SUBGROUPING OF MIENIC LANGUAGES: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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1. Introduction

The Mienic languages constitute one of the two main branches of the Hmong-Mien (or Miao-Yao) language family. There have been numerous attempts to link the Hmong-Mien language family with others. Chinese linguists consider that Hmong-Mien is a subfamily of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Benedict has put forward a controversial proposal, called the Austro-Tai hypothesis, that Austroasiatic, Kadai and Hmong-Mien are all related (1975). Later this hypothesis was expanded to include Japanese (Benedict 1990). These are just the two most well known of the numerous attempts to link the Hmong-Mien language family with others (other proposals are listed in Huffman 1986:574 and Voegelin and Voegelin 1977:228). The most recent proposal comes from Peiros (1998), who presents evidence linking Austroasiatic and Hmong-Mien. None of these proposals are generally accepted and most western linguists simply note this and do not discuss the issue in detail.

Approximately 706,000 speakers of Mienic languages live in China (Wang and Mao 1995:13–16), 474,000 in Vietnam (Dang et al. 1993:149; 2000:183), 22,665 in Laos (State Planning Committee 1997:15), 40,000 in Thailand and 25,000 in Western countries (Purnell 1999). This gives a total of 1.27 million speakers.

2. Subgrouping

The study of Mienic languages is still in its infancy. Only Iu-Mien as spoken in Thailand has been described in any substantial detail. There is a phonology (Purnell 1965), some dictionaries (Lombard and Purnell 1968; Panh 1995; Purnell et al. forthcoming) and a grammar of this language (Court 1986). There are sketch phonologies, grammars and dictionaries of some of the others (Chao 1930; Downer 1961; Mao and Chou 1972; Mao et al. 1982; Mao et al. 1992; Savina 1926; Shintani and Yang 1990; Solnit 1985; Wong 1939). Reconstruction of the proto-languages has received the most attention (for a comprehensive discussion of previous work on Hmong-Mien historical phonology, see Niederer 1998).
Four different subgroupings of Mienic languages have been published. As the earlier subgroupings have influenced the later we will discuss them in chronological order. However, comparing and assessing reconstructions and subgroupings of Mienic languages is complicated by the use of different data sets and a profusion of language names. Four language names commonly occur with minimal variation in their names: Iu Mien, Kim Mun, Biao Min and Dzao Min. However in addition to these names many others are used with most authors using completely different ones. Describing a language by giving the place where the data was collected is, in general, insufficient to identify it uniquely as Mienic peoples have migrated so much that their languages are quite interspersed. Nevertheless in this paper we make some attempt to reconcile the various language names.

**Purnell 1970**

The first subgrouping of Mienic languages was proposed by Purnell in his reconstruction of Proto-Hmong-Mien (1970:137). Purnell’s pioneering study was seriously limited by the lack of quality data available except for the Chiengrai variety of Iu Mien (1970:2–3, 115). Nevertheless his subgrouping has stood the test of time. In brief, the Iu Mien group preserves the voiceless sonorants while the Kim Mun group has merged them with the voiced ones (1970:136).

![Figure 1: Subgrouping proposed by Purnell (1970:137).](image)

In Figure 1, as in subsequent diagrams, we have used the author’s original language names. The names in parentheses serve to reconcile the names used by the different scholars, or by the same scholar at different times. Some phonological changes are listed on the tree.
diagram as well. These are some of the shared innovations that form the basis for the subgrouping.

In China, Yao is the name of an officially recognised minority nationality, which includes mother tongue speakers of Mienic, Hmongic and Tai-Kadai languages. Mien 'people' is an autonym of the speakers of Lu Mien, the largest Mienic language. The autonyms of the other Mienic languages include cognates of this term. Hence this name for this group of languages is to be preferred.

Hsing-an is the name of the county in Guilin Prefecture, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region where the data for this variety was collected (Mao and Chou 1972:240). In Chinese this is written 兴安 (Mao and Zhou 1962). Comparison of the Mien wordlist in (Mao and Zhou 1962:147) with the Guangdian wordlist in (Wang and Mao 1995:13–16) reveals an almost exact match once the difference in the way of marking the lengths of vowels in the different sources is taken into account.²

Mao, Meng and Zheng 1982

![Diagram of language relationships]

**Figure 2: Subgrouping proposed by Mao, Meng and Zheng (1982:61).**

This subgrouping was arrived at by considering a combination of the following three factors: vocabulary, phonetic differences and grammatical characteristics (Mao et al. 1982:61). It is not based on an historical reconstruction. The languages on the far right are listed
in the footnotes not in the body of the text. It has been followed (except for
the details in the footnotes) by Strecker (1987:3) and has
been widely quoted in the literature. In this subgrouping Ao Biao,
L-Thongkum’s Muen, is part of the Iu Mien group (Mao et al.

L-Thongkum 1993

This subgrouping is based on data personally collected by
L-Thongkum in Thailand and China and her subsequent reconstruc-
tion (1993:170). The reconstruction is based on 351 cognates from a
list of 500 words (L-Thongkum 1993:166).

![Figure 3: Subgrouping proposed by L-Thongkum (1993:170).](image)

The Mienic language spoken in Thailand is homogenous
(L-Thongkum 1993:163). Hence we can equate Purnell’s Chiengrai
variety with L-Thongkum’s Western Mien—data from both of which
was collected in northern Thailand. L-Thongkum’s states that the
language she calls Muen is spoken by the Ao Yao and that the data
was collected in Jìnxiù (金秀) county, Guangxi province (1993:164).
The language that these people speak is called Aò Bìào (坳标) and
there are a little over a thousand speakers living in Jinxiu county
(Mao et al. 1982:7, 9 footnote 1).

This tree looks remarkably similar to that of Purnell’s above.
However this similarity may be coincidental as it is unclear how
similar the languages without names in parentheses in the two sub-
groupings really are.

East and West Mien are characterised by their retention of Proto-
Mjuen voiceless sonorants. In North Mien, Mun (Kim Mun) and
Muen (Ao Biao) the reflexes of voiceless sonorants are voiced sono-