



C. Culas

J. Michaud

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In: *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 153 (1997), no: 2, Leiden, 211-243

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CHRISTIAN CULAS and JEAN MICHAUD\*

## A Contribution to the Study of Hmong (Miao) Migrations and History<sup>1</sup>

### *1. Introduction*

There are dozens of mountain tribes inhabiting the northern parts of Burma, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, as well as Southwest China. The whole of this region forms a geographical entity generally known as the Southeast Asian Massif. Its highland plains and mountains for centuries have provided a refuge for relatively small societies trying to keep out of lowland disputes and the fierce competition between powerful foes fighting for control over fertile land and vital trading routes. For centuries the Lolo, or Yi, the Miao and the Chung-chia, or Pu-yi – to name but the most numerous of these groups – criss-crossed the Massif, fleeing from stronger aggressors or simply seeking better opportunities elsewhere; their settlements today are scattered all over these remote mountain ranges.

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<sup>1</sup> This survey of the history of Hmong migrations is part of a project of research on the ethno-history of the Miao/Hmong in Southeast Asia conducted by the same authors. An earlier phase of the research resulted in another, French-language, publication (Michaud and Culas 1997), of which the present article is a revised, updated and expanded version. The authors would like to take this opportunity to thank the British Academy (South-East Asia Committee) for its financial support in the final stage of their research. We are grateful also to Terry King and Jean-Pierre Hassoun for their constructive criticism, as well as the referees of *BKI* whose well-considered comments definitely contributed to an improvement of this paper.

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CHRISTIAN CULAS took his Ph.D. at the University of Provence, where he is currently a research associate, and has specialized in cultural anthropology and ethnohistory. He is also the author of 'Les usages de l'opium chez les Hmong en Asie du Sud-Est', in: P. Le Failler and A. Hubert (eds), *De l'épice à l'extase*, Songkla: Prince of Songkla University Press, 1997, and 'Les Hmong de la péninsule indochinoise: Migrations et histoire', *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines de l'ORSTOM* 3, 1997. Dr. Culas may be contacted at the Institut de Recherche sur le Sud-Est Asiatique (IRSEA), 389, av. du Club Hippique, 13084 Aix-en-Provence, Cedex 2, France (E-mail: IRSEA@romarin.univ-aix.fr).

JEAN MICHAUD, who took his Ph.D. at the Université de Montréal and has specialized in social and cultural anthropology and ethnohistory, is at present a lecturer at the University of Hull. His publications include 'Social Anthropology of Tourism in Ladakh (India)', *Annals of Tourism Research* 18-4 (1991):605-21, and 'Economic Transformation in a Hmong Village of Thailand', *Human Organization* 56-3 (1997). Dr. Michaud may be contacted at the Department of South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX, UK (E-mail: J.Michaud@seas.hull.ac.uk).

However, the fact that they share an eco-region for similar reasons does not make all these societies alike. There are important cultural differences to be observed between their languages, religions, and social organization. Of these mountain tribes, the Hmong probably are the most recent migrants to have arrived in the area to the south of the Southeast Asian Massif. Our primary aim in this paper is to outline the causes and character of the series of Hmong migrations from Southwest China into upper Indochina from the earliest times to the present day. We will complement this picture with an account of the relevant developments in the recent history of each of the countries in the Indochinese Peninsula where the Hmong are to be found. We will conclude with a prognosis of future developments on the basis of the current situation.

There already exist a fair number of summaries of Hmong migrations and Hmong history on the basis of secondary sources, particularly in the form of introductory chapters in the majority of books and doctoral dissertations on this group. These are too numerous to be mentioned specifically here. To possible accusations that we are merely repeating an old story, however, we would reply that the uniqueness of our contribution lies in the fact that: (1) it covers all the territories where Miao/Hmong live or from which they originate, and (2) it draws on the largest number of early, rarely cited, sources, a great many of which were originally written in French and have never been translated into other languages. To give this historical survey a firmer foundation, we will also cite a number of early English-language sources (chiefly British and American), in addition to all the Asian ones that are available in either French or English which we were able to find. The result is a detailed and comprehensive survey of most of the reliable early historical sources in these two languages.<sup>2</sup>

In Laos and in Vietnam, and in a different way in Thailand and China, the relationship between the state and the Hmong minority still is a sensitive issue. We found out to our cost – like numerous colleagues – that field research on the Miao/Hmong in most of these countries is difficult due to local circumstances going back to the past. Reliable historical background information was needed. The decision to write this paper stems from the discovery that there were no published works addressing this question on both a diachronic and a synchronic plane. Most recent attempts only touch on the subject superficially, often from a journalistic viewpoint, overlooking a number of key references (like Hamilton-Merritt 1993 or Quincy 1988), while earlier investigations dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries are outdated, were mainly conducted by mission-

<sup>2</sup> We do appeal to scholars in this field, though, to make available sources in other languages to supplement this picture. Each Asian country where the Miao/Hmong live possesses a number of unique studies in the national language. In other western countries there are also valuable contributions awaiting translation into English, in particular Germany for China, and Russia for Vietnam and Laos.

aries or military observers (both of them often biased ethnographers, needless to say), and are chiefly focused on one particular locality (see, for instance, Clarke 1911, or Lefèvre-Pontalis 1892, 1896).

Although the Hmong of Southeast Asia attracted occasional interest from Asian and western observers over the centuries, it was only after the Second World War that international interest in them began to intensify. Field research began to be conducted on an ever-increasing scale where political circumstances permitted, primarily in Laos and Thailand and, in different circumstances, in northern Vietnam before 1954. Tonkin, under Viet Minh influence, broke away from French Indochina and closed its borders to virtually all foreign observers after the Geneva conference in 1954. China reacted similarly towards the West after the introduction of Communist rule in 1949. Thailand, on the other hand, welcomed 'assistance' and researchers from the First World. Laos was torn between the ideals of a monarchy and communism for several years, so that large parts of its territory were unsafe for western scholars. This historical set of circumstances explains why the majority of academic studies published on the Hmong in Asia still today is based on fieldwork in countries in which the smallest contingents of this group live, Thailand and Laos.

## *2. The Miao: The original group*

We know as a result of modern comparative linguistic research that the history of the Hmong is intimately linked to that of the present Miao of southern China. It is quite a different matter to maintain that Hmong earlier history is also linked to that of the historical 'Miao' as these appear in ancient Chinese texts.

'Le terme Miao, nom ethnique, qui revient fréquemment dans les sources chinoises [du X<sup>e</sup> au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle], prête à confusion; tantôt pris dans un sens étroit, il sert à désigner une ethnie particulière, tantôt pris dans son sens large, il s'applique à tous les groupes ethniques non-Han du Sud-Ouest de la Chine.' (Lombard-Salmon 1972:111.)

The Chinese name 'Miao' for a long time was a broadly generic term referring to the many non-Han groups in South-West China. These include minority groups considered as marginal peoples in comparison with the Han group. Both Moréchand (1968:69) and Lombard Salmon (1972:111) have noted several related designations. Chinese texts often distinguish between *shu Miao*, or 'cooked Miao', and *sheng Miao*, or 'raw Miao', that is, 'Sinicized' or 'subdued', and 'culturally independent' or 'unsubdued' Miao respectively (Colquhoun 1883:212; Hervey de Saint-Denys 1883:103; Lombard-Salmon 1972:117).

In a discussion of the early contacts with westerners – particularly since the 15th century – and the subsequent appearance of various reports and observations on the highland minorities of the region, no definitive con-

clusions can be drawn about the real identity of the groups referred to as Miao by the earliest western authors (to be able to reach any such conclusions, we would need more linguistic data or, at the very least, reliable descriptions; the work involved would require collaboration between historians, linguists and ethnologists). There is no doubt today, however, that the name Miao as it is used both in China and abroad designates a specific, albeit large, set of ethnic groups, all belonging to the same linguistic sub-family (the Miao-Yao), from which the Hmong of the Indochinese Peninsula are descended and with which they are intimately related. The Mandarin Chinese name *Miao* refers to the whole of the Miao (*Miáo zú*) National Minority group (Chiao and Tapp 1989). According to Chinese sources, as well as early western ethnography, this group comprises four linguistically and culturally related subgroups<sup>3</sup> – although their languages are not mutually intelligible – named, in order of size, Hmong, Hmu, Qoxiong and Hmau (see Clarke 1911; Bonifacy 1919:97; Esquirol 1931; Lemoine 1972:15, 195-200, based on the *Tchong kouo chao chou min tzou yu yen kien tche* (*Miao yao yu tzou pou fen*), Peking 1954; and overview in Culas 1997b: ch. 1). The endonym Hmong, Hmung, H'mong (and a few more slightly differently spelt variants) is mentioned and explained by the same authors, as well as by Bonifacy (1904a), Lunet de Lajonquière (1904, 1906), and Savina (1924a).<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the exact geographical origin of the Miao, there is more speculation than concrete evidence. A few authors, including Savina (1924a), refer to a Miao myth placing their origin thousands of years ago in some snowy land in the North; it might be wise not to give too much credence to this story. Several Chinese texts from the first legendary dynasty, the Hsia (2207-1766 BC), and the historical Chou dynasty (1121-256 BC) mention armed conflicts with peoples referred to as *Miao* in some of the major watersheds in the present-day province of Guizhou (Kweichow) (Savina 1924a:115-70). Lin (1940) mentions the same fact for

<sup>3</sup> At least a dozen different typologies of the Miao have been proposed in the West, chiefly on the basis of data collected by explorers and Christian missionaries in China. Whereas these suggestions were often based on a remarkable command of the Chinese language as well as, quite frequently, of one of the Miao idioms, they usually testify to a lack of scientific insight. Most observers stress, for instance, that the various groups derive their name from the colour of the women's dress, hence one finds the names Black, Red, Blue, White and Floral Miao (see Deal 1971:25, and 233, footnote 42, for an example). The relevant practice was initiated by the Chinese themselves and is perhaps as old as the Yuan Dynasty (De Beauclair 1960:269, 270, footnote 1). But observation in the field today may show at a glance that, for a variety of reasons, two villages within the territory of one and the same group can show a striking variety in dress.

<sup>4</sup> The military officer-cum-ethnologist Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifacy remarks, for instance: 'On rencontre au Tonkin quatre tribus de Méo; [...] En langue méo, les quatre tribus sont dénommées: *Mung-tlaó* Méo blancs; *Mung-len* Méo brodés; *Mung-cho-pia* Méo faire rond, à cause de leur coiffure; *Mung-soa* (Méo à peigne)' (Bonifacy 1904a:8).

the first Han dynasty (in particular 140-87 BC) and the Five Dynasties (907-960 AD). The Chinese character for 'Miao' disappeared from historical texts for several centuries. It seems to have been rehabilitated only under the Song dynasties (960-1279 AD), while the name is regularly mentioned during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD), after the Yuan had succeeded in conquering the Southeast Asian Massif (Lombard-Salmon 1972:111; Jenks 1985:39). But the groups subsumed under the name are numerous and heterogeneous: 'Before and during Ming the Miao were set apart, while during Ch'ing Dynasty [from 1644 AD] the term Miao becomes as broad as the character Man, embracing the southern and southwestern barbarous peoples' (De Beauclair 1960:270 note 1). In all these early accounts, then, until roughly the middle of the 19th century, there is perpetual confusion about the exact identity of the population groups designated by the term Miao. We should therefore be cautious with respect to the historical value of any early associations.

Between the mid-17th and mid-19th centuries, China experienced a significant demographic growth, from one hundred million to more than three hundred million head (McAleavy 1968:65). Concurrently, certain external factors began to influence developments. For instance, with the aid of maize (which was unknown in China before being imported from America, via the Philippines, by the Spanish in the 16th century, see Burt 1914:9, 124), which requires neither rich soils nor irrigation, the Han masses in the lowlands were able to deal with the demographic pressures by moving into the less fertile mountain ranges and plateaux of the Massif and settling where previously only mountain tribes had been living (Cooper 1976:30-1). Together with excessive taxation, this invasion constituted one of the most important causes of conflict with highland minorities trying to preserve their integrity vis-à-vis the Han centralized administration and regional rulers and warlords. Some minorities responded by simply migrating further south or into the higher mountain ranges of Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan. Others took up arms. A small number went as far as leaving the Chinese Empire altogether to find shelter in the unpopulated ranges which were later to be incorporated into the modern states of the Indochinese Peninsula. 'In the major campaigns in the uprisings of 1698, 1732, 1794 and 1855, the Miao scattered in all directions, initiating the migratory movements of the modern period' (Wiens 1954:90).<sup>5</sup>

In this light, it can quite safely be assumed that the period of contact between the Miao and their neighbours was quite a long one. Among these neighbours, the Han were undoubtedly the most powerful, and traces of interpenetration with the culture of this powerful group are visible in the cultures of the different Miao subgroups. It is certain that a number of Miao were assimilated into the Han majority. Among the remaining Miao

<sup>5</sup> See also the historical analysis of the 18th-century revolts in Lombard-Salmon (1972:§IV).

there was a certain degree of Sinicization, depending on the intensity of the contacts and the degree of resistance. So Geddes comments:

'Miao groups in China today do present a gradation of similarities to Chinese in economic and, to a lesser extent, in cultural practices. But even in cases where the resemblance is closest there appears to be a strong sense of separate identity reinforced particularly by a lack of intermarriage.' (Geddes 1976:11.)

It appears that during those centuries of contact with the Han at least some Miao groups, despite the fact that most early western observers describe the Miao as swiddeners, became sedentary and practised sedentary agriculture. Some 19th- and early-20th-century missionary accounts depicting Miao settlements with some precision show these to have had permanent houses, and even village walls. How ancient were these settlements? The French linguist A.G. Haudricourt in 1974 suggested that the rich Hmong technical vocabulary linked to wet-rice farming was not the result of linguistic borrowing but reflected a long practice of sedentary agriculture by Miao/Hmong in China. De Beauclair comes to a similar conclusion after contrasting the rich cultural heritage of the Black Miao in Kweichow, with their numerous trading activities, with the descriptions of the Miao/Hmong in Southeast Asia, which

... 'convey a biased picture of the people, with the result that the Miao, among the tribes of Southeast Asia, have come to occupy the place of simple mountain dwellers, on a comparatively low cultural level. The more so, as they suffered cultural losses in their new surroundings, f.i. had to return to primitive farming methods, as the Miao in Indochina and Thailand.' (De Beauclair 1960:273.)

Earlier, in the 17th century, observers in China had seen cities inhabited by people who might have been assimilated into the Miao.<sup>6</sup> There are stories about local princes, territorial resistance to the Han, and cultural differences with the lowland majority. However, we cannot draw any firm conclusions about an early sedentarization process on the sole basis of these early texts. It is also possible that the name Miao was used in its former generic sense to refer to several non-Han minorities of the south. Actually, a fair number of other non-Han minorities still exist in Southern China, notably in Yunnan, where they have been settled for centuries (see Chiao and Tapp 1989:§4). Though some of these groups appear to show some striking similarities with Miao groups, an examination of their religious rituals and their languages reveals a different identity.

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<sup>6</sup> Geddes (1976) found a statement to this effect by the Jesuit missionary Gabriel de Magallans, who lived in China between 1640 and 1677, in W. Lockart (1861).

### *3. Why did some Miao migrate?*

As we will see further down in this article, political events were a major catalyst for southward migration. The 19th and early 20th centuries were a period of trouble in China and Southeast Asia, and, as Crooker states,

'... it was not until the major dislocations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries within China – caused by the Panthay and Taiping Rebellion, Nationalist Revolution, World War II, and the Communist Revolution – that large numbers of Hmong migrated into the uplands of northern Southeast Asia' (Crooker 1986:28).

Before focusing on the precise course of these historical events, though, let us first look at other causes of Miao/Hmong migration into the Indochinese Peninsula. Geddes, in noting that 'if a new territory appears before [the Miao] their migration speeds up according to its potentialities' (Geddes 1976:29), emphasizes that pull factors also were a stimulus for Hmong southward movement. In this respect, the case of the Hmong in Thailand is particularly enlightening. This group is known to have come from Laos at a time when no specific danger is believed to have threatened them – save that from occasional clashes with groups of Chinese freebooters making incursions into Luang Phrabang and Xieng Khouang between 1876 and 1887 (Archaimbault 1967:588, 636; Le Boulanger 1931:264) – , at least no danger great enough to explain why they moved so far into Siamese territory. The general stimulus for this particular migration to barely inhabited highlands was provided by the search for new swiddens, most notably for opium poppy growing – which quickly exhausted the soil – which spread among the Hmong in the mid-19th century.

An explanation of the choice of migration routes is still difficult today. Recent ethnographic studies have highlighted as a significant factor in the choice of territory to pioneer the particular relationship between the Miao/Hmong and the Muslim Chinese caravaneers, the Haw (see Grandstaff 1979 and Culas 1997b). Coming originally from Yunnan, the Haw for a long time were the Miao/Hmong's only suppliers of salt and metals, as well as some basic consumer goods, which they exchanged for medicinal plants and special items of the Chinese pharmacopoeia. The Haw conducted this trade from China with many tribes in the most remote parts of Burma, Thailand, Laos and North Vietnam. This ancient trade between the Haw and the Miao/Hmong later came to include the very lucrative item, opium, that thus found an easy transport route out of the villages (Culas 1997a). The itinerant trade, about which still very little is known, followed ancient routes which for centuries linked cities in the interior of China like Kunming, Dali, Jinghong and Chengdou to maritime trading posts and capitals like Moulmein, Ayutthaya and Bangkok, as well as Vinh and Hanoi in northern Vietnam. Thirty years ago there were still old Hmong in Laos and Vietnam who remembered their travels with the Haw caravaneers

in the late 19th century, quite often as grooms for the horses and mules that carried cloth, salt or opium. Some say that they explored new, fertile and unpopulated regions like the Tran Ninh plateau in Laos and the mountains north of Nan in Thailand. Thus opportunities were offered to those who were prepared to move, and the Hmong south-westward migration did not take place blindly. A combination of the availability of fertile forest land and proximity to a Haw caravan route offered a perfect opportunity both to escape Han wrath and to try one's luck further away.

As was just mentioned, another factor that contributed to the Hmong migration was the cultivation and sale of opium (*papaver somniferum* L.). Due to the marketing of large quantities of opium in China, first by the Portuguese in the 18th century and later by the British and the French, who were bent on raising profits to support the colonial effort locally, there was a high level of opium consumption in China in the 19th century (15 million Chinese opium addicts in 1870, according to McCoy 1989:63). This trend was significantly stimulated and skilfully maintained by the British, who could have the poppies grown in Bengal and the opium produced at an extremely low price and then distributed through the East India Company network developed throughout Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries (McCoy 1989:60). As early as the 18th century, however, Chinese leaders were worried by this growing trade and the huge resultant loss in revenue due to the import of thousands of tons of raw opium – to say nothing of the damages caused by addiction to a vast number of the nation's bureaucrats and elite (McAleavy 1968:55-69). Inevitably, with the stakes being so high, the principal parties eventually clashed in what were conveniently called the Opium Wars (1838-1842 and 1856-1858). In both the victory was claimed by the European colonial powers. As early as 1842, with the signing of the treaty of Nanking, China was forced to allow the Europeans and the Americans to set up trading posts in a number of locations on the Chinese coast and, consequently, to trade almost freely with the huge Chinese market. The only option left the Chinese leaders, in order to be able to compete with the intruders, was to promote and support the production of opium within their own territory, which the central authorities managed very quickly to do. The populations of areas suitable for poppy cultivation, basically the mountains and plateaux in the southwest, were pressured into growing poppies and producing raw opium for sale to government agents, and subsequent processing and sale on the interior market. The pace at which this took place was such that within forty years, by 1880, opium production in China began to exceed imports from British India (Le Failler 1995:242).

Ironically, many of these groups of producers, chiefly members of highland minorities in the southwest, were also encouraged to grow poppies by the French and the British – both keen buyers – who were able to reach the southern parts of the Southeast Asian Massif through the valleys leading north from Burma and French Indochina, especially via the Yun-

nan-Tonkin railway line, built by the French and completed in 1909, connecting the Red River delta to the heartland of Yunnan.<sup>7</sup> Highland minorities in southern China then became engaged in fierce international competition, the scale of which largely exceeded the usual horizons of their life, their political perceptions and, indeed, their military capacity. On the local level, the Lolo, Yao and Hmong – the chief opium producers – realizing the lucrative potential of this new trade and observing the competition between the Chinese and Europeans, as well as among the Europeans themselves, tried to make the most of the situation and soon found themselves on the road leading to economic war with the Chinese administrators, who did not tolerate such insubordination. Thus, like Berlie (1991:51), we believe that the violent revolts and rebellions that shook the southern part of China in the second half of the 19th century – to which, together with the subsequent migration waves, we will next turn our attention – may also be linked to the strong desire to maintain control of the production and sale of opium.

#### *4. The political factors: The 19th century, a time of turmoil*

##### *4.1. Revolts and rebellions in Southern China*

Over the centuries, Han, Mongols and Manchus have mounted numerous military campaigns in the southern frontier highlands. Military expeditions were generally sent to the area to pacify, subordinate, loot, tax, or simply repress recalcitrant potentates, warlords, and sometimes even entire populations. Local resistance was frequent and revolts numerous.

One of the first documented upheavals in the south and southwest of China in the 19th century occurred in 1818, when Muslims violently opposed the imperial armies. It was not until 1850 and the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1872), which was supported by a messianic ideology partly borrowed from the Christian religion, that the imperial troops were actually defeated and most of the large cities in the south and southeast captured by the rebels, however. In 1854, in that same period of intense social and political turmoil, another important rebellion broke out slightly further to the south and west of that area, and centred in South-East Guizhou, which was wrongly named after the Miao (Jenks 1994). Muslim rebels, entrenched in 'their' mountains, attacked Manchu garrisons and local mandarins, Chinese merchants, and landlords, and allied themselves with local Secret Societies, in particular that of the White Lotus.

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<sup>7</sup> The increase in French involvement in the opium trade both in China and French Indochina, and the particular importance of this rail link to Yunnan, where huge opium crops were harvested, is clearly illustrated in many economics articles of the early 20th century, when the trade was still complacently labelled 'legal'. See several articles by H. Brenier and W. Lichtenfelder in the 1903 issue of the French Indochinese *Bulletin Economique*.

'The Muslim Rebellion (Panthai) (1855-1873) began as a dispute over mining concessions between Chinese Muslims and Han Chinese in Yunnan. It was roughly coincident with other rebellions which broke out as the central authority of the Manchus declined, e.g., the Taiping, and Miao rebellions.' (Maxwell Hill 1983:125.)

The Muslim insurrection in the southwest – also referred to as the Panthai or Hui uprising – gathered such momentum that the rebels were led within a few years to proclaim an independent Sultanate in Dali (Yunnan).<sup>8</sup> The rebels were provided with modern arms by the British through Burma, incidentally, while the imperial representatives in Yunnan and Guizhou obtained theirs from the French, thanks to the active mediation of the skilled adventurer Jean Dupuis. The colonial powers, for their part, were hoping to take advantage of the ongoing turmoil to gain access to the southern part of the Chinese Empire without having to deal with the competing factions and the complicated political situation on the China Sea coast.

It is obvious from these specific developments that one of the factors serving as a catalyst for the confrontation between the Ch'ing state and the minorities in the Southeast Asian Massif in the late 19th century was the European presence to the south of the Massif. From the beginning of the 1860s, the French and the British had competed in the search for a safe way into South China, with its valuable resources and economic potential. The rivers leading into China – the Irrawaddy and Salween in Burma, and the Mekong and Red River in Vietnam – were carefully explored. The French, as was indicated above, spent huge sums of money in 1896 to build the railway link from the port of Haiphong to Yunnan-fu (present-day Kunming). The British, on their side, were planning – but never achieved – a similar link between Moulmein and Yunnan via Chiang Mai in North Siam. In that same period, treaties signed in the wake of the Sino-French agreement of 1844 guaranteed the safety of Christian missionaries and converts, and eventually allowed western Christian missionaries to penetrate into inner China. All that had remained of Christian activity in China until then, since the exclusion decree of 1723, had been clandestine (Pannikar 1957:273). The Ch'ing rulers only reluctantly permitted this religious, commercial and military infiltration of the south by foreign powers, however, and were seriously annoyed that minorities in their own territory were entertaining relations with the foreigners in one way or another. Strategically speaking, Peking had no other choice but to increase its administrative and military presence in the southern frontier area, and a clash became inevitable. After a few decades of fighting, the overall losses

<sup>8</sup> For the relations between the Miao and the Taiping and Panthai Muslim rebels, the reader is referred to Teng (1971:366-71), Jenks (1985, 1994), and Radley (1986:45-56); details of the involvement of the Miao and Yao with the Taiping upheaval can be found in Schurmann and Orville (1972:172 ff.).

in material and in human lives were colossal: it was estimated that in twenty years' time, the population of Guizhou dropped from 16 to 6 million in a horrendous downward spiral of war casualties, epidemics, decimation of herds, and famines (Fairbank and Teng 1960).

These turmoils affected the whole of southern China and were a significant factor inducing a number of mountain tribes of various origins to go in search of better opportunities further south, as far as the north of the Indochinese Peninsula. Among these tribes, there was a substantial element of the Hmong subgroup of the Miao minority.

#### *4.2. First signs of the Hmong in the Indochinese Peninsula*

'The movement which took [the Miao] beyond the borders of China was a continuation of a process occurring within China' (Geddes 1976:25-6), and in successive waves increasing numbers of Miao, chiefly from the Hmong subgroup, migrated to several southern Chinese provinces, as well as, in quite a few cases, to sparsely populated parts of the Southeast Asian Massif – areas that today form part of Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. If we are to believe the demographic figures currently available on the Miao/Hmong in China and the Indochinese Peninsula, we can only conclude that a small fraction of the original group was willing or able to move south, a fraction whose ethnic identity is relatively homogeneous. According to Schotter (1909), Clarke (1911), Savina (1924a), and Graham (1937), 'the Miao described for Yunnan and beyond [towards the South], are closely related to the West Kweichow Miao, having split off from them at a comparatively late time' (De Beauclair 1960:271). Clarke, in his 1911 publication, first used the endonym these Miao from West Kweichow used to refer to themselves: *Hmung* or *Hmung-a-li* (Clarke 1911:16-9). Much later, Jean Mottin remarked on the basis of personal observation in the Indochinese Peninsula that, 'Parmi les Miao en général, ce sont seulement les Hmong que nous trouvons dans les autres pays [que la Chine]' (Mottin 1980:37).<sup>9</sup> Mottin also estimated that 85% of the Miao remained in China. Supporting this observation is the decreasing density of the Miao/Hmong population as one leaves Guizhou and moves down to central Thailand through northern Vietnam and Laos (see Tables 1 and 2).

<sup>9</sup> This assertion by Mottin is only partly true, since there are a few settlements of another Miao subgroup, the Hmu, who are very close to the Hmong, on the Sino-Vietnamese border (Abadie 1924:150-1) and in the northern Laotian provinces of Houaphan, Phongsaly and Xieng Kouang (Lemoine 1972:16; Moréchand 1968). Jean Michaud since 1995 has been conducting his ethnohistorical survey in such a settlement in the Sa Pa district of the Lao Cai province in Vietnam.

Table 1. Miao (including Hmong) Population in China by Province, 1990

<i>Province (P)</i> <i>Autonomous Region (AR)</i>	<i>Persons</i>	<i>% of Province population</i>
Guizhou (P)	3,666,751	11.3
Hunan (P)	1,568,951	2.6
Yunnan (P)	895,704	2.4
Sichuan (P)	533,860	0.5
Guangxi Zhuang (AR)	426,413	1.0
Hubei (P)	200,764	0.4
Hainan (P)	51,676	0.8
Guangdong (P)	5,988	0.01
Others	<u>33,515</u>	
TOTAL in China	<u>7,383,622</u>	<u>0.65% tot.pop.</u>

Source: TPCPRC 1993.

Table 2. Miao (including Hmong) Population in Asia

<i>Country</i>	<i>Persons (thousands)</i>	<i>% of national tribal minorities</i>	<i>% of national population</i>
Thailand <sup>1</sup>	124	17.8	0.21
Laos	- a <sup>2</sup>	300-500	?
	- b	205 <sup>3</sup>	10 to 20
	- c	231 <sup>5</sup>	4.92
	- d	260 <sup>6</sup>	5.54
Vietnam	- a	411 <sup>7</sup>	6.23
	- b <sup>9</sup>	558	0.64 <sup>8</sup>
China <sup>10</sup>	7,350	6.6	0.87
		8.1	0.65

Sources:

- <sup>1</sup> TRI 1995:59.
- <sup>2</sup> 1971 figure, Whitaker et al. 1985.
- <sup>3</sup> Estimate based on the 1968 census figure of 293,000 (Taillard 1989:74) minus one third; Taillard estimates that around 30% of the Hmong in Laos have left the country since 1975 (Taillard 1989:97).
- <sup>4</sup> Approximation based on the national percentage of Lao Soung (Hmong and Yao), namely 9.7%, as specified by the Laotian government in 1990.
- <sup>5</sup> Kossikov and Egorounin 1993:5.
- <sup>6</sup> Based on figures gathered from various sources by Chazee (1995:111).
- <sup>7</sup> Figures for 1979 (Cima 1989:314).
- <sup>8</sup> Based on a national population figure of 64,411,668 for 1989 (Cima 1989:xxiv).
- <sup>9</sup> 1989 census, Nguyen (1995:103).
- <sup>10</sup> TPCPRC 1993.

The earliest arrival of Hmong in the Indochinese Peninsula, particularly in the frontier area of what was once known as French Tonkin in the case of the very earliest ones (Bigot 1938), is sometimes said to have occurred as far back as four centuries ago (see Geddes 1976:27, for instance). However, there is no evidence of their presence before the 18th century in any material remains or annals from northern Indochinese localities. In fact, there has been persistent confusion due to the use of the name Mán-Méo by the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) in North Tonkin, which was indiscriminately adopted by some early French observers. It soon became clear, however, that the name Mán normally refers exclusively to the Yao ethnolinguistic group in that area, whereas Méo (a corruption of the Chinese *Miao*) applies only to the Hmong, the Yao and the Hmong being two different, though linguistically related, groups, as was stated earlier. Auguste Bonifacy – an officer stationed in the 3rd Military Territory, along the Clear River, who became a keen observer of ethnic minorities in the late 19th century, speaking and reading fluent Chinese as well as mastering at least two minority languages – rightly noted that some Yao groups had written records showing that they were already settled in the upper valley of the Clear River (Lô River) in North Tonkin in the early 18th century (Bonifacy 1904a:825; 1904b:4), while there is no evidence of the sort for the Hmong.

It is widely recognized among specialists today that it was not until the second half of the 19th century that large numbers of Hmong settlers coming from Sichuan and Guizhou via Yunnan penetrated into the Indochinese Peninsula, where they got as far south as the 17th parallel near Tak, in Thailand, following roughly a north-easterly and south-westerly route from French Tonkin. Father Savina observed that in the early 20th century, at the time when he was studying the Hmong in Tonkin and Southwest China, ‘Les Miao [Hmong] du Tonkin sont tous originaires du Yun-Nan, et ceux du Laos sont originaires du Tonkin. Ces derniers poursuivent toujours leur marche vers le Sud, et ils ont atteint aujourd’hui le 20e parallèle, sur la chaîne annamitique’ (Savina 1924a:VIII). It seems, however, that the Hmong had already begun coming to Indochina in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The French anthropologist Jacques Lemoine collected from Vietnamese ethnologists the following version of the account of the first arrival of Hmong in Vietnam:

‘Selon les ethnologues vietnamiens, les clans Lau et Yang de Dong Van et Meo Vac dans la province de Ha Giang préservent la tradition d’être venus en premier du Guizhou à 80 familles il y a une quinzaine de générations, c’est-à-dire à la fin des Ming ou au début de la conquête mandchoue’ (Lemoine 1995:28).

Fifteen generations at roughly 20 years each comes to around 300 years, which seems slightly exaggerated. On the other hand, according to an early source, 1750 is a credible date:

'Quant aux groupements de la deuxième région «méo», ils nous paraissent avoir été formés par la première poussée, qui daterait de 1750-1800, et aurait abouti à la constitution de la grosse agglomération de «Muong Tuong» (région de Tu-Long, limitrophe des secteurs de Thanh-Thuy et Hoang-Su-Phi, IIIe Territoire militaire [between Lao Cai and Ha Giang])' (Lunet de Lajonquière 1904:223).

However inaccurate and speculative they may be, these approximations nonetheless lend some weight to the supposition of a relatively early migratory movement. The early migration, antedating the period of major social unrest in southwestern China, most likely took the form of a succession of small waves involving pioneering households grouping together to clear the forest in order to grow dry rice and maize. When social or ritual problems presented themselves, or when the soil was exhausted, usually after only a few years, such a local group would disband and the different lineages would go looking for other, more distant groups to join in clearing new patches of virgin forest. Thus, progress was slow but steady.

The first concrete western record of a Hmong presence in the Indo-chinese Peninsula dates from 1860<sup>10</sup>, when several thousand Hei Miao (or Black Miao, perhaps Hmu, but see Culas 1997b:17 note 19, who queries this category) 'soldiers' were seen entering North Vietnam from Yunnan (Lunet de Lajonquière 1906:295-7; Abadie 1924:149, note). Some Annamites had memories of and told Bonifacy (1904b:8) about violent clashes with early settlers in the upper Clear River valley. In Laos, inhabitants of Xieng Kouang province witnessed Chinese Muslims – belonging to the Black, Yellow, White and Red Flag armies – fighting their way through the mountain ranges in flight from Imperial Chinese troops in the north. These rebels were accompanied by (although not necessarily on friendly terms with) members of a number of different mountain tribes, including scores of Hmong. Of the latter, many chose to settle in this fertile area.<sup>11</sup> Lemoine states quite specifically that:

'La plus grande vague de migration se produisit en 1868, après l'écrasement des Tai Ping, lorsque plus de 10,000 Hmong du Guizhou affluèrent au Viêt-nam par le Yunnan et le Guangxi à la fois, pour s'établir dans les provinces de Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Lai Chau, Son La, Nghia Lo, leurs éléments avancés ne tardant pas à atteindre Hoa Ninh, Thanh Hoa et Nghe An' (Lemoine 1995:28).

Yang (1975:7) supposed that the Hmong first moved into Laos in 1810-20. However, the information he used was oral information gathered in Hmong villages in the 1960s, and the time estimates vary noticeably, depending on

<sup>10</sup> This record at least was left by eyewitnesses. Abadie (1924:149-50) mentions an earlier, violent incursion, which was less important as far as numbers are concerned, at the beginning of the 19th century, but the exact identity of these earlier migrants is dubious.

<sup>11</sup> By the early 20th century, French census figures showed several thousand of them to be living in the Xieng Khouang region.

the informant – a problem with which ethnohistorians are only too familiar. For the Hmong accurate time indications are not important, in fact, and a similar lack of accuracy can be noted in several stories that have been collected recently. Some earlier accounts are more accurate, however, since they were left by first-hand witnesses. In Laos, the father of the notorious Hmong leader Touby Ly Fong was said to have arrived in Nong Het (Xieng Kouang Province), where he joined his aunt, who had been living there for several years, in 1875. Some Hmong living on the Tran Ninh plateau in 1894 said that they had come from China to settle here in 1860; in one *huyện* (district) there were over 2000 Hmong houses, implying that there were about 15,000 to 18,000 individuals (Anonymous 1894:41). Another informant, the self-appointed White Tai leader in Tonkin, Đeo Van Tri, stated to Raquez and Cam (1904:257) that when he was 15, in about 1848, he had witnessed the passage of Hmong from Sichuan on their way to Laos through the territory where his family lived, Sip Song Chau Tai, in northwestern Vietnam.

In Siam, the presence of Hmong settlements is not documented before the end of the 19th century. An English traveller gave the following eyewitness account of Nan Province in northern Siam in 1880: 'There are thousands of emigrants from Sip Sawng Panna [southern Yunnan], and Khamus from Luang Phrabang, and a growing population of Meo [Hmong] and Yao. [...] Eight years ago, the Meo were not to be found on the right bank of the Nam-kawng [Mekhong], but, in the interval, they have been swarming down' (McCarthy 1895:71). Another source suggests that the Hmong first arrived in northern Siam in 1885 (Geddes 1976:29). Their dispersion in the area is confirmed for the Phitsanulok and Lomsah regions by Robbins (1928), who observed two Hmong settlements in the mountains in January 1928. In 1929, Hmong settlements were also noted in the Tak region, 300 km northwest of Bangkok (Credner 1935, in Crooker 1986:289). More recently, in 1992, Michaud was told by Hmong informants from three different clans in a settlement in the Doi Luang Chiang Dao area (Chiang Mai Province) that their fathers and grandfathers had been living in the region for 85 years, which may date their arrival as early as 1908 (Michaud 1994a:§4).

Lemoine (1972:18) put forward the thesis that there is very close linguistic similarity between two Hmong dialects spoken in Thailand (White and Green Hmong) – the most distant point from the source of Hmong migration in Guizhou – and the southern Chinese dialect of Tch'ouan Ts'ien Tien. More recently, Ratliff (1992) and Niederer (1995) have summarized the analogies between the Hmong language in the Indo-chinese Peninsula and some Chinese languages in Yunnan, modern as well as early ones. Thus, when one examines the geographical spread of Hmong languages in the region, one will see that between the Miao/Hmong region of origin in Guizhou and the furthest point of settlement in Central Thailand, the migratory route crossed eastern Yunnan, northern Vietnam,

northern Laos, and highland Thailand.<sup>12</sup> An illustration of the kind of route that might be followed through these mountains is provided by the records (written in their own script), or charts (of the same kind as those shown to Bonifacy in Tonkin), of the Iu Mien branch of the Yao, who are very close relatives of the Hmong. According to these records, some Iu Mien now living in the Nan and Chiang Kham region in northern Thailand left the Chinese province of Guangdong around 1860 and crossed Yunnan and Laotian territory to finally settle in Nan province around 1880.<sup>13</sup> This migration involved a thousand-kilometre journey spread over only two decades.

### *5. The 20th century; Direct knowledge, Nation-State formation and division within Hmong society*

#### *5.1. Western interest in the Hmong*

For a long time, only Christian missionaries and a few explorers – chiefly British and French – in search of ways of penetrating the Chinese interior were able to establish contact with the Miao/Hmong in China. In continental Southeast Asia from the late 19th century onward, by contrast, the Hmong were the subject of marked interest from European military authorities, missionaries, administrators, explorers, and later, researchers. Early western interest in mountain tribes in the region coincided with the foundation of anthropology and ethnology as scholarly disciplines and fitted in with the cultural trend of exoticism. As was indicated above, numerous books, articles, and notes were written about mountain tribes in the early 20th century. Western observers at that time were beginning to recognize the cultural and linguistic uniqueness of these minorities. In the case of the Hmong, early French studies – some of which, however, only scratched the surface or painted merely very broad pictures of highland ‘tribes’ – include Lefèvre-Pontalis (1892;1896), Girard (1903), Bonifacy (1904a and b), Raquez (1909), Raquez and Cam (1904), Gaide (1905), Lunet de Lajonquière (1904, 1906), and d’Ollone (1912); all these authors worked in or around French Tonkin. The first solid English works that we were able to trace – apart from a few short early contributions on South China, for example by Bridgman (1859), Edkins (1870), Broumton (1881), and Betts (1889) – were published in the 1910s, when *Among the Tribes of*

<sup>12</sup> As regards a possible further spread into Burma, Lemoine (1972:18) and Michaud (1994a:§4) both mention meeting Hmong in Chiang Mai Province who said they had personally come from Burma. Earlier, Young (1962:37) had made the same claim, while Bernatzik (1970) in 1947 referred to a 1931 census according to which there were 830 Hmong then living in Burmese territory. The earliest evidence of a Miao/Hmong presence in Burma which we were able to find is provided by two photographs from the Kengtung region in Scott (1906:96-7); we do not know by what route these people eventually ended up here, however.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication Hjørleifur Jonsson, Chiang Mai, 1993.

*South-West China* (1911) and *The Story of the Miao* (1919) by the missionaries Samuel Clarke and Sam Pollard respectively appeared. The latter is probably to be regarded as the first tentative western historical account of the Miao of some length and weight. However, the first scholarly work on the subject is François-Marie Savina's impressive ethnography – although it has a strong missionary ideological bias, as is noted by Moréchand (1968:56) – entitled *Histoire des Miao*, which was published in 1924, along with a Hmong-French dictionary printed in a script of its own.

It should be noted that these first studies were prompted primarily by missionary zeal – they were chiefly linguistic studies made as a necessary preliminary step in translating the Bible into local dialects (for details see Smalley et al. 1990:§11) – and colonial ambitions, although occasionally such subjects as physical anthropology (Girard 1903) and the Pachay revolt in Laos and Tonkin of 1918–1921 (Savina 1920, 1924b) were addressed. It was only long after these first steps in general ethnography and Hmong cultural studies that the description and analysis of the social organization, religion, and mythology got under way, while it was not until the 1960s that these studies really took off.

During the Indochinese Wars it became clear that international events again were having an impact on forest dwellers in their mountain habitats, forcing them to take sides in particular national struggles and suffer the consequences if they had made the wrong choice. Thailand was regarded as a key piece in the domino theory in vogue in the United States in the 1950s. Thailand was more or less willing to be transformed by foreign 'aid' into a stronghold against the Communist aggression that had begun to spread into Laos from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the People's Republic of China. In line with their military objectives, American intelligence services, using an array of names that were often least calculated to arouse suspicion (see Wakin 1992), themselves conducted ethnographic research on highland populations in Laos, Thailand and the accessible parts of Vietnam, or commissioned competent anthropologists to do such research. A number of western researchers, encouraged by their respective academic institutions, found themselves impelled to study these remote groups, while financial facilities were offered for in-depth research. It was in the early sixties that Lebar, Hickey and Musgrave, along with Hanks and Smalley, among others, compiled the impressive *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia* (1964), published by the famous American Human Relations Area Files. A few years later Peter Kunstadter, with the help of Moerman, Mandroff, Hickey, Geddes and Barney, issued the two volumes of *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations* (1967), published by Princeton University Press. Not long after that Joann Schrock, directly commissioned by the American Department of the Army headquarters, with a number of co-authors produced the *Minority Groups* series, including volumes on Thailand and North Vietnam (Schrock et al.

1970 and 1972). To this list of publications on the region in general we might add several others focused on mountain tribes in a particular country or area, for instance Laos and Thailand, namely Keen (1966), Binney (1968), Moréchand (1968), Walker (1970), Dessaint (1972), Lemoine (1972), Yang (1975), Bertrais (1977), and Mottin (1978). For the same period we can only gather information about mountain tribes in North Vietnam, with very few exceptions, from what local ethnographers – notwithstanding their personal wishes – were permitted by the regime to write and say<sup>14</sup>, with the military keeping firm control of academic production.

Military commanders in those troubled years of the First and Second Indochinese Wars had a big say in every respect in what could be revealed to the public about the mountain tribes of Southeast Asia and what should be kept hidden in secret intelligence files.

### *5.2. Understanding the current situation*

This century of first-hand knowledge of the Hmong allows us to make a few points about Hmong migrations and Hmong history, and to note in particular that the population movements recorded in the 20th century are localized in space and time. The description of these movements here will require us to concentrate on a few areas so as to be better able to highlight their dynamic qualities and the principal issues involved. First we will put forward some arguments to explain the massive support of the Viet Minh by Hmong in western Tonkin, an area largely dominated by the Tai. Then we will examine the process of division within Hmong society in Laos in the course of certain international historical events which after 1975 led many into exile in Thailand; in this same section we will also see how in one area on the Thai-Laotian border the migratory flux was reversed within the space of a few years. In Thailand, finally, the repercussions of the Indochinese Wars led the Hmong and the Thai state to regard each other with lasting distrust.

In Burma, a deliberate British policy to keep the old enmity between Christianized minorities and the Buddhist Mon/Burmese majority alive, with a view to keeping a better grip on local politics as well as exploiting the colonized kingdom efficiently, helped to aggravate the divisions between highlanders and lowlanders. However, the small number of mountain people involved in the quite recent immigration movements into this area, in contrast to earlier highland migrants like the Shan or the Karen, prevents us from devoting more space to the Burmese situation here; if groups like the Lisu were represented in significant numbers, recent arrivals probably only included a very small number of Hmong, or none at all (see note 12).

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<sup>14</sup> For example, the *Vietnamese Studies* series, also published in French as *Études vietnamiennes*.

### 5.2.1. Vietnam

Historically, the French colonial grip on the highland home of the Hmong was formalized in 1883, when the Hue treaty made Tonkin and Annam French protectorates. In 1885, the Tiensin treaty with China gave France priority over other European colonial powers in effecting a presence in Yunnan. France then began to take control of and occupy the Red River basin and its principal adjoining valleys through numerous *missions de pacification*. The northern Lao principalities, which were later to become the northern part of Laos, then were freed from Siamese occupation and in 1893 became a French protectorate. In 1896 a unified Laos thus became the fifth member of the *Union indochinoise*, with the (reluctant) approval of the British and the Chinese.

French colonial policy vis-à-vis mountain minorities in the north of French Indochina was far from consistent, depending on the context and the inclinations of the colonial administrators, and was in fact never formalized as a general policy. A significant development that decisively affected the Hmong was the relationship that grew up between the Tai (especially the White Tai) and the French in the region of Sip Song Chau Tai – Tai for ‘the twelve Tai districts’ – along the Black River in western Tonkin, between the upper Red River valley and the Laotian border. There were several Tai groups inhabiting the alluvial plains and part of the foothills of that region, where they had had a hierarchical social and political organization, with landlords and peasants, for probably about a thousand years. They were the most highly organized society among the mountain populations. For the French military and administrative personnel, this traditionally stable structure fulfilled a useful role in the chain of command of the colonial power. Hence a close relationship developed with some White Tai landlords. So Déo Van Tri, the Tai leader in the Black River valley, lord of Lai Chau, and former officer of the Black Flag army – with which his family had migrated to Tonkin, he himself being originally Chinese –, with which he had taken part in the assault on Luang Phrabang in 1887 (Le Boulanger 1931:264), later chose the side of the French, becoming a close collaborator of Auguste Pavie. In return, Pavie in 1890 made him the official leader of the Sip Song Chau Tai<sup>15</sup>, an office he retained until his death in 1909.

Pavie had also confirmed the principle of the hereditary transmission of power by treaty, however. This constituted the legal basis upon which later the Tai Federation of Tonkin was founded. In reaction to the unilateral proclamation of independence of the Democratic Republic of

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<sup>15</sup> About the privileged relationship of Déo Van Tri, as a key figure in French defence in northwestern Tonkin, with the French colonials, in particular with several high-ranking army officers, public files are kept at the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer in France under the RST series (*Résidence Supérieure au Tonkin*), numbers 56453 to 56480.

Vietnam by the Viet Minh in September 1945, a temporary French-Tai agreement was concluded in 1948 in an attempt to hold on to the highlands by creating an independent Tai Federation inside the Union française, grouping together the provinces of Lai Chau, Phong Tho and Son La under the presidency of the Tai Déo Van Long, a descendant of Déo Van Tri. The legal status of what were referred to as the 'sub-minorities' inside this Federation – essentially the Hmong and the Yao – was alleged to be one of *adhésion de fait*, or de facto inclusion (Nollet 1953:43). Occupying a position of dominance long before the arrival of the French, the Tai belonging to the Federation now took advantage of French support to exploit these 'sub-minorities' in their area even more. Tuition in the Tai language and script was soon introduced with the help of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient; no other minority population in the region enjoyed such privileges. With the increase in Viet Minh activities at the end of the 1940s, the Tai drew closer and closer to the French, while a large proportion of the Hmong, understandably, sided with the Communists to challenge the power of the Tai rulers.

After the shock of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, which numerous Hmong helped bring about as allies of the Viet Minh, a number of White and Black Tai from wealthy families fled to Laos, followed by other Hmong families from the east of the Red River valley, who, living outside Tai-controlled territory, had no problems with collaborating with the French<sup>16</sup>, particularly in the production of opium (it should be noted that these Tai and Hmong fleeing to Laos later, in 1975, were among the first to flee from Laos to seek refuge in Thailand). Occasional clashes between these pro-French Hmong and Viet Minh soldiers had occurred in the decade following the year 1946, including a few well-organized commando actions in 1952 that induced the Viet Minh to ask Communist Chinese troops to cross the border to help subdue the rebels. Deprived of French support after the Geneva agreement of 1954, these anti-Communist Hmong were badly harassed until their complete submission in 1957, which in turn triggered off a second wave of migration from Vietnam to Laos. As in China before, those who remained behind afterwards unequivocally and irrevocably submitted to the central power.

Living in the mountains outside the main combat areas during the Second Indochinese War, the Hmong of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam seem to have adopted a generally submissive attitude towards the Communist state, which in return adopted a patronizing attitude towards

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<sup>16</sup> It should be kept in mind here that the Hmong traditionally are a stateless society and therefore have no formal political organization. Each household head is free to make any decision he considers appropriate – hence this division among the Hmong of Vietnam. The same applies to Laos.

these 'little brothers'.<sup>17</sup> The traditional trade in coffin wood with China and, above all, the legalized cultivation of opium – officially prohibited only after 1993 – guaranteed them a regular cash income and, in the latter case, significantly helped fill the Viet Minh's coffers. In the virtual absence of Kinh pioneering in the mountain areas where the Hmong have their home<sup>18</sup>, there is active participation of Hmong in the local and regional administration.<sup>19</sup> In 1989 the Vietnamese authorities estimated that there were 558,043 Hmong living in the country.

### 5.2.2. Laos

Relations between the Hmong and the French in the protectorate of Laos developed somewhat differently. After several decades of almost complete indifference, closer contacts sprang up between French parachutists responsible for the organization of the resistance in the interior and Hmong on the Xieng Khouang plateau (Vietnamese, Tran Ninh) after the arrival of the Japanese forces in Laos in March 1945. The French soldiers were sheltered and guided in the mountains for several months by Touby Ly Fong, of the Ly (*Lis* in the Barney-Smalley orthography, 1952) clan. In September 1946, after the French had had their former rights over their protectorate restored to them, Touby Ly Fong was rewarded with an appointment as Chao Muong, or district governor, of Xieng Khouang province by the king of Luang Phrabang. It was in this area that the Hmong of Laos would maintain the closest links with the French and, after the French departed, with the Americans.

The social division among the Hmong in this province at the time was to have major consequences for Hmong participation in the Indochinese wars in Laos (Culas 1997b). A long-standing rivalry between members of the Lo (Lauj) and Ly (Lis) clans developed into open enmity, with the former

<sup>17</sup> 'The provisions of the 1960 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam regarding the status of national minorities are virtually identical with those of the Popular Republic of China Constitution. They provide for equality and autonomy within a unified, multinational state. Prior to the promulgation of the 1960 Constitution, a decree concerning the establishment of autonomous areas in the DR of Vietnam had been issued on April 29, 1955. On May 7, 1955, there came into being the Tai-Meo Autonomous Region, the name of which was subsequently changed to Tay Bac Autonomous Region. The Tay Bac AR embraces an area equivalent to three provinces in the mountains between the Red River valley and the Laotian frontier. On the north, it borders on Yunnan province. Its area of over 36,000 square kilometers is one-fifth that of the entire area of the DR of Vietnam [North Vietnam]; its population of 500,000 includes 25 different nationalities, the most important of which are the Thai (T'ai) and Meo (Miao).' (Moseley 1973:157-8.)

<sup>18</sup> In the provinces of Cao Bang, Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Lai Chau, Son La, Hoa Binh, Thah Hoa, and Nghe An.

<sup>19</sup> In 1995, for instance, a Black Hmong woman was deputy head of the Sa Pa district, in Lao Cai province, where the Kinh, comprising 10% of the population, are vastly outnumbered by the Hmong, comprising 60% (provincial data collected in Lao Cai by Michaud in May 1995).

collaborating with the Japanese and the latter siding with the French. The division between the two clans soon assumed more definite proportions, also affecting those connected with them by kinship or marriage and economically or ritually and influencing the future of a large number of Hmong in Laos. They would also be obliged, directly or indirectly, to take sides in the military conflict first between the French and the Japanese, later between the French and the nationalists, and finally between the Americans and the Communists.

Several thousand Hmong thus participated, more or less intensively, in the fighting against the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh Communists on their march on Vientiane, while perhaps as many other Hmong were enrolled in the People's Liberation Army. The massive exodus of Hmong into Thailand after the Communist take-over in Laos in 1975 was triggered by the Viet Minh massacres in a number of Hmong villages in retaliation for their collaboration with 'neo-colonialist' America. However, there were also numerous Hmong in Laos who had genuinely tried to avoid getting involved in the conflict, in spite of the extremely difficult material conditions under which they lived during the war as a result of the impossibility of working the land in areas under regular shellfire, population displacements in the flight from combat zones or evacuation of Communist-controlled areas, and so on, and so of providing their basic needs. During the war, social and economic inequalities became enormous, with the income of a Hmong swiddener growing mountain rice, or even opium, being much lower than that of a soldier fighting in the Royal Army under Hmong general Vang Pao, which was generously supported by American aid. Thus, the usual lineage or clan obligations were of no use in gaining access to food supplies, provided by the Americans, unless one had a close relative in the army administration who was ready to help. This form of partisanship directly or indirectly affected almost every family, in violation of their often very strong desire not to get involved in the conflict. In the areas under American/Royal control, as well as in the 'liberated zones' of the north, Royalists and Communists alike were unhappy about the lack of commitment of many mountain people to one side or the other, these 'pacifists' therefore being prone to suspicions of sympathizing with the enemy.

Not surprisingly, then, after April 1975 the pro-American Hmong were among the thousands who had to run for their lives. Between May 1975 and June 1985, 309,694 persons left Laos to seek refuge in Thailand. Of this number, 194,220 were classified as *Lao lum*, or lowland Lao, also including Chinese and Vietnamese living in Laos. The remaining 115,474 refugees were broadly identified as mountain people, including *Lao theung*, or mountain-slope Lao, and *Lao sung*, or highland Lao. The Hmong essentially belonged to the latter category. Thus, Taillard estimates that approximately 30% of the Hmong in Laos fled the country after 1975, although the only concrete figure we have is that of 116,000 Hmong from

Laos and Vietnam seeking refuge in Thailand until 1990. In Xieng Khouang province alone – one of the areas most seriously affected by war – the total population decreased by more than 40% between 1961 and 1985, with a large proportion of this decline being accounted for by the Hmong group. In Huaphan, Luang Nam Tha and Sayaburi provinces, the decrease for the same period amounted to 23%, while for Phongsaly, Udomsai and Luang Phrabang the figure was 8% (Taillard 1989:192).

Today, of the eleven Laotian provinces in which Hmong live, four – Xieng Khouang, Vientiane, Sayaburi and Luang Phrabang – are home to over 70% of this group. In 1994, the Hmong in Laos were believed to number 260,000 individuals (Chazee 1995:111), while in 1972 their number was estimated at between 300,000 and 500,000 (Whitaker et al. 1985).

### *5.2.3. Thailand*

Since their first arrival in the Indochinese Peninsula, mountain peoples practising pioneering or rotational swiddening have been tolerated by the Siamese monarchs. Actually, officials of the kingdom and its northern principalities had no clear idea about minorities dwelling in the mountains, and made no attempt to gain any such idea. Unlike their neighbours in Burma, Laos and Tonkin, which had been under firm British or French colonial control from the end of the 19th century, Siam was not attuned to the political ideology of full territorial ownership and well-defined borders (Bruneau 1981; Lim 1984; Winichakul 1994:§3). To the kings of the Chakri dynasty, the traditional existence of buffer areas on the northern periphery of the kingdom was a quite comfortable idea, and it served a variety of purposes in connection with security and trade. The fact that peripheral mountain and forest areas were inhabited by semi-nomadic non-Thai swiddeners was of little significance, as long as these did not pose a threat to the security and prosperity of the kingdom (Winichakul 1994:§5). Up until the 1950's highland minorities in northern Siam/Thailand were able to live their own lives in peace and without major conflicts with or hindrance from lowland Thai for centuries in some cases.

In the early 1950s, however, the Thai state took a number of initiatives aimed at establishing 'pacific and specific' links with the mountain people in a few specially targeted villages.<sup>20</sup> One might well ask why the state suddenly became aware of the existence of these mountain tribes, to the point of drafting programmes for their integration in the Thai nation, at that particular moment. After all, these mountain people then – as still today – constituted a tiny 1% of the total population, while they spoke languages and had religious observances that differed dramatically from those of the bulk of the population of Thailand.

In neighbouring countries decolonization and nationalism were gaining

<sup>20</sup> Lee (1981) and Kesmanee (1991) give details of these early initiatives of the Thai state for the Nan region, for instance.

momentum and wars of independence, whether or not buttressed by a Communist ideology, were raging. Moreover, in China in 1953-54 several autonomous regions coterminous with various highland ethnic groups were created in Yunnan (Thompson and Adloff 1955:222). These political and ideological developments in neighbouring countries and, no doubt, the war situation along its entire eastern border worried the Thai state. Then, in the early 1950s, American pressure on the Thai government grew increasingly stronger as a reaction to the Communist advance. The Thai were expected to exercise active control over their northern frontier zone, a mountainous area suspected of being a refuge for rebels and a potential source of instability for the local mountain tribes, since infiltration of 'hostile agents' from north Vietnam, via Laos, was feared and openly admitted. Thanks to the financial, material and technical support the Americans were giving the country, they succeeded in directing, and even in managing, the various programmes aimed at controlling the land and people in highland Thailand. The externally funded programmes targeted at the highland population, referred to by the generic term 'hill tribes', were aimed in particular at launching anti-insurrectional activities and suppressing the production and distribution of opium (Huff 1967; Pongsapich et al. 1993:4).

Armed opposition in northern Thailand first started in 1967, following the destruction of numerous opium fields and of a few Hmong villages in the Nan region.<sup>21</sup> There was also occasional fighting in four border areas – Nan, Tak, Chiang Kham and Loei-Phitsanulok. Here again, a large proportion of Hmong failed to take sides in the conflict with either the Beijing- or Hanoi-supported guerrillas or the American-supported Thai military. The violence of the fighting and, occasionally, the shelling of mountain villages forced many to seek temporary refuge in the neighbouring Laotian province of Sayaburi. From 1967 on, several thousand Hmong from Nan province moved with their belongings and families to the then more peaceful highlands of Laos. In 1975, when the war finally reached its furthest point in the Sayaburi region, there was a reversal of the trend, with many Hmong from Thailand who had fled that country returning to the neighbouring Thai provinces again.

<sup>21</sup> According to the 1986 CCSDPT<sup>22</sup> Handbook, the camp [of Ban Nam Yao, Nan Province] was left open for 1,350 Htin and 750 Hmong displaced persons claiming to be Thai citizens. They had moved into Laos in the 1960s but re-entered Thailand with the influx of Laotian refugees between 1975 and 1979.' (Chantavanich and Reynolds 1988:30.)

In spite of the important and varied American aid, the Thai army did not

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<sup>21</sup> On the impact of the war and the national opium policy on the Hmong communities in Nan province, see Culas 1997b:§3 part 2.

<sup>22</sup> Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand.

succeed in totally suppressing the insurrection in the mountains by itself. It needed the unexpected help of a complex international situation. In 1980, Thailand unofficially agreed with China to offer the Khmer Rouge – who, in spite of Beijing's support, were severely pressured by the Vietnamese in Cambodia after the December 1979 Vietnamese invasion – the possibility of retreating on Thai soil, where the Vietnamese would not follow them. Consequently, as a gesture of support for its new Thai partner, China then totally cut its aid to the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which it had helped for decades. It moreover asked the Communists in Thailand to cease all military activities against the Thai state. Thus, Communist guerrilla warfare here was not ended by military means, but was rather suppressed as a result of an international concurrence of events that rendered it pointless (Dassé 1993:95). By 1982, Communist guerrilla activity had virtually ceased in northern Thailand.

Life having finally resumed a more tranquil course in the Indochinese Massif, the Thai state's anxieties about security on the highland frontier largely subsided. We can nevertheless detect a tendency on the part of Thai officials to hold the highlanders in general, and the Hmong in particular, responsible for a major national problem, namely deforestation and soil erosion in the northern highlands (see Arbhahirama et al. 1988:174-5; Michaud 1994b), throughout most of the 1980s and part of the 1990s – even though this tendency has more ancient roots (see General Charusathira 1967, in Bhrusasri 1989:13). Priority is now given to sedentarizing the mountain population, introducing commercially viable agricultural techniques and national education in the area (Bhrusasri 1989), with the aim of once and for all making these non-Thai animists assimilate and adopt the national identity, which is Thai, Buddhist and monarchist. In 1995 the Tribal Research Institute of the Ministry of the Interior calculated the Hmong population at 124,000, scattered over 233 villages in 13 northern provinces (TRI 1995), the most important ones being Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Tak and Nan. This constitutes nearly 18% of the mountain population of this country (total 696,629 individuals) and 0.2% of the total population of Thailand.

#### *5.2.4. And beyond Asia*

A survey of Hmong migrations would not be complete without a reference to an important population movement from Laos in the context of what has since been called the Hmong diaspora. Following the Communist take-over of Laos and Vietnam in 1975, there was a wave of refugees, largely comprising Lao and Hmong, though also members of several other ethnic groups (Lua, White Tai, Yao, Haw, Lahu, Khmu), to Thailand, where the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) assumed responsibility for them temporarily, until they could officially migrate else-

where.<sup>23</sup> This exodus from Laos, as was explained earlier, was connected with Lao and Hmong collaboration with the pro-American forces, the collaborators preferring to flee the country rather than suffer retaliation, and sometimes rigorous 're-education' by the Pathet Lao. A majority afterwards were able to leave Thailand and migrate to a third country. In the late 1980s a few dozen Hmong also returned to Laos with the help of the UNHCR, and sometimes under its protection. Due to the success of these repatriation schemes and in the context of offering a political opening to the outside world, as discussed in, for instance, the publication *Outline of the Plan for a Phased Repatriation and Reintegration of Laotians in Thailand in February 1992* (Yang 1992:271), this development is continuing and could soon put an end to the need for Lao refugee camps in Thailand. However, in the Hmong community in the United States serious doubts are being expressed about whether the Lao government is capable of controlling the most radical elements in its own army, which, according to some sources, are retaliating against Hmong, Khmu and Lao who have returned from Thailand (Vang 1993).

War has prompted some Hmong from Laos – and a small number from Vietnam – to settle in various countries outside Asia. Currently, the biggest Hmong community outside Asia is in the United States (approximately 100,000 individuals, according to North and Yang, 1988, and Sherman 1988:594). California is home to almost half this group, while the remainder are to be found in the States of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington, Pennsylvania and North Carolina (Chantavanich and Reynolds 1988:239). In France there are approximately 10,000 Hmong, including 1400 in French Guyana.<sup>24</sup> Canada admitted approximately 900 individuals, while another 360 are in Australia, 260 in China, and 250 in Argentina (Chantavanich and Reynolds 1988:17, citing UNHCR sources for December 1986).

#### *6. A critical epilogue*

From what we know today about Hmong culture and social organization, it is evident that during the colonial period and the Indochinese wars, regional and foreign governments, armies, and other institutions misconstrued the motives of the average Hmong highland dweller in the region. A strong reluctance to side with one party or the other was typically interpreted by the major belligerent parties as opposition to them and a sympathetic attitude to the enemy. In fact, however, it was the reflection of a strong desire not to get involved in other peoples' quarrels – a typical Hmong characteristic as well as a feature of the usual peasant

<sup>23</sup> On the problems of refugees in Southeast Asia, see Songprasert and Chongvatana (1988) with respect to Thailand, and Condominas and Pottier (1982, 1984) for specific case studies.

<sup>24</sup> On the Hmong in continental France, see Ajchenbaum and Hassoun 1980, and Hassoun 1983a and b, 1988; on those in French Guyana, see Géraud 1993.

ethos in the face of unwanted disturbances in customary life.

Told to take sides or else suffer serious reprisals, Hmong mountain dwellers chose one side or the other according to the area where they resided at the time, the amount of pressure put on them, and their own estimation of what was best calculated to ensure their liberty in the long run. The very idea of a Hmong military organization is inconsistent with the segmentary tradition of the group. Some organizational formalization has come about in a temporary way in consequence of external manipulation of certain internal antagonisms, as well as of a recurrent, always latent messianic ideology (see Tapp 1989; Culas 1997b). In the final analysis, it was by a huge mistake based on mutual misunderstanding that many Hmong found themselves in the thick of the action in the Indochinese Wars, particularly in Laos. Had they really been given a choice, it is likely that each household head and each lineage and clan elder would have opted for complete neutrality in these battles between lowlanders and foreigners, with which they felt little affinity.

The principal cause of Hmong insurrections – without the catalyst of some foreign military order or the temporary activities of some messianic leader – from the 18th century in China to the period between 1967 and 1982 in Thailand, was direct aggression by a national army. When the Hmong took up arms, essentially when they considered this inevitable, it was not in pursuit of some political ideology, but in defence of lives, houses and crops, and of the right to continue cultivating the only cash crop that really generated profits: opium – a crop, it should be noted, which the same regional powers had forced on them years earlier, from the 19th century on, when the profits from it provided those in power at the time with a major portion of their revenues.

As in southern China after the 16th century, history has once again caught up with the swiddener in his forest home and seriously encroached on his traditional life style. Only this time escape is no longer possible. There are waves of pioneers literally ascending the mountain slopes of China, Vietnam and Thailand, while in the latter, as well as in Laos, the state is ordering the mountain dweller to abandon his last refuge and settle down in the foothills, so that the higher-altitude forests may be rid of ‘unproductive’ swiddeners whose farming practices are allegedly harmful to the ecosystem. The encounter with ‘the Other’, which has been postponed for such a long time, has now become inevitable, and is leading ethnic minorities down a path where they will experience massive acculturation thanks to the military draft, national education, international markets, and powerful cultural vectors like television.

In an attempt at a prognosis of future developments, it is interesting to note that in Thailand, where economic development is a step ahead of that in neighbouring countries in Indochina, the state, once it got over the stage of surprise and irritation, has resigned itself to the fact that these mountain peoples are attracting disproportionate – but very lucrative – attention,

notably from tourists and academic researchers. Actually, an important factor in the spread of knowledge about the Miao/Hmong has been the increase in the West in the number of university students and scholars in all disciplines bearing on Asia, in particular history, anthropology and development studies. There is an ever-increasing number of academics studying the Miao/Hmong in Asia as well as the Hmong who sought refuge abroad, particularly in the United States and France. International adventure tourism, moreover, swiftly appropriated the 'hill tribes' of Thailand, making them an essential feature of any trip to and tour through the region and lending them disproportionate importance considering their small numbers (Michaud 1995, 1997). This attention to some extent contributes to the understanding of highland minorities, as well as to their economic survival, but above all it makes their existence known to a large international audience. It is indeed a most unexpected form of support for those mountain tribes who were regarded by many observers as being inevitably assimilated by the dominant lowland peoples.

It is possible that with the liberalization of the past few years this phenomenon may eventually spread to Laos and Vietnam and, perhaps, to Southern China (see Swain 1990 and Oakes 1992). Foreign tourists have already penetrated as far as Luang Phrabang and the Plain of Jars in Laos, Lao Cai, Sa Pa, Lai Chau and Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam, and, very recently, Guizhou, Guangxi and Yunnan in China. There is no doubt that it will no longer be possible for regional governments to ignore the existence of the Miao/Hmong, or of mountain dwellers in general, be they labelled 'hill tribes', 'national minorities', or 'little brothers'. What remains to be seen is whether it will be feasible to do justice to the cultural diversity of a region that is prone to economic and socio-political upheaval. In this respect, what regional history can teach us does not give cause for excessive optimism.

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<sup>25</sup> For an illustration of this, see Kesmanee 1988.

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