

**REVIEW OF *LES LANGUES HMONG-MJEN (MIAO-YAO):
PHONOLOGIE HISTORIQUE* by BARBARA NIEDERER**

David Mortensen

University of California, Berkeley

Sometimes the most useful works of scholarship are not those which present original insights into problems, but those that collect and synthesize the hard-won findings of earlier scholarship, providing a comprehensive reference which consolidates the accomplishments of the discipline. One such work is Barbara Niederer's *Les langues Hmong-Mjen: phonologie historique*. This book was published in 1998, but despite its great importance for Hmong-Mien studies, it has not yet (to my knowledge) been subject to a published review. This may be due in part to the relative obscurity of the Hmong-Mien language family. After all, the community of Hmong-Mien historical phonologists is not a large one. However, the central position of the Hmong-Mien (HmM) languages in the East/Southeast Asian linguistic area should make them of interest to a broad range of scholars working on other languages in that area, and Niederer's book will be of great value to such scholars.

The cover design of *Les langues Hmong-Mjen* (hereafter *LLHM*) is not unattractive, but—as is to be expected of Lincom Europa publications—the quality of the printing and binding is not commensurate with the price of the book. The quality of the content compensates for its disappointing presentation, but the book's exorbitant cost may make it a difficult purchase for some readers.

LLHM is logically structured, its first chapter providing an introduction to the Hmong-Mien languages, including their geographic distribution and some notes on their history. It also provides an outline of the work of important figures in HmM historical linguistics, starting with Li Fang Kuei. Understandably, this review concentrates upon those linguists who have contributed original data to HmM studies (Chang Kun, André-Georges Haudricourt, Herbert Purnell, Wang Fushi, etc.) rather than those who have sought to give historical interpretation to data collected by others (Robert Shafer, Paul K. Benedict, and so on). All in all, Niederer's presentation is judicious and evenhanded. Additionally, this chapter includes an overview of the genetic classification of HmM languages developed by Wang (1985) and Mao, Meng, and Zheng (1982). Niederer does not spend much time arguing either for or against this classification system, although she seems aware of its shortcomings. The most glaring problems with this system, the placement of

Bunu outside of the core “Miao” linguistic group and the placement of Pa-hng within the Bunu group, have long been criticized by Western scholars (see Strecker 1987a, 1987b) and have been rectified in recent Chinese scholarship, notably in Mao & Li (1997) and Huang (1999). It is perhaps unfortunate that the mistakes of the older classificatory scheme are perpetuated in *LLHM*, but this is no great shortcoming, the scheme having proved remarkably robust on the whole.

The second chapter—the most voluminous one—provides phonological inventories and notes for 40 HmM dialect locations. These samples are well chosen and provide a representative sample of HmM languages. For each sketch, the classification of the language or dialect is given, along with various alternate names for the language variety; the location at which the data was gathered; any notable or special characteristics of the phonological system; its onset, rhyme, and tone inventories; and very detailed notes. The notes include discussions of the phonetic nature of segments and tones, different possible phonological interpretations of the inventory data, summaries of tone sandhi patterns, the prefix systems, and even—in the case of Jiading—vowel harmony. The descriptions of tone sandhi are particularly valuable, as much profitable comparative work remains to be done in the area of HmM morphophonemics (building upon pioneering work such as Downer 1967 and Ratliff 1992). The fact that tone sandhi information can be given for so few dialects is a further indication of how much more fieldwork remains to be done on just the tone systems of these languages (leaving aside much larger areas of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicography).

In fact, tone systems are perhaps the best-understood component of Proto-Hmong-Mien phonology. As such, the third chapter, devoted to summarizing the work that has been done on HmM comparative reconstruction, discusses tonal developments at great length. The various types of tonal splits conditioned by onset voicing are exemplified quite exhaustively, providing a clear picture of this aspect of phonological development in HmM. The onsets and rhymes are less thoroughly treated, which is unfortunate. These sections compare Purnell’s (1970) reconstructions of Proto-Hmongic, Proto-Mienic, and Proto-Hmong-Mien with Wang’s (1995) reconstruction of Proto-Hmong and Theraphan’s (1994) reconstruction of Proto-Mienic. For the onsets, the segments and clusters are presented in tabular form, grouped by correspondence set, along with their reflexes in various languages and dialects and the glosses of the etyma belonging to the sets. The full forms are not given. For the rhymes—the most perplexing aspect of HmM historical phonology—the coverage is uncharacteristically scanty: while the manner of presentation is similar to that of the onsets, only four modern language varieties are exemplified in addition to

the reconstructions. Nevertheless, this section does serve as a useful reference. Unfortunately, Niederer does not take into account Wang and Mao's (1995) reconstruction of proto-Hmong-Mien, which despite its shortcomings has provided in its numbered correspondence sets a convenient organizing principle for much of the subsequent HmM comparative work.

But these defects are forgivable given the immense value of what follows. Competing in utility even with the second chapter are Niederer's appendix and bibliography, which serve in my opinion as the single most useful guide to the literature on HmM languages available. The appendix, exhaustive in its scope, is organized by dialect locality. Almost every HmM dialect given substantial mention in prior literature is included, and almost every publication citing useful data from one of the dialect localities is referenced. In addition, Niederer gives the genetic classification of each dialect according to the scheme discussed above and rather detailed geographic information about the dialect locality. Since many of the publications cited in the appendix are not directly concerned with HmM historical phonology, and since Niederer was very thorough in her work, this appendix is useful for researching many subjects other than historical phonology. The bibliography, likewise, is very complete and would be a useful and impressive accomplishment even by itself. Combined with the appendix and phonological descriptions, it provides an organized gateway to data that would have otherwise been inaccessible to many scholars. The bibliographical tools are particularly ground-breaking in that they provide coverage not only of Western and Chinese scholarship, but of Vietnamese publications as well.

At the risk of sounding overly effusive, I feel that *LLHM* is indispensable to any scholar who seeks to understand the HmM languages and their historical role in the Southeast Asian linguistic area. This group, I would argue, should include not only specialists in Hmong-Mien, but students of the surrounding languages of Southern China and peninsular Southeast Asia, and general historical linguists interested in the historical development of tone systems, language contact, and issues of classification and reconstruction.

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