

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Kim Mun Language

Kim Mun is a sub-grouping from a family of languages known as the Hmong-Mien. This language family is sometimes called Miao-Yao, particularly by Chinese linguists, after the Chinese minorities of the same name. Aumann (2000: 2) points out that this name is misleading because some speakers belonging to the Miao minority do not speak a Hmongic language, and many members of the Yao minority do not speak a Mienic language. There is also the She minority with some members speaking the Hmongic language She. Therefore, the names for the two largest branches of this family, Hmong and Mien, are preferred by Western linguists.

Linguists have not been able to agree as to which larger family tree to place the Hmong-Mien language cluster under. Some linguists classified the Hmong-Mien under the Sino-Tibetan language family, and many Chinese classifications still retain this today. Other linguists (Aumann 2000, Aumann and Sidwell 2001) have placed Hmong-Mien as an isolated language family. It appears the Miao-Yao and other such languages were classified

under the Sino-Tibetan family because of their resemblance to Chinese, “but it is now clear that the structural resemblances and shared vocabulary among these languages are areal features rather than shared inheritance from a common ancestor” (Comrie 1990: 799). Still other linguists like Benedict (1975) suspect relationships between the Hmong-Mien and the Austro-Asiatic language family.

One of the two Kim Mun varieties under investigation is also known as Lantien. This name seems to largely be restricted to the Kim Mun living in Laos with about 5,800 speakers. The other Kim Mun variety spoken in Vietnam has about 187,000 speakers (www.joshuaproject.net).

As illustrated in *Figure 1*, Kim Mun, which includes Lao Kim Mun (Lantien), Vietnam Kim Mun, and the three Kim Mun varieties spoken in China, all belong to the Mien-Mun sub-group under the Mienic side of the Hmong-Mien language branch.

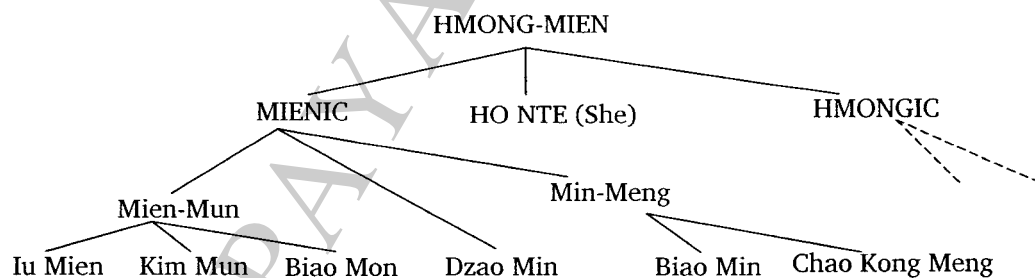


Figure 1. Hmong-Mien Language Family Tree (adapted from Ratliff 1992: 19)

According to Gordon (2005), the Kim Mun and Iu Mien in China are closely related with 78% lexical similarity between the two speech varieties. Furthermore, Kim Mun is 67% lexically similar to Biao Min and 59% lexically similar to Dzao Min. Within the Mienic sub-group, Iu Mien has the most speakers and Kim Mun has the second most speakers. At least in both Laos and Vietnam, many Kim Mun speakers can understand and speak Iu Mien. It appears from this researcher's observations that Iu Mien is more prestigious than Kim Mun. The high lexical similarity of the Kim Mun to Iu Mien in China suggests that the lexical similarity between the three Kim Mun varieties in China, the Vietnam Kim Mun, and the Lao Kim Mun should be even higher.

1.2 Scope of the Study

There are several studies contributing to Kim Mun phonology, such as Edmondson (2007), Mao (2004), He (1999), Liu, et. al. (1998), Chengqian (1991), Shintani (1990), Chang (1966), and Downer (1961). Besides Shintani's brief comments in Japanese comparing the Kim Mun of Hainan and Vietnam (1990), little phonological comparison has been done among this Hmong-Mien language, which is found in the Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Guangxi and Hainan Island, and in Vietnam and Laos. This study presents the phonological analysis and comparison of Lantien, a still

undescribed Kim Mun variety in Laos, and the Kim Mun variety found in Lao Cai, Vietnam, also largely undescribed¹. These varieties will be referred to as Lao Kim Mun and Vietnam Kim Mun in this study.

It is hoped that this comparison will reveal if future language development work such as orthography development, literacy work, and translation can encompass Kim Mun speakers in both Vietnam and Laos. It is also hoped that this study will serve as a springboard for extending language development work to other Kim Mun varieties found throughout China.

An overview of previous research on mainly Chinese Kim Mun phonology including the use of the term preglottalization will be provided. The term preglottalization has been applied to many different phonetic phenomena, therefore making this section in the literature review necessary. Subsequent chapters will provide a synopsis of Kim Mun segments, tones, and syllable structure from Laos and Vietnam, which will in turn be compared. This study ends with a summary of the phonological differences between the Lao

¹ Savina (1926) produced a brief description of the Kim Mun in Vietnam, but his description not only dates back to 1926, but is not extensive. Further complicating matters, Savina used the Vietnamese

and Vietnam varieties as well as a brief conclusion and outlook for future Kim Mun studies.

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orthography to transcribe his data, which was not sufficient to capture all the aspects of Kim Mun phonology (Purnell 1970).