

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” [ʃə⁵⁵], 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.

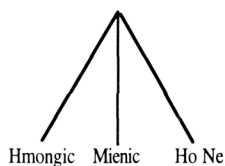


Figure 1a.

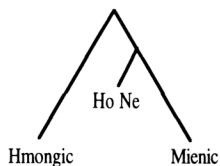


Figure 1b.

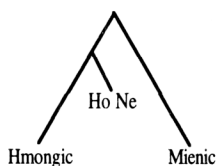


Figure 1c.

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” (*Jiǎnzhì*) 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 **hɔ̌¹**, ‘house’ **ni²**, ‘big’ **vɔŋ²**, ‘small’ **sɔŋ¹**, ‘soft’ **zɔ̌⁴**, ‘eagle/hawk’ **phu⁴**, and ‘eye’ **khɔ̌³** (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, Dzao 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.