

ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF A PARADIGM SHIFT IN YAO STUDIES?

INNOVATORY RESEARCH (BUT DEFICIENT SCHOLARSHIP) IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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A Review Article

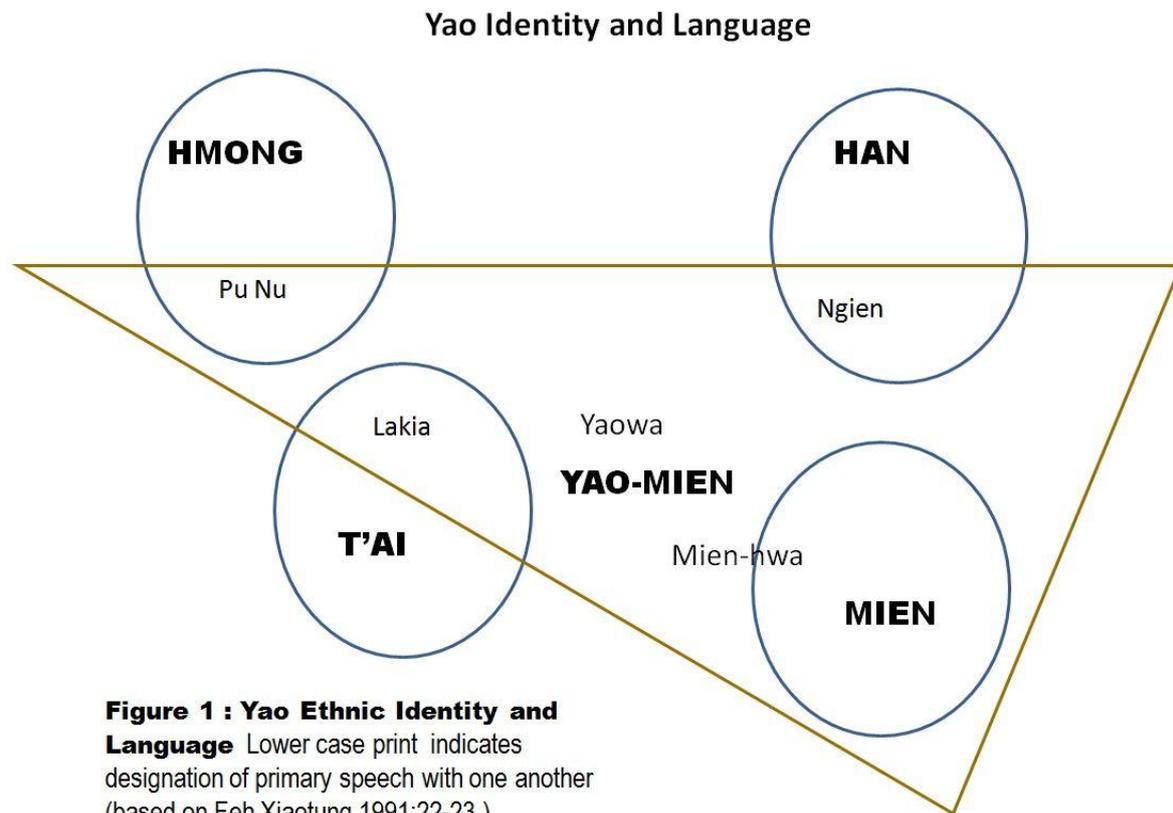
Hjorleifur Jonsson. *Mien Relations: Mountain People and State Control in Thailand*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi +198, b/w photos, map, bibliog., index. US\$ 55.00 (Hc), US 21.95 (Pb), A\$ 35.95; ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-7284-8.

Introduction: The Ethnic Landscape

The anthropological discourse which contextualises this book in the literature on mainland Southeast Asia is most readily exemplifiable by reference to Leach's (1954) *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. That classic about Eastern Burma explores the historical tendency among some mountain people he calls *gumsa* Kachin to "become Shan". The process entails emulation by these uplanders of the hierarchical civilisation and Theravada Buddhist practices which distinguish the majority populations in the lowlands. A structural corollary to such developments receives equal analytical emphasis: the assertion of cultural and political autonomy from valley-centered states by village communities of *gumlao* Kachin who form small and egalitarian alliances in the Eastern Burmese highlands. Jonsson (p. 16-17) draws attention to apparently similar ethnic landscapes throughout mainland Southeast Asia and southern China but focuses his attention almost exclusively on comparable (but not identical) prospects for change in neighbouring north Thailand.

A publisher's citation on the back cover recommends the book as "a detailed ethnography" on one of the several "mountain minorities" in that Kingdom. Use of such expressions risks cynical reprimands on both ethnographic and demographic grounds for misleading sales-talk. Ethnically Thai and Western expatriates who reside in the country's lowland cities are no less substantively prominent as subjects of the volume's anthropological analysis than members of the minority for which Jonsson uses the term "Mien" as an ethnonym in the book's title and throughout the text. But any justification for doing this is also doubtful for geographical reasons apart from the fact that most of the "Mien" whose lifestyle he records have lived in a valley-town (Chiangkham) for several generations. At least in my experience, the primary referent of "Mien" in indigenous usage is to beings who are of human identity but who constitute a majority in their own habitat where neither Jonsson nor any other living anthropologist has ever yet set eyes upon them; indeed, most Mien "shuffled off this mortal coil" millenia ago and have since been denizens of the Paradise about whose population the monograph offers little information and even less anthropological insight than readers have the right to expect from an ethnography. Other writers (including this reviewer) about

the minority people the author has in fact studied have as he acknowledges usually called them “Yao” who in their own conversations do sometimes (but rarely) combine that word with “Mien” and thus into the expression “Yao Mien” (or “lu Mien”) which designates ancestors who are currently undergoing temporary reincarnation on earth as some (but not all) of their own descendants. (Such usage in everyday conversation is comparable in both gloss and frequency to the expression “souls” for “people” among English speakers who occasionally invoke Christian imagery in secular contexts.)



A further religious dimension of these linguistic matters is the Yao dogma that “Mien-hwa” is the language of divine communication among Mien in Paradise as well as between them and all terrestrial Yao through the mediation of priests. But Yao Mien are further distinguishable from all other humans by their use of “Mien-hwa” as the first language among themselves and most definitively in their own homes. Or, to be even more precise, they normally converse with one another in “Yaowa” which is a less rigorously grammatically structured and more idiomatically adaptable version of Mien-hwa. I here refer to all of the Yao in Thailand and to most (but not all) of them in Vietnam or Laos. But there are larger proportions of other Yao in the ethnic group’s distribution north of the international border and throughout “Yueh-Nan” – the five, southernmost provinces of China – where some Yao prefer to converse with one another in dialects of T’ai (e.g. Lakia) or more commonly of Han (e.g. Ngien) and even of Hmong /Miau (e.g. Pu Nu)(Feh Xoaotung, 1991: 21-23). Such people also cultivate Mien-hwa either for use as a *lingua franca* or for talking with any Yao stranger - whatever his/her home language - or for the formalities of dealing via

priests with ancestors and according to circumstances with the infinitely multilingual deities of Paradise. But adult speakers of Lakia, Ngien and Pu Nu tell me they are uncomfortable in Yaowa which I can vouch their children never use when playing cacophonously with one another in any schoolyard.

All such dimensions of linguistic diversity among the Yao are represented throughout Yueh-Nan and, some of them, beyond the PRC's southernmost border. The very terms (e.g. Ch. -hua, Th. -waa; 'words or speech') for such variety reveal the strong influence which verbal dealings with the speakers of other languages have upon their own and provide a measure of the remarkable tenacity which Yao in far-flung localities of this vast ethnic landscape - including towns and villages in North Thailand - retain common ethnic identity while assimilating so much from other cultures. These observations demand attention as elementary starting points for any appreciation of Yao ethnography. But anthropological novices and other readers will look in vain for such basic information in Jonsson's book.

The monograph does however contain the conventional ethnography's overview of relevant literature on population numbers and movements about which I briefly collate a few additional and more recent statistics for the benefit of the following discussion. Southern migrations from Yueh-Nan where to-day Yao total about 2 million (Huang Yu and Huang Fangping, 1990) date from the 13th century (Be Viet Dang, 1994) and largely explain why there are also about 600,000 of these people in contemporary Vietnam and Laos (Khong Dien, 1996). Their presence further west since the last decades of the 19th century accounts for 31,000 Yao in modern Thailand's provinces of Nan, Lampang, Phayao and Chiangrai whose extreme north-eastern boundary forms part of the Kingdom's precipitous frontier with former French Indochina. That mountain chain and a niche at a lower altitude immediately south of Chiangmai's provincial border with Burma, are Yao habitats whence former poppy growers have recently moved to both rural and urban settlements in the lowlands where Jonsson has been conducting fieldwork among them (intermittently) since the early nineties.

High Commendation with Reservations

Never before have I (nor as far as I know, any reviewer for *New Mandala*) evaluated a monograph by predicting that future historians of anthropology will acclaim any publication in our time for initiating a paradigm shift in some branch of the discipline. But I risk that forecast now to applaud the innovatory contribution which the book under scrutiny could make to the future of research and teaching by the social sciences about modern Thailand and I do so with particular reference to the current state of scholarship concerning the Yao minority of that Kingdom. This enthusiasm is however compromised by discomfort I will exemplify with inadequacies in Jonsson's fieldwork, with shortcomings in his library research, and with the tricky sales-talk in his publisher's (Cornell University Press') deceptive advertising on the back cover of the paperback edition.

The TRC(I): Its Methodological Fictions ?

Among readers who might be familiar with my CV, some may suspect that any negative assessment I make of Jonsson's book will be biased by excessive professional sensitivity to his central critique

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which is a retrospective attack on the anthropology practised by the Thai Government's Tribal Research Centre, (TRC) from the mid-1960s till mid-1980s; (i.e. before it became an Institute).

I was among the first of the expatriates whom the "Centre" recruited as Research Fellows throughout 1966-86. Each of us spent approximately 18 months in an upland village of the ethnic group which the director assigned to the fieldworker as the focus of a research project which would be commensurate with the then current requirements for post-graduate candidature in Anthropology at the University of Sydney.

Fundamental to Jonsson's (p. 94-98) criticism of the TRC is a highly structured division of intellectual labour which he insists its protocols imposed on all staff including foreign recruits. He stereotypes each of the Centre's projects as concentrated exclusively on but one highland ethnic group which the anthropologist was to study with the help of a Thai trainee. What the author makes controversial is a set of expectations which he attributes to the TRC that each such enquiry respect several working assumptions which according to him the staff recognised as fiction but whose utility was to standardise and thereby facilitate observation, analysis and documentation in the interests of comparison: for example, as if each highland ethnic group were framed by borders within which the culturally distinct minority existed as an isolate without significant relations with either other like entities in the highlands or with Thai peasant lowlanders; and as if such boundaries shielded "pre-modern" elements of its culture from the effects of outside influences for which the evidence in reality was therefore to be overlooked.

But the methodological fiction which bears most directly on Jonsson's central exegetical thrust is one to which the TRC firmly demanded the most uncompromising and unexceptional adherence from its expatriate as well as Thai research staff but to which Jonsson's formulation of the monograph's very title is in fact a most direct and forthright challenge: *Mien Relations: Mountain People and State Control in Thailand* is an explicit enquiry into the allegedly on-going abuses which it argues the Yao have suffered from the Thai state throughout most of the period that has elapsed since their forebears first settled in the Kingdom's north. The author seeks to convince the reader that the TRC's research among the descendants of these immigrants has yielded results which are of doubtful scientific quality and which have therefore had dire practical consequence for its human subjects precisely because investigation and analysis have been conducted as if relations between the state and this minority could be anthropologically ignored for lack of significant relevance to the ethnic distinctiveness of life among these highlanders.

Most expatriate research officers and their Thai counterparts seem to have lived and worked quite easily with these assumptions (plus several more like them) - for example, when back in the TRC's premises and systematizing fieldwork notes for filing but also during more informal discussion with colleagues on campus about village experiences - but what I find most directly revealing in retrospect, in the least demanding of circumstances including for instance even while privately sorting photographs at the request of office staff to illustrate their work in exhibitions which might take place during an anthropologist's frequent and prolonged absences. Beyond any surveillance, they became their own censors: some always showed mountain women and younger children in ethnically distinguishable costumes but "as a rule" chose a picture only if there were no men visible in it either at all or at least in its foreground. The criterion of exclusion was that post-pubescent highland males normally dressed in the same unattractive, dark and drab attire of their lowland Thai

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counterparts and were presumed to be of little visual interest unless also displaying ethnically distinct items of material culture (e.g. finger knives or holy portraits).

Even so, it is crucial to note that the selectivity of such self-censorship in fact varied in degree among the staff and did so with far finer nuances and greater subtlety than the harsh crudities which Jonsson's stereotype conveys. Hence, the reality of a minority's relations with outsiders was indeed conspicuous in some projects (e.g. Hinton's on the Pwo Karen and mine on the Pulangka Yao) but only very slightly discernible in others (e.g. Walker's on the Lahu or Chindarsi's on the Hmong); but never was its actuality completely expunged from any of the printed descriptions or analyses (especially statistical) as it could so easily be from the posters and exhibitions. Regrettably Jonsson does not mollify the sledge-hammer of his criticism by softening the blows with such velvet.

Forty years on, resort to methodological fictions of the crudity which I have just summarized has become professionally unacceptable. Their exposure and rejection in retrospect for what they were have become mandatory whenever the quality of such an earlier research project's contribution to the ethnographic record is at issue. Later comment will illustrate the irony that Jonsson himself should now grossly distort the undeniability of their invocation in the cases under review by caricaturing the varying truths about them into a metaphoric obfuscation of the genuine nature of the fieldwork methodology in question, of the information it has produced, and of the analyses of those data.

His critique of my project (1966-68) for example fails to mention the enquiries which I have conducted and documented in several publications he elsewhere purports to have read about triadically structured cross-ethnic relations between urban Chinese merchants at whose behest their Yao debtors among grain growers in Pulangka village produced and delivered almost the total annual subsistence needs in rice and maize of several poppy growing households in different Hmong communities over more than a decade. Throughout more than half a century the same businessmen have regularly purchased offspring of northern Thai peasant mothers and fathers but nevertheless mediated permanently life-long relations between the subsequent Yao adopters and the biological parents of these children while true to expectations as fictively "grandparental kin" in the affections of the youngsters themselves.

That said, I nevertheless insist that Jonsson has every justification to condemn the restrictions with which the TRC attempted to muzzle any anthropological investigation and commentary about the Thai state's relations with the highland minorities of the Kingdom. I note however that the "Centre's" efforts to enforce such control were to some degree eluded by some research and publication even during its heyday in the mid-1970s but more so in the onset of the TRC's decline during the 1980s (see e.g. Race, 1974; Sharp, 1975; Cooper, 1984, Tapp 1989 on the Hmong); further, that commentary on the state's relations with yet other mountain peoples though rare was nevertheless at least evident even during those decades; and moreover that the appearance of such critiques was to become so common by the late 1980s as to be to be unremarkable throughout the 1990s. But until the printing of Jonsson's book there had been almost no exceptions among anthropologists who worked on issues concerning contemporary Yao who had ever broken the silence which their collective professional interests apparently imposed against the direction of any such criticism at the Thai government's treatment of this minority and which they may have quietly invigilated among themselves. The following section offers a partial explanation for the stubbornness of these scholars.

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Jonsson's iconoclastic challenge to the steadfastness of TRC's reticence on such Yao matters has been one of two main reasons why I applaud his book as marking a paradigm shift in studies of the Yao in Thailand. But there is an additional reason which is equally compelling.

The IAYS, Yao Bibliophilia and Anthropology's Whisper

The International Association of Yao Studies (IAYS)

I strongly endorse Jonsson's complaint about what Yao Studies has become during the last 23 years and applaud his book for the anthropological resurgence it anticipates by challenging the restrictive dominance which other intellectual enterprises and especially religious philology have slowly but certainly assumed over that pursuit since the TRC ceased to be a base for anthropological research during the mid-1980s and China's simultaneous corporatisation of the IAYS. The sudden emergence of that organisation and its gestation during the late 1980s and 1990s as the only international association dedicated to the study of any Chinese "nationality" while headquartered in the PRC overlapped with the fading of the Tribal Research Centre in Thailand and has proved to be at the cost of anthropology's eventual abdication and marginalization as a major stakeholder in (but never its complete withdrawal from) scholarship about the Yao throughout the years which have since ensued.

Jonsson' flies the banner of the "conscientiously objecting outsider" when he targets Yao Studies which is now like a brand name for the multinational enterprise which has almost monopolised its business globally through more than a quarter of a century. And my review might be read as a response by a "not so conscientiously defensive insider" because I am readily identifiable as one of the longest serving among the now ex-presidents of the International Association of Yao Studies (IAYS) and thereby with a global constituency of colleagues whose profession is to think, write, teach and publish about the minority under consideration. These specialists who are in continuous intercommunication now number a fluctuating 200 and I regretfully forecast that few of them will take the slightest notice of Jonsson's opus during the foreseeable future and that almost none of them will ever appreciate its anthropological achievements.

My pessimism is partly due to the fact that most of these scholars have no interest in conceptual advances in Anthropology which was once the dynamo of Yao Studies, (see e.g. Lebar et al, 1964 pp. 82ff especially on French publication about Yao in Indochina) but which since the mid-1980s has been distantly marginalised to the periphery of pursuits under that rubric by far more dominant interests that have vastly different research priorities.

Since 1986 and the inaugural meeting in Guangdong, China of the IAYS, the main standard bearers of research about the Yao have been that organization's trend-setting doyens for whom through more than two decades, their constituents have provided with the venues and the endorsement necessary to authorize by example what scholarship about the Yao should do and be. Such luminaries and their Association's general members are mostly academics in various tertiary institutions throughout the PRC but they also include full-time bureaucrats and influential Communist Party cadres who prepare and deliver reports on Yao topics in many different interstices of China's governmental apparatus. Their research has been mainly oriented to the preferences of several disciplines as practised within universities and other state institutions of the country and especially throughout the five southern

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province of Guangxi, Guizhou, Guangdong, Hunan and Yunnan (or, collectively, “Yueh Nan”) I refer especially to such schools and departments of Philology and of Comparative Religious Studies as well as of Linguistics.

Archaeology, Museum Studies and specialist training for a branch of the tourist industry which Chinese call “Ethnology” must also be additions to this list. Anthropology’s main claim for inclusion is that it was the flagship of Yao Studies during the 1920s and 1930s and that as such provided and/or endorsed opportunities during those years for the research which has resulted in most of the books which were published about China’s southern *minzu* before the war with Japan. They still remain classic centre pieces of such holdings about “nationalities” in many modern libraries of Yueh Nan (Feh, 1991).

Yao Bibliophilia

The different intellectual commitments which are evident from the numerous and various pursuits comprising Yao Studies all converge in a collective discourse on what I label Yao Bibliophilia whose overwhelming dominance has almost silenced the audibility of any voices which are identifiably in the interests of anthropology into a rarely discernible whisper. A brief detour into Yao material culture is a necessary preliminary to the elaboration which will follow of this point.

Residents in any community of Yao whatever its location, include readers of Chinese script. Literacy is one of the most distinctive features of their culture and is unique to them among all of the so-called “tribal” people in northern Thailand. Some of their kin units are indeed internationally renowned for their heirloom libraries of rare (but not necessarily antique) books.

The size of most larger collections maintained by the now prosperous former Yao refugees of the suburb of Pangka in Chiangkham town (Miles 2009a: Images 10 and 11) is due mainly to the regularity with which financially able but now long deceased kin of earlier generations employed itinerant professional scribes who visited Yao homes when on routine tour by mule train through the northern Thai highlands to reproduce manuscripts (“maternal editions”) which their clients had hired from one another or exchanged in long-term loans. These experts used brush and black ink to inscribe each replication’s “offspring edition” into an initially blank but pre-bound copybook which comprised the same number of rice-paper pages as its “mother”. I have never witnessed the entire production process of these tasks in Pangka but have every reason to believe the statements of friends that it still happens in the manner I have just described.

At least until recently, the criterion of a new copy’s worth was whether one of the owners or their appointee could chant it while dancing either in private or better still in public; but I stress that it may well be that neither may have more than partial access to the meaning of the words in his own intonation and often none at all (Miles, 1982). That, I intuit, is one reason why Yao custodians of such books at the end of the 1960s tended to welcome the earliest offers of university-based philologists mainly from Japan and most likely first in the entourage of Shiratori (1975) to provide photocopies, written transcriptions and translations of texts whose meaning had previously been utterly opaque to the owners.

Hence, the occurrence of transactions in which the foreign experts negotiated for the right to retain copies of whatever manuscript they photographed. But in fact some of the Japanese aficionados had

a far greater interest in using their cameras to reproduce associated adult human-sized portraits of deities painted on rice paper sheets which the Yao also collect and store as concentric rolls in vermin-proof rattan cylinders. By all accounts the villagers in Laos revelled in the experience of suddenly understanding and semantically appreciating the contents of what had previously been of calligraphic and mnemonic value but not of semantic utility

I note that all of these manuscripts are anonymous by definition; also, that none of them even suggest the ethnic identity of their authors and therefore that the usual European classification of the collections as “Yao writings”, “Yao books”, “Yao literature”, “Yao paintings” is problematic. Worse, it is misleading especially in the light of the roles which non-Yao play in their reproduction. The situation is further confused by the fact that Yao often use the name of the copiers or translators to tag and thus classify books into a single category or to distinguish different sets.

The earliest indications of international interest by scholars in Yao collections of manuscripts had not advanced much beyond a preliminary phase of informed curiosity at a tertiary level until the publications of several Japanese pioneers including Shiratori, (1975, 1978.) The proliferation in Japan of the type of research which they popularised during the 1970s followed a sudden realisation among Yao in central Laos that foreign philological expertise now gave them semantic access which they had never previously enjoyed into some of the classics in their collections and was perhaps in response to an upsurge in demand for their expertise by the owners of the books. But not until almost a decade later was there comparable indication of equally serious academic attention in the USA. This occurred mainly among former students of the Japanese scholars I have mentioned (e.g. in the work of Strickman, 1982 and of Boltz, 1987) but at a time when there were simultaneously brighter signs of serious interest in China (e.g. from Zhang Youjun, 1981 and in the Guangxi Zhaunagzu Zizhiqu Bianbjizu, 1983) where the transcription and translation of manuscripts from Yao collections were eventually to expand into an intellectual obsession throughout the campuses of Yueh Nan.

What Has Been Done?

Obi and Muller (1997) have published a most scholarly and comprehensive annotated bibliography on such philological activity whose output has remained at the prolific level since it apparently “peaked” in the mid-nineties. Their extended essay also provides a measure of the extent to which enquiry into religious texts which date from the dynasty of the Southern Song (AD 1127-1279) now has centrality within the philological discourse on Yao Bibliophilia. One by-product of such dominance is of greater concern to me than to Jonsson: a smothering of any continuity with previous anthropological fieldwork and publication concerning Yao social organisation, economics or contemporary religious practice in the early 20th century (e.g. by Fei Xiaotong’s wife Wang Tong Hui, 1936 and by Fortune, 1938 and his Chinese undergraduate refugees from Lingnan University under war-time conditions; but see comments below on the exception of Lemoine).

Jonsson has never published any explicit objection to any philological research into Yao collections of manuscripts and certainly not to that pursuit’s development of conceptual refinements or to their application in any of these areas I have mentioned. What he does react against is the fact that the continuous hegemony of the collective impact by such work upon Yao Studies has largely muted the

expression of intellectual interests which otherwise might have long ago engaged with the issues which he now proclaims on behalf of anthropology as the main concern of his book.

Hence, to appreciate what is innovatory about this message and the use to which he puts it, it is not as necessary for me to present any further details which Obi and Muller have now so conveniently made available about what Yao Studies has already actually done during the last quarter of a century as it is to distil the issues which demand priority of attention among the multitude of matters which in Jonsson's judgment Yao Studies has actually left undone during those years ; it is also necessary for reasons I shall later elaborate, to confront these problems urgently. The sub-title of Jonsson's monograph nominates his top priorities in deceptively the simplest of terms: ... *Mountain People and State Control in Thailand*.

What Needs to be Done and How?

I congratulate Jonsson for the presentation of an overwhelmingly compelling case that the quest for knowledge concerning the Yao must now extend into areas where it has never before ventured and into which he has taken the first pioneering steps by setting precedents for confronting the issues I outline below. Hence also, my plaudit that his work deserves commendation for its initiation of a paradigm shift specifically in scholarship about Yao in Thailand; but perhaps also, for its potential influence even further afield.

To my knowledge, there has been no previous investigation by anthropologists or other social scientists into Thailand's sports stadia and concert-halls as arenas of state politics. I therefore wonder whether others may soon emulate Jonsson's precedent by re-thinking and broadening the criteria by which they identify political behaviour among the highland populations they study in this Kingdom but maybe also in other states of mainland Southeast Asia. My point is that the status quo ante in research about the general region might now yield to expansion and multiplication of approaches in the empirical sense; but also in the conceptual senses on which I will later elaborate.

Conscientious Objector, Teacher and Stimulating (but Careless) Writer

It is due to Jonsson's superb sense of narrative not only that his Introduction quickly engages the reader in the innovatory ideas that his research promises but also that subsequent chapters provide reason to expect even more of them as does the breathtaking finale. This quality of his writing bodes well for the book's prospects in teaching.

Consider for example his question why the Yao in Thailand attach so much value to football whose promotion and administration throughout the country is a state responsibility under the constant surveillance of officialdom i.e. "the King's men". Later, I shall further contextualize the conceptual intricacies of his theory that for example, by playing, watching, coaching, arguing about and (I would add) especially by gambling on the game, Yao in the Kingdom strive for and earn (but ultimately fail to gain or maintain and enjoy) public recognition of their eligibility "to become Thai"; (cf. Leach, 1954 on Kachin who "become Shan" or on *gumlao* egalitarians who "become" *gumsa* monarchists in the highland politics of neighbouring eastern Burma)

Clearly then, this volume is not just another colourful but easily dispensable primer in ethnographic exotica or a back-pocket crib for crash tuition in elementary anthropological theory. Indeed, this book will be required study in any future anthropology course which even just touches on the role of the state in the origins and sustenance of racism or thereby ventilates the possibility that the processes of genocide are extant in Southeast Asia (consider the insightfulness of pp. 44-72).

Jonsson resumes the role again of a “conscientiously objecting outsider” by taking the opportunity to re-examine established wisdoms. The senior undergraduates I envisage (rather than as yet less well-read beginners) will also enjoy intellectual tussles over his provocative inversion of the cliché that anthropology so often becomes the handmaiden of imperialist and neo-imperialist interests in the further flung regions of its practice. He entices younger scholars to look again when he draws on the history of modern Thailand which has never been a colonial possession to find evidence that Asian hegemony may also domesticate the expertise of Westerners (including the professors of anthropology among expatriate advisors) and harness the priorities of imperialism’s so-called “handmaidens” to the interests of the Thai ruling elite rather than the reverse. We shall later see that the same conclusion is the outcome of thinking Jonsson stimulates in at least one reader through his insights into the Tribal Museum.

The aim of Jonsson’s investigation into The Siam Society of yore and into the TRC of yesterday is mainly to advance this anti-thesis which certainly convinces me. Even so, I warn prospective buyers or library borrowers to beware the flaws in the scholarship of this writer’s first monograph yet remind themselves that some defects are perhaps inevitable in such a pioneering preview of what hopefully will be the marketing of his products to date. Be that as it may, not even the least carping reviewer can resile from the responsibility to draw the author’s and the publisher’s attention to those deficiencies by the specifications in what follows.

A Shift to a Different Paradigm

Let me expand very briefly on my own recent realisation that the interests of the IAYS have never previously extended to this set of issues. As a committee member of that international body from its inception until 1997 I can vouch that none of the papers presented to participants at its seminars, bi-annual conferences, workshops etc., or included in any of the handsome publications under its imprimatur, has ever conveyed the slightest indication of interest in the use of violence by the modern Thai state to control the Yao; nor has there ever been any attention given to such matters in the open seminar discussions which these presentations have preceded. In a longer version of what you are reading now, I have documented and analysed the agendas of all IAYS meetings over that period and can confirm that (with the same exception) not one of these academic offerings to knowledge about the Yao has suggested even a hint of the criticism which Jonsson’s case study of Thailand so robustly exemplifies against any government policy which is detrimental to their interests wherever this minority resides.

The appearance of *Mien Relations* in 2005 has not only ended the entrenched refusal of scholarship about the Yao in Thailand since the 1960s ever to attend to the oppression of these highlanders by their rulers but also to announce with unprecedented clarity that controls which the Thai state

imposes on the freedoms of the contemporary Yao is now a major priority of anthropology's interest in these people whatever their location. And I hope he is right.

In stark contrast with the artificial detachment of the IAYS from anything relating to national current affairs, Jonsson's own overriding intellectual commitments are to the comparative investigation of state control over all upland minority people throughout frontier zones of southern China and across the mainland, the peninsula and even throughout the archipelago of Southeast Asia. He has however sharpened the initial impact of his message by producing a remarkably slim volume (fewer than 167 pages of text) and for that purpose, he has concentrated on only one such ethnic group (which he calls the "Mien") in the uplands of only one such state (Thailand) whose government he characterises as a perpetually sinister and often invisibly menacing presence which darkly shadows too many terrible days in the colourless lives of these people and too many grim paragraphs for any book which sets out to stimulate students but which too frequently really is deeply depressing.

I appeal to the optimists among readers therefore to ask themselves how then have the Yao managed to sustain their cohesion as a viable ethnic group in the teeth of such oppression while several other minorities within a short radius of Chiangkham (e.g. Khmu, Phu T'ai, Mrabri) have almost disappeared from anthropology's vision during my own lifetime and survive no more than as vague memories within the minds of elderly neighbours or in murky photographs above inadequate captions in even more obsolete ethnographies about former habitats. The answer I hope will emerge from the following paragraphs.

Jonsson's critique is not just about Thailand. It is the spearhead of his investigations which harshly expose the appallingly stubborn refusal by Yao Studies ever to have taken any initiative or responsibility for the theorisation of racism or the possibility of genocide under Thailand's ruling elite whose iconically but deceptive serenity, charming but fabricated sophistry and obfuscatingly dazzling smiles have stereotypically characterised the presentation of itself to the rest of the world since beginning of modern history and can probably presume it can do so forever more. As this book signals, a sea change of highly innovative conceptualisations will be necessary if research of quality concerning the Yao of the Kingdom will ever manage to rectify itself.

"Relations": The Key Concept in Jonsson's Analytical Equipment

The purpose of Jonsson's monograph is not only to illuminate this need and thereby to justify the awesome challenge he thus sets for scholarship about the Yao in Thailand but also to illustrate his exhortation for readers to grasp the nettle of theoretical concepts which must be cultivated and shaped for that purpose and which he exemplifies by comparing the operation of several "self-definitions" or "self-fashionings" which Yao in Chiangkham invoke both to identify with and to distinguish themselves from the Thai majority of the country (p. 10). The implication is that numerous analogues operate along with the three case studies he analyses to enable these people to "... realise and vary their contemporary understandings of who they are and of the way they relate to a larger context of identity and state control"; further, that each of the three self-fashionings "... carries a particular definition of the Mien (i.e. the Yao) as an (*sic*) acting subject". I quote in detail to epitomise the concepts on which the persuasiveness of Jonsson's arguments

depends and which to my mind makes this publication a major innovatory contribution to far more than Yao Studies and indeed to the general body of anthropological theory.

Yao as Thai Sportspeople

I have already made reference to Jonsson's theory that it is through sports (football, volleyball, handball, basketball, pingpong, *takraw* etc.) that the Yao seek to demonstrate to Thailand's public as well as to the state's rulers and indeed to the whole world that they are "progressive villagers" who as such are "very compatible with the rest of the country" (Jonsson, p. 10) and able to perform for national (and even more hopefully international) evaluation as Thai: i.e. that they have thus "become Thai".

Yao as Thai Environmentalists

These propositions have to be considered within the same context as a second and more complex case study whereby Jonsson contends that Yao in Thailand define "their ethnic group as a bearers of eco-wisdom" in defence of nature and as a foil to "slashers-and-burners" of the environment; that they thus strive to dissociate themselves from the "un-Thai" who in the collective wisdom of the Thai majority are not just shifting cultivators but as such veritable vandals of the wilderness; that on the contrary, there are environmentalist Yao who "relate" to and are identifiable with national eco-political movements among majority Thai whose campaigns they join for the "greening" of state policies even to the extent of invigilating public observance of new regulations in such areas; alternatively they oppose environmentally suspect legislation by joining "green" Thai dissidents in the politics of the state at all levels of government (national, provincial, district and sub-district).

Yao in Thai Tourism: Weddings for Hire

While I find the two foregoing examples of "relations" most constructively thought provoking, I have some misgivings over another type of self-fashioning Jonsson discerns through application of his analytical equipment to the way in which Yao entertain themselves and others at contemporary concerts in village halls and schoolyards. At these events, he reports, the emphasis is on "Mien cultural heritage". The "larger context of identity and state control" (p. 10) to which he sees them "relating" in this area is as primary producers at the coal-face of the national industry of domestic and international tourism; i.e. in the interests of bureaucrats and businesspeople who seek to attract city-dwelling tourists and even some foreign travellers from and via Bangkok to villages such as Pangka where the visitors over indulge themselves at Yao feasts at which they also participate in rhythmic hand-clapping and synchronized rice-whisky drinking on cue to accompany chanting in the Mien archaic song language. The same guests also accept invitations to join in "traditional" dances but are not informed (though they may well guess) that these are the inventions of last week.

I consider exploitation of the traditional Yao wedding to be not only the most creative of the adaptations through which Yao in Pangka draw on and gear their cultural heritage to the interests of tourism but also that this event provides the ethnographically most revealing example of the limits which operate in defence of ethnic and religious identity among the Yao when they exhibit the

expertise for which they are famous as organizers of feasts for outsiders rather than for themselves (including their own ancestors).

What they advertise for blatantly commercial purposes among prospective customers (i.e. among typically Thai-speaking Chinese in Bangkok) is an opportunity for any long-married couple to re-boot a stale matrimonial relationship as the focus of a ceremony in which urban husband and wife become a Yao bridegroom and bride for one day and one night under the collective dictatorship of a cohort of elderly women who are experts in nuptial conventions.



Image 1: A Yao Bride in Pulangka (1966)



Image 2: Bangkok Chinese engineer as a Yao Groom(1996)

The participants initially divide into two groups one in the school's gymnasium with him; the other in the girls' shower room with her and several hairdryers a-blowing in both. The old women spend hours in alternating shifts with sewing machines a-buzzing and scissors a-snipping as they fold and fit, adjust and readjust every component of the wedding costumes on which they work (both his and hers) in accordance not only with the measurements and preferences of their two metropolitan clients but also with their own artistic tastes. The armed sentries at the doors behind which all this frenetic activity takes place relax by doing double duty as musicians (flautists, drummers, cymbalists, blowers, whistlers, fiddlers and most recently buglers) in two bands - one his, the others, hers. They tune their instruments and practice solo and jam near their guard posts in readiness for the main events which follow.

Awaiting the emergence of the bands after midday but sometimes as late as dusk are the couple's relatives and friends who sit in two contingents of formally attired diners on the expansive timber

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deck where the ceremony will take place and where some of the all-night entertainment will ensue. Many of these spectators will have arrived by air in north Thailand the same day; some come from Bangkok but just as many from cities all over Asia and Southeast Asia, even from the USA. In the only such “wedding” which I have attended they (and a solitary non-Chinese observer from Australia) had proceeded from various airfields to Pangka aboard a fleet of luxury air-conditioned and “en-suited” coaches which had dispensed tea, coffee, wine, and iced soft drinks at roadside picnic spots en route followed by canapés, French pastries and ice-cream on arrival while temporary toilets were being installed behind the first-aid post under canvas, and tents were erected on the school’s football field mainly to accommodate over self-indulgent visitors through later and smaller hours.

This is what the Thai-speaking (and English-speaking) Chinese who have joined the guests from the crème-de-la-crème of Bangkok’s business world relish as “camping”. They literally do have a ball during the next 24 hours all at great expense to the visitors as well as to the welcome profit not only of every household in Pangka but also of many Yao in several other suburbs of Chiangkham. What these paying guests experience accords almost exactly with detailed descriptions of genuine Yao weddings by several anthropologists (e.g. Hanks, 1965; Miles, 1974) These are so much the same as what my field notes and photographs document of the event I witnessed in Pangka 30 years later, I simply commend the earlier descriptions to the more assiduous reader rather than perpetrate the redundancy of repeating them here almost verbatim. But even so I stress the rider that the superficial but minute contrasts which comparison reveals have crucial implications which will later receive the careful attention they demand.



Image 3: Pulangka Yao nuptial couple in all-night prostration to the groom’s ancestors (1966)

The most important observation to highlight about the hired wedding concerns the identity of the participants who are Thai-speaking Chinese and it is in that regard that Jonsson’s notion of “relations”

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resonates most revealingly with my earlier research experience in Thailand during the 1960s. In attending the event and while writing up my notes about it I could not help but to hark back to Pulangka and to the multi-generational clientship of the typical poppy-grower's dwelling group (*peo*) to the urban Chinese trader was the main source of credit for the Yao whom he linked as producers of rice, maize and opium not only with other highland ethnic groups but also with city-centred businesses including prestigious Chinese boarding schools (Thai-language), restaurants and other enterprises for example in Bangkok where many Pulangka youths of the sixties and seventies spent much of their childhood and most of their adolescence (Miles, 1990:146; Miles, 2009b)

The hired wedding rekindles my interest in the extent of identification by Yao rural dwellers with the Thai –speaking, urban and mercantile Chinese minority of the nation's metropolitan business centres (Skinner,1957) as an alternative to their “self-fashioning” by reference to the ethnically Thai-elite officialdom of the Kingdom's royal ministries and houses of government. This possibility seems to have escaped Jonsson's considerations; so has the illustrative relevance of the hired wedding as an alternative or in extension to his theory about “relations”.

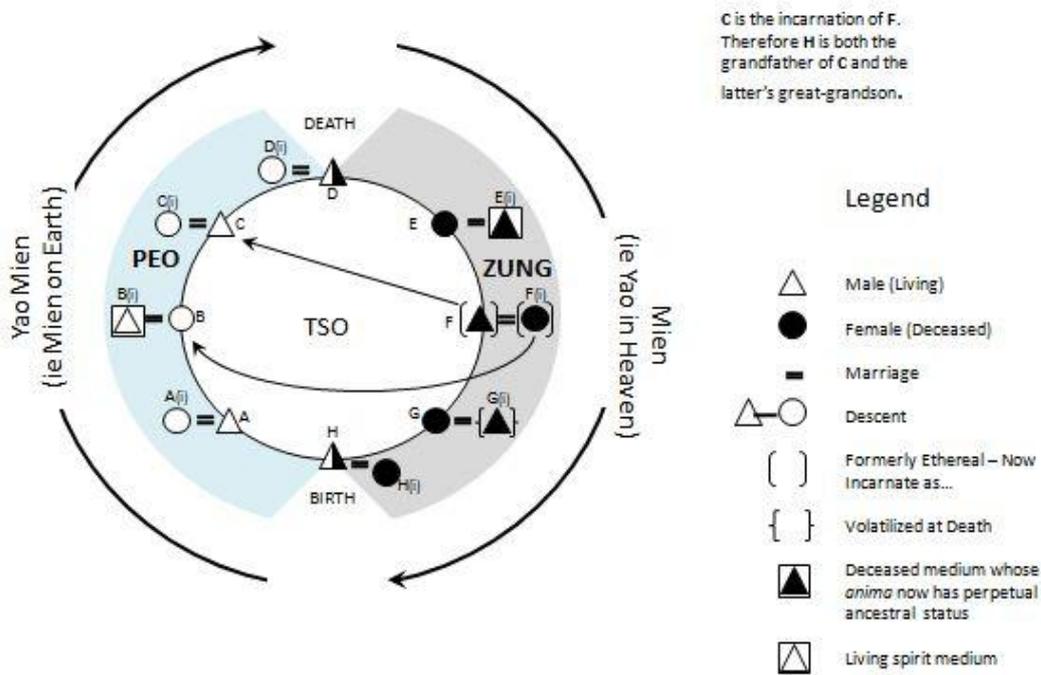
I shall therefore shamelessly purloin his concept of “relations” by extending enquiry into whether there is an enduring tendency for Yao in Thailand to “become” Southeast Asian Chinese rather than Thai in the process of also distinguishing themselves internationally as Daoists rather than Buddhists.

Stateless Tribespeople or Subjects of a Transcendent Theocratic State?

Whatever their origins, the Chinese tourists, other businessmen and bureaucrats I have mentioned surely represent only one significant aspect of a vastly “larger context of identity and state control” (p. 10) to which Yao perceive themselves as “relating” as bearers of a diacritical “cultural heritage”. If the archaic songs of this rural minority belong to that heritage, so of course does much of the ancestral culture which is unique to their ethnic group and whose profound and enduring value for these people has nothing to do with titillation of big-spending visitors. For example, in the wedding for tourists there is no replication of what is religiously the crucial requirement of a wedding and of what transforms a Yao bridegroom and bride into a married couple: i.e. one party must abrogate all commitments to the worship of his/her own ancestors and becomes a devotee of the deceased residents of the other's dwelling where the pair will henceforth reside. Most of the ceremony is a ritual which determines (by oracle) whether the newcomer is acceptable to the other spouse's deceased ancestors.

Figure 2

Yao Incarnation and Cyclical Descent



At a wedding for a tourist couple there are of course no such dealings with the deceased relatives of either bride or groom. Indeed, the Christian denomination of the Chinese couple whose re-marriage I witnessed had motivated the groom to confirm in advance by way of long distance phone calls with the organizers from the residence of a Bangkok clergyman that no dealings with deceased Yao or their gods was planned

A few comments about ethnonymy are a necessary preliminary to any elaboration of this very revealing point which is crucial to one of my fundamental criticisms of Jonsson's thesis. All Yao use the word "Mien" whose primary referent is to the uncountable population of deceased Yao in their Heaven. At any point in time, a miniscule proportion of this etherealised totality is about to become temporarily incarnate with the expectation of regaining Paradise after a lifetime. In other words, they become terrestrially feral. Even so, both they and their progeny remain indisputably spiritual beings of the Mien variety, even if both are subject to the genetic and other influences of earthly humans with whom they commonly nurture other relationships including cohabitation. (Hence, wordlists in literature about the Yao often give both "spirit" and "human" as translations for the word "Mien"; e.g. *sibmienmien* = "a make-spirit-human" = a priest).

These facts contribute to the collective understanding that the ethnonym "Yao" is an adjective by which incarnate Mien distinguish themselves from the denizens of Paradise and by which they expect humans of other origins to address and refer to them. Hence, the occasional use as an expression in daily conversation of "Yao Mien" (i.e. those "Mien who are incarnate as Yao" by contrast with those who remain in Paradise) which often recurs in the ethnographic literature as "lu Mien" and as a designation of "divine" speech (Mien-hwa). Mien-hwa actually refers to the primary language of intercommunication not only within Paradise but also between the denizens of Heaven

and their descendants who are incarnate on earth. This is a more formal and more structurally consistent version of the more variable everyday talk (Yaowa) in which terrestrial Yao engage among themselves and which reveals the strong influence of other languages, words or speech upon their own.

The vital point to which such apparent pedantries lead can be made perhaps most tellingly by reference to Yao Daoism to which Jonsson assigns no analytical importance in his thesis and whose existence he acknowledges by a mere footnote (fn 7, p.190). Yet, in the perception of these uplanders, their most religiously important and ethnically distinct ceremonies are their “Correct Rites of the Heavenly Heart” (T’ian Xing Zhen Fa) which are ordinations (and include funerals).

These are the ceremonies which give the religion of the Yao its most exclusive and particularistic ethnic stamp by “relating” them to a vastly more transcendent “context of identity and state control” than a few Thai government officials, tourist agencies and the manager of a bus company. Note well the fact that all Mien whether in Paradise or on earth see themselves as subjects of a theocratic state under a supreme triumvirate of gods who are the three most ascendant deities in a pantheon which is structured as a vast and elaborate bureaucracy of ministries and departments and the complexity of whose “pomp-and-circumstance” protocols utterly defies the analytically pathetic ethnographic truism that Yao are “stateless”. It is certainly the very opposite of the truth to declare that this minority lacks any indigenous concept of the state and they cite very compelling reasons for their state to minimize the extent to which it has become terrestrial.

Jonsson (p. 155) dismisses any suggestion of even the theoretical possibility that the persistence of pre-modern Mien traditions might transcend “the different political, social and economic circumstances in which the distinctive ethnic identity” of these people becomes manifest. In this regard he (p. 155) criticises my earliest work (Miles,1974) for speculating whether “...the Mien stand outside of history and of regional dynamics”.

I readily plead guilty to the statement which this quotation attributes to me and indeed make no apology that I somehow had the good sense to risk such an utterance during the early 1970s because I believed then and insist even more strongly now that there is certainly a strong case for a debate over whether what Jonsson denies as an article of faith and in advance of enquiry might in fact be so; also, because the Yao themselves insist that the existence of both their ethnic group and of their theocratic state does indeed transcend such contingencies of time and place. Is it necessary to share their religious convictions as one of their “true believers” to justify enquiry into the reasons they invoke for making such an uncompromising declaration? Not at all; but to engage in that investigation does require at least a suspension of disbelief in what they say rather than Jonsson’s *a priori* dismissal of any possible truth to their statements. And recognition of that necessity makes vastly greater demands on anthropological research among the Yao than Jonsson has been prepared to allocate to what he calls their “pre-modern” culture.

Elementary Ethnography or A Teaching Text?

Contrary to the publisher’s sales-talk on the back cover of the paperback edition, *Mien Relations* is certainly no conventional “ethnography” which despite some latter-day tinkering with terminology among the discipline’s maverick avante garde, has always retained its primary meaning in

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professional anthropological discourse as any monograph which inter alia documents the customs and traditions that are diacritical of a particular ethnic group. But I certainly cannot recommend Jonsson's book as anything of the kind. Nor should Cornell University Press stoop to mischief of doing just this.

Indeed, it could be that it is its very dearth of ethnographic detail which helps to make this anthropological monograph such a quick yet gripping read for the busier student who prefers to avoid entrapment in rich exotica and in respects few other anthropological monographs come to mind as comparable. Jonsson's formulation of his book's major themes further typifies his avoidance of over indulgence in unnecessary complexities. But rather than invoke the abstractions necessary to theorize these arguments, I shall simply epitomize them by a few examples which will constitute most of what I have to say in the remainder of this paper

The Siam Society and the Creation of the "un-Thai"

They "are stupid and rough... Their ideas of cleanliness are very vague". This startling description is of "Yao" in Thailand. It gives voice to informed expatriate opinion in Bangkok during the 1920s and to initial Western complicity in the inclusion of these mountain people in the creation of the "un-Thai" by the "proto-ethnographers" of The Siam Society (1920-64). The quotation is verbatim and from a typical presentation by two of this society's fellows when they reported to an audience of members after the return of an expedition they had joined not long before into their Kingdom's northern mountains. The transcript of the address later appeared in the *Journal of the Siam Society* 1925, vol. 19: 83. They spoke and wrote in English and both were aristocrats but each was ethnically Thai.

The society's headquarters at that time stood in royal gardens of Bangkok and operated as the principal venue for the regular confabulation which during the 19teens and through into the 1950s characterised relations which the highest ranking of the Kingdom's civilian and military officers maintained with amateur and self-appointed experts in ethnology among their European advisors including the German military officer Major Seidenfaden who was architect of the modern Royal Thai Army and curator of the society's museum for over five years. These gatherings of the society, together with its publications and its museum exhibitions continuously established, and reaffirmed what Jonsson (p. 47-56) convinces me was indeed an essentially racist consensus about minorities in Thailand's northern uplands and what was to become nationally hegemonic through state endorsement.

The TRC's White Knights and their Perpetuation of the "un-Thai"

During the 1960s the argument continues, this prejudice gained even greater legitimacy through more professionally specialised authorisation when the principal venue of such deliberations itself shifted north out of the capital and into the campus of the newly established University of Chiangmai on the very threshold of highlander habitat. For the next 33 years Thailand's most regional tertiary institution became the location of the Tribal Research Centre (TRC) and of its re-named successor the Tribal Research Institute (TRI).

I have already abstracted Jonsson's stereotype of the Centre's research of which he explicitly targets my writings as a sample (Miles, 1967-68, 1972a, 1972b, 1973a, 1974, 1990). To these I add references to three more which analyse triadic relations which Pulangka Yao farmers and their urban Chinese commercial creditors maintained not only with households of Hmong opium producers but also with ethnically Thai irrigation farmers whose children they adopted (Miles, 1973b, 1978, 1979). Best I allow readers to judge for themselves whether this documentation which elsewhere Jonsson (2000) purports to have read supports his denial that the TRC's research assumed that that no such structured relationships existed among the different ethnic groups of north Thailand. His failure to report such ethnography with precision and its outright contradiction of those criticisms is all the poorer scholarship especially because his responsibility for accuracy has surely increased when the literature on which he claims recognition as the authority has become inaccessible to most of his readers after more than thirty years since publication.

The preceding paragraph expresses more than a pedantic suggestion of flaws in Jonsson's library research and is regrettable because to expose them as I must, is to risk deflecting attention from the brilliance of the turn his argument takes concerning the naïve complicity of expatriate anthropologists in the creation and perpetuation of "un-Thai" with whom, despite tremendous effort by the Yao of the Kingdom to avoid that classification, the state still identifies their minority on the basis of the following criteria:

- They inhabit the northern mountains and speak Mon-Khmer or Sinitic dialects as their first languages.
- They grow and subsist on glutinous as well as non-glutinous rice and with the exception of some Karen they practise shifting cultivation, are crudely egalitarian and conceptualised in both popular and elite thought as indigenously "stateless".
- Their beliefs about the supernatural are ethnically particularistic and unique to their distinctive contexts of their own cultures.

In Thailand, Yao are arguably classifiable as "un-Thai" on each of these counts; or at least "doubtfully so" on some of them, while "certainly so" on most. But limitations on wordage force me to ignore all but one of these criteria and to restrict my consideration of the implications to the following comments about the significance of agricultural technology as a criterion of ethnic differentiation and identity.

Jonsson tells the reader that "pure" and "real" Thai farmers pride themselves on their use of irrigation techniques in rice growing; that to engage in shifting cultivation is to violate this pre-requisite among many other necessary qualifications for unchallengeable identification as a Thai. If that is indeed the case then over two decades of research by the expatriate anthropologists from the TRC have persistently and repetitively entrenched an unchallengeable rationale for the rejection rather than the assimilation of minority people. We White Knights proudly and consistently raised our banners as champions of shifting cultivation by persistently reaffirming as we all did the success and sustainability of the publically condemned agricultural technique whose abandonment in the foreseeable future was no more endorsed by the government's TRC than by the shifting cultivators whose swiddens we knew so well

But of course the Centre experts resiled from involvement in relations of the minority with the military. The irony is that powerful others who had reason to reject the yearnings of such farmers “to become Thai” could thus publically invoke the most locally informed international scientific opinion to re-affirm that any mountain minority they had reason to oppress was still agriculturally dependent on the slash-and-burn technique and therefore deserved vilification as uneducated, unreformed unrepentant “un-Thai”. The Royal Thai Army (3rd Region) was among the stakeholders who gladly exploited this opportunity to disparage even mountain people including the Yao who no longer engaged in shifting cultivation but according to their detractors, only because of military constraints (e.g. landmining) against the practice.

Could it be however that Jonsson is exaggerating the entrenchment and permanence of any “un-Thai” stereotype of the Yao especially now that the expatriate anthropologists are no longer on the scene to throw doubt on it? Doubts I might have entertained to that effect completely evaporated during my reading of his account of the Tribal Museum. This I commend as the crown jewel among many gems of analytical insight in *Mien Relations* but not because there is much that is at all “tribal” about the place.

The Tribal Museum: Thai Kingship/Buddhism and the “un-Thai’s” Destiny

The Tribal Museum is what the TRC(I) became during the mid-1990s after its internationally respected Thai staff of proudly post-graduate anthropologists relocated from Chiangmai University campus and into to a newly constructed building which overshadowed a public park on the city’s fringes. The move accompanied their bureaucratic transfer out of the Department of Social Welfare and into the provincial Tourist Office. The change also transformed them into mere guides and bus-hopping spruikers of counterfeit artefacts and oddities. The pensions of this postgraduate elite among Thailand’s own anthropologists were at risk if they failed to comply for the few years left for them to serve before retirement. All but one more or less managed to cope; the exception was a recent retiree who died, his wife tells me, from the humiliation of the uncertainties of what they had both become as a result of such changes by fiat. But at least modern premises provided respectable state-of-the-art facilities for the storage and exhibition of artefacts which several generations of these staff had collected while in the field. The following comments summarise the information which Jonsson presents about this monument’s contribution to the continuing racialisation of the Kingdom’s ethnic landscape. I also draw on my own recent visit to enhance his earlier argument about Thai domestication of Western expertise.

As Jonsson observes, the very architecture of this three-storied edifice contributes in a number of ways to the promotion and inculcation of politically correct views in the psyches of Thai visitors. I think it does so partly by confining its overcrowded exhibition of dusty but authentic pre-modern Yao tools and other “tribal” artefacts to the ground level, close to the earth. On the floor above however there are kiosks vending postcards and photographs of upland children in ethnically distinct clothes, brand-new examples of which are for sale. During my own visit, I also spent time at another counter where recent copies of obsolete farming equipment are available for purchase (such as opium tapping instruments) along with highland women’s embroidery adapted to modern fashions (in waist coats, yachting jackets, handbags, mobile phone holders, pen containers, dining table place mats etc.). The message according to Jonsson is that traditional equipment has been rendered

obsolete and useless by skyrocketing progress; but that thanks to the state's initiatives and guidance, the ingenuity and skill which its manufacture requires can now be harnessed to developments whereby an even more refined highland culture may evolve out of the barbarisms of tribal tradition and towards higher civilization whose replications are on display above the stairs to the next level. I agree with the direction of this analysis.

Groups of visitors obediently remove their earth-soiled footwear at the behest of the guide who then leads them up a few carpeted steps from a mezzanine floor to the building's uppermost level and whispers orders for silence as they proceed. A sonorous melody of chanting monks becomes audible even before the visitors pass through the only curtained doorway in the building and gaze upwards at an exhibition which is hardly "tribal" at all. Rather, as Jonsson (p. 71) infers, what confronts them defines the conditions and sacralises the ideal, ethereal, and as yet unattainable destiny of Yao and other uplanders who will one day perfect their evolution by their final assimilation into the lowest levels of Thai society. Moreover, the message delivered is that the "un-Thai" can attain that end only through total erasure of any "contamination" of ethnic autonomy and only if they combine conversion to Buddhism with abrogation of unique and exclusive ancestral religious beliefs and practices.

Commercial dry-cleaning and starch have transformed the tribal female costumes on the life-size plastic mannequins of young women whose perfectly manicured hands direct the visitors progress through the display; otherwise, the third floor is almost bereft of tribal material culture which is replaced by depictions of its relinquishment. Tastefully arranged gold-leaf effigies of the Gautama Buddha dominate in geomantically perfected orientations. Between these icons are magnificent coloured photographs of barefooted mountain people who have also donned immaculately laundered indigenous dress to make obeisance at the feet of His Majesty King Bumiphol or lesser royals on several other thrones.

Projected images also depict members of the court receiving highland farmers whose hair is perfectly coiffured if they are women and whose uncalloused hands are in the prayer position as they sit barefooted and cross-legged on a luxurious carpet before the nobility in some photographs and squat prostrate before monks in other pictures. They seem to inhale the continuing chant with the incense fumes in apparently complete adoration.

Occupying the armchairs on both sides of the carpet are those who represent the nation and who take credit for arranging such audiences: high-ranking, civil servants and military officers of the Royal Thai Army heavily and gleamingly shod below, glittering with braid and service medallions above; all wear resplendently immaculate uniforms whose whiteness matches their dazzling, avuncular smiles. Jonsson's insights clearly demand the attention of any scholar whose research bears upon the political and other implications which museums have for the interests of states.

Indeed, Jonsson (p. 73) proposes that the Tribal Museum soars above its earthly foundations as a monumental celebration and sanctification in concrete and glass of the supreme role of Monarchy, Buddhism and Nation in the Kingdom's policies towards mountain minorities. But his documentation of how this icon has come into being is incomplete and he does not appear to realise that a few more details would have also made this account the best example in the book of how the hegemony of the Thai state appropriates international expertise for the kingdom's own purposes. At least a

simple footnote somewhere should record how in 1997, the Chiangmai Provincial Tourism Authority paid for the accommodation (but not for the return fares) of a Lecturer in Anthropology and Museum Studies at Australia's James Cook University to advise on the design and layout of the exhibitions on each of the museum's three floors. The University decided to deem the international collaboration a Public Relations project. The special touch which personally identifies the academic's work is evident in the elegance of arrangements within every glass case and was certainly appreciated greatly by bureaucrats who had wanted them. She completed her entire assignment during a few weeks leave (on full pay) and returned to James Cook University after a formal function where the most refined of grateful speeches by the highest ranking of provincial personnel had assured her that the successful results of her visit were entirely the outcome of her own "genius" and creativity. And who in or out of Thailand, would have yet suggested otherwise but for *Mien Relations*?

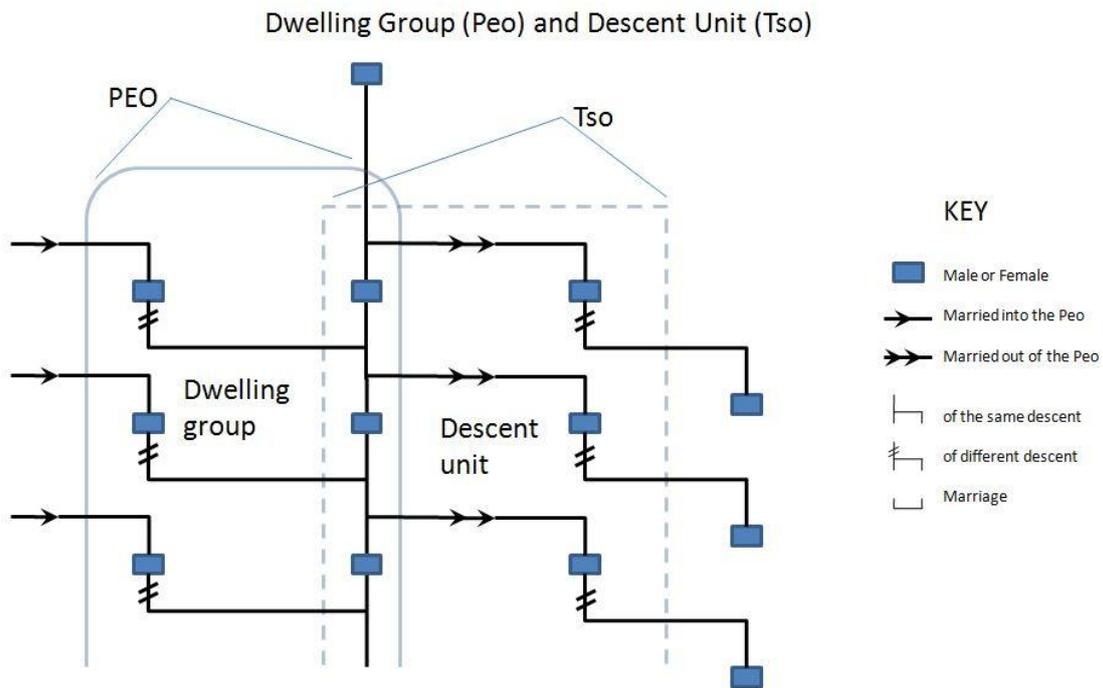
Global Occupational Diversity and the Extinction of the Extended Family?

Like some Thai promoters of the Tribal Museum, Jonsson evinces little if any interest in Yao traditions (p. 190, fn 7) Indeed his systematic avoidance of any "pre-modern" practice in the contemporary lives of the Pangka Yao deceives him into overlooking the potential of its reality for enquiry into constraints against even greater control of their lives by the Thai state and into their capacity to sustain ethnic autonomy by resistance.

Take for example the globalisation of the occupations in which the Yao of Thailand are to-day employed and the implications of that phenomenon for such infrastructural features of Pangka society as their family structure. I use this example rather than several other possibilities mainly because Jonsson's alludes to the Yao family and household when referring again to my research into the kinship organisation of Pulangka and seems to agree with the argument that the prominence of the extended family in the social organisation of that community manifested a scarcity of labour in its multi-crop system of shifting cultivation (Miles 1972, 1978). But he also writes as if the extended family has long since been extinct among the descendants of Yao refugees in Pangka and as if its disappearance is an inevitable by-product of urbanisation. Well is it?

Jonsson might well have reached the opposite conclusion had only he considered the relevance of religion to the composition of the Yao bilaterally extended family (*peo*) in the suburbs of contemporary Chiangkham where its structure is isomorphic with the iconic kin unit among the Yao of Pulangka (Figure 3). He would of course have had to agree that Yao never conceptualise the membership of their domestic units without including deceased personnel who through ancestor worship receive scarcely fewer benefits as consumers from descendants after their deaths than before; i.e. that the physical absence of the deceased does not deny them any continuity of membership. Likewise, until the abandonment of Pulangka in 1968, able-bodied married offspring (plus spouses) were also conspicuous by their absence from their village homes because they continuously maintained temporary accommodation in various complexes of demountable huts on rice farms and maize swiddens as well as poppy fields typically several hours walking time from the village where their children resided permanently with a pair of grandparents who typically cared for the offspring of several sons and/or daughters who were each others' adult siblings.

Figure3



But of course the working absentees remained full members of the extended-family domestic unit of which their children's grandfather or grandmother was the head and my surveys (which Jonsson cites) of household genealogical structure and membership numbers included those workers in the total for each unit and regardless of whether they slept most nights on the farms.

Jonsson declares the death of the extended family in contemporary Pangka, not only because the cessation of simultaneous multi-crop farming by techniques of shifting cultivation has ended one set of influences on the formation of this type of kin unit but also because his surveyors counted as household member only those who happened to be home and behind any Pangka door at the moment they knocked on it. Obviously he does not include long-absent workers in the family but he should do so and even if their only practice which approximates agriculture is their occasional cultivation of citrus trees on the slopes of former swiddens above.

But to-day the workers to whom I refer are neither at home in these dwellings nor at work in the orchards above the village but wherever they are, they remain the sons and daughters of elders who have been permanent occupants of these house sites throughout most of their lives. Further, the same absentees are the mothers and fathers of the children who are in the long-term care 24/7 of such grandparents. The younger able-bodied adult Yao on whom I focus have permanent employment overseas but nevertheless continue to play crucially live roles in the village's economy and domestic budgets even if as in previous generations their contribution of their age cohort group to the raising of their own offspring is minimal.

The workers of Pangka are well employed abroad and fully so in occupations which certainly still require them to do no less shifting to-day than as slash-and-burn cultivators years ago but perhaps even more of it much further apart from one another than ever used to be the case and by coping with more distant and longer-lasting separations from those at home. Having farewelled their children and parents, they have typically by-passed even their provincial capitals and Bangkok en route to recruitment as truck drivers in Lebanon, female domestic servants and cooks in Hong Kong, interpreters and silverware manufacturers in Taiwanese industries, gardeners for municipal councils in Japan, specialists in assemblage in the automobile industry and in the manufacture of parts in Toulouse and California. In Chiangkham I have met Yao on leave from jobs as armed mercenaries in Iraq and last month heard of one who is a gunsmith in Oregon. Since then, two more whom relatives describe as “flight security personnel” with an international American airline returned fleetingly to Pangka for a funeral.

Employment abroad of husband and wife (not infrequently simultaneously on different continents) results in the assignment of even heavier domestic responsibilities to grandparents as child carers back in Pangka to-day than in Pulangka forty years ago and thereby generates an even more powerful motivation for the formation of extended family households than ever. Of course, all living members of such domestic entities would rarely if ever coincide in situ in their homes or mobilise as a single entity in toto for counting by any anthropologist. But I assure the reader they were irritatingly never available, even to mobilize for a family photo under the most rural of conditions forty years ago. Regardless of where they would prefer to be, these young fathers and mothers belong to the international labour force. Any Thai-speaking Yao worker is likely to have children who reside permanently with the offspring of his or her sibling(s) and in the care of common grandparents in a northern Thai town. Further, this globalised variant of the classically Yao extended family accounts for the composition of most domestic units in Pangka and indeed for a larger proportion in the suburb than in Pulangka.

It is remarkable that Jonsson’s fieldwork has not enabled him to identify even the existence in Pangka of these extended families which are fast spanning the globe while they retain the distinctively Yao form in which I first studied them in the highland village. Hence of course his failure to recognize that they remain structurally crucial for the support not only of elders who have now retired back into the foothills of North Thailand’s mountains but also younger people who have never yet left the rural town but keenly await their opportunity also to become part of an international Yao workforce of the future. And from the Yao viewpoint their viability is crucial for the posthumous welfare of the deceased members who are now the ancestors their descendants worship.

The cultural impact of this global phenomenon on the people back home is just as noteworthy. Consider for example, the scope of the total “world view” shared by the dozen Yao part-time road workers with whom I spent one bibulous evening in Chiangkham during late 1996. They were again living permanently in Pangka after prolonged employment abroad and their accumulated expertise in foreign languages extended enviably to complete facility in French, Arabic, Japanese and in three Chinese languages; but also my astonishment in passable English in which none could have uttered a single word thirty years earlier; (and they consoled me with a patronising pretence that their Thai was “rustier” than mine.) Little wonder that the Yao in this village respond so positively to sudden

surges of global interest not only in World Cup football and pop music but also in topics such as SARS, Terrorism, Weapons of Mass Destruction, Climate Change and the World Financial Crisis. They have supreme confidence in the years of street wisdom with which they can enliven any dinner-party conversation; and most especially of late in the unique contributions they can offer to international interest in Daoism. But there is no indication of any understanding by Jonsson any of these religious interests.

The extra point to make is of course that the range of intellectual and ideological resources on which the Yao may draw to-day either to collaborate with the Thai state or to resist its control far transcends their own cultural heritage as well as national borders and is also global in scale. Jonsson (p. 132-134) acknowledges this reality (perhaps inadvertently) through the details his book reveals of the support which the people of Pangka received from outsiders for Yao political protests which recently pitted them against the Royal Forest Department and which provide the topic which I shall discuss next.

Yao Arson as Thai-Style Rebellion (not Revolution)

The crisis which exploded at Thai government's field station in Tham Sakoen Wildlife Reserve in September 1999 is the subject of Chapter 5. But the fuse which leads into its analysis begins to spark 80 years previously and 110 pages earlier at the beginning of Chapter 2 where Jonsson foreshadows discussion on the "racialisation of Thailand's ethnic landscape" during the early twentieth century. No Thai media have as yet dared to report on this scandal; no presentation at any IAYS meeting has ever yet alluded to it. But anyone at these conferences who knows of my connections with Pangka is likely to ask me about it. I can at last refer these enquirers to Jonsson (p. 132-134) and to 15 September, 1999 when the Pangka Yao fulfilled a threat which they had previously advertised to raze a whole complex of government buildings including an office block, fully equipped biological and photographic laboratories as well as a compound of staff residential bungalows constructed as an official outpost on a wildlife reserve of Thailand's Royal Forest Department. The recent dedication of the park made it illegal to cultivate that territory which the families of the arsonists had used for swiddening since emigrating from Laos over a century earlier. Further, the relevant legislation prohibited the sealing of any road through the reserve and thus undermined not only such a proposed improvement in the reliability of access by students and staff to Pangka Public School or of pregnant mothers and other patients to the polyclinic opposite from neighbouring villages during monsoonal downpours but also devastated ambitions to establish a culturally themed luxury resort with flower gardens and spectacular views for domestic and international tourists on the former site of Pulangka village.

But anthropologically, Jonsson's most intriguing insight into the opposition by the Yao of Pangka to the Tham Sakoen Wildlife Reserve is what he does not mention: that it resonates so clearly with Gluckman's (1951) classic distinction between rebellion and revolution. This is the proposition that the mode of resistance to which the Yao have resorted "relate" them to what to-day's internationally-minded Thai middle-class of prospective sympathisers nostalgically recall as what they once themselves were - or yearned to be - 30 years ago; not of course as barbaric and ignorant new millennium "un-Thai" terrorists armed with state-of-the-art remote controlled explosive devices but paradoxically as good old fashioned black pyjama-ed, barefooted and unfailingly polite,

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heroically courageous, purely Thai student dissidents and heroes armed only with sharpened bamboo, machetes and pitch forks in the styles of the late-1960s ; also, that the Yao have sought to be so depicted in international media and via an open and publically circulated letter in the national language as well as in English under the heading, "To Whom it May Concern". This has the layout typical of a document from a Los Angeles legal firm and the English of the translations is of commensurably impeccable quality.

Anthropology's literature contains no richer case study with which undergraduates might engage in courses on the politics of development or concerning environmental issues in the fourth world. And they will undoubtedly be seeking up-dates about the unfolding of this contemporary saga. But Jonsson has been wise to not elaborate on such matters in this book and his restraint has certainly sharpened the impact of his message. In the interests of brevity, he has rigorously confined consideration of the even "larger contexts" to which the Yao of Thailand "relate" and between which they "vary their criteria of their identity" but has dealt only with those of their "relations" which operate within the Kingdom. It is my own intellectual impatience which, to his credit, he has enlivened and which urges me to step beyond these limits with the following propositions.

The Yao Social Formation: An Internationally Transcendent and Multilingual Theocratic State?

There is surely a real sense in which the Yao of Thailand have "always" seen themselves as able to by-pass and transcend control by the Thai Kingdom in "relating" through the mediation of priests as willing and obedient subjects (and payers of tribute) to the theocracy which rules over all Mien whether they are in or out of Paradise (or China or Thailand or Asia). In doing so, Yao can expect divine assistance whenever necessity for it arises provided they can pay for that benefit with animal sacrifices, whisky oblations and ceremonial cash. Individual households see themselves as the decision-makers whenever such relations with their theocratic state are activated and regard its divine bureaucrats as far more likely to be benevolently responsive to their prestations than the Thai officials whom they must likewise bribe in secular life.

Such considerations certainly deserve at least some attention from an anthropologist who is investigating the capacity of this minority to resist the Thai state and who envisages future enquiry as part of a wider project comparing the highlanders under his direct gaze with other mountain people not only in the Kingdom but also in the PRC (see especially Litzinger, 2000) and under different Asian regimes. Sequels to *Mien Relations* either by its author or others must take up that task. France and the USA also offer to be of particular interest. There is a vast amount of information already awaiting immediate attention including, for example, the fact that the Yao of Thailand give voice to their solidarity not only by reference to their own football players within provincial, national and Asian competitions but also by proclaiming themselves to be the world's most loyal supporters of Liverpool FC.

Moreover, the computers with which they up-date news about sport throughout the world also provide them with access to Japanese and American websites which are the main sources of their new awareness that they share identity as Daoists with millions of others on several continents; further, that their familiarity throughout life with distinctively Yao practice has equipped them to

make unique contributions to the beliefs and knowledge they realize they share with others about this recent candidate for recognition as a world religion.

The Bottom Lines

Jonsson has certainly shifted the dominant paradigm of Yao Studies by a compelling call to those who study Yao in Thailand and elsewhere to expand the scope of their research into areas where they have shown no previous interest in treading. It would of course be churlish to deny him acclamation for this achievement out of irritation with deficiencies in the scholarly quality of his own application of this advocacy. But the advance which such pioneering effort offers to anthropological analysis in general and to the study of mainland Southeast Asia's highland minorities in particular will surely be severely and unnecessarily curtailed if others who persevere with his innovations are equally cavalier in respect to professional standards of craftsmanship in fieldwork and to conventional criteria of precision in all worthwhile scholarship; also, if they follow his example ethnographically by ignoring Yao Daoism.

But I must now desist from such excessively precious criticism and will end unusually with a retrospective plaudit for the publisher. Cornell University Press needs to realize that *Mien Relations* has enormous potential for teaching about the politics of development and environmental issues in anthropology and can honestly print words to that effect on the back cover to replace the silly terminological deception with which they have sought to promote the edition I have reviewed of Jonsson's book.

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appreciation of my own empirical observations and analyses in a manner which I have found instructive and encouraging.

The foregoing observations relate mainly to what I write here about Yao in north Thailand where each of my research projects (1966-69, 1975, 1988-89, 1993,1996-97) has benefited from sponsorship by the Tribal Research Centre/Institute, Chiangmai University campus as well at various times from centres and departments at the University of Sydney (1966-69, 1975), from the Australian National University (1986-87) from James Cook University (1993, 1996-97) and from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore (1988).

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