

Steps Toward Standardization of a Minority Orthography: An Update on Mien (Yao)

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The terms “standard” and “standardization” as applied to a variety of a language which has gained (or which has been accorded) a measure of prestige and power have come under considerable scrutiny and criticism in the last few years (e.g., Bex & Watts 1999, Cheshire & Stein 1997, Milroy & Milroy 1999).¹ They have been linked to prescriptivism and the consequent denigration of other varieties of the language or, worse, to hegemony by elites or those in power over users of what are considered “nonstandard” varieties. This paper is not about such issues. Nor is it about the broader question of whether the very introduction of literacy has actually done harm to minority oral cultures by being used as an instrument of linguistic imperialism (Muhlhausler 1996). Rather, this paper is about the development and use of a recognized writing system by a minority people who are attempting to enhance their status in the competitive arena of both other minorities and the majority cultures within which they find themselves, and in this way to try to preserve their identity through literacy.

The use of the term “standardization” here thus refers to uniformity in the use of graphic conventions which were adopted by representatives of the speech community. That is, in this paper the term refers only to spelling and does not include any reference to the standardization of pronunciation, grammar, or the meaning of words. As used here, the term “standard” is descriptive and carries no pejorative connotation when discussing deviations from the agreed-upon writing conventions.

Conformity to or deviation from spelling norms in Mien is a major part of what this paper will address. Overall, the focus is similar to Milroy & Milroy’s general comments on standardization, though the process in Mien is just at a very early stage.

It is only in the spelling system that full standardisation has been achieved, as deviations from the norm (however logical) are not tolerated there....standardisation does not tolerate variability....Standardisation is motivated in the first place by various social, political, and commercial needs and is promoted in various ways, including the use of the writing system, which is relatively easily standardised... (Milroy & Milroy 1999:18-19)

However, the underlying matters of how the general orthographic conventions were established, and how the use of these orthographic resources has been understood by writers from different segments of the community, will also be examined. That is, conformity or deviation can be understood only in light of what the ethnic community and the specific users understand the writing system and its constraints to be. First, however, it is necessary to situate vernacular literacy in general, and the current standard orthography in particular, within Mien culture.

The Mien Language System

The Mien have a complex core language system comprised of a ritual language (*ziec-waac*), a literary language (*nzung-waac*), and a vernacular (*mienh waac*). The first two of these were borrowed from Chinese some centuries ago, not as specialized lexical additions to the vernacular but as separate functional systems in their own right. Both have long since been fully integrated into the overall Mien system. The ritual language, used for traditional Daoist religious functions, was borrowed together with the manuals for performing such ceremonies (Lemoine 1982). The literary language was borrowed from a somewhat different form of Chinese and is used for a variety of primarily secular purposes, from congratulatory wishes hung by a doorway to a wide range of poetry and song. Along with the literary language, the Mien borrowed the metrical system characteristic of Tang dynasty "Old Style Regulated Verse" (Purnell 1991, 1995, 1998).

Literacy in Mien

For several hundred years, a degree of literacy has been present in Mien culture in that the ritual and literary languages have been written using Chinese characters. Literacy was spread unevenly in the culture, however, being confined solely to males. All men were expected to be able to write the eight characters identifying the year, month, day, and hour of their birth, information needed for ritual purposes, but significant literacy was confined to a relatively small number of men: Daoist priests and their apprentices and men who had been exposed to some literacy instruction in Chinese. However, there was no literacy in the vernacular, and no script had been devised for that purpose.

Since the early 1930s, however, seven orthographies have been devised for the Mien vernacular, the first of these by a Mr. and Mrs. Trung, Vietnamese missionaries working in northern Thailand (Purnell 1987). All seven scripts are listed in Table 1.² As will be noted below, the Mien refugee community in America had the primary role in developing scripts 5 and 7.

Table 1: Mien Vernacular Scripts

1. 1932: Thai-based (nonstandard)
2. 1954: Roman-based (nonstandard)
3. 1956: Thai-based (standard)
4. 1981: Thai-based (simplified)
5. 1982: Roman-based (Western)
- 6: 1982: Chinese-based (bo-po-mo-fo phonetic)
- 7: 1984: Roman-based (pinyin and Western)

In the early 1980s, Mien refugees from Laos now living in the United States, Canada, and France wanted to develop a new orthography so that they could identify themselves as a people distinct from other ethnic groups from Laos (especially the Lao and the Hmong) and could maintain communication among their scattered communities (Purnell 1987).³ None of the

previous scripts were acceptable, either because of their appearance relative to English and French or because of their perceived connection with Christianity (scripts 2 and 3 having been developed within a Christian missionary context).⁴ Accordingly, a new, nonsectarian Roman script with transfer value to English and French was developed and adopted by 30 Mien representatives at a 1982 conference on Mien orthography.

During this period, researchers at the Central Institute (now University) for Nationalities in Beijing, namely Prof. Pan Cheng Qian and his associates, were working on a Romanized script for Mien based on the Chinese pinyin system. Prof. Pan, himself a Mien, saw that the new script of the refugees was similar in many ways to the China script and proposed that there be talks aimed at unifying the two if possible. A small delegation from America went to China in 1984, and held talks with Pan and his colleagues. The negotiations were successful, and a “Unified Script” to be used by Mien in China and the West was agreed to. It is a compromise between a pinyin-based and an English-based alphabet. (Table 2 gives the letters used in the script. Tones are marked by the use of letters at the end of words as in Hmong.)

Table 2: Vernacular Orthography #7 (“Unified Script”)

Initial Consonants ⁵	p	t	c	q	k
	b	d	z	j	g
	mb	nd	nz	nj	nq
	f	s			h
	hm	hn		hny	hng
	m	n		ny	ng
	hu	hl			hi
	w	l			y
Final Consonants ⁶	-p	-t			-k
	-m	-n			-ng

Vowels ⁷	i	ie	iu		u	ui	uo
	e	ei	eu	er		o	ou
	ae					or	oi
			a	ai	au		
			aa	aai	aau		
Tones ⁸	1: unmarked			3: -v	5: -x	7: -v	
	2: -h			4: -z	6: -c	8: -c	

Upon their return to the U.S., the delegation called for a second orthography conference to discuss the decisions reached in China. Some dissatisfaction with the choice of certain letters was expressed by those attending, but in the end the desire for unity with fellow Mien in the ancestral homeland carried the day, and the 85 Mien representatives approved the decisions. Once more, primers were revised and literacy classes were begun in the new script. Letters were sent back and forth between literacy classes in the U.S. and China. In addition, the Unified Script was adopted for use in the Thailand refugee camps to give Mien a head start on literacy before they went on to third countries in the West (Saephan 1986).

Despite the overall agreement with the China side, it soon became apparent that there were major differences in how the new script was actually being used. In an attempt to reach greater uniformity on both sides, a third conference was held in 1987, attended by well over 100 Mien, to coincide with a visit to the U.S. by Prof. Pan and several other Yao scholars. Unfortunately, the effort was not successful. Both sides had good reasons for their positions and were unwilling to compromise. Variability was thus accepted as regrettable but tolerable in the interest of the larger ethnic unity. The end result is a situation similar to the differences between British and American spellings (e.g., centre/center, labour/labor, tyres/tires) but more extensive. Nevertheless, since many differences are systematic, it is possible for readers on both sides to get used to them and comprehend most of what is written.

Now, some 15 years after it was first introduced, the script enjoys widespread support by the Mien in America, and the number of Mien adult readers here continues to grow, although the total numbers are still modest.

Reading and Reference Material in Mien

Since the Mien have had the Unified Script for a relatively short period of time, the amount of available general reading material is still quite limited. The key materials, both secular and religious, reference and general reading, are noted in Table 3 (see References for additional materials).⁹ Here I will just comment on the websites. Although virtually all of these belong to young adults, many of whom do not read Mien and may not even speak much Mien, at least one website, *M.i.e.n.h* <www.mienh.dreamhost.com>, has a very attractive and well-designed language section, complete with sound, to help Mien young people and others to learn to read the script.¹⁰

Table 3: Selected Vernacular Materials

A. Reference Material

- 1. Dictionaries (Pan^h 1995, Purnell et al. forthcoming)
- 2. Literacy primers and helps (Bien^h 1988, n.d.; Callaway 1985-87, Pan et al. 1985)
- 3. Language lessons for non-Mien (Burgess 1996a-b)

B. Reading Material

- 1. Religious (Christian)
 - a. Bible (Thailand Bible Society 1990, 1996)
 - b. Hymnbook (Central International Fellowship 1995)
 - c. Newsletter and Reports (*Contact*, Yang 1998)
- 2. Secular
 - a. Folktale readers (n.a. 1990; Beard et al. 1993, 1995; Dang n.d.; Giacchino-Baker 1995; Sae^{phan} 1997)
 - b. School readers and instructional materials (Sae^{chao} 1994a-f, 1999a-e)¹¹
 - c. Websites

Although most of the literates continue to be from the Christian section of the refugee communities, the gradual availability of more secular reading matter is providing an impetus for those in the larger Daoist community to desire vernacular literacy as a means of personal development and cultural maintenance. Publication of a traditional wedding manual is planned (Purnell & Deng 1987). To date, none of the Daoist manuals have been retranscribed using the Romanized script because the spirit priests and spirit masters are the only ones qualified to conduct ceremonies, and they remain fully proficient in the requisite Chinese characters. Nonetheless, the vernacular script is adequate to transcribe the ritual language of the Daoist manuals should this be necessary or desirable.

At present, virtually all Mien literacy activity and literature production is taking place in the United States and Thailand. In China, however, government interest in Mien literacy appears to have cooled off considerably. Few materials seem to have been produced, other than a literacy primer (Pan et al. 1985).

How Standardized is the Unified Script?

It is too early to address in any depth the questions about uniformity and variability because of the small number of writers and the fact that many of the same writers have been responsible for producing or helping to edit most of the literature which is forming the basis for the standard. Nevertheless, within the Mien community there has been little, if any, criticism of spelling variation. There appears to be an attitude of tolerance for variation. Some of this variation is simply misspelling as people get used to writing in Mien, and some represents acceptable individual or regional dialect differences.

The establishment of the script in its current form has been advanced by the production of key pieces of literature, the sort which have been common in helping to establish standard written languages in general: literacy primers, dictionaries, and the Bible. To these are added Mien children's school readers,

general folklore readers, and now websites. Those producing these materials have attempted to follow the script as approved by the representatives at the 1984 and 1987 orthography conferences.

An examination of the major materials in Mien, along with more informal examples of writing, such as pamphlets, notices, and correspondence, including e-mail, shows considerable uniformity in spelling. In one sense this is not at all surprising, considering that many of the current writers are linked through community, school, and religious associations. Also, non-Mien whose work includes examples of written Mien (e.g., Giacchino-Baker 1995 and Goldman 1995) have consulted individuals very familiar with the standard script. Nevertheless, several areas of variation do exist.

Spelling Variations

In the following selection of spelling variations, the main contrast will be between how the script is used in China and America based on the 1985 China primer and the China positions at the 1987 conference.¹² The U.S. Mien community will be used as representative of Mien in Western countries since most of them live here. Some differences in use within the American Mien community will also be noted.¹³

1. The first difference concerns how to spell the name for the ethnic group, a matter which has not yet been finally settled within the larger community. The variants are *Mien*, *Mienh*, *Yiu-Mien*, *Yiu-Mienh*, *Iu Mien*, *Iu-Mien*, and *Iu-Mienh*. The main issues are whether to write the tone letter on *Mienh*; whether to include the full name and, if so, whether to indicate the tone change with a hyphen; and whether there should be a “Y” at the beginning.

2. A second difference has to do with how tone change is indicated. Tone change occurs on the first member of a compound expression and is phonetically regular: syllables with stop finals become the c tone, and all non-stopped

syllables become the h tone. The American side indicates tone change by placing a hyphen between the members of the compound. They decided that it would help the reader if only one basic form for a word needed to be learned, plus a simple rule for using the hyphen to indicate tone change. The China Mien, on the other hand, write the resulting changed tone on the first member (i.e., -c or -h) and do not use the hyphen. They felt the reader would be helped more if the actual tone to be read were written right in the text. Furthermore, the China side wanted to follow *pinyin* convention and write compounds as all one word (Li 1987), whereas the U.S. side wanted to separate compounds but join them with a hyphen if tone change occurred. These differences are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Tone Change

	U.S. basic tone plus hyphen	China resulting tone, no hyphen
airplane	cie-ndaix	cieh ndaix, ciehndaix
colt, foal	maaz-dorn	mah dorn, mahdorn
yearly	hnyangx-hnyangx	hnyangxh hnyangx, hnyanghnyangx
granddaughter	sieqv-fun	sieqc fun, sieqcfun

A few writers in the U.S. are not always consistent in marking tone change. They sometimes either do not mark it at all, leaving the reader to understand from the context that this is a compound where tone change occurs, or they write the actual resulting tone, as in China. Thus, (the standard spelling is in parenthesis): *siang norm* (*siang-norm*) ‘new one,’ *manc manc* (*manc-manc*) ‘bit by bit,’ *njien youh* or *njienh youh* (*njien-youh*) ‘joy.’

In a 1999 letter from China, a prominent Mien leader shows two interesting developments in the way tone change is indicated. First, he uses a compromise position when writing compound words in those cases where tone change would be specifically marked. He writes the resulting tone following the

China decision, but he also uses the hyphen to show that the expression is a compound and thus has the unstressed-stressed rhythm typical of compounds. Some of his examples are (the U.S. spelling is in parenthesis): *Baqc-jing* (*Baqv-ging*) 'Beijing,' *gongh-zinh* (*gong-zinh*) 'salary,' *hnyiouh-zoih* (*hnyouv-zoih*) 'keen mind,' *leih-nyieic* (*leiz-nyeic*) 'custom.'¹⁴

Second, the writer introduces a new pattern for writing tone change in those compounds in which the basic tone of the first word is already the same as the resulting tone change (i.e., the basic tone is either c or h to begin with) and thus there is no visible sign of tone change. The U.S. Mien never use a hyphen in this one case feeling that it would be redundant. However, using the hyphen here enables the writer from China to treat all compounds the same, whatever their basic tones, and to alert the reader to the stress pattern for compounds. Some examples are the following (U.S. spelling is in parenthesis): *fangh-buangh* (*fangh buangh*) 'meet,' *kuh-fiqv* (*korh fiqv*) 'regret,' *Mienh-Nzaangc* (*Mienh nzaangc*) 'Mien script.' This is a significant advance in consistency and should be considered by the U.S. side. Unfortunately, the amount of literature already in use here plus the large number of compounds needing to have a hyphen added may militate against this very useful change.

3. A third difference has to do with how phonetically long /aa/ in open syllables is written: with one symbol or two. Mien in the U.S. write the long vowel symbol aa in open syllables (e.g., *daav*, *maa*, *zaah*), whereas in China the short vowel symbol is used (*dav*, *ma*, *zah*). The issue arises because there is no contrast in length in this position; a short form never occurs. American Mien decided to treat the phonetic value of length consistently in parallel with aa in closed syllables, as for example, *zaah zaaic zaamv zaanv zaangz*, and therefore write the two symbols in open syllables. The China Mien decided that since there was no contrast, a space could be saved by writing a single symbol in this position, using the double symbol only when it was needed in closed syllables, thus *zah zaaic zaamv zaanv zaangz*. Both sides have been very consistent in their spelling on this point.

4. Another difference is in the way contractions are written. In the U.S., the vowel in the initial unstressed syllable of a contraction is written with a simple vowel, sometimes u though most often a (which in this case is phonetically similar to schwa), followed by an apostrophe to indicate that the first syllable has been contracted. Some contractions can be readily expanded to their full form, but in other cases speakers differ over what the full form should be. To simplify matters, U.S. Mien decided to write contractions all the same way, as single words: *da'faam* 'third,' *da'bung* 'country,' *ga'ndiev* 'below,' *gu'nguaaic* 'above,' *fu'jueiv* 'child'. The China side decided to write the first vowel as it was pronounced, schwa being symbolized as er, and since the unstressed syllable has a slight falling tone, to write it in an uncontracted form together with a tone mark, thus making two words visually: *deih faam* (or *derh faam*), *derh bung*, *gerh ndiev*, *gerh ngaaic*, *fuh jueiv*.

5. A fair amount of variation has to do with whether to write a medial i (a palatal on-glide) after palatal initials. A 1986 letter from China proposed that medial i be dropped after all palatals. The U.S. side was surprised at this because from the start they had treated this sometimes audible high, front on-glide as being phonetically predictable in the transition from the palatal initial to the following vowel, and thus they did not write it. The China side, as evidenced in the 1985 primer (Pan et al.), eliminated medial i after palatals. This also reduced the sequence ie to e in this environment: *jeqv*, *njec*, *qex*, *yetc*, but not elsewhere: *miev*, *siec*, *ziepc*. However, the U.S. system treats ie as a front centralizing vowel glide and thus keeps it even after palatals: *jieqv*, *njiec*, *qiex*, *yietc*, *miev*, *siec*, *ziepc*.

In the 1999 letter from China, the writer goes back to putting medial i after all palatal initials, including restoring ie, as in *hnyiangx* 'year,' *jiauv* 'road,' *jiomc* 'poor,' *njiaaux* 'teach,' *nyiei* 'possessive marker,' *qiemx* 'need,' and *yietc* 'one.' The U.S. side, however, shows no sign of changing from its original position: *hnyangx*, *jauv*, *jomc*, *njaaux*, *nyei*, *qiemx*, *yietc*.

Nevertheless, some U.S. writers (e.g., Saechao 1994f) do use a medial i after palatals and before the vowel ou when they sense the presence of some extra high front vowel quality. This may be partly due to their making an effort to be careful and correct, thus sounding out the word carefully before writing. The more the articulation is slowed, the more on-glide can be heard in the transition from palatal initial to main vowel as the consonantal articulation moves to a vocalic one. For example (the standard spelling is given in parenthesis), *yiouz* (*youz*) 'man's younger brother,' *jiouh* (*jouh*) 'bridge.' The same process seems to be at work with some writers (Saephan 1997) who add a medial u after initial w in a few words: *wueiv* (*weiv*) 'son-in-law,' *wuaac* (*waac*) 'word.'

6. Another area of spelling variation involves palatal and velar initials and has to do with regional pronunciations stemming from an original consonant cluster of a velar stop and l. The original l was lost in some dialects of Mien, particularly that spoken around the town of Chang Dong in Jin Xiu County, Guangxi, the dialect which was chosen by the Chinese government to be the "standard Yao (Mien) dialect" in China. In other dialects the l became a y (written as i in the orthography), and in still other dialects the velar + i cluster fused to become a unitary palatal.¹⁵ In the China materials, the plain velar spelling is always listed first followed by the palatal spelling in parenthesis. In the U.S., the velar + i and the unitary palatal forms are both widespread. So far, the palatal spelling is considered standard here, and some who use the velar + i pronunciation do write palatals, but the use of the velar forms is so common that the widespread variation in spelling is readily accepted. Some examples are: *gluv* > *guv*, *giuv/juv* 'dog,' *glauv* > *gauv*, *giauv/jauv* 'road,' and *nqlaangh* > *nqaangh*, *nqiaangh/njaangh* 'pool.'

7. In America, there is variation between the short diphthong ai and the simple low front vowel ae after palatal initials: *jai/jae* 'chicken', *nyaiv/nyaev* 'ashamed.' Until recently, ai, based on the common pronunciation in Thailand,

was the standard, but ae is quickly becoming the standard here because it reflects the pronunciation of the refugees from Laos.

8. There is also variation which might eventually change the standard spelling of individual words. One example of this is *haiv* which varies with the standard *haaix* as in *haiv dauh* (*haaix dauh*) meaning ‘who, anyone’ and *haiv nyungc* (*haaix nyungc*) ‘what, anything.’ In writing oral dialogue, some younger Mien also write a fused, somewhat slangy, form of *haiv nyungc*, particularly when it is stressed: *hnyungv* ‘what in the world; well, whatever.’¹⁶ *Haaix* is still the standard in writing, but *haiv* is quite widespread in speaking and may become more common in writing.

Another example is the first part of the very common word ‘if’ which is written in several ways, primarily *se gorngv*, *sex gorngv*, *seix gorngv*, and *six gorngv*. Although it is most often pronounced with a rising tone (indicated by the tone letter *-x*), *se* was chosen as the standard spelling to avoid having it look like the English words ‘sex’ or ‘six.’ Still, any of the varieties seems to be acceptable, at least in informal writing.

V. Conclusion

To sum up, the 1984 “Unified Script” is now accepted simply as “the Mien script” in Western countries and China, and the available literature in the US is beginning to establish a writing standard. Perhaps 10% of the Mien in America are literate in Mien to some extent, most of whom would be between 20 and 50 years of age. Children and young adults, however, have moved quickly into English and have little interest in learning to read Mien, especially when many of them can no longer speak the language with confidence. Even those in their 20s who have retained the spoken language and who are literate in Mien often prefer to write in English. As one young Mien woman wrote to me, “I would write in Mienh but I don’t speak it as well as I should and for some reason, written Mienh doesn’t flow as easily as English, no matter how hard I try” (personal communication).

Those in America who do write in Mien follow the agreed-upon writing system quite closely. Some variability exists, most of it as a result of writing according to one's own pronunciation, but the script has been able to handle all of the varieties. In the limited number of cases where variability is widespread, it appears that no standard has been established yet and that people are free to write as they please. In any event, the current level of variability is tolerable for the community, and there has been no attempt by any faction or individual to insist on conformity to a strict standard of spelling. Instead, the community seems pleased with the progress made in developing their written language and accepts these dialect differences as minor.

The Mien, like other Southeast Asian refugee groups, have had to deal with a number of difficult challenges in adjusting to life in the West. It is nice to know that so far a dispute over their orthography has not been one of them.

Notes

¹ This paper is a revised version of the paper presented at the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society, May 2000. I am grateful to Tzeng Saechao for his comments.

² Scripts 2 and 3 are still in use in Thailand. Script 3 is more vital in that it provides a bridge to literacy in Thai and seems to be easy to learn by those Mien already literate in Thai. Script 2 has little chance for long-term survival since it does not provide a bridge to any Western language or to *pinyin*. Script 4 was never used for the Mien, although the use of a simplified Thai script was implemented for several other minority languages where it appears to have had some success (Smalley 1994:289-290).

³ For a number of years after the Mien began to arrive in the United States in 1978, they were lumped together with the Hmong or were simply called "Laotians" and thus were not recognized as a separate ethnic group for educational and social benefits.

⁴ Script 2 is completely adequate to transcribe Mien but uses the Roman letters in ways which look odd to a Westerner. For example, to avoid using di- and trigraphs as in Hmong, the same upper and lower case letters were given different phonetic values, e.g., h = /h/ but H = /hny/. Also, several consonant letters (c, r, x) were used to represent vowel sounds. The script

worked fine in the 1950s in remote areas of the Thai highlands but looked strange in America and France thirty years later.

⁵ The five columns represent labials, alveolars, alveolar affricates, palatals, and velars, respectively. Three initial consonant symbols (c, h, z) are also used as tone letters. The set mb, nd, etc. are plain voiced stops and are not prenasalized. Voiceless w and y are symbolized as hu and hi, respectively.

⁶ When used as a final, -q represents the glottal stop.

⁷ The plain letter o is /o/, but in uo and ou it represents schwa, and in or and oi it represents the mid back lax vowel, as in English “jaw” and “joy.”

⁸ Tones 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6 fit into the common A-B-C tone categories used to describe Southeast Asian languages. Tones 7-8 represent category D, those syllables with final stops. For orthographic purposes tones 7 and 8 are treated as allophones of tones 3 and 6, respectively, for a total of six tones.

⁹ There are also many popular and academic references in English about the Mien, only a few of which are included in the References below because of their relevance for the refugee community (Butler 1981, Gogol 1996, Goldman 1995, Lemoine 1982, Lewis & Lewis 1984, Moore-Howard 1989). Some recent books written by Mien on their educational and cultural experiences in America are Chao (1998) and Saetern (1998). Saechao et al. (1998) have produced *Quietly Torn*, a book of poignant autobiographical vignettes by young Mien women and are already planning a second volume.

¹⁰ This website provides an insider’s view of Mien history and culture and contains samples of modern Mien prose and poetry written in the vernacular rather than in the literary language since the latter is now largely unknown by the younger generation here. There are few other Mien websites; one is *IuMien.com* <www.iuMien.com>.

¹¹ For information on the Merced materials in Mien or Hmong, contact: Paul Guevara, Director/Bilingual, Merced City School District, Merced, CA 95340 (209-385-6666; fax: 209-385-6673); <<http://mercedcity.k12.ca.us>>.

¹² I have also used three personal letters from a China Mien (12/8/85, 3/10/86, and 8/7/86) along with a transcription of several folktales done by a Mien language instructor in Guangxi (1988).

¹³ The variation in the U.S. materials is found primarily in the folktale readers produced by the Laotian Handcraft Project (Beard et al. 1993, 1995; Saephan 1997), in Bienh’s booklets (1988, n.d.), and in correspondence. The areas of variation given below have been selected for purposes of illustration and do not cover all spelling variation. Also, no examples were found of the non-prestige reduction of voiceless sonorants to simply h, as in *hoi* (< *hnoi*) ‘day’ and *heix* (< *hleix*) ‘star.’ It would appear that if there are writers from this dialect, they consistently use the full consonantal spelling.

¹⁴ Some of the spelling differences between China and the U.S. will be mentioned below; others will not be covered because of space limitations.

¹⁵ A few dialects and some elderly speakers in other dialects still maintain the l-cluster.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Tzeng Saechao for pointing out the age-related usage.

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