as Hmongic.

4.1. Lexical

Certain common lexical items are consistently represented by different roots in Hmongic and Mienic. In each of these oft-cited cases, Ho Ne shares the Hmongic root:

	<i>Ho Ne</i> <i>M&M 86</i>	<i>West Hm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>East Hm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>NorthHm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>Mien</i> <i>TT 93</i>	<i>Mun</i> <i>TT 93</i>
spirit	kji ¹	tɕaŋ ¹	ɕjaŋ ¹	qwei ¹	miəŋ ³	mwan ³
clothing/ coat	ɔ ³	—	u ³	ə ³	lu:i ¹ Downer 91	
intestine	ŋjɔ ³	ŋo ³	—	ɕe ³	ka:ŋ ²	kla:ŋ ²
pig	pui ⁵	mpua ⁵	pa ⁵	mpa ⁵	tu:ŋ ⁴	toŋ ⁴
beard/ mustache	ŋji ^{4/6}	—	ŋaŋ ⁶	ŋi ⁶	sja:m ¹	ʂom ¹
girl	phui ^{4/6}	ntshai ⁷	phi ⁷	mpha ⁷	siə? ⁷	ɕa: ⁷
meat	kwe ²	ŋka ² <i>Bunu</i>	ŋa ²	Nqai ²	o ³	—

And despite the influence of Kejia on Ho Ne, certain HmM roots that have been displaced by Chinese (primarily Cantonese) borrowings in all branches of Mienic are retained in Ho Ne:

	<i>Ho Ne</i> <i>M&M 86</i>	<i>West Hm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>East Hm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>NorthHm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>Mien</i> <i>TT 93</i>	<i>Mun</i> <i>TT 93</i>	<i>Cantonese</i> <i>TT 93</i>
white	kjɔ ¹	tɕeu ¹	ɕu ¹	qwə ¹	pe? ⁸	pe ⁸	pak
thick	tui ¹	tua ¹	ta ¹	ta ¹	ho ⁴	hu ⁴	hou
tooth	mun ³	ŋa ³	ŋhi ³	ɕe ³	ŋa: ²	ŋa: ²	ŋa
paper	tɔ ³	ntəu ³	tu ³	ntə ³	sou ¹	θou ¹	su Mand.
pot	vun ⁴	za ⁴	vi ⁴	wε ⁴	tshɛŋ ¹	tseŋ ¹	tshaŋ

4.2. Phonological

The following are developments in the segmental phonology of these languages that argue in favor of an intermediate node linking Ho Ne and Hmongic.

4.2.1. Phonological developments shared with individual branches or dialects of Hmongic

- As in East Hmongic and the Nunu dialect of Bunu (West Hmongic), prenasalized voiceless obstruents (preserved in North and West Hmongic)

become voiceless obstruents. Compare the development to voiced obstruents in Mienic:

	<i>Ho Ne</i> <i>M&M 86</i>	<i>East Hm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>West Hm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>Mien</i> <i>TT 93</i>
long	ta ³	ta ³	nte ³	da:u ³
wear hat	tɔŋ ⁵	tə ⁵	ntɔŋ ⁵	doŋ ⁵
straw	kan ¹	qɛ ¹	nqen ¹	gan ¹
salt	tɕa ³	ɕi ³	ŋtɕe ³	dzau ³
launder	tsji ³	sho ⁵	ntshua ⁵	dzo ⁵
blood	sji ³	ɕhaŋ ³	ŋtɕhaŋ ³	dzya:m ³

•As in the Nunu dialect of Bunu (West Hmongic), PHmM voiced initials have become voiceless aspirates (probably through an intermediate stage of voiced aspirates, which are attested in the NE Yunnan dialect of West Hmongic):⁵

	<i>Ho Ne</i> <i>Meng 93</i>	<i>Bunu</i> <i>(Nunu)</i> <i>Meng 93</i>	<i>East Hm</i> <i>Meng 93</i>	<i>Mien</i> <i>Meng 93</i>
nine	khiu ²	tɕhou ²	tɕə ²	dwo ²
gate / door	khɔŋ ²	tshaŋ ²	tə ²	tɕɛ:ŋ ²
fire	tho ⁴	thu ⁴	tu ⁴	təu ⁴
die	tha ⁶	tho ⁶	ta ⁶	tai ⁶

•The following Ho Ne forms more closely resemble the Hmongic forms and may retain place features from the protolanguage (reconstructions unsure):

- (1) Ho Ne 'rain' has a coronal, like Hmongic, whereas labials appear in Mienic:

	<i>Ho Ne</i> <i>M&M 86</i>	<i>Gaopo</i> <i>Wang 79</i>	<i>East Hm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>NorthHm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>Mien</i> <i>TT 93</i>	<i>BiaoMin</i> <i>DS 85</i>	<i>Mun</i> <i>TT 93</i>
rain	nuŋ ^{4/6}	naŋ ⁶	noŋ ⁶	noŋ ⁶	bju:ŋ ⁶	blə ⁴	boŋ ⁶

- (2) Ho Ne 'hand' has a velar, like Hmongic Gaopo, whereas labials appear in Mienic:⁶

⁵ For confirmation, observe that this non-historical aspiration does not appear on words with odd-numbered tones, which had voiceless initial consonants in the protolanguage (with one exception in the data above: 'to kick' *thja*⁵, for which I have no explanation).

⁶ The velar in Ho Ne and Gaopo probably comes from an old prefix (compare 'wing' in section 5.3 below).

	<i>Ho Ne</i> <i>M&M 86</i>	<i>Gaopo</i> <i>Wang 79</i>	<i>East Hm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>NorthHm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>Mien</i> <i>TT 93</i>	<i>BiaoMin</i> <i>DS 85</i>	<i>Mun</i> <i>TT 93</i>
hand	khwa ⁴	kæ ⁴	pi ⁴	tur ⁴	puə ⁴	pau ⁴	pu ⁴

4.2.2. Syllable structure arguments

The most commonly recognized distinction between Hmongic and Mienic is that Hmongic languages retain original complex initials while Mienic languages retain complex finals. Ho Ne has a simplified inventory of finals, like Hmongic. Its initials are simplified, too, but as we have just seen, certain specific simplifications have counterparts on the Hmongic side of the family.

As in Hmongic, Ho Ne exhibits loss of PHmM final oral stops and reduction of final nasal contrasts, while *-p*, *-t*, *-ʔ* (< *-k*), *-m*, *-n*, *-ŋ* are preserved in Mienic:

	<i>Ho Ne</i> <i>M&M 86</i>	<i>Bunu</i> <i>MMZ 82</i>	<i>Gaopo</i> <i>Wang 79</i>	<i>Zhongdi</i> <i>Wang 79</i>	<i>Mien</i> <i>TT 93</i>	<i>Mun</i> <i>TT 93</i>
bean	tho ⁸	tyu ⁸	tə ⁸	tu ⁸	top ⁸	tap ⁸
eight	zi ⁸	ju ⁸	zɑ ⁸	zi ⁸	hiət ⁸	jat ⁸
six	kɔ ⁵	ʈyu ⁵	ʈə ⁵	ʂu ⁵	tɕu ⁷	kjo ⁷
water	ɔŋ ²	aŋ ¹	oŋ ¹	aŋ ¹	ʎuəm ¹	wam ¹
person	ne ²	nu ²	ɲin ²	—	miən ²	mun ²
good	ŋɔŋ ⁵	ɣaŋ ⁵	zɔŋ ⁵	zɑŋ ⁵	loŋ ⁵	gɔŋ ⁵

According to Mao and Meng (1986), any Ho Ne words with final *-t* and *-p* are Kejia borrowings.

As in Hmongic, Ho Ne has fewer diphthongs than in Mienic, and no vowel length contrasts:

	<i>Ho Ne</i> <i>M&M 86</i>	<i>West Hm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>East Hm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>NorthHm</i> <i>Wang 85</i>	<i>Mien</i> <i>TT 93</i>
salt	tɕa ³	ɲtɕe ³	ɕi ³	ɲtɕur ³	dzau ³
long	ta ³	nɛ ³	ta ³	ntu ³	da:u ³
kill	ta ⁵	tua ⁵	—	ta ⁵	tai ⁵
ask	no ⁴	no ⁶	ne ⁶	ne ⁶	nai ⁶

4.3. Morphological

Meng 1993 reports that the hallmark Hmongic nominal prefixes are found in Ho Ne, but are not productive and give the appearance of relic forms. It is not

clear whether nominal prefixes should be reconstructed for PHmM; at any rate, they do not appear in the Mienic languages.

	<i>Ho Ne</i>	<i>West Hm Bunu</i>	<i>North Hm</i>	<i>East Hm</i>	<i>Mien</i>
wing	ka ¹ -tai ⁶	ka ¹ -to ⁷	qɔ ¹ -tei ⁷	qa ¹ -ta ⁷	dart
ant	ta ¹ -phui ³	ka ³ -mphai ³	ta ¹ -mp ^h a ³	—	dzjou ³
flea	ka ¹ -mɔ ¹	ka ¹ -mɔŋ ¹	—	ka ¹ -m ^h en ¹	mwo ¹

5.0. HO NE IS HMONGIC: NEW TONE CHANGE EVIDENCE

Downer (1991) has written that among the phonological evidence for the separation of the family into two branches, Miao (Hmongic) and Yao (Mienic),

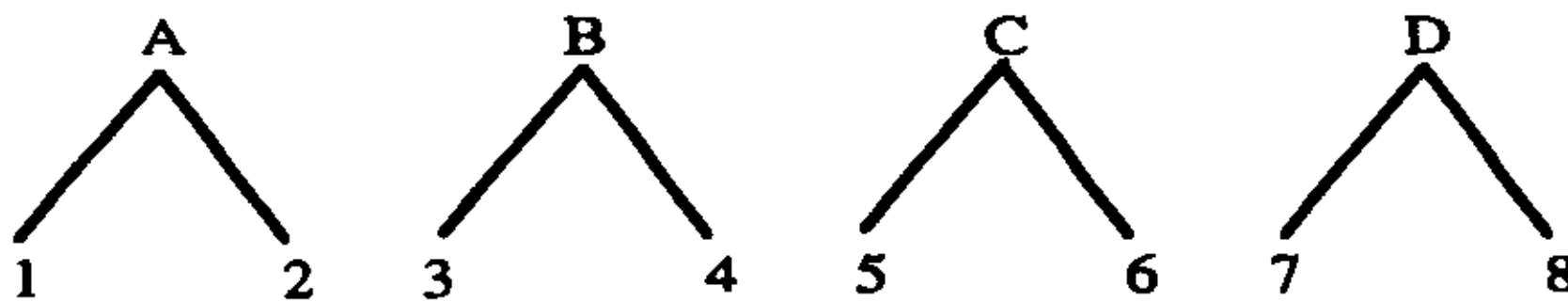
The most conclusive evidence for separate development may be seen in the Miao treatment of words with tones *7 and *8, which remain as such in Yao, but for which Miao has split the finals into two groups, -p and -t remaining with tones 7 and 8, but words with *-k becoming tones 5 and 6, with consequent merger with words with original PMY *5 and *6. This innovation is not found in Yao (although other mergers may occur). (1991:41)⁷

The importance of this innovation is also mentioned by Strecker (1987c), as one reason to posit a split “between Mienic and everything else”.

This Hmongic innovation taken together with a specific Ho Ne innovation, the loss of a distinctive reflex of historical category *6 and the merger with the reflex of historical category *4, give us the final evidence we need to definitively assign Ho Ne to the Hmongic branch.

First, here are examples of Ho Ne behaving like a Hmongic language, changing tone 7 to tone 5 for words which may be reconstructed with a velar final:

⁷ Proto-tone categories A-D. Transphonologization of initial voicing contrast leads to split into 8 tones: the odd-numbered ones (1, 3, 5, 7) < *voiceless initials, the even-numbered ones (2, 4, 6, 8) < *voiced initials.



•PHmM 7 → Hmongic/Ho Ne 5 when from $*C_{[-voice]}Vk (> CV?)$:

	<i>Ho Ne</i> M&M 86	<i>East Hm</i> Wang 85	<i>Mien</i> TT 93
kick	thja ⁵	tei ⁵	di ⁷
six	ko ⁵	tu ⁵	tɕu ⁷
hundred	pa ⁵	pa ⁵	pɛ ⁷
red	sji ⁵	—	si ⁷

Second, here are examples of the Ho Ne merger of tone category 6 with tone category 4:

•PHmM 6 → Ho Ne 4:

	<i>Ho Ne</i> M&M 86	<i>West Hm</i> Wang 85	<i>Mien</i> TT 93
die	tha ^{4/6}	tua ⁶	tai ⁶
ask	no ^{4/6}	no ⁶	nai ⁶
rain	nuŋ ^{4/6}	naŋ ⁶	bjuŋ ⁶
be fat	khun ^{4/6}	tau ⁶	kun ⁶
beard	ŋji ^{4/6}	ŋaŋ ⁶ <i>East Hm</i>	—

Finally, here is the correspondence which shows the relative chronology of these two tone changes. First, Proto-Hmongic (including incipient Ho Ne) changes tone 8 to tone 6 for words which may be reconstructed with a velar final, then the specific Ho Ne merger of 6 with 4 affects both original tone 6 category words, as shown in the table above, and those tone 6 words which arose from this older change of 8 to 6, some examples of which are given below:

•PHmM 8 → Hmongic/Ho Ne 6 when from $*C_{[+voice]}Vk$, then → Ho Ne 4:

	<i>Ho Ne</i> M&M 86	<i>Hmongic</i> Wang 85	<i>Mien</i> TT 93
bird	no ^{4/6}	noŋ ⁶ (West Hm)	no ⁸
enter	pho ^{4/6}	pə ⁶ (East Hm)	piə ⁸
read	tho ^{4/6}	tu ^{8!} (East Hm)	to ⁸
mat	tsha ^{4/6}	—	tsi ⁸
few; little	tshu ^{4/6}	tɕeu ⁶ (West Hm)	tsu ⁸

A final Ho Ne tone merger involves reflexes of tone categories 7 and 8 for those words *not* ending in a velar. Therefore the relative chronology of the three tone changes is as follows:

1. Hmongic D (7, 8) merges with C (5, 6) when *CVk
2. Ho Ne 6 and 4 merge (modern [42])
3. The remaining Ho Ne D-tone words from *CVp and *CVt merge, regardless of voicing of initial (modern [35])

The historical interpretation of these changes is straightforward, given independent studies of the relative strength of final stop consonants in final position (for example Strecker 1986). Languages of the Hmongic branch lost final *-k* before they lost final *-p* and *-t* (this historical stage is reflected in the syllable inventories of the modern-day Mienic languages, in which syllables of the shape CVp, CVt, and, if anything, CV? are found). Before the loss of the remaining final stop consonants, the tone merger of 6 and 4 occurred, which affected both words with an original 6 tone and with this derived 6 tone.

I should add that there are similar-looking tone mergers within Mienic: Biao Min merged tones 4, 6, and 8 (Solnit 1985) and Northern Mien merged 5 and 7 (Theraphan 1993). But, crucially, none of these particular mergers is common to all Mienic languages and dialects; they occurred independently and sporadically within this branch of the family.⁸ The Hmongic merger of 8 and 6 for *CVk is evidenced in all Hmongic languages and dialects and is therefore old; the Ho Ne merger of 6 and 4 is particular to that language and is therefore more recent. And most importantly, in neither Biao Min nor Northern Mien is there evidence of a tone change which affected D-tone words of a certain composition separately as in Hmongic and Ho Ne. This is the Hmongic branch innovation which provides the best evidence for an intermediate Hmongic/Ho Ne node.

6.0. CONCLUSION

Although Meng and Mao give good evidence for Ho Ne as Hmongic, strong enough even in the absence of other evidence to make the case, the lexical and phonological evidence they give for the connection could be challenged: (1) the shared forms in section 4.1 could be intra-family borrowings, and/or missing-link cognates in Mienic could have been replaced by borrowings; (2) the phonological changes common to Hmongic and Ho Ne

⁸ The merger of the even-numbered tones is not surprising on phonetic grounds, since tones that arise from proto-voiced initials often share phonation type and phonation type is frequently one of the components of tone in the SEAsian area.

in section 4.2 could be independent developments; and (3) shared retention and shared loss arguments are inherently weak as evidence for subgrouping.

But the tonal evidence involves the relative chronology of *Lautgesetze*, and the sum of these changes cannot be dismissed as shared retentions, shared losses, or changes likely to have occurred independently because they are simple and natural. Since the 8 → 6 change provided input for the Ho Ne 6 → 4 merger, and since this earlier change has been taken as the strongest evidence that Hmongic constitutes a separate branch of the family, it is difficult to imagine a scenario other than a period of common development for Hmongic and the Ho Ne language, followed by a split between the two on the basis of lexical and phonological developments, including the independent Ho Ne tonal merger of 6 and 4.

I think this is one of those happy times when a linguistic problem can be pronounced “solved”, and need not be dealt with further. It is even possible to take a piece of Chen’s circumstantial evidence and reinterpret it in the light of these linguistic findings: in Kuang Lou’s *Red Elegance*, written during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), we find reference to the fact that the Mien referred to the Ho Ne as “guests”, using a character which also means “latecomers” (Chen 1984: 212). This is in fact what they would have been had they moved East to Guangdong only in relatively recent times, leaving behind those whom Mao and Meng believe were their nearest ancestors, the Bunu Yao of Guangxi, who speak a Hmongic language.

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