LANGUAGE POLICY FOR MINORITY LANGUAGES
IN THAILAND AND CHINA

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Introduction
There are five large minority groups found both in Thailand and in China; they are the Lahu (Musur), Akha (Ikaw), Lisu, Mong (Hmong, Meo, Miao) and Mien (Yao). Each of these groups also lives in two or more other countries including Laos, Myanmar, India and Vietnam. The total current population of these five transnational minorities is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Transnational minorities, Thailand and China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>group</th>
<th>total population</th>
<th>China population</th>
<th>Thailand population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lahu</td>
<td>630,000</td>
<td>360,000</td>
<td>65,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akha</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>255,000</td>
<td>38,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisu</td>
<td>850,000</td>
<td>575,000</td>
<td>28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mong</td>
<td>5,000,000</td>
<td>4,200,000</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mien</td>
<td>1,800,000</td>
<td>1,400,000</td>
<td>38,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While each of these five languages has substantial internal dialect diversity, in all but one case there is a generally-agreed standard dialect used as a lingua franca and for writing. The Lahu standard is Black Lahu, the Lisu is northern Lisu, the Mong standard is White Hmong (very similar to the Green Mong of Thailand), and the Mien standard is Mien as spoken in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and parts of China as well as among refugees elsewhere. The composite Hani nationality of China, as discussed below, includes diverse languages and the standard Hani chosen there is fairly similar to Akha but not identical. Printing and other media including the regular radio broadcasts by the Thai government and Chinese government stations use Black Lahu, northern Lisu, Mong (in Thailand, Yunnan and parts of Guizhou) and Mien (in various areas including Thailand, Yunnan and Guangxi) and to a small extent Hani; in the Akha
area of China, Xishuangbanna, there are even more limited Akha broadcasts; these are much more extensive in Thailand.

Thailand
The general Thai policy towards hill tribes is very supportive, providing substantial assistance in education, medical care, marketing traditional products, new crops and roads to transport them to markets on. This process has been increasingly rapid over the last twenty years, and has been very strongly supported by members of the Royal Family, the Border Patrol Police, the Public Welfare Department, and many other government agencies. There have been some problems in the delivery of government services arising from remoteness and Thai attitudes to hill tribes, and economic problems associated with population pressure and land scarcity - augmented by a very large-scale movement of Thais into traditional hill tribe areas and increasingly by restrictions on land use and crops over the last twenty years. In general the transitional, integrative policies of the Thai government do not support the maintenance of traditional culture and language.

Special institutions for the hill tribes include a number of nikhoms (welfare centers); the Tribal Research Institute in Chiangmai; a number of handicraft distribution and sales operations, several sponsored by members of the Royal Family; and various hostels in towns such as Fang, Chiangmai, Chiangrai and elsewhere where hill tribe children stay while studying at schools in the town. As the schools provided in many hill tribe villages tend to reach only lower primary, such hostels are urgently needed but so far have mainly been provided by Christian organizations, not the government.

One result of the various programs which do reach the villages is rapidly increasing ability of the hill tribes to speak Thai, especially among those (mainly Christian) young people who manage to attend schools in towns and become able to participate fully in Thai society by acquiring professional qualifications. Literacy in Thai is still not widespread, but speaking and understanding Thai to some degree is now virtually universal. Insofar as they are literate in their own languages, these groups in Thailand use missionary-devised romanized scripts. Naturally it is
mainly the Christians, assisted by missionaries, who achieve literacy in their first language - usually in tandem with study of the Thai curriculum in schools partly supported by the community or the missionaries, or in extra classes run by local pastors.

The Lahu romanization was devised in the 1920s in Myanmar by Protestants and is very widely used there and in Thailand by Christians who form about a third of the Lahu population of Thailand. Based on this is the Akha romanization devised in the 1950s and more recently introduced into Thailand with rather restricted success. There is a competing Catholic romanization for Lahu, but this is much less used. The Mong romanization was agreed upon in the 1950s by Protestant and Catholic missionaries in Laos, and has subsequently spread into Thailand via refugee populations; despite its many digraphs, it is very widely used especially in refugee camps. Also very widespread (but perhaps less in Thailand than in Myanmar) is the Fraser script for Lisu, devised in the 1920s and using upright and inverted capital letters, some in rather novel phonetic values. The most recent Mien romanization has not spread as widely as the Lahu, Mong or Lisu scripts; Mien also have a tradition of using Chinese characters for liturgical purposes. Other competing indigenous scripts have been developed for Lisu (see Bradley and Kane 1981) and for Mong (see Smalley et al. 1990) but have had very limited dissemination.

While the Thai government has expressed its preference that hill tribe languages be written with Thai-based scripts, those which have been devised have met with little success; for some examples see Smalley (1976). This preference does not extend to the prohibition of missionary-devised roman scripts, though of course the government also does nothing to support these. In general, it wishes to ensure that the hill tribes are good citizens, increasingly forming a part of the Thai nation albeit culturally and linguistically distinct. This is not incompatible with literacy in the hill tribe language as long as it is accompanied by knowledge of Thai.
China
The official policy on nationalities derives from Lenin's policy, which recognises the rights of minorities and seeks to establish and develop grouped nationalities based on combinations of one or more similar minorities. At present there are 55 recognized national minorities in China; the process of recognition as a national minority is long and complicated. The right of nationalities to maintain their languages and cultures is embodied in the Chinese constitution; conversely, nationalities may also choose not to maintain them. Autonomous regions, prefectures, counties and lower-level units are established for the recognized nationalities; but like everything else in China the actual degree of local autonomy is determined by general political trends throughout the country.

There has been a conscious effort to improve the living standards of the nationalities, with large subsidies going to their autonomous areas. On the other hand many traditional aspects of culture which were judged to be out of step with Communist ideology have been eliminated. The positive side of this process has created local industry, communication and education networks and economic development; but this has also brought very large numbers of Han Chinese into every part of China, and thus has greatly increased the exposure of the national minorities to Chinese language and culture.

There are various official bodies which provide special linguistic services for recognized national minorities. Many of these are controlled from the State Nationality Affairs Commission at the China-wide level, with provincial and local offshoots. Special provision is made for education in the form of Institutes of Nationalities scattered around the country in relevant provincial capitals, and also special primary and secondary schools at lower levels. In admission to these and other educational institutions as in many other things members of national minorities receive preferential treatment. There is extensive media provision through national and various provincial Nationalities Publishing Houses, central, provincial and prefectural radio and translation services, editions of Chinese newspapers and magazines and original periodicals in the languages of various national minorities. Maintenance of culture is meant to be provided through national