

What is the actual number of the (H)mong in the world?

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes the state of knowledge about the size of the (H)mong population in various regions of the world. Particular attention is paid to clarifying what is known about the number of (H)mong as opposed to Miao in China, an issue which has been associated with considerable confusion. The author concludes by deriving hypothetical estimates of the actual number of (H)mong throughout the world based upon available information.

The (H)mong, like most tribal societies around the world, have never had any precise idea of their population number from time immemorial. Wherever they live today, they have learned about their numbers by others' calculation and until recently never paid much attention to figures. They certainly had a sense of a number under which they felt their ranks were being depleted and, wherever they were sent by the vagaries of history, the pioneers among them had two goals in mind: how to attract fellow tribesmen to join their group and how to reproduce and expand their small communities to the point they would feel at home in a foreign environment.

To this may be added that their own ethnicity was officially acknowledged only recently: in the early 70s in Laos, in 1975, in Vietnam, and in the late 70s, in Thailand, following the flow of (H)mong refugees from Laos. To this day China has still not recognized any kind of (H)mong ethnicity nor any other ethnicity at all. The Chinese version of minority nationalities is an original construction based on historical, linguistic, cultural, economic criteria and the assumption that the groups gathered into one nationality would be happy to integrate into such a political entity. The (H)mong of China have been trapped into the Miao nationality in the wake of the Communist takeover in 1949 together with at least four other ethnic groups who had in common to have been classified as Miao by the Chinese writers of the Qing dynasty. But the same Chinese scholars and artists who produced the Miao albums for the purpose of entertaining Manchu emperors did also

classify as Miao all kinds of other people like the Yao or the various *tai-kadai* ethnic groups of Guizhou and Guangxi; Miao was a kind of vague category, something like "aborigine" which was used to classify all strange and backward looking non Han people in Southern China. To be called Miao-tse in the beginning of 20th century China was not particularly flattering. In Indochina, "Meo", the Vietnamese and Tai pronunciation of this word that the (H)mong immigrants had brought with them, was even more derogatory being homophonous with the word for "cat" in both languages. There is then little wonder that when (H)mong leaders and intellectuals started playing a part in Laotian and Vietnamese politics during the Vietnam war, they wanted and managed to have their ethnic name, (H)mong, acknowledged for such. This change, which occurred already 30 years ago spread round Indochina like wildfire. The main reason for this was that, apart from a group calling themselves Black (H)mong (Hmoob Dub) in North Vietnam and North Laos¹, the bulk of the Meo population in Southeast Asia was only Hmong.

Today according to various censuses in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, we have a rather accurate idea of the number of (H)mong in the Indochinese Peninsula; we also know the populations of the diasporas to Europe or to the USA, but the number of (H)mong in China has remained quite uncertain and this has led several authors to jump to the conclusion that the official number given for the Miao nationality by the 1990 Census could be used as an indicative of the (H)mong number in China. A demographer and anthropologist as serious as Peter Kundstater does not hesitate to write: "The largest number of Hmong, 7.4 million,² live in southwestern and central China; about one-half million live in northwestern Viet Nam and

¹ Hmong Dou (Hmoob Dub) can speak Hmong but their own mother tongue is quite different and after recording, and having transcribed and translated into Hmong some of their songs in the late 60's, I have made the hypothesis that they could be Mhu from Southeast Guizhou and a few places in Guangxi. But this remains to be checked by more documented linguistic investigations.

² Population Census Office, ed. n.d. *Tabulations on the 1990 Population Census of the People's Republic of China*.

another half million in the northern part of the Lao People Democratic Republic..."³ This assertion is misleading. Not only is the number of (H)mong in Lao PDR grossly exaggerated compared to actual censuses (231,168 in 1985; 315,465 in 1995), but a detailed account from the same 1990 Census in China, provided by Wang Fushi and Mao Zongwu⁴, shows that the number of (H)mong in China at that time amounted at most to a mere 2.088 million; while the other Miao groups: A Hmao (300,000), Mhu (sometimes known as Hmu or Hmub)(2.1 million) and Qho Xiong (900,000) total only 3.3 million. The total number of Miao speaking a Miao language, 5.388 million leaves aside about 2 million Miao who do not speak any Miao language. Our authors remark judiciously that in Western Hubei, Southeast Sichuan and Southwest Guizhou, in the (H)mong area, or in Southwest Hunan and Northeast Guangxi, in the Qho Xiong area, quite a number of Miao only speak a Han dialect. Some of them, living in a Dong district, speak the local Kam dialect and not any Miao language. In the Mhu region in Southeast Guizhou the Ge are adamant in adhering to the Miao nationality they have been granted and have struggled since the beginning of the nationality policy to achieve separate recognition as a Ge nationality⁵.

This means that even if we assume that, in the best case, one million of the Miao speaking only Chinese could be part of the so-called (H)mong population of China, the total number of the (H)mong in China in 1990 could not have amounted to more than 3 million. But one could assume as well that these one million Han-speakers close to or acquainted to (H)mong clansmen may prefer to consider themselves as Miao rather than (H)mong for the good reason they feel foreign to the (H)mong communities of the various dialects they can't speak. In that case the 1990 number of the (H)mong in China would probably be not much more than the 2.088

³ Peter Kundstater, 1996: "Aspect of Change in Hmong Society: Economy, Demography, Gender Status and Marriage", *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Thao Studies, Theme III, Family, Community, And Sexual Sub-Cultures in the AIDS Era*, Chiang Mai, Thailand 14-17 October 1996, p.104.

⁴ *Miao-Yao yu guyin gouni "Reconstruction of the ancient pronunciation of Miao-Yao languages"*, Chinese Social Sciences Press, Beijing 1995, p.2-10

⁵ See, for instance, Cheung Siu-woo: 1996, "Representation and Negotiation of Ge Identities in Southeast Guizhou". in Melissa Brown ed., *Negotiating Identities in China and Taiwan*, Berkeley, Cal. Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California Press.

million of (H)mong speakers. This is something (H)mong travelers to China could easily verify with their (H)mong clansmen. But, even this conservative figure could also be exaggerated. According to the Chinese linguists, the Chinese (H)mong speaking the same language as "the Miao (Hmong) of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar in the regions neighboring China" are the numerous speakers of the first of three local idioms of what they call the Chuanqiandian "sub-dialect", because it is spoken in the three provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan, and which should be considered as "(H)mong proper". However they account for only 1.4 million. The linguists provide also the following 42 locations at the district level for the speakers of this (H)mong language:

- in Sichuan: Gulan; Xuyong; Xingwen; Gongxian, Gaoxian, Changning, Muli Tibetan Autonomous District,
- in Guizhou: Jinsha; Chishui; Xishui; Renbei; Xifeng; Bijie; Nayong; Qianxi; Dafang; Zhijin; Puding; Pu An; Xingyi; Qian Ning Buyi and Miao Autonomous Prefecture; Anshun; Liupanshui,
- in Yunnan: Qianxiong; Weixin; Yanlü; Zenshan; Yanshan; Qiubei; Maguan; Guangnan; Xishou; Malipo; Mengzi; Bingbian; Kaiyuan; Jinping; Yuanyang; Gejiu; Mile;
- in Guangxi: Longlin, Napo.

Looking at a map, we can see that these Hmong settlements constitute a very homogenous territory extending from North to South at the junction of the three provinces down to the Vietnamese border.

The other two local idioms belonging to the same "sub-dialect" are to be found for the first: in Nayong, Liupanshui, and Chizhang in West Guizhou, and for the second in the suburb of Anshun and Jiuzhou, also in Anshun district. Their respective numbers were 84,000 and 3,000. The authors provide no indication that these two groups may call themselves (H)mong.

The same linguists, in a 1959 anonymous book for internal use (neibu)⁶, had given a first detailed account of the speakers of Miao languages – which they called the Miao "dialects" – and of their dialects (for them "sub-dialects") in exactly the same places as in their more recent detailed account. At that time, in the late 50s, the total number of the (H)mong was 1.042 million. There were 100,000 A Hmao, 920,000 Mhu and 500,000 Qho Xiong. That meant a total number of 2.56 million Miao speaking a Miao language while the official number of the Miao was 2.7 million. Again some 150,000 Miao did not speak a Miao language and probably only Han⁷. These figures have always seemed to me quite reliable and the Chinese linguists who provided them are, needless to say, renowned scientists who probably wanted that their "internal" accountancy be preserved for future researchers. They certainly deserve our grateful thanks. We cannot compare their figures to other sources because, so far, none other has ever surfaced. But we still can check their internal consistency.

From the late 1950s to 1990, in a span of a little more than 30 years, the total number of the Miao population has increased by 174%; the number of Miao who do not speak a Miao language has increased by 1,233%. I shall come back to this figure later. The number of (H)mong has increased by 100%, of Qho Xiong by 80%, of Mhu by 110%, of A Hmao by 200% and the total number of Miao speaking a Miao language by 110%. Except for the A Hmao who experienced a faster growth, these figures are mutually consistent. The difference in the growth of population from one group to the other reflects, I suppose, a differential depletion in the number of native speakers according to the different Miao languages. The outstanding increase of non

⁶ Anonymous: 1959, *Zhongguo shaoshuminzu tiaocha baogao(Miao Yao yuzu bufen)* Beijing.

⁷ I have introduced these figures and the classification of various Miao languages and dialects in an appendix to my book, Lemoine: 1972, *Un Village Hmong Vert du Haut Laos*, Paris, Editions du C.N.R.S., p.197-199. In that first book the Chinese linguists obviously divided the Miao languages into three main groups: Hmong speakers, Mhu speakers and Qho Xiong speakers. These three language names which were representing ethno linguistic groups have disappeared from the 1995 publication of their 1990-1992 study, under, I suppose, a political pressure to enforce a single Miao identity and they ostensibly ignore that (H)mong identity has been recognized in SEA countries, persisting to call them Miao. Meanwhile one of the other sub-dialects, the Northeastern (Qiandongbei) one, I thought included into the Hmong language, was in fact spoken by the A Hmao, or Dahua Miao. After visiting this group, I can testify that their language, even if related to Hmong in the past, is today quite unintelligible to any average Hmong speaker. And of course they have their own ethnic name: A Hmao.

speakers of any Miao language may be ascribed to a change in politics in the mid 1980s which has attracted towards the minority nationality status a great number of people who could claim Miao ancestry through only one parent and were not required to speak any Miao language. This is the special characteristic of the 1990 Census of China and the Miao were not the only example. See, for instance, the extraordinary increase of one of their neighboring nationalities such as the Tujia of Hubei and Hunan, which has been explained in these terms.

If we assume a regular increase for the speakers of anyone of the Miao languages, the (H)mong show a 33% increase for each decade, compared to a 36% for the Mhu, 26% for the Qho Xiong but 66% for the A Hmao. This means that one decade later, in 2000 China, the actual number of the true (H)mong speakers (all dialects included) may have reached around roughly 2,777,039.

At about the same time in 1995, the official number of (H)mong in Laos was about 320,000, in Vietnam 787,600 in 1999 according to Vuong Duy Quang⁸ and some 118,000 to 150,000 in Thailand. This makes a total of 1,257,600 (H)mong for the Indochinese Peninsula and, roughly, 4,034,639 for Asia as a whole. At the same time, the 2000 Census in the USA has recorded 186,310 (H)mong with an increase of 97% in the decade 1990-2000. This is much more than in China or in Laos, where the increase between 1985 and 1995 is particularly low, a merely 15%! But some (H)mong consider that the Census figure in the United States is still too low and should be raised to 300,000 when adding the number of unenumerated (H)mong people⁹. If we take their feeling as granted and add to that number an estimated 2000 (H)mong in Australia,

⁸ Vuong Duy Quang: 2004, "The Hmong and Forest Management in Northern Vietnam's Mountainous Areas" in Nicholas Tapp, Jean Michaud, Christian Culas and Gary Yia Lee, ed., *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm

⁹ Mark Pfeifer and Serge Lee: 2003, "Hmong Population, Demographic, Socioeconomic, and Educational Trends in the 2000 Census", in Bo Thao, Louisa Schein and Max Niedzweick ed., *Hmong 2000 Census Publication: Data & Analysis*, Washington, DC, Hmong National Development, Inc. (HND)

1500 in French Guyana, 15,000 in France and some 600 in Canada and another 600 in Argentina¹⁰ we should have a number of about 320,000 (H)mong in the various diasporas.

Thus, in all likelihood, the actual number of the (H)mong speakers around the world in 2000 should have been something between 4.4 and 4.5 million depending on whether one trusts or disregards the American 2000 Census, and pending confirmation that the five other "sub-dialects" of the Chuanqiandian "dialect" all belong to the Hmong language and ethnicity and do not hide other ethnic groups like the A Hmao. In that case, the number of true Chinese (H)mong in 1990 would have been a mere 1.4 million and, if we keep the same general growth rate of 33%, they should have been 1.862 million in 2000, lowering the total number of the (H)mong around the world down to 3.5 million. And a rough estimation of their number today would vary between 4 and 5 million. We are far from the 10 million some bold writers already anticipate!

May I add that (H)mong and other scholars writing about the (H)mong should be more careful in the figures they throw at a naive audience who have no means to scrutinize them. A variation from 5 to 10 million may already engender dangerous dreams such as the search for a national territory. American linguists are innocently propagating illusions when they replace the Miao-Yao Languages family by a so-called *Hmong-Mien* Languages family enforcing the idea that all the Miao are (H)mong even if they have a different ethnic name and speak a language unintelligible to the (H)mong. In China, the Miao who are not Hmong, mainly the Mhu and the Qho Xiong impressed by the records of (H)mong economic successes in Europe and America have also tried to lure the (H)mong outside China to return to the Miao fold by pretending that Miao and (H)mong are only one people as can be seen in the title of a recent *Comprehensive History of the Miao in China* with an English subtitle "*A Comprehensive History of the Chinese Hmong*" in two volumes which have already been translated into (H)mong and widely circulated

¹⁰ Kaoly Yang: 1999, *Naître et grandir: les processus de socialisation de l'enfant en milieu hmong*, Ph. D. thesis, Université d'Aix-Marseille

among the (H)mong¹¹. There may arise a Hmong/Miao transnationality as suggested by Louisa Schein¹² but the (H)mong would be well advised to think twice and remember the troubles of the Ge before putting on the flowery "All Miao" strait jacket their good Chinese Miao friends present to them because, in my opinion, there is not a single chance that the opposite new "All Hmong" strait jacket proposed by the linguists may ever be accepted by the Mhu or the Qho Xiong Miao in China.

And the (H)mong all know that sometimes it is better to be small and free than big but bound to an unwanted match.

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¹¹ Wu Xinfu: 1999, *Zhongguo Miaozu Tongshi A Comprehensive History of the Chinese Hmong*, 1&2, Guizhou Nationalities Press.

¹² Louisa Schein: 2004, "Hmong/Miao Transnationality, Identity beyond Culture" in Nicholas Tapp, Jean Michaud, Christian Culas and Gary Yia Lee, ed., *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm