

HMONG IN EXILE: the double diaspora of a non-Han minority population

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I An Orinary Diaspora

The Hmong number some three million people in the southern Chinese provinces of Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Yunnan. They are one of three to four major ethnic-linguistic groups, such as the Hmu and A Hmao (see below) classified by the Chinese under the ancient term of “Miao” owing to remote linguistic and historical connections between them. Since the early 1950s the Chinese government has pursued a policy of positive discrimination towards the 55 peoples or groups of peoples officially classified as ethnic or national minorities under the *minzu shibie* project of national identification (see, for example, Mullaney 2011). The category of “Miao” is one of these 55.¹

The Miao have a long record in Chinese history, and were considered by some to be the aboriginal or indigenous Chinese, having inhabited the present lands of China before the ancestors of the Han. Whether the present-day genetic-linguistic people classified as Miao really had ancestors who were the same as those people referred to by the ancient Chinese documents as “Miao”, we have no means of telling. However, given the extraordinary admixture of peoples, cultures and languages which has taken place in southern China (Schafer 1967), and the fact that for large parts of modern history, even up to the late nineteenth century and sometimes still today in ordinary parlance, the term “Miao” has been used in a very loose sense to refer to all the non-Han “barbaric” tribal peoples of southern China (Ruey 1962), the balance of probability is that those people classified as Miao today did have ancestors who were among those classified as Miao in the ancient records. It is for this reason, and the likelihood that 2,000 years ago, they may have shared a common language and culture, that the Chinese state has classified them all as Miao today, although there is practically nothing in common between the various Miao groups.

Of the Hmong themselves, however, we have no record at all in the historical Chinese archives. Under their own ethnonym they have always been an invisible people so far as historical written records are concerned, and even today they are practically often invisible under the official category of Miao, since it is the members of other and more advanced groups of the Miao who have taken the lead in representing the Miao in written records and in political organization. It was not until Western travellers, colonial officials, and ethnologists began photographing and recording them in British Burma, French Indochina, and southern China, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, that the Hmong began to be recognised as a distinctive cultural and linguistic group.

As Miao, however, in the Chinese historical records, they were associated with rebellions and a life of shifting agriculture in the high altitudes of the mountains, dating back to very early recorded legends that a Miao chieftain, or group of Miao states, was defeated by the legendary ancestor of the Chinese, the Yellow Emperor, around the Yellow River basin in the third millennium BCE, and subsequently dispersed to the south. Since then there have been almost incessant reports or notes of Miao uprisings and rebellions in the south, as Wiens (1954) recorded. Again, these images have some resonance with credible reality, since we know that Miao of Yunnan and Sichuan, who are predominantly Hmong, were involved in many of the uprisings of the nineteenth century, while all credible records of them over the

¹ *Shaoshu minzu* can be translated equally well as national or ethnic minorities, since the term *minzu* conflates the meanings of “ethnic” and “national”.

past 160 years have described their life as shifting cultivators in the mountainous areas, with the very few exceptions of some areas in south-eastern Sichuan and northern Vietnam where the Hmong maintain extensive terraced wet-rice fields.

As the subaltern studies movement has taught us, to supplement the written historical record which conveys only the viewpoints of the dominant and elite, and partially rescue what might have been the voices of these historically invisible people, we need to turn to the oral tradition. The Hmong, lacking any form of writing until missionary scripts were developed, have a rich and extensive oral culture which has now been quite exhaustively recorded and examined. Since oral tradition has been very widely revised and reformulated over the past 50 years, however, we must be careful to distinguish between the more “authentic” and older versions of oral culture and those which are the more obvious results of the “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), which indeed are important in themselves for what they tell us about the creative ability to refashion culture and history under conditions of enforced dispersal and flight. Here, let us restrict ourselves to those aspects of the oral tradition which were recorded and authenticated in traditional locations in China and Southeast Asia prior to the traumatization of many Hmong from Laos as refugees to the West from the mid-1970s onwards following the wars in Indochina.

These traditional stories and legends, not only the informal genre of tales which may be told in family settings, but also those contained in more “serious” and less changeable parts of the culture such as the death and wedding chants, reiterate much of the same history of conflict, flight and dispersal which we find in the Chinese annals. In broad terms, they speak of an original claim of the Hmong to the lands of China, their struggles for supremacy with a people known as the Mab-Suav, their defeat, and the subsequent loss of their King or Emperor, the loss of their own original form of writing, and their present dispersal to remote locations and conditions of abject poverty and powerlessness. In the formulation Mab-Suav, Suav generally refers plainly to the Han Chinese, while the origin of Mab is uncertain, but may refer to the Lolo or Yi peoples who formed stratified class-like societies in many of the hilly areas of Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou where Hmong lived.

It is clear from these oral materials that a narrative of loss, flight and expulsion is inscribed in the very fabric of Hmong culture, and that they speak of an originary diaspora at the dawn of history, a sense of dispersal which has been constitutive in their formation as an ethnic group, in terms which rationalise their current position in Asia as a society with no state of its own, no centralized form of leadership, and without political power or economic strength. This is certainly the view which most Hmong themselves, including youth brought up in the US or Australia still have of their own history, which they have inherited through complex processes of social memory, even where they have lost the command of their own language. It is a view to a large extent supported by the Chinese records, both those of a legendary nature and those which are more historically verifiable. We may describe the mythical expulsion of the Hmong from the heartlands of power and prosperity as a first diaspora, which prefigured their later diaspora from China in an almost Biblical sense.

II

The Secondary Diaspora

The Background in Southern China

The ethnic categories of southern China have emerged from a millennium-long history of the struggle over scarce resources, from land and water to timber and metals, the gradual colonisation and settlement of the region by Chinese officials, military, and migrants, and the rapid increase of population following the introduction of maize to the region in the 16th century.

From a historical point of view, some groups were able to form petty states in the region, such as the Tai-speaking peoples of present-day Dehong and Xishuang Banna, or the Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples who dominated the kingdoms of Nanzhao and Dali.² Others, however, retreated into impregnable mountain fastnesses well beyond the reach of the state, such as the Nuosu people (the Yi of today), while most of the more fertile irrigated valley lands suitable for the cultivation of irrigated rice, the towns and administrative centres and market-places and transit routes, became dominated by the Han Chinese. Such domination was achieved by a combination of military suppression and decree, administrative legislation, and the strategic manipulation of land-contracts, title deeds and inheritance. Nobody has described this process of colonisation better than Claudine Lombard-Salmon did for Guizhou in the 17th and 18th centuries. It seems that other groups must have lost out entirely in this process, and either remained in the remote locations they had always inhabited or were forced into the habitation and cultivation of the most inaccessible, least fertile and poorest regions, particularly those at high altitudes. Scott (2009) would see this as the result of deliberate strategy, but history is not always a matter of choice.

Among the latter groups we may number traditionally high-altitude shifting cultivators such as the Hmong, Yao, Lisu, Lahu, and Hani, tribal Tai-speaking groups like the Tai Dam and the Tai Khao (Black Tai and White Tai),³ cross-border groups who retained some autonomy in their own affairs such as the Wa and Jingpo, and smaller indigenous groups such as the Khmu and the De'ang, or Ang.⁴ There are some important and as yet unresolved historical questions here. Why was it only the Hmong, among all the other Miao groups (except for one rare exception in north Vietnam, described below), who migrated out of China into parts of Southeast Asia?⁵ And, at a wider level, why was it only some of these other minority groups of southern China who migrated out of China, including for example many of the state-based Tai-Lue of the Xishuang Banna in Yunnan, while others did not?

In approaching such questions, we should be careful to distinguish different kinds of mobility, such as the more gradual and radical mass movement I refer to below. At one end of the spectrum there were real large-scale mass movements or emigrations out of China which took place at specific times, but at the other end of the spectrum, there were also periodic and recurrent movements back and forth by peoples who may properly be called cross-border groups, such as the Jingpo or Wa, in the sense that their traditional territories had been carved up and divided by the formation of modern nation-states, or as van Schendel (2002) put it, "routinely...sliced into pieces" by modern cartography. Despite these different types of movement, there is no doubt that over several centuries there was an overall flow of populations from what is now southern China into the neighbouring hinterlands of what we now recognise as Southeast Asia. To understand the background to this, it may be useful first to try to imagine something of the situation in southern China in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the most marked and major of these movements occurred, and examine some of the factors which must have led to the mass flights of Hmong recorded into northern Vietnam, and subsequently to Laos and Thailand.

Lombard-Salmon (1972) has well described the mass revolt of the Miao of Guizhou in 1734-37, after the reform of the "local chieftain system" of indirect rule had followed the Han Chinese colonisation of agriculture, the exploitation of mines for copper, lead, cinnabar and gold, and intensive commercial activities in the realms of salt, cotton, silk, and timber. She

² Tai refers to the language group, Thai to the language of Thailand.

³ By tribal Tai we mean Tai-speaking people who were not necessarily either Buddhists nor organized into feudal-type states with a complex social organisation, but cultivated upland wet-rice in the high valley basins, and were organised according to principles of unilineal kinship.

⁴ See Li Quanmin (2011).

⁵ See Section III for details of this exceptional case.

also describes the “Great Rebellion” of 1795-1806 of the Miao in Guizhou and Hunan. Both of these uprisings were followed by unimaginably severe repressions; castrations, public beheadings, villages razed to the ground, whole families exterminated, and general rape and pillage of an atrocious kind. Jenks (1994) also examines in detail the “Miao” Rebellion which convulsed most of Guizhou and neighbouring provinces from 1854 to 1873, overlapping with both the Taiping rebellion of 1851 to 1864, and the (Islamic) Panthay Rebellion in Yunnan which established a separatist state there in 1855-73. Jenks’ argument was that this Miao rebellion should not be considered as purely an ethnic rebellion, nor solely a “Miao” one, adopting a restricted usage of that term, since it involved many local Han and the members of other minority groups. Subsequently, McMahon (2002) attempted a re-examination of the earlier Guizhou-Huguang (Hunan and Hubei) revolt, which he dates more strictly than does Lombard-Salmon as 1795-9. He argues that this should be seen, in the light of Jenks’ work on the later uprising, as something other than a straight Miao-Han conflict, giving as evidence the (failed) Manchu attempt to enlist the Gelao and other minorities against the Miao. Donald Sutton (2003) has since provided a further re-examination of the same uprising, arguing that it should not after all be seen as “cross-ethnic” in the same way Jenks had suggested for the later rebellion, although ethnicity at that time certainly was in a fluid and dynamic state, and indeed partially formed in reaction to the imposition of imperial order.⁶

Whatever the complexities of these fluid ethnic identifications and attributions, and whether we see the revolts in general as popular uprisings (as communist historiography tends to have it) or ethnic ones, there can be no doubt that Miao were prominently involved, as leaders and instigators, fighters and attackers, and eventual victims, in all these uprisings. There can similarly be no doubt that *Hmong* were heavily involved in these uprisings, like it seems were many other impoverished and oppressed local inhabitants. Almost certainly, the often unremarked Hmong of Guizhou and Yunnan (and Sichuan) would have had their identity masked by the more prominently visible (non-Hmong) Miao of Hunan and Southeastern Guizhou. It does seem, however, that a process of ethnic scapegoating and “ethnic cleansing” followed the failures of all these uprisings, which may have originally been more popular and pan-ethnic in nature. The rebels were all labelled as Miao – as many or most of them undoubtedly were – by the triumphant Qing victors, and it was those who were called Miao (including, as I have said, the Hmong) who suffered worst in the savage reprisals which followed. It should be no surprise, therefore, that it was probably from this time that we start to see a gradual drift southwards of the Hmong, in an almost straight line on the map, from Guizhou down through parts of Yunnan and Guangxi bordering on what was shortly to become the northern part of French Indochina. We are still left with the question of why those other, more prominent Miao groups, were not the ones who mainly migrated out of China! One answer, unless we abandon altogether the hypothesis that the failures of such rebellions were instrumental in Hmong movements out of China, may be that the Hmong were much more involved in these general uprisings than has commonly been supposed.

But it is clear that the suppressions of rebellions must have been one of the primary factors in some of these southwards movements by Hmong. The Chinese chronicles themselves (I follow here such historians as Lombard-Salmon, Jenks, Sutton and McMahon) give some idea of the strength and reach of these popular movements and the savagery with which they were suppressed. These records are supplemented not only by oral Hmong accounts of the savage repressions they endured in history from the Chinese, but also by the accounts of some Western travellers and explorers later in the 19th century. Towards the end of that century, in the year 1898, Wingate records, “in wild Kuei-chou”, that “Only a few weeks prior to our arrival in the neighbourhood there had been a raid, and we found the heads of the rebels hanging on posts by the roadside. We were constantly coming across towns and

⁶ Neither author makes any reference to Lombard-Salmon. See also Sutton (2006).

temples partly demolished. In fact, this part of China was full of the ruins of war.” (Wingate 1940: 228) Colquhoun (1900: 372), writing of the same years, declares that “The Miao tribes were for many years in a state of warfare against the Chinese government, taking up their position in dangerous fastnesses, and from their ambushes firing poisoned arrows upon the Chinese troops, and defying subjection”. Earlier, before his murder in 1875 in Yunnan, a minor British consular official from Shanghai, Augustus Margary, recorded finding whole deserted areas where the Miao had “come down from the hills and butchered the whole population”, and described them as suffering from scorn, contempt, and legal robbery in rents and taxes. (Anderson 1878).⁷

We must look at all this, I would argue, also in the context of growing control over resources in southern China by representatives of the Western colonial powers. In 1885 the British annexed Upper Burma and the French took control of Tonkin, the northern part of Vietnam and Laos, and rivalry between these two nations over commerce and mining took paradigmatic expression in the race to build the first railway out of south China into, perhaps British Burma and India via Chiang Mai, or into French Indochina. Rivalry over prospecting likely routes for this railway was intense. Margary had been part of just such an expedition when he was killed, and Colquhoun too was prospecting for its route. It was finally built by the French from Kunming out of China down to Haiphong via Hekou and opened in 1910, but appears to have been very little used except for the years 1937-40 (Lee 2011) until it was closed by the French under Japanese pressure in 1940.⁸ Foreigners throughout the region enjoyed extra-territorial privileges, and resentment was mounting against them. The first five Treaty Ports along the eastern seaboard had been established with the enforced signing of the Treaty of Nanking after the First Opium War of 1839-42. Christian ideas had sparked the long Taiping Rebellion which convulsed large areas of the south, and had only been quelled in 1864. In Yunnan province, as mentioned above, the Panthays, who hoped for British support, had briefly established a Sultanate based in Dali. Margary’s murder caused a major diplomatic incident between the British and Chinese governments, and the Chefoo Agreement subsequently signed in Yantai in 1876 further strengthened the extra-territorial privileges of British subjects in the area. An uneasy peace reigned before the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 targeted missionaries and other foreigners as legitimate targets of murder.

It was also during this time that Protestant missionaries became active among the Miao in Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou, and I believe the missionary impact must also have had some effect on the Hmong in their migrations out of China.⁹ The missionaries were often at loggerheads with the colonial governments of those states of which they were subjects on such issues as the opium trade. Samuel Clarke of the China Inland Mission, for instance, who worked with the Miao in Guizhou, was on the Permanent Committee for the Promotion of Anti-Opium Societies, set up in 1890 in Shanghai. On many occasions their championing of the ethnic minorities, in particular the Miao, who flocked to their churches and congregations, led to trouble with the Chinese authorities and feudal Lolo feudal landlords, and can be seen as having increased local ethnic tensions which were already inflamed.¹⁰ The missionaries established schools which taught geography and history and awakened a realisation of other

⁷ Also cited in Tapp (1989), p. 92.

⁸ See also Pholsena (2013). The latter was part of a project coordinated by Stan H-B Tan called “Views from the Dian-Viet Railway: Transborder Landscapes”, according to Pholsena, co-funded by the National University of Singapore. That in turn must have been part of the 2008-09 Toyota SEASREP research programme; “Beyond Hills and Plains in the Southeast Asian Massif: A Historical Geography of the Kunming-Haiphong Railway” coordinated by Stan Tan.

⁹ See also Tapp (2011). Cheung. (1995) maintained that because of the impact of capitalism and class stratification, the Hmu of Southeast Guizhou stuck to traditional forms of rebellion rather than, as with the A Hmao of Northeast Yunnan, adopting Christianity as a means of resistance.

¹⁰ Huang (2014) does argue that it was the failure to actively intervene in Han-Miao conflicts which led to the failure of the Protestant mission in Southeast Guizhou, as opposed to its success in Northeast Yunnan, but certainly there were attempts to intervene in southeast Guizhou too.

political orders beyond the extent of the Chinese state. Clarke (1911) describes incidents of conflicts with the Han among the Black Miao of Southeast Guizhou, and Samuel Pollard, of the Bible Christian movement, who worked in the Zhaotong and Weining areas on the Guizhou-Yunnan border, left many accounts of such incidents in his diaries and published writings. "A Miao dare not get rich or his landlord will take away his wealth", he remarked, after meeting a man whose escape from poverty had aroused the jealousy of the neighbouring Nosu (Lolo). They had accused him of stealing, tied him up for a month, pricked his thumb with "red-hot tongs", beaten him on the back with a sword, driven away his oxen, horses and sheep, and imposed a fine on him. "It appears that this kind of oppression is common", says Pollard (Kendall 1954). Mass conversions of the Miao, predominantly the Hua Miao (Flowery Miao or A Hmao) but also including the closely related Hmong, were reported in the closing years of the 19th century and throughout the first decades of the 20th. Often these took messianic form (Tapp 1989).

Tensions were high both against Westerners and between ethnic groups in the region. After the appearance of Halley's Comet in 1910, for instance, there was an anti-foreign rebellion in the Zhaotong area of Yunnan by an army of 3,000 which included Hua Miao and Nuosu people, in the very heartland of the Pollard mission (Dingle 1911), which for some reason went almost unrecorded by the missionaries. The people blamed the foreigners for a poll-tax introduced after opium cultivation had been banned in Yunnan, and demanded the right to cultivate opium again. Grist (1921) linked this movement to the deaths of thousands of coolies on the new French railroad being constructed at that time from Vietnam to Yunnan, which he says led to rumours that the missionaries were sacrificing children to the railway gods, or as Dingle (1911) puts these rumours, that they were buying up children to use their heads to make grease for the railway engine wheels. Formerly, around 1900 (the time of the Boxers) in the same area, there had already been rumours that the foreigners were giving bags of poison to the tribes people to poison the water supplies, and that Pollard was dropping magical water into Miao mouths which instantly enabled them to read Chinese. Converts were beaten, turned away from the town, and imprisoned (Tapp 1989). The 1910 uprising was led by a young girl who distributed green beans outside all the houses she came across in the belief that wherever a bean was dropped, an invincible warrior would spring up. The next 80 years would see many similar uprisings among the Hmong of China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. It seems clear that we should see the origins of Hmong mass migrations to Southeast Asia in the wider terms of this deepening struggle for scarce resources caused by the steady historic settlement of the south by Han Chinese and the imposition of imperial order, which had led to their tenancy, indebtedness, landlessness and indeed often slavery, a situation which directly led to uprisings and their suppressions. It is possible that the Hmong became the main scapegoats for all the Miao rebellions, and it is likely that their increasing encounters with Western missionaries spoke to at least some of them of hope elsewhere, outside the realm of China.

The Movements out of China; associations with "Chinese"

Migrations of Hmong into the northern parts of Southeast Asia, mostly of a gradual and small-scale kind, had occurred for some centuries prior to the mass migrations of the 19th century. In fact the Hmong exemplify two quite different kinds of migration out of southern China, although there must have been some interconnections between the two, as I will show in more detail below. First, there was the slow and long-term historical movement of Hmong and Yao, and probably Lahu, Lisu and Akha from China too, southwards to find fresh fields to cultivate. Here the imperatives were mostly economic, and can be linked with the nature of their shifting cultivation system and the growing scarcity of arable land in relation to population in the region. Secondly, there was the close association between the Hmong and Yao with certain kinds of ethnic Chinese, which led to more radical types of migration, and here the imperatives were

more social than economic. This association with certain kinds of ethnic Chinese was also of two different kinds, and yet these two different kinds of association with “Chinese” were also interconnected to an important degree.

On the one hand, the Hmong had historical associations, which to some extent continue today, with the long-standing Yunnanese caravan trade down through Southeast Asia, mostly run by Muslim Haw/Ho from Yunnan, and quite close trading and other relations with these people. On the other hand, there were also strong and fairly long-standing associations between the Hmong and Chinese rebels, or semi-independent armies and militia. After the defeat of the rebel Muslim Panthay state of the Haw Chinese in Dali in 1873, there was some coalescence of these two types of association.

Relations between Hmong or other Miao groups and Chinese rebels probably extend much further back in time than the late Qing. Mottin (1980) for instance, records a story that in 1680 the defeated Ming Dynasty General, Huang Ming, fled from Guizhou to take refuge among the Miao, and then in 1682 another Ming rebel general, Ma Bao, also fled to take refuge with them in Yunnan. After the Miao had confiscated Ma Bao’s weapons, Huang Ming, it is said, taught them how to use, and make, their famous flintlock rifles (Mottin 1980, p. 25).¹¹

Yet friendly relations with the Haw Chinese of Yunnan of a patron-client type have also been of very long standing. One knows that the Haw caravans were for centuries the main trading mechanisms linking upland villages with lowland markets (Israeli 1980; Forbes 1986, 1987; Lipman 1997; Hill 1998). These caravans commonly wended their ways between Hmong, Yao, Akha, Lisu and Lahu villages in the highlands. One can well imagine how they must have recruited ethnic minority people from these villages, perhaps particularly the Hmong, to serve as porters and guides, while at the same time forming occasional liaisons with minority women and settling down in the villages to found new minority clans. This was a quite common process. I am very fond of the following quotation, by David Wu (1989) from Tao (1943), which shows something I saw the tail-end of in Thailand in 1981:

A Chinese man arrives in a minority region, becomes an itinerant trader; and after toiling on the road among local villagers and market towns saves enough money to settle down. He either purchases a piece of land or opens a shop at a market town; and this small merchant or landlord acquires a native woman to become his wife. When he prospers and his family grows, he will send one of his mixed sons or grandsons to a school in the regional capital, or even the capital city of Yunnan, to acquire proper Chinese education and eventually to become an official. The idea is that this son, if successful, would carry on the “honourable” Chineseness of his family, while the other sons who stay at home may eventually become natives.¹²

This is a paradigmatic account of a process which occurred again and again among the non-Han peoples of southern China. How many sons of Hmong mothers really became officials in this way, we have no means of telling. But the example serves to highlight the kind of process in which close relations were formed between the Hmong and (particularly) the peripatetic Yunnanese Chinese, usually Muslims and therefore somewhat different from the majority Han population, as the attempt to establish their own state in Yunnan had showed. It also suggests the ways in which Hmong involvement in the caravan trade, if not perhaps also in the 19th century movements of militia into Indochina, may have strengthened these extra-national relations at the expense of relations with the dominant peoples of the Southeast

¹¹ Huang Ming and Ma Bao were indeed rebel Ming generals. See Nicola di Cosmo (2006). This would have happened after the battles in Guangdong of the Prince of Gui, the last (and Christian) Ming Emperor. A bit like the legendary flight of Bonnie Prince Charlie, his flight took him through Guangxi and Guizhou and finally to Burma.

¹² Also cited in Tapp (1995).

Asian lands in which the Hmong now found themselves, as I will explore further in the following section.

Jacques Lemoine (1995) reports that according to Vietnamese ethnologists, the Hmong of the Lauj and Yaj clans in the Dong Van and Meo Vac districts of Ha Giang province in northern Vietnam retain the tradition of having been the first to migrate from Guizhou province. Eighty of their families claimed to have lived in Vietnam for fifteen generations, which would bring us back, Lemoine says, to the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing in the seventeenth century (counting 20 years per generation up to, presumably, the 1960s). It is probable that it was the pioneer shifting cultivation system of the Hmong, which sometimes involved moving villages over 100 miles to find virgin forest (Geddes 1976) which led to such early migrations into Indochina. Culas and Michaud (2004) also cite the White Tai leader, Deo Van Tri, saying that when he was fifteen, in about 1848, before the later mass incursions into Indochina, he had seen the passage of Hmong from Sichuan going to Laos through the territory where his family were living in the Sip Song Chau Tai in northwestern Vietnam. Slow, gradual migrations for fresh fields to cultivate, therefore, probably took place for several centuries.

However, as Lemoine notes, what was probably the largest wave of migration of Hmong into Vietnam occurred in 1868, after the crushing of the Hakka-led Taiping revolt in 1864, when as many as 10,000 Hmong arrived from Guizhou via Yunnan and Guangxi to settle in the provinces of Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Lai Chau, and Son La, but also in Nghia Lo, and even advancing as far as Hoa Ninh, and the provinces of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An (Lemoine 1995).¹³ The father of the later very famous Hmong leader, Touby Lyfoung, was said to have arrived there in 1875 to join his aunt who had already been living there for some years (ibid, p. 73), showing perhaps something of the interconnections between the two major types of migration I have suggested above.¹⁴ Interestingly, in terms of the process of settlement of Chinese in minority villages I have illustrated, Touby said his father had learned Chinese from his grandfather who had been orphaned and brought up by a Han Chinese couple (Mai Na Lee 2005).¹⁵

This 19th-century mass incursion and subsequent movements were associated both with the marauding bands who were remnants of the fleeing Taiping Rebellion armies after the suppression of that rebellion in 1864, and also with fugitives from the Panthay Rebellion in Yunnan after its final defeat in 1873, which was led, as we have noted, by the Muslim Yunnanese known in Southeast Asia as the Haw or Ho (see Ann Hill 1998). These “Flag Armies”, as they were known, laid large areas of Tonkin to waste, and it seems that they were both led and supported by ethnic minorities. I will elaborate more on this below.

In a Foreword to the original edition of Stephan Feuchtwang’s *An Anthropological Analysis of Chinese Geomancy*, published in Vientiane in 1974, Lemoine records his astonishment at hearing from the Hmong a geomantic tale of how the “Haw bandits” had tricked the Laotian residents of the town of Xieng Khouang, in northeastern Laos (bordering on Vietnam), in order to seize the town. They had sent down merchants to tell the Lao that valuable treasures were hidden in the hills so that when the Lao townspeople rushed off to dig for them, they broke the “veins of the dragon” and, according to the principles of *fengshui*, lost

¹³ I use the RPA system for Hmong terms, in which final consonants are not pronounced, but indicate tone values. Pinyin is used for Chinese names.

¹⁴ Mottin (1980) cites a source (to which he gives no reference) about an earlier incursion in 1860 which was finally repelled by a charge of elephants. However, Culas and Michaud (2004) also cite early twentieth-century sources saying that Black Miao “troops” were first seen entering northern Vietnam from Yunnan in 1860.

¹⁵ Touby, who was sometimes referred to as the “King of the Meo”, received the extraordinary honour under French Laos in 1946 of being offered an appointment as *Chaomuang* or Lord of all the Hmong of Laos, and later became a Cabinet Minister in the independent kingdom.

their good fortune, and their town. According to a footnote by Lemoine, these “Haw” were the infamous “Black Flags” (see McAleavy 1968) who took Xieng Khouang in either 1873 or 1874.¹⁶ It is clear that the Hmong, who remembered this incident so vividly a hundred years later, were closely associated with them, and with other “Flag” bandit militias, such as the Yellow, Red, and Striped Flags, who were remnants of the suppressed rebellions in Guangxi and Yunnan. The “Black Flags” themselves were to play a pivotal role in Vietnam, for they later not only assisted the Vietnamese court in resisting the French, but also in suppressing - and I would say managing - the northern Indochina ethnic minorities, through their involvement in the complexities of local ethnic politics.

Since most of the cannon-fodder (their troops) were ethnic minority people, they had obvious advantages in playing such a role in the multi-ethnic areas of northern Vietnam where they had fled. Led by non-Han, Hakka minorities, their ranks, and the ranks of some of the other “Flag” armies, included ethnic minority members from Guangxi, particularly the Tai-speaking Zhuang. However, many of these ethnic minority members, from both Guangxi and Yunnan, I would argue, must also have been Hmong or Yao. The royal Thai chronicles at this time, for instance, referred to the “uprisings” of the Black Flags against the rulers of the Sipsong Chau Tai variably as either “Ho” or “Meo” uprisings (Cholthira 1990) and these Ho or Meo “uprisings” even also involved members of the local Austroasiatic-speaking populations, as Cholthira showed.¹⁷

David Atwill too, has shown how the Panthay rebellion (1856-73) was not fundamentally a religious one, but one in which the Muslim Haw Muslim leaders had forged specific alliances with the minority Yi and Zhuang people, and talks of the “presence of powerful Miao-Hui” armies (Atwill 2006:144). As early as 1857, he says, the Yi and Hui (Haw) had formed an army of 10,000 in China, and were helping the Miao. By 1862, official concern was already mounting about the help the Hui and Yi were giving to the Miao. It is plain, therefore, that Hmong (assuming these Miao were or included Hmong) were involved not only with the peaceful historical Haw traders and caravaneers from Yunnan, but also with the militant Haw or Panthays of the Rebellion in Yunnan which failed in 1873. Moreover, there were indeed contacts between the leaders of the Taiping and Panthay rebels, and Tai minorities were closely associated with both movements. Proschan (1998:180) reports that the Ho (Haw) were particularly allied to Tai leaders in Tonkin such as the White Tai chieftain Deo Van Tri, who famously supported the Black Flags of the Taiping remnants, and also with the (Austroasiatic-speaking) Khmu. Deo Van Tri, himself of mixed Tai and Han descent, had become the chief of the Sipsong Chau Tai territories stretching into China, and was a pivotal figure in the French colonisation process, going on to sack Luang Prabang in Laos in 1887, in alliance with renegade Black Flag troops who had stayed on in Tonkin after it finally became French in 1884. The Black Flags received particular support from the White Tai in Tonkin. Again, Atwill talks of the Dali (Panthay, Haw) troops entering Xishuang Banna in 1863 specifically to win the support of the Tai-Lue leaders there. But why should these different rebel movements have received such widespread ethnic minority support? As we have seen, the Taiping movement was led by Hakka, to this day considered a non-Han ethnic minority by many Chinese, while the Panthay leaders were Muslim Chinese who have today been officially classified as an ethnic minority in China (the Hui). I think this leadership, by Chinese

¹⁶ Culas and Michaud (2004: 72) also mention incursions of the Hmong in Xieng Khouang in the 1860s, associated with “various colours” of the Flag armies.

¹⁷ Despite Lemoine’s suggestion of Black Flags, it may well have been other Flags who ravaged Xieng Khouang at this time. It was from about 1872 onwards that new Red and Striped Flag rebels from Yunnan started pouring into southeast Laos, just as the Muslim Sultanate of the Panthays was crumbling, while in 1873 Xieng Khouang was seized by the Striped and Yellow Flags, the main *rivals* of the Black Flags (Forbes 1988). Le Boulanger (1931), in Culas (2000), says the Hmong who arrived in Luang Prabang were called White Flags, and states it was the *Red* Flags who sacked Xieng Khouang around 1872. For sure there was an alliance between the Yellow Flags and the Miao tribes formed in the 1860s.

who were not quite Chinese, must have been crucial in mustering the support of other non-Han Chinese minority groups, including the Tai and Hmong (cf. Geusau 2003 for Akha-Han relations).

The Panthays do seem to have enjoyed widespread support, not only from the Tai but from most of the ethnic minorities in the borderlands region in the 1860s (Fytche 1878, p. 300). I would speculate that the reason for this was that although they were highly Sinicised, they were discriminated against by the Han Chinese in the same way as ethnic minorities were generally discriminated against, owing to their non-Chinese, Muslim religion. Besides this, they had successfully established their own separatist state in the region at Dali which survived for nearly 20 years. For those desperate for an alternative to Qing imperial control, these Chinese-like but disaffected Ho/Haw must have seemed like natural leaders. Indeed, so may the partially Sinicized Hakka leaders of the Taiping uprising have appeared to their Tai (Zhuang) and, I would say Hmong, followers in Guangxi.¹⁸ Given the long-standing relations of the Hmong with both Chinese rebels and the Yunnanese caravaneers, as outlined above, it therefore need not surprise us that the mass migrations into Tonkin of Hmong during the nineteenth century should have been so closely associated with the Flag armies which entered the region after and during the suppressions of both the Taiping and the Panthay rebellions.

The role played by these semi-Chinese marauders in the late 19th century in relation to other ethnic minorities in fact seems uncannily similar to the role played much later in the 1960s, in northern Thailand, by the mainly Yunnanese remnants of the KMT (Guomindang, Nationalist) Chinese armies. These acted for many years as a buffer on behalf of the Thai government against what was at that time the main threat to Thai national sovereignty; communism, rather than French colonialism.

These KMT Yunnanese, just like the “Flag” rebels before them in Tonkin, took a leading role in organising and controlling the local ethnic minorities in Burma and Thailand and intervening in the local politics of ethnicity, opposing the Shan (Tai) armies in Burma for instance over the opium trade (McCoy 1972). Among all the ethnic minorities with whom these KMT Yunnanese, and the longer-term Yunnanese (Haw) traders in the area, maintained relations, the closest relations have always been with the relatively Sinicised Yao and Hmong. I recall from my own first fieldwork in a Hmong village in Thailand the two houses belonging to Chinese, one an ex-KMT soldier who had taken a very young Karen wife who eventually ran away from him, and the other a Muslim Chinese from Yunnan who was the main opium trader in the locality. In these examples, a century apart, we see the close – and long – association of the Hmong both with Chinese rebel dissidents, and at the same time with the Haw traders from Yunnan. Still, we need not be too strict in drawing lines of distinction at this time between Chinese (Muslim) traders from the Yunnan area, and the fleeing rebel Chinese armies, of varying shades, which made use of their trading networks and local contacts. As I have said, there must always have been some interconnections between the association with traders and the association with rebel militia. For one thing, rebel armies have to eat, and thus necessarily become involved in the local economy and trading routes. But while inter-ethnic relations with Chinese rebel armies have necessarily been sporadic, those with the Muslim Yunnanese traders are of an institutionalised and perennial nature. As Culas and Michaud (2004) notice, Lemoine (1972) had reported that there were still old Hmong in the 1960s who remembered their travels with the Haw caravans in the late 19th century, often as grooms for the mules and ponies carrying cloth, salt or opium.

¹⁸ A conflict over copper mining was instrumental in sparking the Panthay uprising, while silver and coal miners were also heavily involved in the Taiping movement, pointing further to a common base of support for both movements.

But we know that they were not only grooms and servants for the Yunnanese caravans, they were also troops and militia (foot-soldiers) and guides for the rebel armies at the same time, and one would opine that they probably served also as grooms for the armies, and as guards, guides and sentries for the caravans too. And at the same time as all this, as I have shown, there must also have been free, gradual, “natural” movements of Hmong and Yao villagers at the highest altitudes, from village to village, as continues today, or from old village to a new settlement as was common every decade or so up until the late 1960s. Although there were such clear interconnections between their relations with bandits and traders, it is still certain that we are dealing with different kinds of Hmong movement into Southeast Asia in the closing years of the 19th and opening years of the 20th century. On the one hand there was gradual drift; the long-term, slow flow of people out of southern China into northern Indochina. This probably involved both individual inter-clan marriages (which to this day take place in villages and districts very far apart from each other, and involve preliminary scouting trips), and the movements of whole villages or clusters of related villages to find more fertile forested land to cultivate. Within that long-term flow southwards, there were also circular migrations and repeated oscillations, as villages moved down to Laos or Vietnam from Guizhou and then back up into Yunnan again, of which I have some records myself. However, overall the general tendency of movement was south. On the other hand, another kind of movement, we may say, was closely associated with the dissident or at least non-state-aligned Chinese, particularly where the Islamic Haw of Yunnan or the Hakka Chinese from Guangxi were involved. Although, heuristically speaking, Hmong relations with more dominant groups from China must have involved different types of association, both with the longer-term commercial interests of the Yunnanese caravaneers and with specific political and military movements emanating from southern China. At this time in history in the mid- to late 19th century these two kinds of association must to some degree have coalesced, as we see precisely in their involvement with the Haw Panthay rebels.

For the military movements, we have seen how Hmong took part in the rebel Flag militias which ravaged Tonkin in the late 19th century. They appear to have used in much the same way later by both the French/Americans and the Viet Minh/Pathet Lao during the Vietnam Wars and the “Secret War” in Laos - as spies, porters, guides and troops. The mountains were their home and their support was crucial to anyone vying for power in these regions, as the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was later to show (McCoy 1972). One imagines, too, that during the 19th century incoming Hmong accompanying the Chinese rebel armies would have contacted Hmong who had already settled in the mountains for help and support, and maybe recruited more supporters from local Hmong villages, just as the “Zhuang” troops from Guangxi in China must have had some communication with related local Tai-speakers (such as Deo Van Tri, referred to above), the conscripted Yao soldiers from China with local Yao, Khmu with Khmu, Yao with Yao, and so on.¹⁹

What we observe of the general situation in southern China during the 19th century was increasing imperial control, the impact of colonial capitalism, immigration from the North, and the failure of various local and ethnic rebellions and their savage repressions. At the same time, there was a longer-term process of increasing population growth in southern China and growing pressures on the availability of land needed for subsistence.

The earliest sightings of Hmong villages in northern Thailand were made in 1880 (Culas and Michaud, cf. Tapp 1989). This generally involved a slow, gradual process of

¹⁹ The modern PRC term Zhuang, based on an ethnonym pronounced Zheung, includes at least four Tai-speaking groups in Guangxi; the Nong (Punong), the Tu (Putai), the Sha (Puyai, aka Buyi) and some Tai Lue and probably some other Tai sub-groups, such as the Pumin. See Kaup (2000); Eric Johnson (SIL Report, 2010). It seems that the Nung (Nong) of Vietnam may have arrived from China under similar conditions as the Hmong after the failures of various rebellions, and their dialect is now quite divergent from that of the Chinese Nong (Johnson 2010).

migration for the purposes of agriculture across the border from Laos or Yunnan into Nan province, and then into Phetchabun and Phitsnanalok, which accelerated from the 1920s, and further after the conflicts in Indochina. It seems in sum that the largest waves of Hmong migration out of Guizhou into Southeast Asia may have occurred from 1800 (Mottin 1980; Culas and Michaud 2004), after the ending of the Miao revolt there, and then after 1868, as Lemoine records, following the ending of the Taiping rebellion, and during the subsequent decade or so, for which we have sound records from Southeast Asia. Only very small groups penetrated into Burma.

Hmong rituals and stories detail, like the Yao legends (Lemoine 1982), crossing a Great Water, which may have been the Red River in Yunnan. Stories of the loss of books, or writing, are attributed in popular folklore to this fatal crossing. At special rituals during which a pig is sacrificed behind closed doors, in which no women are allowed, and no language other than Hmong can be spoken, this event is periodically commemorated by individual families and thanks are given for the Spirit which saved their ancestors. The experience of loss, deprivation, and flight, is thus deeply embedded in the Hmong psyche, and this has only been triplicated by their dispersal to the “four corners of the world”, as they put it, in the refugee exodus from Southeast Asia which began in the mid-1970s.

III Reflections

Other Miao Groups besides the Hmong

We can return here to consider some of the questions raised earlier, about the other ethnic groups of southern China and enquire into why it should have been that some Miao groups migrated out in large numbers, while others did not. It has generally been supposed that, of the four main groups of Miao who are identifiable within China (the Kho Xiong or “Red Miao” of Hunan; the Hmu or “Black Miao” of Southeast Guizhou; and the Hmong and the A Hmao [“Flowery” or “Hua Miao”], of Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou and Sichuan), it has only been the Hmong who emigrated out of China, and to a great extent this is true. However, there are two minor corrections that need to be made to this picture.

It is almost certain that some groups of the A Hmao, whose language is incomprehensible to the Hmong, even though they speak languages of the same Miao language branch, must also have migrated into northern Indochina with the Hmong and become assimilated to them through intermarriage owing to their much smaller numbers.

Secondly, we noted above that it was “Black Miao” who were reportedly sighted entering northern Indochina from Yunnan in 1860, and if there is any accuracy to this claim, these people may have included some of the Hmu people from Southeast Guizhou, who are radically dissimilar -- culturally and linguistically-- to both the Hmong and the A Hmao.²⁰ In an extraordinary work, Nguyen van Thang (2007) identified the small group of “Na Mieu” (Meo, Miao) people of Cao Ban, Lang Son, and Bac Giang provinces in Vietnam (and in some parts of Laos), as originally being Hmu from Guizhou in China.²¹ It was for this reason -- their feelings of difference from the Hmong -- that when the Vietnamese government decided to call the Hmong “Hmong”, rather than the derogatory term of “Meo” used for them before 1980, the Na Mieu vigorously objected and requested that they continue to be known as Meo (or

²⁰ Culas and Michaud cite Abadie (1924:149), and Lunet De Lajonquière (1906: 295-97) for these sightings of “Black” Miao. There is also reference to a footnote in Culas’s (1999) thesis which questions this category, which I have been unable to check. There is no reference to “Black Miao” in this context in my copy of Abadie (pp. 159-50), although the date of 1860 is confirmed there.

²¹ Lemoine had previously suggested this but gave no materials to support the claim.

rather Mieu).²² Six generations previously, they said, their ancestors had had their own state and a king in Liuzhou, Guangxi province, but rose up in arms against the oppressive Qing government and were savagely repressed (Thang 2007). In Vietnam they have been deeply affected culturally by the dominant local culture of the Tai-speaking Tays, with their housing structure for example adopting the Tay form, and them becoming bilingual in Tay and (H)Mu. With the recent influence of Kinh (Viet) culture on them, they have become “trilingual” and Thang shows from this example how flexible ethnic identity can be in the region.²³

We may surmise, therefore, that there were some other Miao groups who fled, or migrated, together with the Hmong, yet the Hmong were undoubtedly the overwhelming majority of all the Miao who fled or otherwise migrated. Some of the reasons for this may be sought in the facts behind the traditional Chinese classification of the Miao into two quite different types, according to the extent of their Sinicisation, and therefore their supposed degree of “civilization”; as either *sheng*, “raw”, wild Miao, or *shu*, “cooked”, civilized Miao.²⁴ Given the general invisibility of the Hmong in China as I noted above, among even the other Miao groups, it may be thought that the Hmong were the shyest, most remote, most “wild” and uncultivated in Chinese terms, of all the “Miao” tribes. It may have been precisely those most marginalized among the Miao who most eagerly adopted or instigated rebel causes and movements, and most adamantly resisted the growing cultural influences of the Han, and the growing imperatives to take part in the Chinese state project.

It is also possible, as I suggested above, that even where their involvement in the larger Miao Rebellions was not extensive or prominent, they were the ones most likely and most easily singled out as scapegoats. Many of the other Miao groups, after all, were settled farmers, either in degraded positions of tenancy and serfdom like the A Hmao of Yunnan and Guizhou, or with their own irrigated wet rice fields as in Southeast Guizhou or Sichuan. The Hmong for sure were still practising pioneer techniques of shifting cultivation on the high mountains at this time, and as we have seen, land pressures of forest scarcity had already led them to embark on slow settlement across the countries of northern Southeast Asia, so that when mass migrations occurred, it would be natural to head for the places where they already had family links. I have also suggested that Christian missionary teachings may have played a part in this, in opening awareness of other realms beyond the reach of the Chinese state in the new colonial nations bordering China, and other political regimes which upland shifting cultivators may not have been aware of. But surely it is in the context of the mammoth expansion of the Chinese population from the 16th century and the general pressures on natural resources this brought about that we should ultimately understand the exodus of the Hmong from China, whether this involved passive expulsion or active and voluntary migration.²⁵

Other Groups besides the Miao

A comparative analysis of the Hmong migrations into Southeast Asia in relation to those of other ethnic minority groups from China is beyond the scope of this paper, but a few words should be added here, and it is hoped these may open up some areas for further historical

²² “Meo” is the Southeast Asian pronunciation of the Northern Chinese term “Miao”, pronounced “Mieu” in Southern Chinese dialects. Historically it has always been a derogatory term; however in socialist China it has lost its negative connotations.

²³ Yet (as Thang also notes) it was clearly not flexible enough for them to have forgotten their origins and their radical differences from the Hmong!

²⁴ Ruey (1962) dates this dichotomy back to the Ming dynasty in the mid-16th century, but it continued to be widely used through the Qing.

²⁵ Interestingly, among the two main cultural divisions of the Hmong to survive in Southeast Asia -- the White and the Green Hmong -- it is always the White Hmong who are said to be the more Sinified of the two, and the Green Hmong to have retained more of their traditional culture.

research. The dispersal of the Tai-Lue people of the Xishuang Banna in Yunnan to Southeast Asia has been well described by Paul Cohen (2000) and Wasan (2010), and has often attracted the attention of those working on Thai/Tai studies. The Tai-Lue diaspora to the USA and elsewhere has recently been well examined by Hsieh (2002) and Kang (forthcoming). Less attention has been paid to the movements of the tribal Tai, such as the Black and the White Tai, although these certainly took place at this time and for centuries before it, and in the US and France today there are small communities of the Black Tai and other Tai groups (one estimate gives 4,200 in the USA). We need to distinguish carefully between the very different patterns of migration of state-based, wet-rice cultivating peoples like the Tai-Lue, and the hill-dwelling minorities such as the Hmong, Yao or Lahu. We have already noted the influence of the tribal Tai chieftains among the Hmong who settled in northern Indochina and we should note that they too maintained strong relationships with China since they occupied territories which had been only recently divided by the new kind of borders established between Tonkin and China. This resulted for instance in the struggle for control of Muang Singh, closely allied with the similar Tai-Lue states of Xishuang Banna in China which was claimed not only by Siam, but also by the British in Burma (through Chiang Tong) who finally ceded it to the French (Grabowsky 1999; cf. Walker 2008 on Chiang Saen). Tribal Tai leaders played an important part in cross-border politics and often moved from one side to the other. The White Tai leader Deo Van Tri himself, for instance, while of mixed Han and Tai descent, had become the chief of the Sipsong Chau Tai territories between northwest Vietnam and China. At first allied with the Black Flags who had received legitimation from both the Vietnamese court and Chinese authorities to resist French influence, he killed Francis Garnier in 1873. Later, he made peace with the French rulers, and his sacking of Luang Prabang put a final end to Siamese claims over Luang Prabang and over the Sipsong Chau Tai region which he despotically ruled. It was in general not rebellion and oppression that led most of the Tai-speaking people to migrate from China into Southeast Asia at this time, so much as the natural increase of an expanding population and the constant need to find new lands to till, processes which as we have seen also partly account for the Hmong movements out of China, over a much lengthier period of historical time than the occasional mass migrations recorded.

We should except from this gradual process of settlement in Southeast Asia the occasions where victorious Tai or other princelings forcibly transplanted the native populations of territories they had conquered and took them back to their own places to settle. This had long been a quite common feature of regional ethnographic history, as we find that the rulers of Nanzhao brought back 3,000 Pyu from Upper Burma as early as the 9th century and settled them in Yunnan. Similarly, large numbers of Tai-Lue were settled in Thailand in the early 1800s as a result of Chiangmai's campaigns against the Shan states in Burma and Xishuang Banna states, just as centuries earlier craftsmen and artisans from Northern Thailand had been resettled by the victorious Burmese around Pegu (Grabowsky 1999; Beemer 2009).²⁶ Around Luang Prabang today there are specialised crafts villages whose ancestors were royal slaves captured in wars against the Tai-Lue and the Cham.

It seems that it was not in general either the Tai, or those indigenous minorities who enjoyed tributary relations with them, who fled, either to Southeast Asia in the first instance, or to the United States and other overseas destinations later (although there is now a sizeable community of Khmu from Laos in the United States).²⁷ It was in particular the most recent

²⁶ Beemer (2009) examines the cases of the mid-16th century settlement of Northern Thai lacquer makers in Burma and the late 18th-century removal of Central Thai artisans there, mentioning also the early (mid-13th century) settlement of Burmese gong-smiths in Northern Thailand.

²⁷ The Khmu population is estimated at 8,000 in the US, and 1,500 in France. In the US there are also some 2,200 Lahu Shi, or "Yellow Lahu", sometimes known as the Kucong, Kui, or Suai (who may be an Austroasiatic-speaking group assimilated to the Lahu). All have had similar recent trajectories to the Hmong of Laos, being used by the CIA, together with Tai Lue, White and some Black Tai, and some Wa, as guerrilla fighters in either Vietnam or Laos, and also within Yunnan.

emigrés from China, the Hmong and Yao, who later were forced to flee as refugees from Laos into Thailand and thence overseas. The reasons for this are probably to be sought in the particular positions they assumed in the Tai domains in Southeast Asia, which I explore in the next section. Other minorities comparable to the Hmong and Yao in their shifting cultivation and mobility, the Lisu, Lahu, and Akha, had, like the Jingpo (Kachin) and Wa people, already inhabited parts of what became British Burma for many centuries, and so the context of their migrations from China into Southeast Asia is quite different from that of the Hmong and Yao. We must be careful, as mentioned at the outset of this paper, to separate the scattering of peoples owing to the formation of modern nation-state borders, such as the Hani/Akha and even the White Tai and Tai-Lue, both from actual processes of flight and from long-term movements south. Shifting cultivation by its nature involves periodic migrations which traditionally took not much account of official and often disputed frontiers and borders. Most Hmong movement must have been of this kind, and for the Akha, Lisu and to some extent the Lahu, much of their migrations into Southeast Asia seem to have been of this kind.

IV

The position of the migrant Hmong in Southeast Asia

In terms of the experience of being an ethnic minority, the position of the Hmong in China was radically different from the position they assumed in Southeast Asia, and also from the position they would later assume in multicultural societies overseas. It is not quite correct, therefore, to argue that the long experience of being an ethnic minority has equipped the Hmong well for their new life in the global diaspora, although this is often claimed (e.g. Kou Yang 2013). In Southeast Asia, the Hmong found themselves mostly in a very different political and social environment from that which had obtained in China. Although under the remote influence of a colonial regime -- and in Vietnam with the Kinh as the dominant majority in a somewhat similar role to that which had been occupied by the Han in China -- it was within the putative boundaries of Tai statelets that the Hmong now found themselves, in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. In all these Tai states the Tai had instituted particular relations with the aboriginal speakers of Austroasiatic languages who, it was generally accepted, had occupied the lands long before the Tais themselves had settled there. This was the case in various polities, including Chiangmai (Thailand), Jinghong (China), Chiang Tong (Burma) and Luang Prabang (Laos). These relations took ceremonial and economic form, with regular annual tribute offered at the courts of Tai princes by representatives of the aboriginal (or Kha, Xa, "slave") populations in the hills (see Archaimbault 1964; Keyes 1976 *et.al.*).²⁸ Newly-arrived swiddening groups like the Hmong, Yao, Lisu, Lahu and Akha, however, were beyond the pale of this traditional feudal system, which involved local populations such as the Lamet (Rmeet), Khmu, Lawa, Palaung, and Xingmun. While more dominant than the Austroasiatic speakers, the Hmong in Indochina now found themselves in a subordinate position to Tai rulers, who in turn served at the behest of the French colonialists, and additionally subordinate to the majority ethnic populations of the Lao or Kinh. The facts of this, and the politics involved, have been well charted by historians such as Alfred McCoy and Mai Na Lee (2005), who show how intra-tribal rivalries and the opium trade interplayed with the demands of administrative control until, at least in Laos, some outstanding Hmong leaders were enabled to emerge with their own effective fiefdoms. But the point to emphasise is that the experience of being a minority was radically different in the Southeast Asian context, from what it must have been in the late 19th century Chinese context. Hmong culture was alien and strange to the valley-based rulers of Tai principalities and to the French officials in Indochina, as indeed it must also have been in the Tai statelets of the Xishuang Banna in Yunnan where Hmong had also now migrated, and which were barely incorporated into China at this time. As with the Yao, whose religion was for a long time in Thailand assumed to be a tribal one rather than a

²⁸ See also Sao Saimong Mangrai (1981); Scott and Hardiman 1900-01; and Grabowsky and Renoo (2008). Recently Badenoch and Tomita (2013) have sought to supply a corrected, and more complex, view of this relationship.

branch of Daoism (Lemoine 1983), high-altitude shifting cultivators in the former Tai states took on an appearance of radical isolation and difference which they may not have had in the multi-ethnic complexity of the non-Tai areas in southern China (see Moerman 1968). The continuing curiosity which this apparent uniqueness has provoked among Western missionaries, travellers, colonial officials, reporters, linguists, ethnologists and anthropologists, which led to active interventions on their behalf, I have argued, can only have furthered the social distance between the Hmong and the people they were now surrounded by (Tapp 2010). That process of social distancing in turn can be seen as more than in small part responsible for the later alliances of the Hmong with the French and allied powers in Laos, which led directly to their third exodus, out of Southeast Asia altogether.

V

Continuing Relations with China

And at the same time as there was this artificial segregation from neighbouring peoples in Southeast Asia, relations between China and the borderlands of Southeast Asia were never entirely severed. At particular periods of history movements and cross-currents across these borders became positively “viral”, often involving ethnic minorities who had migrated from China into Southeast Asia. In the early 20th century, for instance, there was huge turmoil in the Indochina/China borderlands, when the messianic Hmong leader Pachay led his famous revolt against the French with some support from the Hmong in China, and even from local Chinese officials across the new border (Gunn 1986). This Hmong revolt in 1918-21, which convulsed most of northern Indochina for several years, was almost certainly influenced by a similar movement under a “Miao King” (Savina 1924) which was in process across the borders in China at the same time, and they both coincided with a severe drought and famine in Southwest China for which missionary collections were being made around the world. Many Christian conversions were made as a result of this early “food aid”, in response to which Pachay’s revolt may have been an indigenous reaction. By 1919, for example, the *Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* (Vol. VI) recorded both Miao and Lisu in parts of northwest Yunnan (the area of missionary activity in Zhaotong) had been “reduced to eating the roots of ferns, first pounding out the juice, then boiling it until the pulp turned black. Even this food could be had only in small quantities and contained so little nutrition that those feeding on it were soon too weak to climb the mountains” (cited in Tapp 1989).²⁹

Gunn (1968) follows Savina in tracing the outset of this rebellion under French rule to the arrest of a Meo “sorcerer” (presumably a shaman and messianic leader) in Yunnan, so that the revolt at its outset was one against the Chinese authorities. It then spilled over into Tonkin, taking on an “anti-Tai” character, as Gunn (1968) remarks, against those Tai officials who had so ruthlessly extorted taxes and levies on opium production by the Hmong (who, indeed, had been initially encouraged into such production by Chinese merchants - and money-lenders - in view of the market and the colonial opium monopoly set up in Indochina in 1895).³⁰ There was another exodus of defeated Hmong into Tonkin after the suppression of

²⁹ Ferns and suchlike are known as “famine foods” in China and are often resorted to in times of destitution, for example during the Great Leap Forward in 1958-59. See Wu (2003) for an account of how such so-called famine foods have recently become fashionable again in China as nutritious and healthy foods.

³⁰ The Indochina monopolies followed the precedent set by the (British) East India Company from 1793. Siam had established its own Royal Opium Monopoly in 1852 under British pressure. The opium monopolies in general were a strict system of licensing to Chinese for the management of areas where opium was produced (money was loaned to them in return for the product), processing of the opium in government factories, and auctions of the product to licensed sellers and owners of opium dens who were also Chinese. Efforts were made to restrict opium consumption just to Chinese and forbid it to “natives”. It was quite uncommon to find opium poppy in Upper Burma in the 19th century, Leach (1983) noted, citing Scott and Hardiman (1900-01) and other evidence. Similarly, Michaud (forthcoming, 2015) notes that French officers contributing to the 1897 ethnographic survey of highland Tonkin reported that it was “not grown locally in significant volumes. In both Burma and Tonkin at this time, it seems that

this China-based movement by both Chinese and local Tai officials in Yunnan (and, let us not forget, there were also recurrent and circular movements of Hmong from Tonkin back into Yunnan). Since the opium extortion by Tai local chieftains now took place under the terms of the opium monopoly in Indochina, the Hmong agitation then turned, by a natural and logical progression, from being directed against the Chinese Mandarins, towards being directed against the local Tai overlords who were attempting to enforce their authority over the Hmong. Then finally (in a very short space of time) it became an insurrection against the French colonial authorities who had authorised the collection of such taxes by the Tai leaders.³¹ Yunnanese caravaneers, interestingly in terms of the very close relations between Hmong and the Haw, were at this same time buying low-price opium, selling rifles and ammunition to the insurgent Hmong, and “incongruously” and “brazenly”, as Gunn (1989) puts it, even displaying German military images. As Gunn (cf. McCoy 192) shows, the Pachay revolt saw some soul-searching among the French colonial administration about their treatment of the Hmong and resulted a much greater measure of autonomy for the Hmong of Laos in the future (see also Mai Na Lee).

We see here a continuous and ongoing process of historical marginalization of a culturally distinctive group which first displaced them from the fertile heartlands of China and then encouraged their gradual expansion, and at times mass flights, into the borderlands of northern Indochina. This historic experience of a double displacement is deeply engraved on the Hmong psyche, and is often appealed to by those who later became the victims of a third displacement as a result of global politics, after the Indochina conflicts, and had to leave Asia altogether. These movements of large segments of the Hmong population resulted not only from the demands of shifting cultivation and the failures of rebellions, but also, in the case of both the exodus into Southeast Asia and the subsequent global diaspora, the active interventions of Western missionaries and colonial authorities.

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opium was mostly imported from Yunnan, as part of a Chinese attempt to reduce the importation of British Indian opium.

³¹ Pollard often remarks on the absence of “idols and opium” among the Miao of Northeast Yunnan in the early years of the 19th century (Kendall 1954: 139).

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