

CHAPTER 2

GENERAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Kim Mun Origin and Location

While no detailed records of Kim Mun history exist and oral stories of Kim Mun history vary widely, there is some understanding as to the history of the Yao people as a whole, and since the Yao languages form the majority of the Mienic language family, this is relevant information (cf. Figure 1).

According to Schliesinger, it is believed that the ancestors of the Yao people already lived in China 4,000 years ago, though Chinese annals do not mention them any earlier than the fifth century B.C. The Yao are reported to have come from a big mountain range separating the Si-kiang and Yangtze Kiang rivers. This region extends over the provinces of Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi, and Guizhou (2003). Around the thirteenth century A.D. the Yao began to migrate south into modern-day Vietnam where they are called Zao. Besides soil exhaustion, drought, and bandits, possible reasons for their migration could be that the Chinese were confiscating their land (Schliesinger 1998: 86). About four centuries ago the Iu Mien and the Kim Mun began migrating west into Laos. While the Kim Mun only went as far

west as Laos, the Iu Mien also went into Thailand and Myanmar (Schliesinger 2003: 273f). No Kim Mun villages have yet been discovered in Thailand, but some isolated Kim Mun individuals live in Iu Mien villages in Thailand, apparently fleeing the various wars that have plagued Laos².

Today the Kim Mun are found largely in Southern China along the borders between China and Vietnam as well as China and Laos. They are also in Guangxi, China and Hainan Island, China. There also may be a few Kim Mun villages in Northern Myanmar along the China border just south of the Chinese county Xishuangbanna (Chengqian 1991: 48). Kim Mun villages can be found throughout Yunnan Province of China, but apart from the claim by Chengqian there is not yet any evidence to validate whether Kim Mun villages really do exist in Northern Myanmar. In one short visit to the city of Jing Hong in Xishuangbanna close to the Myanmar–China border in 2007, people responded to the researcher’s investigations about the Yao, which include the Kim Mun, that these live farther to the east along the Lao–China border and that people around the Myanmar–China border generally were Tai, not Yao.

² Personal communication with a Kim Mun language consultant from a Mien village in Lampang Province, Thailand.

There are different figures about the population of Kim Mun. Gordon mentions a total of approximately 374,500 people (2005), with about 200,000 Kim Mun located in China (Wang and Mao 1995). According to a 2000 census 61,000 of those Kim Mun in China are located on Hainan Island. Edmondson (2007) finds that there are about 170,000 in Vietnam, and Laos has the least amount of Kim Mun with approximately 4,500 (Chazee 1995 in Gordon 2005). More recent estimates, using the above resources in conjunction with data from the U.N. on population growth, show the following population figures: China 301,000; Vietnam 187,000; Laos 5,800. This makes a total of 493,800 Kim Mun people (www.joshuaproject.net).

The two Kim Mun varieties under study in this thesis may be from a common origin according to Lemoine (2002). Lemoine, in reference to the Kim Mun of Luang Namtha in Laos, states, "they themselves recall their coming from China". While Lemoine does not list the point of origin, he traces their migration route through Hekou in Yunnan province of China into Lao Cai, Vietnam following the Red River. From Lao Cai, it appears some of the Kim Mun continued their migration route into the province of Phongsaly in Laos and through several regions of Laos before a group of them finally arrived in Luang Namtha. According to Lemoine, the Kim Mun reached the plain at the same time as the arrival of the Tai Dam in 1894. The Kim Mun were

subsequently overpowered by the Tai Dam and were pushed to the outskirts of the Luang Namtha plain. Lemoine also documents that some of the Kim Mun from Luang Namtha migrated to Bokeo province of Laos as early as the Lao civil war in the 1960s. Lemoine asserts that these two groups are “homogenous” (2002: 2).

2.2 Kim Mun Lifestyle

The Kim Mun have long been poor farmers who live in mountainous areas, often near rivers (Mansfield 2000: 35). They like to grow rice or corn, and also their own cotton for making clothes. Like the Iu Mien, the Kim Mun have a good reputation for raising animals like pigs, chickens, ducks, goats, turkeys, small horses, and buffaloes in some lowland areas (Schliesinger 2003: 276). Although the Kim Mun are also known for being good hunters, they do not eat a lot of meat. Their diet normally consists of rice and vegetables.

The Kim Mun are largely polytheistic animists and follow animistic practices along with ancestor worship. They believe in many different spirits, the two most important spirits being the spirit of the house and the spirit of the village. The Kim Mun often offer animal sacrifices to appease the spirits.

The Kim Mun family is strongly patriarchal. In the past it was not uncommon for Kim Mun men, especially for the rich ones, to have six or seven wives. More recently monogamy is practiced more often than polygamy.

Kim Mun houses look very similar to Iu Mien houses, though Kim Mun houses are usually larger. The typical Kim Mun house is made of planks of wood with a dirt floor, except when the house is raised, which is often the case since many Kim Mun villages are settled around rivers. Kim Mun houses have very few windows and a simple roof with a hole in it for smoke to escape from the fire pit, which is used to cook on as well as to keep warm in the cold season. The house is usually one large room that is partitioned off with thin bamboo sheets for each part of the family. Usually the men gather in the center of the house and talk while the women's place is along the edges (Schliesinger 2003).