

## **Diaspora and the Predicament of Origins: Interrogating Hmong Postcolonial History and Identity<sup>1</sup>**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines two basic issues that have been of major concern to the Hmong in the diaspora: (1). What is their historical and geographic origin; and (2) are the Hmong part of the Miao nationality in China, and should they accept being known under this generic name? There have been many theories about where the Hmong originally came from, ranging from Mesopotamia in the Middle East during Biblical times, the North Pole, Siberia, to Mongolia and China. This paper consolidates these many propositions with their supporting evidence, and draws its own surprising conclusion as to the real location of the original homeland of the Hmong. Depending on what they regard as their origin and which history they wish to be aligned with, the Hmong may have to reconsider being known as Miao or Meo, a name which most have vehemently rejected because of its derogatory connotation, especially among the more politically conscious Hmong now living in Western countries.

### **Introduction:**

This paper deals with the search by the Hmong for their history and national identity after being subject to Chinese control for many centuries in China, followed for those who later migrated to Indochina by a further 80 years under Western colonial and neo-colonial domination. The post-independence world has given many enlightened Hmong in Western countries the opportunities to know more about themselves from frequent contacts with co-ethnics in other places during the last 30 years through cross-border visits or by telephone and on the Internet. In the process, they have been confronted with uncertainties and many unresolved questions about their historical roots and how to fill the black holes in their history, a history usually written by others and from the perspective of outsiders. For example, the simple search for the home of their ancestors before the latter's migration to Southern China where most of the Hmong still are today, is often met with contradictory explanations as they learn more about their past.

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The problem lies in the fact that this search for ancestral origins inevitably touches on the definition of who the Hmong are and how they are related to the other three ethnicities in the larger entity more broadly known as "Miao" with whom they have been classified, a classification originally imposed by the conquering Chinese. Because of this forced affiliation between four different groups, conflicting historical narratives have been presented, with some even borrowed from other sources and people<sup>2</sup>. Each of these Miao groups has their own history, and their own views about who were their ancestors and where they originated from, but these varied versions have now been combined to read like a single unified account (Vwj Zoov Tsheej, 2004). To further complicate matters, these groups speak different languages and cannot communicate with each other. Although they have their own local ethno-names, they like being known nationally as Miao and do not find this appellation derogatory, unlike the Hmong outside China who strongly resent it, and who steadfastly resist its application to them.

With such major differences, what do the Hmong and Miao have in common? Did they have the same cultural and geographic origin? Were they historically different or the same people who now call themselves by different names like Hmong, Qho Xiong, Hmu and A Hmao? If they share the same history, what roles did each of the groups play? Can this origin and related historical events be disentangled for identification, or should they be left as revisited-revised proceedings purposefully joined together into a glorious acceptable narrative to be appreciated, but not to be questioned too much as to which groups its many elements really belong to? These questions have caused much self-reflection among the Hmong in the diaspora today after their post-1975 scattering around the world from Laos and the postcolonial desire for a written history of their own that will pull together the disconnected parts in their collective memories.

While not claiming to make a definitive statement here, I will examine these issues from an "emic" (insider) perspective, from the view point of a Hmong and a researcher, using "etic" (outsider) discourses provided by non-Hmong writers. In addition, I will adopt a "critical theory" stance in that I see historical analysis as grounded not primarily in the search for truth and universal values, but more in the need to problematize the present for its political relevance and utility for social action (Dean, 1994). It is hoped that these two approaches will help bring together the major issues and theories involved, and will add a new position to the discussion of this most controversial subject and attempts at Miao/Hmong historical recovery.

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<sup>2</sup> See Robert Entenmann, "The Myth of Sonom", *Hmong Studies Journal*, Vol. 6, 2005.

## Who are the Hmong?

The Hmong form one of the many tribal minorities, also known as Miao/Meo, who are scattered in the border regions of China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Those classified as belonging to what Schein (2004: 274) calls "the cumbersome umbrella" term 'Miao' in China include:

- the "Qho Xiong" in Western Hunan;
- the "Hmub", "Gha Ne" or "Hmu" for a group speaking the same dialect in South eastern Guizhou;
- the "A Hmao" in Northwest Guizhou and Northeast Yunnan; and
- the "Hmong" in South Szechwan, West Guizhou and South Yunnan.

The separate ethnic name also refers to the language spoken by each group concerned. The social organization of these groups is based on the clan system through the sharing of specific surnames similar to those of the Chinese.

The total number of Miao population in China in 2000 is estimated at 9.2 million with 3.1 million being Hmong. The figure for the latter increases to 4.5 million world-wide if we add the following: 787,000 in Vietnam; 460,000 in Laos; 120,000 in Thailand; 2,000-3,000 in Myanmar; 200,000 in the USA; 15,000 in France; 2,000 in Australia; 1,400 in Canada; 300 in Argentina; and 110 in Germany (Lemoine, 2005).

The Hmong in Laos were greatly affected by French colonialism in that small country from 1893 to 1954. During this period, they became politically divided into two major factions, one supporting the French and the maintenance of their colonial project under the Royal Lao government, the other joining the independence movement that fought to take back Laos from France. After the departure of France from Laos in 1954, civil war broke out between ideologically opposed Lao political parties as the Americans stepped in to fight against communism in Indochina. The Hmong factions continued their separate political alliance, with those under the French now working closely with the Americans. The war took a heavy toll with a third of the estimated 300,000 Hmong dead or injured from being recruited to fight for the warring factions, and half of the total Hmong population forcibly displaced in various areas. Many subsequently escaped to Thailand as refugees from the newly installed Lao communist regime in 1975, and were eventually resettled in the United States and other Western countries, the latest group as recently as 2005 from the Tham Krabok Temple camp.

Although the Hmong form the major group of the Miao to have migrated out of China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to Southeast Asia, they do not have their own written records to show where they originated from. Claims have been made that they left Mesopotamia after the fall of the Tower of Babel, then gradually migrated north through Russia, Siberia and Mongolia before ending in their present location in southern China (Savina, 1924; and Quincy, 1988). Other writers have refuted these claims, stating that the Hmong's original home has always been southern China before it was slowly conquered over the centuries by the Han Chinese, judging by the religious, language and cultural assimilation between the two groups<sup>i</sup> (Bradley, 1987; Geddes, 1976; Lee and Tapp, 2005; and Yang, 1995). As a diaspora today, the Hmong have myths that foretell their eventual reunion one day by a messiah or king who would give them back their history and their country, a country that was believed to have been lost somewhere in the distant past.

Until their exodus from Laos as refugees to Thailand and the West, the Hmong were called "Meo" by other people, a derivative of the Chinese word "Miao" used for them in China. However, this is not the term the Hmong outside of China use or want to refer to themselves. With a slight change in accent, the word "Meo" in Lao and Thai can be pronounced to mean "cat". It is most offensive for many Asians to be compared to an animal, a lower form of being in their views. For this reason, the Hmong have taken exception to being known as "Meo". After much advocacy, the term "Hmong" has come to be used internationally during the last thirty years. The main issue is that their co-ethnics in China seem to have no problem with being called "Miao", although they readily switch identity when they deal with the American Hmong by calling themselves "Hmong" (Schein, 2004: 284-285). The Hmong, however, have little desire to change to "Miao" in such encounters, or would only do so most reluctantly.

No longer controlled by any colonial power nor confined under restrictive political regimes today, those Hmong in the West who are more vocal have started to question these differences, to wonder whether their fellow majority in the former homeland of China really form one single people with them, one Hmong nation scattered across many borders. This attempt at postcolonial ethnic identification has placed the long-separated Miao and Hmong in a difficult predicament – as people who desire unity but who have conflicting ethno-names, diverse languages and ambiguous identities.

As a result, it has not been easy to decide which origins, historical events and figures from which Chinese minorities and which Miao/Hmong groups to adopt for the larger national entity. This tenuous position has led to endless debates and many discourses among Hmong Internet

discussion groups and other intellectuals (see soc.cult.hmong discussion on the www. Hmong Homepage.com; and the Hmong "Sib Tham" group in Yahoo.com). Often, "these discourses have the aura of authority and the effect of definitively identifying, framing and stabilizing what constitutes 'Miao-ness' ... [and] are seen as highly legitimate, perhaps even more reliable when produced by non-Miao." (Schein, 2000: 35-36).

## **Theorizing Hmong Origins**

These Miao/Hmong, where did they originate from? In trying to answer this question, we may also be able to shed light on who they are, or what kind of identity and history they have or want to maintain. Let us now look at some of the major claims and explanations that have been advanced as answers to this question.

### **1. Mythical Origin**

The Hmong have stories about the creation of the world and how the first people came to populate the earth. The most important text that refers to this mythical origin is the Song of "Showing the Way" or "Qhuab Ke", the first ritual that opens the funeral ceremony<sup>3</sup>. The ritual performer opens by asking whether the dead person really dies or is only faking death. If he or she is truly dead, then the person is informed that his or her body is to be washed and dressed in mortuary costumes, and the soul will be guided back to all the places he or she has lived to show them gratitude before joining the ancestors in the After World. Prior to making this journey, however, the "Qhuab Ke" chanter informs the dead person about the beginning of the world, the getting of seeds for crops and why people die. The "Showing the Way" chant says that a pair of female and male super-beings<sup>4</sup>, Nkauj Ntsuab (Gau Njua) and Sis Nab (Shi Na) were sent from the Nether World to fashion the world, to make the mountains and plains, the rivers and lakes; and to populate it with people without specifying who they were.

Where is this Afterworld of the ancestors that the soul of the dead is sent back to? And what does it look like? Can it be said to be the mythical original home of the Hmong? In the "Showing the Way" funeral chant, it is said that the sacrificial animals for the dead are given to the soul of a dead person for use either as food or assets to pay debts incurred while alive on

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous blind reviewer of this paper for pointing out the importance of the Quab Ke chant in tracing the mythical origin of the Hmong. For a full and accurate English translation of the chant, see Symonds (2004: 193-238).

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that the pair is always mentioned together, but with female first.

Earth. Should he or she want to replenish this stable of animals, the need will be made known through a sickness among the close living descendants who will then have to carry out an "ox ceremony" (ua nyuj dab) involving the killing of a cow. Thus, if we look at the number of sacrificial oxen killed at the funeral of a Hmong elderly together with those killed for the "ox ceremony", it would appear that this distant mythical domain is "a pastoral heavenly place where animal husbandry is a major economic activity" (Lee, 2005:27). Apart from incense, rice alcohol, paper money and these sacrificial cattle, no other economic needs are mentioned in Hmong rituals. Yet, cattle grazing is only a minor activity undertaken by the more wealthy Hmong in real life, although the ability to afford meat as part of their diet is a major issue.

Other than the Qhuab Ke, the Hmong have folk tales that relate to the First and Second Creations, and to life in mythical times. A story, "How People Lived in Very Ancient Times" from the Ch'uan Miao in China (Graham, 1954: 19), states that:

"In very ancient times people were not accustomed to wearing clothing. A man wore only a grass skirt to cover his lower organs. A woman wore a wooden apron over her abdomen to cover her shame. They had no good things to eat. In warm weather they had merely the fruit they picked, and during the winter they captured and ate small living creatures. In warm weather they lived in the old forests, and in winter they returned to their (natural) stone caves. As to their way of living, a few tens might live in one group, or only a few people. We do not know how long they lived in this way."

A story entitled "Ancient People Who Secured Seed" in the same collection says that "the ancient Miao tribe" came "from a mountain wilderness" where they cut the trees to burn and plowed the land in order to plant crop seed (Graham, op. cit.: 18). It thus appears that gathering and living in "forests" and "natural caves" were practised "in very ancient times", followed by slash and burn farming after the "ancient people" were able to obtain rice "seed" and learn to plow.

In another tale from the Hmong of Laos (Livo and Cha, 1991: 33), it is said that long ago the world was a black flat rock and humans lived far underground with their animals. One day, a man and his wife were following their dog as it was chasing a monkey through a long rock tunnel. They eventually emerged on the face of the earth. After seeing it, they decided to go back home, gathered all their worms, animals and seeds, and returned to live on the surface where they sowed the seeds and put the worms in the ground. Soon the seeds sprang up, the worms multiplied and life began on earth. Although there is no space here to give all the details, it should be noted that this story, called the First Beginning of the World (Johnson, 1992: 3), does not mention Hmong or Miao but only humans after the earth was settled by the

original couple from underground<sup>5</sup>. It also makes no reference to the making of the earth by a Supernatural Being like God, nor that the wife was made from a rib from the man, but only that she emerged from the same place as he did.

The next story, known as the Great Flood and the Second Creation, refers to the creation of the Hmong and their many clans, following a great flood from which only a brother and sister survived. In the version by the Miao of Guizhou, China (Bender, 2006: 159-68), the brother became restless and lonely: "Jang Vang (the brother) looked to the East, and then gazed to the West... he saw no one to love." In the end, the cotton bamboos advised him to "find your sister and talk of love, and brother and sister will become a pair." (pp. 163-164) The sister did not want to marry her brother, but he was cunning and used various tricks to convince her until she agreed to call him "husband". After the marriage, she gave birth to a lump of flesh: "it had feet but no arms; it had no face, but had eyes... like a fish wrapped in paddy grass; just as ugly." (pp. 166-167). In anger, the husband cut it up into small pieces with a crooked sickle, filled nine manure buckets with them and spread them over nine hills.

The version of the story from the Hmong in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand says that the next morning little huts sprang up where the pieces of meat fell. With smoke coming out of them, each hut was occupied by a couple<sup>6</sup>. The piece of flesh that landed in the goat house (tsev tshis) gave rise to the Lee (Lis) clan, the one that ended up in the garden (vaj) yielded the Vang (Vaj) clan, and so on (Johnson, 1992: 115-117). The fleshy pieces also turned into insects, birds, oxen, buffaloes and rodents (Livo and Cha, op.cit.: 43). However, the version from the Guizhou Miao says that the scattered pieces of flesh "turned into many, many peoples, turned into myriads of persons" of different races like the Dong, the Lolo, Chinese, etc.. (Bender, op.cit.: 167). The bones (tough and marrow-rich) turned into the Miao people, the meat (rich in nourishment) into Han Chinese, and the intestines (of lower quality) into other groups, although these were not named (Bender, p. 208, note 9). It is interesting to note that

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<sup>5</sup> However, Bender (2006), in a note to the Prelude to the Epic Poems of the Miao in Guizhou, China, states that the gods (Fu Fang, Bu Pa, Ye Xing, Niu Dliang and Hu Li) were born first, and it was only after Jang Vang was born that "the present age of humans begin" (p. 192).

<sup>6</sup> Many other ethnic groups in Asia have similar stories about a great flood giving rise to new people or their own ancestors. Van was able to collect 307 such stories among minority groups in Vietnam and neighboring countries. See Van, D.N. (1993). "The Flood Myth and the Origin of Ethnic Groups in Southeast Asia." *Journal of American Folklore*, Summer 1993, 106: 304-337.

this epic creation story puts different ethnic groups into a hierarchy based on which body parts they came from and according the elevation of the landscape where they live today.<sup>7</sup>

One may ask if the brother and sister who gave birth to the Hmong were not Hmong, then what race did they belong to? If they were not Hmong, how could their children be Hmong? Were they the ancestors of the Hmong only as stated by the story of the Hmong in Laos, or were they also parents of other races as told by the Miao of Guizhou?

## **2. Biblical/Caucasian Origin**

Savina (op.cit.: X-XI, 103-104 and 246-247) states that the Miao inform him they originally moved to a region called "To Sia" (which he translated as a big plateau but should have correctly been "highlands" or "Toj Siab") to the north of their current abode in China (Hunan). The move took place, following these Biblical events:

- the confusion of the tongues (which he describes in Hmong as: *phay lu*), and
- the dispersion of people (*phay du phay te*) after the destruction of the Tower of Babel (*Nthay Ndu* – heavenly stairs).

He also claims that the Hmong have folk stories that are similar to those in the Bible such as tales about the creation of the world, the first woman being made after the first man, the original sin caused by the woman eating the forbidden strawberry (but not an apple as in the Bible), their banishment from their original home, and the Great Flood. This claim is made, despite the fact that the Hmong stories are quite different from those of the Bible with their omission of God as the creator of the world in seven days, or the first woman being made from one of the first man's ribs. Regardless, Savina (op.cit.: 103) links the Hmong to an origin in Mesopotamia where Biblical mankind was believed to have first started, for only the Hmong, the Armenians and the Chaldeans still "keep memories of the Deluge, the Tower of Babel, the confusion of languages and the scattering of peoples" - with Hmong traditions "possessing stories that closely parallel to the first chapters of Genesis."

These interpretations are very common in older books about the Hmong, particularly with early missionaries who were looking for Christian converts and who might have an interest in linking the Miao/Hmong with a Biblical origin in order to render them more susceptible to a new set of

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<sup>7</sup> Bender, personal communication, 6 December 2007.

religious beliefs from Europe. Savina also likens the Hmong to Caucasian people, and therefore with a Caucasian origin. This is despite the lack of any supporting evidence, except he noticed that some Hmong children were fair-skinned and had blue eyes, even though albino children were also found in other non-European groups.

This Mesopotamian Biblical origin has been repeated by many writers up to the present day, including Quincy (1988), the latest Hmong history book that has been so popular that it went into a second edition (1995). This is despite his many fanciful speculations that are completely devoid of supporting evidence or references.

### **3. Genetic Origin**

Although Savina believes that the Hmong may have been Caucasian in the very distant past due to some of them having fair skin and blue eyes, there was no genetic evidence to support this since no one tried to obtain such evidence in the early 1920's when Savina wrote his book. As with the Chinese, for example, claims that they are related genetically to Caucasian people, have been refuted on the ground that genetic analysis shows most Han Chinese not to have 'Caucasoid' genetic markers. Past mixing with other races may have caused one out of 10,000 Han Chinese to have a Caucasoid genetic marker, but DNA samples from at least 50,000 Han Chinese spread all over China would need to be collected to obtain representative samples. They would have to be analyzed very carefully and even then the results may not be generalized to the larger Chinese population (Bobo Huang, 2004)<sup>8</sup>.

The Genographic project, under the *National Geographic Magazine*<sup>9</sup>, has tried to explore the "Human Journey" by tracing the origins of different races through the analysis of their genes<sup>10</sup>. It examines the presence of specific types of Y-chromosome DNA markers among people in different parts of the world, and finds that the Haplogroup 0 with the genetic marker M175 "appears in 80-90% of all human males in East and Southeast Asia...[but it] is almost nonexistent in Western and Northern Asia and is completely absent from Europe, Africa, and the Americas..."

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.asiawind.com/forums/read.php?f=2&i=4123&t=305>).

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Michel Ya-Lu, through Prof. Louisa Schein, who brings this project to my attention.

<sup>10</sup> See [https://www3.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/pi/jin\\_profile.html](https://www3.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/pi/jin_profile.html)

The on-line Wikipedia states that Haplogroup O has 3 subclades: [Haplogroup O1](#), [Haplogroup O2](#), and [Haplogroup O3](#)<sup>11</sup>. These [subclades](#) with their defining mutation further consist of:

- [O1](#) (MSY2.2) branching to O1a (M119) found among [Austronesians](#), southern [Han Chinese](#), and [Daic](#) peoples.
- [O2](#) (P31, M268) branching to [O2a](#) (M95) represented in [Austro-Asiatic](#) peoples; [O2b](#) (SRY465 and M176) with O2b1 (P49) found in [Koreans](#) and O2b1a (47z) in [Japanese](#) and [Ryūkyūans](#).
- [O3](#) (M122) distributed throughout [Central Asia](#), [East Asia](#), [Southeast Asia](#), and the [Austronesian](#) regions of [Oceania](#), with O3a3 (LINE1, M159) represented in [Hmong-Mien](#) people; and O3a5 (M134) in [Sino-Tibetan peoples](#).

On the basis of this classification of Haplogroup O genetic markers, the *National Geographic* project has completed tracing for a number of racial groups, although no analysis has been done on the subgroup Hmong-Mien who carries genetic marker M159. Among the groups so far studied<sup>12</sup>, two with genetic markers in the subclades closest to the Hmong are:

- Haplogroup O3 with marker M122, believed to have existed within the last 10,000 years probably beginning in China with a widespread distribution of descendants (more than half of Chinese men). This suggests that its members could have been the descendants of the first rice cultivators in China, based on archaeological evidence found in northern China with millet (a wheat-like grain) grown about 7,000 years ago.
- Haplogroup O with marker M175, first appeared 35,000 years ago in Central and East Asia. The carriers of this marker are part of the M9 Eurasian clan whose early members, probably Siberian hunters, traveled east along the great steppes and gradually crossed southern Siberia. Today, 80-90 per cent of people living east of Central Asia belong to this group, with marker M175 almost absent in inhabitants of Western Asia and Europe.

In a separate research project that focused specifically on Hmong-Mien "mt DNA genetic/molecular variance", Bo Wien (2005: 725-734) and 17 other university scientists in China (Shanghai and Yunnan) and the United States (Cincinnati, Ohio), took blood samples from 537 individuals in 17 sites in Hunan, Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong provinces, China. After some complicated analysis and much tabulation, they observed the following:

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<sup>11</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haplogroup\\_O3\\_\(Y-DNA\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haplogroup_O3_(Y-DNA))

<sup>12</sup> see <https://www3.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/atlas.html?card=my042>

- A close “relatedness” between the Hmong-Mien (H-M) people and other southern East Asians (SEAs), with the Miao in Hunan (believed to be the site of their original home) “closer to” northeast Asians than other H-M populations (p. 730).
- A significant correlation between genetic and geographic distances across H-M and SEAs: gene flow between adjacent populations is more evident than with distant ones.
- “a general southern origin of maternal lineages” with “more contact” between Hmong-Mien and northern East Asians than other people, due to “the higher frequency of north-dominating lineages observed in the Hmong people” (p.725).

These findings are said to be “consistent with” archaeological and historical evidence linking proto-H-M with the Neolithic culture in the Middle Reach of the Yangtze River in southern China (Fei, 1999), including the Daxi Culture (5,300-6,400 Years Before Present) and the Qujialing Culture (4,600-5,000 YBP) – accounted for by the presence of Haplogroup B5a which is “very homogenous” in 11% of H-M mtDNAs and exists in most of the H-M populations (p.732).

It is worthy of note that the Bo Wien study finds the Miao populations to be relatively distant from the Yao/Mien populations. The researchers also state that their findings (for a general southern Miao origin with more northern contacts) “might provide some clues for tracing” the history of the San-Miao from their establishment in the Lake Tungting area and expansion northward to the Yellow River basin, led by Chiyou before their defeat by the Yan-Huang tribe (under Huangti) and push-back to the south. They conclude that “our systematic study of H-M mtDNA diversity provides genetic evidence for the origin and migration of the H-M populations and the data for further investigation of the genetic structure of East Asians.” (p.733).

#### **4. Linguistic Origin**

According to the online Britannica.com, Miao-Yao (myou'you') is a small group of languages whose speakers are found in mountainous areas of southern China and Southeast Asia<sup>13</sup>. Previously, Hmong-Mien (H-M) languages were included in the Sino-Tibetan language family, but are now seen as being a family of their own. Originating probably in southern and central China, their greatest diversity is found between the Yangtze and Mekong rivers today. This distribution has led to speculation that their speakers could have been the millet growers of the Shang dynasty, since the Hmong tale of Creation and other stories mention rice growing very early in their legendary past (Bender, 2006: 92-107; and Livo and Cha, 1991: 33-35). The

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<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.Britannica.com/miao-yao>

original H-M language diversity is believed to have spread even to northern China, but few dialects have survived there to the present. The Hmong-Miao branch of the family now has some 35 dialects divided into: 'Gelo', northern Hmong, Xiangxi Miao (Red Miao), Western Hmong, Libo Miao, Weining Miao, Yi Miao, Hmong proper (includes Hmong Njua [Blue/Green Miao], Hmong Daw [White Miao], and Magpie Miao), Central Hmong, Qiandong Miao (Black Miao), Longli Miao, East Guizhou, Patengic, Pa-Hng and Yongcong.

Having learned the Hmong Daw (Western Hmong) dialect and composed the first Hmong-French dictionary, Savina (1924: 42-69) compares 239 Hmong words with those used in nine other languages (Man, Lolo, Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, Tibetan, Tartar, Malay and Sting), and concludes that:

- Miao, Man, Lolo and Tibetan (being monosyllabic) belong to the Nordist (Northern) group of languages which originated from the Tourane – a plateau in ancient Persia.
- Chinese, Malay, Thai and Vietnamese belong to the Sudist (Southern) group – deriving from the Dravidian language family of Davira in India (pp.92-100).

Other linguists, however, have different explanations. Schein (2000: 46), citing Cao Cuiyun (a Beijing linguist researching the Miao language), states that “the presence or absence of certain terms in the Miao lexicon pointed convincingly to the conclusion that they could not have originated farther north than their present distribution.” In other words, the Miao have always been in central and southern China where they are today. This is further supported by Ratliff (2004: 147-160) with her study on H-M environment and subsistence vocabulary. She looks at the origins of Hmong and Chinese terms for animals (elephants, monkey, pangolin, river deer, thrush and tiger), plants (onion, cogon grass and tshuaj kab raus), hunting (cross bow, to shoot, to track, track/footprint), domestic animals (chicken, crest of chicken, to lay eggs, dog, duck, horse, to ride, stable/pen, pig, sheep/goat and water buffalo), non-rice agriculture (bean, buckwheat, cucumber, eggplant, soybean, sweet potato and taro), and rice agriculture (rice, chaff, cooked rice, glutinous rice, growing or unhusked rice/rice paddy, husked rice, paddy field, sickle, rice cake, rice head and rice seedling). She finds that some H-M terms (relating to hunting, local flora and fauna and rice culture) in this vocabulary are native to the H-M or connected to Austronesian and Mon-Khmer languages, but words from the fields of animal husbandry and non-rice agriculture “show such strong ties to Chinese” and “rice terms show an overlay of Chinese influence, especially with respect to terms for wet rice cultivation...”.

Thus, Ratliff concludes, "it seems clear that the Hmong and Mien people have occupied roughly the same areas of southern China that they occupy today for at least the past two millennia." (p. 160). Culas and Michaud (2004: 65) also point out the suggestion by Haudricourt (1974), a French linguist, that the rich Hmong technical vocabulary linked to wet-rice farming exists not from borrowing from the Chinese language but from a long tradition of "sedentary agriculture by the Miao/Hmong in China." According to Bender (personal communication, 12/6/07), recent archaeological digs in Southeast China in the Yangzi delta in Zhejiang province, suggest that rice cultivation took place as early as 7,500 yrs ago in the region, and this rice growing practice could have been "exported upriver to the west along the very same lines that early Miao or proto-Miao groups may have traveled." An earlier study of the Miao language edited by Purnell (1972) further finds many Miao/Hmong words to be actually Chinese words. This may have arisen from borrowing and assimilation by Miao speakers over many centuries of contact with the Chinese, as they are now doing with the languages of their neighbors in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and other countries. Bradley (1987: 282) also finds that many ancient words are shared between the 'Miao' and Chinese languages; and 'such words indicate that there was early, intimate contact between the ancestors of the Miao and the Chinese'.

## **5. Middle-East/Siberian origin**

A northerly origin has also been suggested, based on "stories" of the Hmong migration from a "land at the back of China" (Suav Teb Tom Ub), a "land of ice and darkness" where the sun only shines for six months of the year, and a "land of scorching sky and brittle earth" (Savina, 1924: x; and Quincy 1988: 20-25). However, no such stories can be found among today's Hmong<sup>14</sup> In the most comprehensive collection with a staggering 752 Hmong folk stories by Graham (1954), there is not one story that alludes to any land with the aforementioned descriptions. The only story in this huge collection that mentions anything about Hmong origin and the weather, is called "Ancient People Who Secured Seed". It asks: "Where did the Miao come from? From a mountain wilderness... When those Miao first came, [they] remembered that they should clear a wilderness" so they could plow and grow crops (pp. 18-19). After the "green bird" flew to get seed from "Ntzi's granary" in the "Lo Tse'en Tsi land",

"the ancient Miao received the seed and put it into a barrel. He waited until spring arrived with two cool months. There are two cold months in winter. When the weather

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<sup>14</sup> see the 3 volumes of "**Dab Neeg Hmoob**" ((1985) from the Hmong in Laos published by Fr. Yves Bertrais and his 29 Hmong folk tales collected from China "**Dab Neeg Kwv Txhiaj Keeb Kwv Nyob Moos Laj**" (1992). Also Charles Johnson in his book "**Myths, Legends and Folk Tales from the Hmong of Laos**" (1992), with 27 tales.

was temperate, during the first moon, and the place was warm and the sky was dry, and the land was also dry, then the ancient Miao took fire and burnt off a mountain..... then returned home and rested....."

The story only states "two cool months" of spring and "two cold months in winter" such as that found in south China, but not "six months of darkness" as would be the situation if it was the North Pole. Furthermore, the Hmong do not have stories that would indicate an ice or snow culture. Savina's speculations about a northern polar origin probably stemmed from an inaccurate translation of Hmong terms. For example, Savina translates 'dej npau' as 'snow and ice' when it should be 'boiling water' - the opposite. Also, a verse in the poetic funeral chant "Qhuab Ke" (Showing the Way) which urges the soul of the dead to take left-over food and drink to the ancestors, states that the latter live in " *ntuj qhua teb nkig, ntuj txias teb tsaus*". This should be correctly translated as 'under dry Sky on brittle Earth, cold Sky on dark Earth'. However, it was wrongly rendered as 'under burning skies on the scorched earth, under icy skies on the dark earth' by Ken White from the Hmong transcription of the ritual by Lemoine (1983: 8)<sup>15</sup>.

There is major difference in meaning between "dry" and "burning", "brittle" and "scorched", or "cold" and "icy", particularly when the Hmong do not even have a word for "ice" in their vocabulary, and the Hmong word for "burning" is "kub hnyiab" (ku nhia). These translation mistakes have led other writers to conjecture that the Hmong came from a land of ice and snow (as in Siberia or the North Pole) and before that, from a land of 'burning skies' and 'hot earth' (such as Mesopotamia in the Middle East). But these funeral metaphors are only Hmong *poetic* expressions for the sinister world of the dead rather than any real place on Earth. The last word of the above verse "teb *tsaus*" (dark earth) is critical and should not have been taken out of its original context where it is used to **rhyme** with the next verse which has been left out of the discussion, namely "koj thiaj muaj noj muaj *haus*" (so you will have things to eat and drink).

Did they come from Mongolia? What evidence is there? Do they have anything in common with the Mongols? On this issue, Yang Kaiyi (1995) is at pain to refute the misconception by many Hmong in America that they originated from Mongolia. He points out that the Hmong have very different physical, linguistic and cultural features from the Mongols. This mistaken belief probably arose because of the similarity in the syllable "mong" in the two names. However, a closer examination reveals that the Hmong do not have anything that would link

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<sup>15</sup> See also further discussion of this subject in Lemoine, Jacques, "Mythes d'origine, mythes d'identification", *L'Homme*, 101, Janv.-Mars 1987 XXVII(1) : 58-85

them to Mongolia. Nothing could be said to have been influenced by the Mongols such as words or religious rituals. Although they have folk tales about kings (huab tais, or Huangti in Chinese), they do not have any legends about emperors and Khans, or being conquered by Mongolians. They have no stories about a grassland nomadic life involving horses and sheep like that in Mongolia, but have many stories about tigers and jungles as found in the highlands of China, and especially tales about Chinese whom they call "mab suav" who chased them across rivers and mountains, so they ended up today in southern China and Southeast Asia.

## **6. China Origin: North, East, South, West and Center.**

Despite speculating that the Hmong originated from Mesopotamia, Savina (1924: VII) opens the Preface to his book "Histoire des Miao" by stating that "From times immemorial there exists in China a race of men whose origin no one knows." He goes on to say that these people, who call themselves "Hmong" in their own language, already occupied the lower basin of the Yellow River and the Hoi River in the distant past when the ancestors of the Chinese made their first appearance on these shores and "through their arrogance" called the Hmong "Miao", meaning natives or savages – "a name which survives until today".

The term "Miao" was used in pre-Qin China (before 207 BC) to refer to non-Chinese people of Southern China, often in combination with such names as "Miao Min" (the Miao people), "Yu Miao" (the Miao) and "San-Miao" (the three groups of Miao). But the name "Miao" disappeared for many centuries until the Tang (A.D. 618-907) and Sung (A.D. 960-1279) dynasties when the word "Nan Man" (Southern Barbarians) was used<sup>16</sup>. The term "Miao" appeared again in 862 A.D. in Fan Chuo's book *Manshu* on the Man Tribes. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, both the terms "Man" and "Miao" were used. However, late Ming and Qing gazetteers preferred to classify the Miao as Raw (Sheng) and Cooked (Shu) Miao – the first referring to those who refused to be assimilated into Chinese ways and the latter those who "were sinicized and therefore more civilized." (Diamond, 1995: 100). By 1741, the name came to be used for thirteen kinds of Miao people, distinguished from each other by cultural traits and the ethnic costumes of their women. The Qing dynasty (1644-1911 A.D.) finally saw the term used for the

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the terms "Miao" and "Hmong", see Enwall 1992) who concludes that the Hmong in the diaspora may have to be content with the name "Miao" as it is not derogatory in China and is easy to write in Chinese compared to "Hmong".

four Miao minorities in today's China where they are also called "Miao-Tseu" (Miao zu or Miao nationality) in Chinese<sup>17</sup>.

Schein (2000: 44-48), writing about the Miao/Hmu people in Southeast Guizhou, China, provides a succinct summary of the main explanations advanced by both Chinese and Western writers. She concludes that there are at least five different theories about where the Miao came from: the North, the South, the East, the West, and the Centre of China. If the Miao "whose origin no one knows" have been in China "since times immemorial", as stated by Savina above, it is possible that they have always been there and did not come originally from any far-flung places. According to him (op.cit: VIII), the first encounters between these "Miao" and the Han Chinese took place probably in the 27<sup>th</sup> century BC during the time of Chiyou<sup>18</sup> and the Chinese Yellow Emperor Shun. With continued Chinese expansion through military conquests and civilian usurpation of native lands, the Miao slowly migrated from their original home in the Yellow river basin, some to the northwest of China (Shunsi, Shensi and the basin of the Wei river), others to the southwest (towards the mountains of the Blue river basin and Sikiang), thus leaving the basin of the Hoai river to the Chinese invaders (Savina, op.cit.: 97). It is said that some later established "a strong Hmong kingdom in the Hupei-Hunan-Kwangsi region" but this was believed to have been annexed by the Kingdom of Nanchao in the seventh century (Marks, 1994: 106). All this, of course, is speculation, not historical facts.

Further evidence that the original home of the Miao/Hmong is somewhere around the Yellow river basin in China, is provided by the Chinese classics (the *Mang-tsze* and the *Shu Ching*) which mentioned the 'San-Miao' or 'Three Miao' as living in that region 4000 years ago (Geddes, 1976: 4-5). A popular epic poem of the Miao in Guizhou also describes the home of their original ancestors as being a place where "the earth and waters were as one, the shining waves billowed up to the blue sky: everything was as flat as a bamboo mat, like the river flats where grain is dried." (Bender, 2006: 170). The next line of the poem goes on to ask "When the parents (ancestors) lived in the East, what clothes did they wear? What food did they eat?" This seems to suggest that the origin of the Miao is east of Guizhou where they now are, possibly near Lake Tungting (in present-day Hunan province) and Lake Poyang (in northwestern Kiangsi), for it would probably be around these big lakes that the "waves billowed up to the

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<sup>17</sup> Bender (personal communication, 12/6/07) points out that the term "Miao-Tseu" seems to be similar to the modern term "Miao-zi", a derogatory appellation still sometimes heard today, but not in front of Miao people, as it is taboo under government regulations.

<sup>18</sup> Chiyou is today regarded by the Miao/Hmong of China as their hero and ancestor, and is honored annually through festivals and commemorative events in various places. See "A Hmong Hero of Pre-China - Chiyou" by Lee Maoqing in (<http://www.hmonghome.com/dongtai.asp>). Accessed 2/19/07

blue sky" and where the shore and land around was "as flat as a bamboo mat." It is further said that the ancient "Five Pairs of Parents" of the Miao "lived in the east along a sea shore" in China and later moved west "because of poverty and overcrowding" (Bender, *op.cit.*, p. 191)

Lee and Tapp (2005), Bradley (1987), Geddes (1976: 3-15) and Ratliff (2004) argue that the Miao/Hmong must have always been in Southern China, based on folk stories, linguistic and cultural features they have developed or share with the Han Chinese. The Miao/Hmong original home was probably more to the Southeast of Beijing – for the name "Beijing" translates as "City of the North, or City of Heaven" (Pem Ceeb) in Hmong. The Hmong in China send the soul of their dead to "Pem Ceeb" while those outside China send it to "Tuam Tshoj Teb" (Land of China). There are also many religious and cultural similarities between the Chinese and the Hmong which suggest that the Hmong have always been in close contact with the Chinese, rather than any other people. Hmong stories and funeral rituals often mention the Chinese (Suav) but no other peoples, with one folk story even saying that the ancestors of the Hmong and the Han Chinese were once two brothers worshipping at the same ancestral grave but parted company due to conflict over properties (Graham, 1954: 27).

Tapp (2003: 444-45) relates another story which says that "... long ago, the ancestor of the Miao and the ancestor of the Chinese were brothers, the Chinese being the older brother and the Miao being the younger". The Jade Emperor gave each of them a text, but a cow ate the text of the Miao while they were resting at a bridge so Miao people had no writing today. Some writers, however, believe that "the Miao were in China before the Chinese" (Mottin, 1980: 16), and "Wherever the Chinese are now in the north and east, the Miao were there before them." (Clarke, 1907: 252).

The acceptance of the Miao/Hmong origin as being in China would depend on whether the Hmong accept as their ancestors the Miao mentioned in Chinese legendary history 5,000 years ago. Such acceptance would also assume that the four groups currently classified under the umbrella name "Miao" are descendants of the legendary Miao in Chinese history. A further assumption is that the current Miao people are homogenous (displaying unity and uniformity) in acknowledging these historical references and their experiences of perceived historical traumas. There is also the issue of how events of the past should be interpreted in relation to each and all four groups, for as During (2005: 60) remarks, "the past we have today is not, in any clear way, the past as it was once variously experienced." Each group has obviously experienced this past differently, judging by their diverse reactions to being called by the same Miao name.

What is also important here is whether the mythologized "Miao" in Chinese historical records can be seen as the ancestors of today's Miao/Hmong, or whether they were other indigenous non-Han minorities in southern China. And those armed encounters between them and the Chinese, can the Miao/Hmong claim them to be part of their lost history? A positive answer to this question may mean that they are trying to recover, even revise, their history on the ground of what During (op.cit.: 59-60) refers to as "organized collective memories", a paradigmatic means of looking at the past based on organized texts and change-driven social memories in an attempt "to resist and correct false representations of a community by outsiders - often for political purpose, especially in the case of marginalized oppressed groups in colonial contexts."

## **Discussion**

Each of the six explanations of the origins of the Hmong discussed above can be contextualized as attempts at historical recovery for the Miao/Hmong by them and other interested people. Schein (op.cit: 49) sees this search for origins as stemming initially from the need to lend continuity and credence to Miao history and to articulate inter-ethnic relations in China and the repositioning of the Miao in relation to the majority Han Chinese, although this discourse has now been extended beyond the Chinese borders into a transnational international context to include the Hmong in the diaspora. Today, these diverse perspectives make it difficult to assess their validity, but they represent the outcome of the conflicts that exist in historical production, conflicts between the inaccessible mythical past, the interpretation of often disjointed historical events and the contradictory present. Nevertheless, such interpretation is necessary when it will help to bring the many unconnected origins into focus and to see if it is possible to reach a unified single all-encompassing explanation.

In a sense, these accounts of different Miao/Hmong origins can all be taken as equally useful. Each explanation has its own function and validity, depending on what we want to do with it and the political purpose for which we are looking at the issue. As pointed out by During (op. cit.: 54-60), history can exist for many reasons. It can be produced and consumed as: (1) politics or representation of the rulers, (2) public social memories to be celebrated or mourned; (3) ground of identity at the family ( through genealogy) and social levels through the identification of a group with certain historical events; (4) "nostalgia for the past" which is a sign of the lack of "real history in the present" and the weakening of the role of the past in the construction of social identity; (5) entertainment in fictionalized TV films/documentaries; (6) popular, middle-class centered "heritage industry" based on organized/commercial cultural

memories preserved as monuments/models in historic villages, parks and museums; and (7) injury/trauma/collective injustices used as a paradigm to see the past based on organized cultural memories to resist and correct false representations of a community by outsiders.

Today, the Hmong's interest in tracing their origins obviously stems from most if not all of these uses of history. I would suggest that seeing history as a critical inquiry, a collective paradigm to affect social change, plays a big role in this endeavor, as the Hmong now realize the need to redress past injustices and to correct false representations or the lack of representations within the vicissitudes of world history. The Miao in China have accepted that they were already in China before the coming of the Han Chinese, and are related to the "San-Miao" referred to in ancient Chinese history, because such a (re)claim "imparts a legendary stature to the present-day Miao, positioning them as important players during the formative period of the Han people. This identification also bestows the dignity of great antiquity, authoritativeness and a firm standing in the documentary record." (Schein, op.cit.: 38).

For these reasons, the four groups of Miao in China today do not wish to let go of the use of this name for them due to the benefits such a close association with ancient Chinese history can bring to them. If it is true that "Man knows himself only in history, never through introspection" (Dilthey, 1962: 138), then the Miao must have known themselves well. They have adopted Chiyou as their first ancient hero so as to take their history back to mythical times. They have claimed the "San-Miao" as their ancestors, having the foresight to appreciate the political utility of being linked to the San-Miao kingdom. They have used history for its practical possibilities, using history not for the sake of knowledge but as a useable tool to bring about social change, emancipation and freedom from oppression and injustice, as a means to stimulate new ways of thinking and action. To quote Best (1995: xii) from another context:

*"They know that the ability to define the meaning of the past grants the power to define the meaning of the present and future; they understand that a people without a historical memory are easily manipulated through myths of the present. To lack a narrative of one's own past, from the personal to the national level, is to fall victim to the pseudohistorical representations of others. Each culture needs to see the present as history and to create its own narratives that secure their meaning and identities..."*

Such a project and vision, even if they consist only of essentializing what is needed from all the myriad of jumbling events, accords well with the critical theory of history, for to study and to

know history is to be able "to loosen the grip of established reality... to create a space of concrete freedom i.e. of possible transformation" (Foucault in Kritzman, 1988: 36). Historiography, the writing of history, can be affected by the quality and amount of information transmitted from the past, and by how we interpret and use this information – whether for knowledge only or also for social criticism and political change, for making us concerned with past and present forms of inequality. As seen by Best (op.cit.: ix-x), history "is the continuous present that instantly recedes into the past and from which we project the future.... History begins when human beings... realize they have a past that is useful to know, interpret, relate, study and maintain..." In this way, history is a creation of people about their past through the narration of events from specific perspectives, especially those in dominant positions.

Arnold (2000:114-115) states that although using facts, the craft of writing history is also an art, the art of rhetoric persuasion. Fiske (1868:29), referring to the French critic Sainte-Beuve who sees history as being mostly "a set of fables which people agree to believe in", suggests that "much of what is currently accredited as authentic history is in fact a mixture of flattery and calumny, myth and fable". If this is the case and if history is both an art (subjective knowledge reflective of the observer) and a science (objective facts and knowledge unconnected to the observer), then we are faced with the need to resolve the conflict between (a) a truth that is based on myth, meaning and perception; and (b) a truth that is grounded in inert facts and "reality". In history, however, an event can be studied many times and from many perspectives, so that its "facts" become part of the context of its meaning and interpretation. Truth is thus a process of consensus, a general acceptance by one's fellow human beings – a matter of feeling and understanding. This is despite the need for historians to stay with what is made possible by the sources of information, and to recognize what is not, without inventing new evidence or suppressing facts that do not agree with their agenda or narratives.

Apart from references in Chinese historical books, there are no archaeological ruins and other "factual" evidence that could be claimed to belong to the Miao/Hmong or to show their "true" origin. They do not seem to have built lasting monuments or carved distinctive structures anywhere, except in China where cave dwellings and burial sites have allegedly been found (Xiong, 2000). If truth is a matter of interpretation and if we can only interpret history from the sources of information available to us, then what we choose for Hmong history today depends very much on what we want to get from the act of historical reconstruction. Thus, based on the existing information, the various theories on the origins of the Miao/Hmong and

the fact that history is both an art and a science, what can we conclude about the original homeland of the Miao/Hmong people and ultimately the foundation for their historical identity?

## Conclusion

In my view and from all the accessible evidence, an origin in China is the most plausible, especially given the results of recent DNA testing on the distribution of genetic markers which clearly show a southern China origin for the Hmong-Mien people. Furthermore, contacts with Han Chinese must have been initiated so long ago that Chinese impact on Hmong life has run very deep: in Hmong history, Miao/Hmong legends and folk stories, language, and their collective memories of China and the Chinese. The Hmong have made Chinese influences into narratives, into a concrete reality deeply engrained in their psyche and culture. Their funeral rituals and religious practices contain measures to prevent grave desecration and robberies of the dead by the "Suav" (Chinese). Han oppression has been made an integral part of Hmong traditions. The recognition that they originated only in China and the search for this origin through the inclusive "Miao" designation are thus stronger than any other explanations. It also lends credibility to their political voice when backed up by 9.2 million Miao around the globe, compared to much smaller populations if they are divided into more distinctive ethnic groups with their own origins. Which would the Hmong prefer, being known as Miao and having a long history stretching back to the antiquity of China with a large global population, or possessing only a sketchy history going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century AD when they first converted to Christianity and became known as Hmong<sup>19</sup>, with only 4.5 million members world-wide?

The Chinese Miao have recognized the potential of having an ancient history and being the fifth largest nationality in China. They have struggled for this identity over many years and joined hands as one single people with one ethno-name, as this gives them the strength and support, as well as the recognition and respect they need<sup>20</sup>. They refuse to be known only as "hill tribes", "little brothers" and a people without history. Again, to borrow Best (op.cit.: xiv), they "challenge the current state of affairs... with awareness that social reality is historical and contingent in nature, with the knowledge that things have not always been this way and

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<sup>19</sup> Culas and Michaud (2004: 70) state that the name "Hmong" was used for the first time in writing in 1911 by the British missionary, Samuel Clarke, in his book, *Among the Tribes of South-West China* (London: China Inland Mission, 1911).

<sup>20</sup> See Cheung (2004: 237-272) who finds, in his study of Miao identity in Western Guizhou during the Republican period before 1949, that the Nuosu and the A Hmao actively sought to appropriate the classification "Miao" for themselves in their struggles for official recognition, thereby redefining the Miao identity beyond the terms of its traditional meaning and the boundaries of these two ethnic groups.

therefore could be otherwise, with the realization that what has been constituted can be deconstituted and reconstituted...[as] potential forms of empowerment..." This issue, however, has not even begun to enter the thinking of the 200,000 Hmong in the diaspora, except that they do not want to be known as Miao because of its negative connotation of earlier times.

Yet, the Hmong are today reclaiming their history based on this very identity, on a deconstruction and reconstruction of historical events claimed earlier for the Miao. However, they cannot choose the soft option of simply substituting the name "Hmong" for "Miao" in the historical context of China, as some of them have tried to do, unless they accept the Miao people in Chinese history as their ancestors, and regardless of whether all the Miao groups today speak the same language or not. A second alternative may be to accept to be called Miao in one context and Hmong in another, but this will be confusing and unusual – for few groups of people in the world have multiple names and conflicting identities like Miao/Hmong/Mong. The final choice is to stay with being Hmong and have nothing to do with other Miao groups and their histories. But will the 3.1 million Hmong in China agree to this when they cannot extract themselves from the official classification "Miao"? What will be the long-term consequences? Whatever is decided in the tortuous pursuit of their history with the Miao in China, the diasporic Hmong are now wedged between a rock and a hard place. In the end, they may have to stop being resentful and to learn to take pride in being known as "Miao" like their more numerous brothers and sisters in China who see their national name as a proud group designation with a long past stretching over 5000 years and no negativity.

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