Chinese Hmu or Hmu Chinese?

– Chinese Loanwords and Calques in the Hmu Newspaper

_Baod Leix Hmub Leix Gud_

Joakim Enwall

Stockholm University

Introductory remarks

The purpose of this paper is to present a picture of the present status of written Hmu, using the newspaper _Baod Leix Hmub Leix Gud_ as an illustrative example. It also provides a brief historical introduction to Hmu writing in order to facilitate an understanding of the sociolinguistic setting. The author is convinced that the present conditions for Hmu writing are quite representative for many of the writing systems devised for the earlier illiterate/literate peoples in southwest China in the 1950s and propagated from the early 1980s onwards and thus provides some glimpses of the actual work being carried out by the language and writing authorities in the minority areas on the local level. For further details of writing in Hmu and other Miao languages in China, cf. Enwall 1994 and 1995.

Introduction

The Hmu language of the Miao language group, or, one might also argue, the Hmu dialect in the Miao language, is spoken by some 1.5 million people in the southeastern part of Guizhou province in southwest China — mainly in the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture. By the Chinese and in older Western sources this language was referred to as the Black Miao dialect,
Chinese Hei Miao. Out of these 1.5 million people around 65% speak the northern vernacular, which has served as the basis for all writing systems devised for Hmu. The self-designations used by the speakers of Hmu are Hmu, Hme and Ghab Nes. The area in which Hmu is spoken is relatively homogenous linguistically, compared to other neighbouring areas. Apart from an increasing number of Chinese there are Dong, which constitute the second minority in the prefectural autonomy, some Buyi and also some speakers of a Hmong dialect, i.e. Western Miao. The speakers of Hmong refer to themselves as Ghao-Hmong and were earlier called Gedou/Keh Deo by Chinese and Westerners. Many of the people speaking this language speak Hmu as their second or third language, depending on whether they live near Hmu or Chinese speakers.

The Hmu area has for a long time been one of the richest Miao areas, with relatively prosperous farmers with rice and maize as their main crops. It has also been one of the most important strongholds against sinization in the Miao area. Several rebellions against the Chinese rule started in this area, particularly after the introduction of the reform to abolish local hereditary rule and transfer the power to Chinese Mandarins in the 1740s. After a bloody suppression of these rebellions many Miao fled to other areas. Almost all Hmong in the area fled to the neighbouring countries in the south, mainly Vietnam and later also to Thailand, Laos and Burma. Most Hmu stayed on, however, and the only Hmu living outside China have been reported by the Vietnamese scholar Nguyen Van Loi, who mentions a group comprising less than 1000 individuals in northern Vietnam (Nguyen Van Loi 1983:12-14). The Hmu is thus one of the most geographically concentrated Miao groups.

In the 19th century an increasing number of Chinese started to move to the area, mainly after the suppression of Zhang Xiumeiis rebellion during the reign of the Tongzhi emperor. By the turn of the century Kaili – the capital of the prefecture – was basically a Chinese city, and Chinese townships grew up in many places around Kaili, often quite close to the Hmu villages. Those Hmu who wanted to advance in the Chinese society thus had an opportunity to put their children in Chinese schools.
Early Hmu Writing

In 1895 the China Inland Mission started missionary work among the Hmu. Soon missionaries were sent to the Hmu heartland, to Panghai village on the Qingshuijiang river. The missionaries preached through an interpreter, but soon they reduced the language to writing in Latin script. No samples have been preserved of this writing, which can be seen as a sign, though of doubtful scientific value, that this writing system was never used extensively, perhaps not even in printed form. A school was opened around the turn of the century and the attitude towards written Hmu was described by one of the missionaries, Samuel Clarke (1911):

When we opened a school at Panghai some years ago, and offered to teach the scholars to write their own language in the Roman script, the parents would not consent, but wished their children to learn to read and write Chinese. Their way of looking at the matter is not hard to understand. What writing they have to do must be done for them in Chinese. Any Miao who can read and write passably may easily make his living among his neighbours by doing their reading and writing for them. All proclamations and official notifications, all pleas and counter-pleas in law cases have to be written in Chinese.

The development of Hmu writing before 1949

Around 1920 the Australian missionary Maurice H. Hutton introduced the National Phonetic Script, i.e. the so-called bo-po-mo-fo, to write Hmu, and between 1928 and 1934 the Gospels, a Catechism, a Hymn Book and finally the whole New Testament were published in Hmu. The number of Christians in the area was, however, quite limited, and can be estimated to altogether a few hundred people. Out of these it may be reasonable to assume that around 100 persons learnt the National Phonetic Script-based writing for Hmu. It is thus not so much for the impact on literacy that the early translations into Hmu may be of interest to us. It is rather the language of these translations. A problem is that these translated texts are the only Hmu texts of any length available to us before around 1950, and the texts from the early 1950s are of two strongly divergent kinds – folkloristic texts
which preserve an older poetic language, and political texts translated from Chinese. There are thus no samples of the ordinary spoken language. In evaluating the Bible translations we furthermore have to take into account that not only Hutton was influenced by Chinese, the language he had used for his missionary work during his first ten years in China, but also that those four or five Hmu Christians who took part in the translation work may have considered Chinese-like words and expressions to have a higher status than those purely Hmu.

The Hmu writing conference in 1956

Between 1955 and 1956 almost all varieties of Miao were recorded by field linguists, as this material should serve as the basis for the Miao writing system or systems to be devised in the autumn of 1956. At the Conference for Miao Writing held in Guiyang in November 1956 four orthographies were devised for the four chosen standard dialects – Ghao-Xong, Hmu, Hmong and A-Hmao. In 1958 the orthographies were revised in that they were adapted to the Chinese Pinyin System which had been passed by the People’s Congress in the spring of 1958. That same year, however, the use of minority writing systems was stopped and was not resumed until the early 1980s.

The propagation of Hmu writing in the 1980s – ups and downs

The development of Hmu writing 1981–1987 has been analyzed by Sun Ruolan (1989: 118-38), a Zhuang researcher, who presented a paper at the sixth conference of the Association for bilingual education of minorities. Sun described the three phases of the development as the rise (1981–3), the summit (1984–5) and the fall (1986–7).

In the spring of 1981 the authorities in Guizhou decided that teaching in Hmu should officially be taken up again, and in November the government of the Qiandongnan Autonomous Prefecture sent out a document about the resumption of the work on minority writing systems, and the prefectural Nationalities Affairs Commission shouldered the responsibility of carrying out the first experiments