

Information on the Lao Lu Mien

Compiled between 1986 and 1994 by Ann Goldman and the Mien staff at Laotian Handcraft Center

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MIEN BABIES

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The Lu Mien believe in reincarnation, and babies are believed to be returned to earth from the spirit world. They need to be very carefully cared for so that the ancestor spirits that sent them will not want to take them back. One of the ways to protect them is to have them wear baby hats which are embellished with colorful embroidery and pompoms. The hats are believed to make the children look like flowers and thus fool these ancestor flower spirits.

Also, ceremonies are held in the home to ask for protection for the baby. Spirit money is folded up into a ball by the priest and tied onto the hats. When a tiny baby is taken out visiting or when any small child is taken on a long trip, walking, pieces of long green leaves like grass or rice or thatch are attached to the hat to guard the child from the outside spirits (tiger, wind, etc.). At one month of age, a flower ceremony is held for the baby. When boys are 12 years old and girls are 14, there is a ceremony to tell the flower ancestor spirits that they are no longer flowers but adults and need to be cared for by the family ancestor spirits.

Mien Children in Laos

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Playing in Laos

In Laos, Mien children didn't have any toys except what they or their parents made with materials at hand. Children made little houses out of grass and bamboo and banana leaves. On their backs they carried dolls made out of folded baby carriers. They made play clothes out of banana leaves and they pretended little white flowers were rice which they hung on rice drying racks. Boys made wooden horses with wheels and stilts from bamboo or wood. They had stilt races and running races and played hide and seek in the grass. They took long poles and

balanced them on logs to make teeter totters. Boys also went fishing and made rafts out of banana trees to go swimming in the river.

Helping their parents

Children would go together in groups to pick black berries, bamboo shoots and different fruits when they got ripe. They would also carry water in gourds to the people working in the fields. Sometimes children had the job of chasing off the birds when the new rice was coming up, and many children fed the livestock and took the cattle out to the jungle during the day. There they gathered food, told stories, worked on embroidery and sang while tending the animals. Children also tended the babies while the parents worked, helped with the cooking, and pounded rice, which was a very hard job, especially for a small person. Sometimes it was necessary to hold rocks to make enough weight to work the pounding log or two people had to work together. Or it was necessary to pull the log with a rope and jump at the same time!

Learning to embroider and to write

Some boys were taught by a priest or Chinese teacher to write the Chinese script used for religious ceremonies, but most Mien lived far away from villages with schools so they didn't learn to read or write Lao, the national language, or their own language, Mien.

Girls were never taught to read or write the Chinese script because they couldn't be priests so they wouldn't need to learn. Instead, they all learned to embroider so they could have embroidered Mien pants when they grew up. Their mothers usually taught them, but embroidery was difficult to learn and sometimes the mother had no patience or time so a grandmother, aunt, older sister, or a friend was the teacher. The girls couldn't wait for the younger brothers and sisters to go to sleep so they could work on their embroidery. They all talked about it and worried that if they didn't learn, they would have no clothes to wear!

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Iu Mien Embroidery

Ann Y. Goldman

Iu Mien embroidery is done by women and is learned at an early age. Even four and five year old girls will want to try some stitches with their mother's needle and thread, and by the age of nine or ten most girls have finished their first pair of pants. Since the traditional clothing is worn every day, all year, at all times, a woman usually carries her embroidery with her so she can work on it whenever she has spare time.

Mien women embroider on a cotton even-weave fabric and must carefully count the threads to create the many designs in cross, weave, grid, and stem stitch. They work on the reverse side of the fabric and keep the completed section wrapped in cloth to protect it. In Laos and Thailand Mien women buy unbleached cotton cloth from neighbouring people who grow, spin and weave cotton. It is bought by the bolt and then dyed dark blue or black with indigo dye. Mien women

used to dye all their silk and cotton embroidery thread, too, but now most threads are commercially dyed.

A Mien woman's daily dress consists of embroidered pants made from two solidly embroidered panels, a long coat which has an embroidered collar piece and a thick red wool ruff sewn to the neck edge, a six yard long sash with embroidered ends, and a six yard long turban also embroidered on the ends and often along the center. An appliquéd and embroidered baby carrier and unadorned undercarrier are used to carry small children, and a special baby carrier with additional needlework and silver ornaments is worn by women at ceremonial events such as weddings.

A traditional Mien man's outfit consists of unadorned baggy pants, an embroidered sash, and a jacket with appliquéd edging, silver buttons and sometimes some embroidery on the front. Older men sometimes wear berets, and for certain special ceremonies men wear red embroidered turbans.

Babies and toddlers wear beautiful baby hats which are covered with embroidery, applique, pompoms, tassels, good luck charms and silver ornaments.

Other special garments include the embroidered square worn by the bride on the top of the wedding hat used for big weddings. She might use two special sashes in addition to her regular one and white leggings embroidered with black thread. Bride and groom and their attendants in both large and small weddings wear embroidered white towels across their shoulders.

While conducting religious ceremonies, men will wear special embroidered and tasseled head gear and silk tunics and skirts.

The names of Mien embroidery designs reflect the village life of the Mien. Many have plant and animal names such as *gibbon*, *squash flower*, *cornstalk*, *tiger's claws*, *spider*, *baby pig's hoof*. Some make reference to other groups of people with whom the Mien are in contact such as *Chinese letters* and *Thai houses*. Still others are named for daily utensils such as *saw* and *steamer*. Design names differ from village to village, and Mien from different geographical areas of Thailand and Laos have distinct color preferences

Most Mien women over 35 years old can remember when the older women used only the weave and grid stitches on their pants, but over the years women have begun to add cross stitch patterns from other garments or borrowed from other people. Cross stitching takes more time to do, but in refugee centers in Laos and Thailand people did not have farms to tend and could therefore spend more time on embroidery. The traditional grid and weave stitch designs are still always used on the bottom five or six rows of embroidery on a woman's pants. p. 2

Mien Spirit Money Stamps

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Mien use carved wooden stamps to print their spirit money with certain designs. The long wood money stamp is called a *mat pei*. *Mat* means ink and *pei* means a wood block carved for

stamping money. The ink that is used is made from the ashes of rice or corn stalks or banana leaves mixed with water.

The spirit money that is printed with the stamp is made from bamboo, cut into the desired sizes and stored until needed. The paper is called *tse*. The money made with the long wood stamp is called *tse ma* or horse paper because of the horse design carved in the stamp. The horse can carry lots of money or rice to the spirit world. *Tse ma* is most often used for bigger rather than smaller ceremonies. The cut pieces of paper are stacked and printed together with the ash ink and then set aside to dry.

Larger pieces of paper are imprinted with a *tsu tse* which is a long metal imprinting tool which is pounded on top of the paper making round indentations. These pieces of paper are called *dom tse gong* or large imprinted paper. There are also small pieces of imprinted paper.

The *dom tse gong* and the *tse ma* are stacked alternately in a specific way, folded together, tied in bundles and burned as spirit money in ceremonies when needed.

There is also a small wood printing block called *ian*. It usually has a carved animal on the top such as a tiger or a frog. The printing design on the bottom is Chinese characters. It is used to stamp letters being sent by a priest to the spirits during important ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, *guaax dang* and bridge ceremonies.

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Iu Mien Wedding Ceremony – the small wedding

When a Mien boy and girl like each other and want to marry, and the boy's parents like the girl, they visit the girl's parents and ask the date of her birth (*naaic ninh seng*). They eat a meal together. The boy's parents then go to someone with the Chinese astrological books to find out if the couple is suitable for each other. If it is determined that they are, the boy's parents return to the girl's parents with a pair of solid silver bracelets (*jiemh*). They again eat together. Within a week or two, the girl must decide whether to keep the bracelets, which means she and her family accept the boy, or return them which means she doesn't want to marry him. If she keeps the bracelets the boy's family returns again with a rooster which is killed for the engagement meal (*nyanc koi nzuih jae*) which involves the groom's family asking the girl's family what they want, and the bride's family listing its demands regarding bride price, size and type of wedding, number of guests, number of pigs to be killed, and anything else the groom's family must provide. Later, the boy's family goes again with one hen and one rooster to the bride's parents. Arrangements for the wedding are clarified, agreements are finalized and written down. Some of the bride price is paid to the parents at this time. When all demands have been agreed upon, the couple is considered engaged (*jia ting*), and both families are considered related. The groom's family consults the Chinese astrological calendar to determine a good date for the wedding. The bride's family must agree to this date.

Ideally, in Laos, a couple becomes engaged in the winter months after the rice harvest. The wedding usually takes place the following winter giving the girl a year to embroider and sew complete outfits for herself and her future husband, pants for her mother-in-law and neck

edgings for all her sisters-in-law and aunts. During the betrothal period she is excluded from field work and house work, if possible, giving her the necessary time to complete the garments.

In the USA the bride often embroiders nothing. Instead, all new garments are purchased from Thailand or from someone in the USA who makes them to sell. The cost of the garments is now often divided between

the two families. If the bride embroiders anything, it is usually the white towel (cong x s'chao) she wears around her neck like a scarf during the wedding ceremony. Her mother and aunts often help her. Instead of neck embroidery, cotton sarongs from Thailand are often given to the female relatives.

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Sometime after the boy's family has informed them of the wedding date, the girl's parents invite the guests to come to eat at the wedding. Those who are invited are given a packet of salt wrapped in banana leaves. The boy's parents go to their relatives and friends and ask them to help at the wedding. Those who agree to help are given cigarettes.

The day before the wedding, the groom's family goes to the home of the bride. A meal is prepared, and the bride price paid. The husband of the bride's next older sister or her maternal uncle presides over the paying of the bride price. If he feels the engagement agreement has been fulfilled, he sits down to the meal. If he feels that the groom's family has not fulfilled their part of the agreement, he does not sit down, and no one else can sit down until he is satisfied that all is well. During this ceremony, the bride's house spirit is told that she is going to live elsewhere so doesn't need to be protected in her parents' house anymore. She leaves the house to spend the night before the wedding at the house of a friend or relative.

The next day, the bride's parents go to get her, and they all go to the groom's house early in the morning. Two girls who are younger than the bride act as her attendants. One will be her sister if she has a younger sister. One attendant pulls her by her fingers and carries her blanket made of black shan cloth and filled with batting, and the other follows carrying an umbrella. She is also accompanied by her younger brother or cousin who carries her suitcase, and by her next older sister and her husband who carries the salt packages of all the guests who have come to the wedding. "Guest money" from the groom's family is divided as many ways as there are guests or salt packets. The bride is wearing two pairs of pants which she made and two jackets; one which she made for the wedding and one which her mother-in-law made for her.

In the U.S. she usually wears two jackets but only one pair of pants, and her blanket is often a new Mexican striped wool blanket bought at the flea market.

When the bride reaches the house of the groom's family, she must wait outside the door while the priest is preparing the house for her arrival so she will be protected in her new home. When the priest is ready, the bride and her attendants enter, passing under a pair of her mother-in-law's used pants held above her head by one of the groom's female relatives. This is to ensure that the bride will be obedient to her mother-in-law and other older persons in her new

household. This custom is seldom followed in the United States. The groom and his attendants, at least one of whom is

p. 3 a younger brother or relative, are waiting in the main room of the house for the bride to enter.

The bride kneels in the center of the room while the groom stands, and the priest conducts a ceremony. The priest opens all her bags and suitcase and sends out all evil spirits. He tells the house spirit that there is a new person to be protected. The priest gives a cup of wine to the girl's attendant who gives it to the bride who drinks. The priest then gives the same cup to the groom's attendant who gives it to the groom who also drinks. Then one of the groom's female relatives with lots of good, healthy children leads her to the bedroom with her attendant to wait until the priest has finished the ceremony at which time she is officially married. While in the bedroom, she can take off her extra pants and jacket. She comes out with her attendants with all the wedding gifts she has embroidered for the groom's family.

When she come out, she is given a big bowl, two chopsticks and a cup. She puts water in the bowl and in the cup which is in the bowl. She puts the chop-sticks across the top of the bowl and a Chinese towel on the sticks. The bride then takes the bowl first to the husband of her next older sister. He washes his face or hands with water from the bowl, dries on the towel, empties the water from the cup and puts money in the cup. He keeps the towel. She then goes to the priest, to her father and to her other male relatives, according to a specific age order, who are older than she is. She then goes to all male relatives on the groom's side in the same order. Next she goes to her female relatives starting with her mother, then her aunts and her older sisters. Last, she goes to the female relatives of the groom. In Laos the bride collects all the water and throws it under the groom's bed. In the U.S. it is either simply thrown away or collected in a bucket and saved for one or two days and then thrown away.

She now must help cook the meal because she is married.

When everyone is seated for the meal, the groom and his attendants pass out cigarettes, and the bride and her attendants pass wine and tea in the same order as the washing. This is to thank people. Then a big meal is served after which the priest and husband of the bride's next older sister talk to the couple giving them advise on how to be a good husband and wife. After this, the bride and groom, followed by their attendants, go with a bowl of raw rice and two empty bowls to everyone in the same order as above. Everyone puts wine and a bit of meat in the empty bowls and money or silver coins in the rice bowl.

People from the bride's side and the groom's side will take turns singing to each other. The bride's side will thank the groom's side for all they have provided for the wedding and will express sadness over the loss of their daughter. The groom's side will apologize for the inadequacy of the meal and for causing the bride and her family to separate.

p. 4 On the first night, the bride must go to sleep first or the groom will get sick when she becomes pregnant.

In the USA other customs are changing, too. Often there is a traditional Western-style wedding cake which bride and groom cut and feed to each other. And a band is often hired to play modern Laotian music while the guests dance.

Told by Muey Sio Fong and Ying Kwen Saeteun to Ann Goldman April 1989 and revised September 1992.

MIEN NEW YEAR

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Before the beginning of the New Year, each Mien family determines what would be a good day to hold the ceremony of the Old Year, the year that is ending. On the appointed day, a pig is killed, there is much feasting, and all debts are paid to friends, relatives and ancestors. Debts to ancestors are paid by burning ceremonial money. The New Year should start off right, and old debts should not be carried over from the Old Year.

Mien New Year is on the same day as Chinese New Year, usually in late January or early February. It is traditionally observed for three days.

There are several restrictions placed on activities and diet during the New Year celebrations. It should be a time when people stay home and don't do work outside the home. It should be a quiet, studious time when fathers teach their sons to read and write Chinese, when mothers teach their daughters to sew, spin and embroider, and when there is storytelling.

Firewood, fodder for the animals, food and water should be gathered or fetched before New Year starts as outside labor should not be done during the three days. There should be no fighting or arguing, and although receiving money is all right, spending money is not. It is a quiet, family-oriented time. Parents tell their children that if they go visiting other people, the hairs on their legs might fall off which would make them people who like to visit too much and do not enjoy staying home. They also tell their children that if they get into a fight and hit someone during New Years they will get boils on their hands.

No vegetables should be eaten during this time or else the weeds will take over the rice fields.

It is important to set good standards during the three days of New Years. Three meals should be eaten daily, people should be on their best behavior, and they should get up early.

On the day before the beginning of New Years, children take a cup of water to the priest. He writes something on a piece of paper for each child, and the child burns the paper in the cup of water. The next morning the children get up early and drink the water in the cup to make them smart. The first child to drink receives extra good luck.

After drinking the water, the priest gives each child one piece of ceremonial paper money. The children all stand in a row holding out the money in front of them. They kneel and stand facing the center of the house to ask for good luck to come in, and then they do the same facing out to

chase away the bad luck. In the United States some parents participate in this tradition with their children.

Then the boys are given axes and the girls knives, and they go outside through the front door and pretend to cut grass and trees. They also call the chickens and pigs and feed them grains of rice. Early the first morning when the roosters crow, the men shoot off their guns to start the New Year. If the family has a spirit house, bark tapers or oil lamps are lit by the men or boys on the family altar. They also burn incense. These are kept burning throughout the three days.

p. 2 For several days prior to New Years, eggs are collected which are dyed red during the morning of the first day and given to the children as rewards for studying hard, learning to embroider and being industrious. Girls also give eggs to their boyfriends.

On the third day, a chicken is killed and eaten, and a priest examines the bones to predict the future. Spirit money is burned and the ancestor spirits are notified that the New Year has begun. Although outside activities are limited during the three days of New Years, sweeping inside the house is allowed, but the dirt must not be thrown out. It is stored with the garbage in the house until the end of the third day when the laziest child from each house must take it to the village crossroads and burn it.

Immediately after New Years and often overlapping, is the two day observance of Tiger Day when people stay home, don't work or play and don't make noise so the tigers won't hear them. During this time there should be no travel in or out of the village, and woven bamboo signs are put up at the village entrance and exit to warn people of the restriction.

Next comes Wind Day on the 20th day of the first month when families also stay quietly at home. No sweeping is done outside the house. This protects homes and crops from wind damage. On the first and second days of the second month are Bird Day and Mouse Day. These are observed to protect the crops from bird and rodent damage. People stay quietly at home and don't go to work in the fields. On Bird Day small breads are made from sticky rice cooked on the previous day. Pinches of dough are used to stick paper money on the walls of the house, pig pens, chicken coops and granaries to protect them.

In this country, the Mien observe the ceremony honoring the Old Year by killing a pig and having big meals to which friends and relatives are invited. Ceremonial money is burned for the ancestor spirits to tell them the old year is over. Old debts are paid off.

During New Years children are expected to get up early and study hard. Parents give eggs to the children and sometimes to friends and teachers. Unusually the New Years celebration only lasts one day. Many Mien communities in the U.S.A. hold large communal New Years parties with speeches and Lao dancing. In the mountains in Laos, people did not celebrate this way. New Years was a quiet family holiday.

Since most Mien do not farm here, there is not much need to protect crops, and Wind Day, Bird Day, and Mouse Day are not much observed.

MIEN THOUGHTS ON CHILDREN AND ON PARENTING PROBLEMS IN THE U.S.A.

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This information was obtained by interviewing six Mien women ranging in age from 16 to 52. All but the 16 year old have children, and all have been in the United States for 6 to 12 years. The interviews took place in March 1991 and were for the purpose of identifying problems the Mien were having in the area of parenting.

Attitudes about babies

Babies are always welcome, and most people think the more the better up to about 7 to 9 children. Most people also think that more than 10 might be too many. In Laos having children meant you were rich because you had many. In Laos having children meant you were rich because you had many people to help with the work. Here, for families on welfare, more children also means more money. When you don't have many children, you could "lose your culture". You lose the connection with your ancestor spirits. Grandparents have to have grandchildren to care for their spirits after they die. They must hold ceremonies for them to send food and money to them in the spirit world. People never know which children will be good and will take care of the family and the culture and will stay with the parents after they marry, so it is good to have many. Grandparents complain if there are not enough grandchildren, although in the United States if a couple has 3-4 children and 1 or 2 are boys, then that is alright and no one will worry.

If a couple can't have babies, fertility ceremonies are held. If that doesn't work, it is common for couples to adopt babies from Mien families with too many children.

People do not worry much about the expenses associated with giving birth or with raising young children. Welfare payments increase with each child. People not on welfare worry more and usually will not go off welfare unless they can get medical coverage with their job.

People do worry about the expenses of raising the older children because they will need expensive clothes, cars and maybe college.

Age of mother

Most women say that ideally a girl should wait until age 17 or 18 to have children. That's how it used to be in Laos. Here parents think it is better for the girl to finish high school first. However, many girls do become pregnant earlier, and pregnancy is generally viewed as okay after 13 years of age. Younger than that the mother is still a child who doesn't understand things. Whatever her age, if she is unmarried she and the baby will live with her family, and if married, she will live with her husband's family, so there will always be people to willingly help raise the baby.

There is little stigma attached to pre-marital sex or to having children before marriage, although people recognize that a young woman with children is somewhat less likely to finish her education than one who postpones child-bearing.

Birth Control

Older women (over 30) are often afraid to use any form of birth control and don't know how to stop having children, but many families now don't want too many children. About half of the Mien women in the U.S. use some form of birth control, usually the pill. Sometimes relatives who want to adopt more children get mad if a woman uses birth control. Many who use the pill say it makes them sick or has other side effects.

Tubal ligation is also a widely used method of birth control but usually only after having 4 or 5 children, and almost all women who have done this complain of pain, weight loss or gain or other problems later on, and they see the tubal ligation as the cause.

Some women have abortions, but this is generally viewed as a poor choice. If a woman has many, she could have problems later on. Also, when a woman has an abortion, the spirits of the grandparents can get angry and cause sickness to children who are still under 12 years of age. In Laos abortions can be induced by applying indigo leaves on the stomach. A woman might resort to this if she is mad at her husband.

Parents here do not instruct their children about birth control because they feel the children know more than they do.

Very few men use any birth control.

Discipline

In Laos, all the Mien people living within a village were the same. They had the same values, clothes, chores, and resources. When children wanted something that other children had, the parents could generally provide it.

Here the children also want to be like the other children they see, but unlike in Laos, the children are not all the same. Some have very expensive things and some do very expensive things. But Mien parents still feel they must give children what they ask for even when it is unreasonable.

It does no good to lecture children when there is a problem because good children always listen to and obey their parents so they don't have problems, and bad children don't listen anyway so it does no good to talk to them. Besides, children under 13 or so are seen as not being old enough to understand so reasoning with them does no good.

Some women said that playing with children is not good because then the children will see that the parents are not mean and will not obey them. Parents should make their children uncertain whether they love them or not. This is especially important when the children are small.

Problems

In the early years of childhood there are few problems. Parents sometimes worry about childcare costs, about their children getting hurt from accidents, and about whether their children will like going to school or not. But mostly the little children stay with the parents and cannot go off by themselves so they don't pick up bad habits.

When the children are in grammar school parents worry that the children will not want to do school work or that they will need help and the parents will be unable to give it since they have never been to school. Some children begin to pick up bad habits at this age, and many make demands on their

parents for expensive clothes. Many parents are paying their children to come home right after school and do their homework. p. 3

The big worries start in junior high school when influences from peers are the strongest. Some children don't try to learn, don't study, fall behind and begin to cut school. The universal worries among Mien parents seem to be that the children will start cutting school, joining gangs, stealing and getting in trouble with the police. Many parents drop their teen-agers off at school and pick them up after school. Some enroll them in Chinese school on the weekends. They want to be notified if the child is absent, and they know which schools do this. They realize that a school might not call the parent if there is no way to communicate.

Parents feel that their teenagers know more than they do. The children can speak and write English, they know the customs and the laws, and they have an education. Often the children will no longer listen to them. Parents cannot hit their children because they are afraid it is against the law here. Sometimes children threaten to report parents if they use physical punishment. Many parents cannot control their children. They don't know how. Parental guidance is mostly by silent example or, in times of trouble, by using problem children as negative role models.

Although there are many Mien children who are doing well in school and college and are causing no problems, all the informants knew of 4 to 8 families whose children, mostly boys, now have police records or are actually in jail. The crimes range from drug involvement to car or gun theft to murder. They knew of many more families whose children had dropped out of school, run away from home, joined gangs or were causing other serious family problems. There are instances of teenagers and young adults threatening parents and grandparents with guns and demanding money.

Parenting classes

All the informants thought that parenting information would be appreciated, that Mien parents need help, and that they would be interested in topics such as discipline, school achievement, helping with homework, early sign of trouble. They thought an impersonal classroom would be an appropriate setting to present the material. They all cautioned against putting pressure on people to talk about their own experiences or naming others as examples. People might not be willing to volunteer any information in class.

Although not as clearly defined by the informants, other areas of interest might be:

1. defining and maintaining a good parent/child relationship
2. defining the child's role in the family here in the U.S.
3. maintaining control without using force
4. establishing contacts with teachers and schools

Questions which arose but were not pursued involved possible differences between Christian and non-Christian families, welfare and non-welfare families and large and small families as far as problems with and goals for the children were concerned.

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Cultures in Transition.....The Lao lu Mien talk for the Harald Summer Humanities Institute 7/11/90 Ann Goldman

During the past 100 years, several thousands of Mien migrated south from China into the mountains of Northwest Laos where many now live in villages practicing slash and burn agriculture; growing rice, corn, vegetable crops, and livestock on steep mountain slopes. Many are isolated from health services, schooling and other modern facilities because of lack of roads. They generally do not speak the national language and often do not speak the same language as neighboring villages. They have been in a position of a minority people always and have learned to avoid conflict and contact with outside authorities whenever possible.

Their traditional religion is Taoist/animist, and religious ceremonies are held frequently to assure protection from forces of nature. Ancestor spirits must also be properly cared for by ritually sending them food and money so they will not get angry and cause sickness.

The Mien, as well as the Hmong, lowland Lao, and Khmu have come to this country in large numbers as legal refugees because of their involvement as soldiers fighting for the CIA in the war against communism in Laos. When the Americans withdrew, they were fearful of punishment by those in power and they began to flee by the thousands to Thailand where they were held in refugee camps, often for years, until they could be processed to go to a 3rd country for permanent resettlement.

Although the different Laotian ethnic groups bear many cultural similarities, their languages and many of their customs differ. This paper will focus mainly in the Lao Mien.

Approximately 16,000 Mien have come to the US since 1976 and most have settled in California, initially in neighborhoods where housing was cheap and rundown but where they could have large extended families in one apartment. Those who have managed to get jobs have begun to save money and move out of these ghetto neighborhoods, but many remain in areas of high crime and substandard housing. They worry about their safety, about their children and about their future.

It is important to remember that they have lived through war experiences few of us can comprehend. They have had to flee from village to village and then flee their country. They had to pay bribes to get across the Mekong River into Thailand, in Thailand they were harassed and bribed by Thai officials. Over the past 30 years the men have been forced to fight for the French, the Pathetic Lao and the CIA. They have been intimidated, tortured and pursued. They have lived in fear for a long time.

They have all left some relatives behind and there is guilt. They send whatever money they can back to relatives in villages and refugee camps to help make their life easier and to pay the necessary bribes for processing for resettlement here.

Those who have the necessary health, education, and skills to get jobs work very hard here, often both husband and wife have several jobs—one full-time and 1 to 3 part-time in the evenings and on weekends. Grandparents help by staying home and caring for the grandchildren, cooking, doing embroidery for clothing, collecting aluminum cans. They desperately want to remain useful to their family like they were in Laos.

There are other less fortunate ones who have suffered depression, cannot speak English, have physical or psychological wounds. These people tend to live more in the past wondering if life would have been better had they remained in Laos. But almost everyone agrees that life is better here, especially for the women. There is medical care for the sick, and education for the

children. No one has to chop and haul firewood over mountain trails, no one has to get up early to pound grain and cook food for the pigs. Most women live through childbirth, most children survive to grow up. Most people have learned that the police are for their protection and do not need to be bribed. Many people are buying houses and becoming citizens. They all want to be successful in this country. The parents place great hope in their children. p. 2

But one of the main concerns of the Mien parents here is that their children will not learn the Mien culture which they feel is necessary for them to become good, useful and respected members of their communities.

In the mountains of Laos where schooling was not generally available, children learned what was necessary from their parents. They learned farm work, embroidery, cooking, hunting, house building, story telling, and how to conduct family ceremonies. Some boys learned how to become sharmen and some learned to write the Chinese characters for recording genealogies, ceremonies and folk tales in the family books. By the example set by their elders, they learned the Mien culture and the proper way to behave.

Many ceremonies and rituals include roles for the children which teach them the Mien values. An example of such a ceremony is the New Years celebration.

Mien New Year:

Mien New Year lasts 3 days and coincides with Chinese New Year, usually falling in late January or early February. Before the New Year begins, all debts must be paid off to friends, relatives and ancestors. New Year should start right and debts should not be carried into the New Year.

There are several restrictions on activities and diet during New Year. It should be a time when families stay home and don't do work outside the home. It should be a quiet, studious time when fathers teach their sons to read and write Chinese, when mothers teach their daughters to sew, spin and embroider, and when there is much storytelling.

Firewood, fodder for the animals, food and water should be gathered before New Year starts as outside labor is forbidden. There should be no fighting or arguing, and no spending money. It is a quiet, family-oriented time. Parents tell their children that if they go visiting other people the hairs on their legs might fall off which would make them people who like to run around too much and do not enjoy staying home. They also tell their children that if they get into a fight and hit someone during New Year they will get boils on their hand.

No vegetables should be eaten during New Years or else the weeds will take over your rice fields.

It is important to set good standards during the 3 days of New Years. Three meals should be eaten daily, people should be on their best behavior, and they should get up early.

On the day before the beginning of New Years, children take a cup of water to the priest. He writes something on a piece of paper for each child who then burns the paper in the cup of water. The next morning the children get up early and drink the water in the cup to make them smart. The first child to drink receives extra good luck.

After drinking the water, the priest gives each child one piece of ceremonial paper money. The children all stand in a row holding out the money in front of them. They kneel and stand 3 times facing the center of the house and 3 times facing out. Then the boys are given axes and the girls knives, and they go outside through the front door and pretend to cut grass and trees. They also call the chickens and pigs and feed them grains of rice.

For several days prior to New Years, eggs are collected which are dyed red on the morning of the first day and given to the children as rewards for studying hard, learning to embroider and being industrious. Girls also give eggs to boyfriends.

Although outside activities are limited during New Years, sweeping inside the house is

allowed, but the dirt must not be thrown out. It is stored with the other house garbage until the end of the third day when the laziest child from each house must take it to the village crossroads and burn it.

Family structure:

Among the Mien and most other S.E.Asians, the family unit is all-important. It usually included 3 generations; parents, their sons, the sons' wives and children. Among the Mien the family is seen as an economic unit, and its main concern, beyond survival is wealth accumulation. Without wealth, the proper religious ceremonies insuring the family's well-being cannot be held. Therefore, everyone in the family is rated to some degree by how much they contribute to the workforce, and individuals are judged on how industriously they work toward the family goal.

Children are highly valued both because the Mien love children very much, and also because they add to the necessary work force. Parents try hard to insure good marriages for their children. For sons, a good wife means a valuable addition to the work force and additional children. For a daughter, a good match means a big wedding adding to the daughter's status and a big bride price which adds to her family's wealth. When a man's family cannot pay the demanded bride price, the new couple have to live with the girl's parents until the debt is paid off through labor, often 10 years or more.

There are many rules governing the conduct of women. They must not be in the same room with certain males, they must keep their heads lower than certain males, they must obey their husbands and parents-in-law. They must be careful not to look at or talk to men other than their husband in a playful way. Both men and women generally agree that a good wife is subservient to her husband, his older brothers and his parents. She has, in essence, been purchased for a huge amount of silver or money and must prove her value. In most cases, she is proud of her new status, proud of her bride price and works hard to help her new family maintain or increase its standing in the community. She wants children, preferably equal numbers of boys and girls so the bride price received upon the marriage of the daughters will offset the bride price paid to get good wives for the sons. Children are very important, and if a wife cannot bear children or if several die, children are often purchased or adopted to increase the size of the family.

The following description of a Mien wedding describes customs reinforcing the woman's role as a wife and the relative importance of various family members.

Iu Mien Wedding Ceremony—the small, one day ceremony.

When a Mien boy and girl like each other and want to marry, and the boy's parents like the girl, they visit the girl's parents and ask the date of her birth. They then go to someone with the Chinese astrological books to find out if the couple is suitable for each other. If it is determined that they are, the boy's parents return to the girl's parents with a chicken which is killed and eaten, and a pair of solid silver bracelets are presented to the girl's parents. Within a week or two, the girl must decide whether to keep the bracelets, which means she accepts the boy, or

return them which means she doesn't want to marry him. If she keeps the bracelets, the boy's family returns again with 2 roosters which are killed for the engagement ceremony which involves the groom's family agreeing to meet the demands of the bride's family regarding bride price, size and type of wedding, number of guests and anything else the groom's family must provide. When all demands have been agreed upon, the couple is considered engaged. The groom's family consults the Chinese astrological calendar to determine a good date for the wedding. The bride's family must agree to this date.

Ideally, in Laos, a couple becomes engaged in the winter months after the rice harvest.

p. 4 The wedding usually takes place the following winter giving the girl a year to embroider and sew complete outfits for herself and her future husband, pants for her mother-in-law and neck edgings for all her sisters-in-law and aunts. During the betrothal period she is excluded from field work and house work giving her the necessary time to complete the garments.

In the U.S.A. the bride often embroiders nothing. Instead, all new garments are purchased from Thailand or from someone here who makes them to sell. The cost of the garments is now divided between the two families. If the bride embroiders anything, it is usually the white towel she wears around her neck during the wedding ceremony like a scarf. She might also embroider the towels used in the face washing ceremony.

Sometime during the week or two before the wedding, the parents of the couple visit their friends and relatives to ask people to help with the preparations for the wedding. Those who agree to help are given cigarettes.

The day before the wedding, the groom's family goes to the home of the bride. A meal is prepared, and the bride price paid. The husband of the bride's next older sister presides over the paying of the bride price. If he feels the engagement agreement has been fulfilled, he sits down to the meal. If he feels that the groom's family has not fulfilled their part of the agreement, he does not sit down, and no one else can sit down until he is satisfied that all is well. During this ceremony, the bride's house spirit is told that she is going to live elsewhere so doesn't need to be protected in her parents' house anymore. She leaves the house to spend the night before the wedding at the house of a friend or relative.

The next day, the bride's parents go to get her, and they all go to the groom's house early in the morning. Two girls who are younger than the bride act as her attendants. One attendant pulls her by her finger and the other follows carrying an umbrella. She is also accompanied by her next older sister and her husband and also by a younger brother or cousin who carries her suitcase. The bride is wearing two pairs of pants which she made and two jackets; one she made for the wedding and one her mother-in-law made for her.

When the bride reaches the house of the groom's family, she must wait outside the door while the priest is preparing the house for her arrival so she will be protected in her new home. When the priest is ready, the bride and her attendants enter, passing under a pair of her mother-in-law's used pants held above her head by one of the groom's female relatives. This is to insure

that the bride will be obedient to her mother-in-law and other older persons in her new household. The groom and his attendant, who is a younger brother or friend, are waiting in the main room of the house for the bride to enter.

The bride kneels in the center of the room while the groom stands, and the priest conducts a ceremony. The priest opens all her bags and suitcase and sends out all evil spirits. He tells the house spirit that there is a new person to be protected. The priest gives a cup of wine to the girl's attendant who gives it to the bride who drinks. The priest then gives the same cup to the groom's attendant who gives it to the groom who also drinks. Then one of the groom's female relatives with lots of good, healthy children leads the bride to the bedroom with her attendant to wait until the priest has finished the ceremony, at which time she is officially married. While in the bedroom, she can take off her extra pants and jacket. She comes out with her attendant with all the wedding gifts she has embroidered.

When she comes out, she is given a big bowl, two chopsticks and a cup. She puts water in the bowl and in the cup which is in the bowl. She puts the chopsticks across the top of the bowl and the embroidered towel on the sticks. The bride then takes the bowl first to the husband of her next older sister. He washes his face or hands with water from the bowl, dries on the towel, empties the water from the cup and puts money in the cup. He keeps the towel. She then goes to the priest, to her father and to her other male relatives according to a specific age order who are older than she is. She then goes to all male relatives on the groom's side in the same order.

Next she goes to her female relatives starting with her mother, then her aunts and her older sisters. Last, she goes to the female relatives of the groom.

p. 5

She now must help cook the meal because she is married.

When everyone is seated, the groom and his attendant pass out cigarettes, and the bride and her attendant pass wine and tea in the same order as the washing. This is to thank people. Then a big meal is served after which the priest and husband of the bride's next older sister talk to the couple giving them advice on how to be a good husband and wife. After this, the bride and groom, followed by their attendants, go with a bowl of raw rice and two empty bowls to everyone in the same order as above. Everyone puts wine and a bit of meat in the empty bowls and money or silver coins in the rice bowl.

On the first night, the bride must go to sleep first or the groom will get sick when she becomes pregnant.

Family Discipline.

Within the family everyone has chores. In Laos older children care for babies, pound rice, carry wood and feed animals. Grandparents also care for children, teaching them traditional stories and proper behavior, and they cook, sew and help on the farm. Younger adults work hard planting, harvesting, hunting embroidering. There is not much spare time except on ceremony days.

Ancestor worship determines much of interpersonal relationships within a family. Respect is always shown to an older person. Besides being more experienced, an older person will join the ancestor spirits first, and if, as ancestors, they are not pleased with you, they could cause you harm.

On the other hand, older people don't want to be on bad terms with their children. The children will care for them in their old age and when they are in the spirit world. They will hold ceremonies offering food in the form of animal sacrifices and money in the form of burned ceremonial money. These ceremonies assure comfort and position in the spirit world and are extremely important.

Because of this, parents and grandparents often have a hard time here denying things to demanding children, especially teenagers who have so many demands, such strong influences from outside their own culture, so much free time to roam and so few essential chores reinforcing their importance in the family. Parents feel quite powerless to control their children here. They feel that if they physically discipline their children someone might report them and they might go to jail or the children might be taken away from them. they feel the children don't need them.

Not long ago a Hmong father in the valley was having trouble with his son who was running around with gangs, stealing, staying out all night and causing great worry and shame to his family. He would not obey his parents, and his father beat him. He was reported and received counseling but the son's behavior got worse. The father was jailed for child abuse. The father wanted to be a strong father and make sure his son grew into a good man, but since he could not discipline him in the only way he saw left to him, he felt helpless and eventually couldn't see any solution other than taking the whole family hostage at gun point and ultimately killing himself and his wife.

A Mien woman in Portland, Oregon says, "There are many ways to discipline children. First you teach them the right and wrong things to do by using appropriate language. But if they don't pay attention you can punish them by not giving them what they want. If they still don't pay attention to you you can hit them with a small bamboo stick. It would hurt a lot but it only hurts on the skin. It would not harm the child. We always spank our children but it does not mean we hate them. We hurt them because we want them to be respectful and to be accepted by

p. 6 society. In the United States we are not allowed to do that, so we don't know how to discipline our children. If we use the same ways that we did in our country we might end up in Jail. Now the children are going to school and they speak better English so they can do what they want to. We just hope they will learn the right way in school and will not forget their parents. In our country we wanted them to support us when we get old." (Foxfire mag. from Portland Oregon, p215.)

Child custody

A child belongs to the family of the mother. If she is married then her children belong to her husband's family since that is the family she belongs to. If she becomes pregnant before she is engaged or married, the child belongs to her birth family. If she should subsequently marry a man not the father of the her child, her parents might keep the child.

Here when a girl names the father of her child for child support, then the boy and his family feel they have rights to the child since they are paying for it. For this reason, often the mother won't name the father.

If a woman here divorces her husband and demands child support through our court system for her children, this is seen a very unjust by the man and his family since the man has to pay for something he does not necessarily get.

If a boy gets a girl pregnant but for some reason they do not marry, the boy and his family will do things to help her for the month after the child is born, like cook food, bring thing. But the baby is hers and her family's.

Justice System

The Mien justice system is very straight forward. You must pay damages to the person or family you damaged. Payment is based on the fact that everyone has a value and if hurt or damaged, must be paid for. There are definite rules governing how much a person is worth. A woman usually gets less compensation than a man because a man is stronger. If someone in a family is harmed, that family will go to the family of the aggressor and demand payment. Usually the aggressor's family wants this kept quiet so they won't be shamed in front of the community, and an agreement is reached. If no agreement can be reached, the families involved go to the village leader. Leaders have been appointed to all the Mien communities in California and every family belongs to one of those communities.

The guilty party must pay the victim.

The guilty party loses face.

Justice is done.

In our society, we place enormous importance on individuals solving their own problems and making their own decisions about what is right and wrong. We recognize very little family or community power over individual behavior that is not physically harmful or criminal in nature.

People who come here from very structured cultures where all families within a village or group of villages hold the same values, where decisions are rarely made without consulting family and maybe also the astrologer and headman, and where children are expected to obey anyone older often feel themselves in a very difficult and discouraging situation. Children are away at

school all day learning not only school subjects, which the parents consider very important, but also learning the behavior of their peers. Because they often enter school in the middle years, many do not do well. Many have never had to read and write before, and they cannot catch up. Their friends tend to be children who have also fallen behind. They cannot excel in academic subjects, we do not offer much in the way of trade school type classes, they are too young to work, so some form gangs and excel in other areas such as stealing, drug

p. 7 dealing, cutting school, etc. As teenagers, many are not interested in what their parents have to teach them. It does not seem to apply to their life. They begin to see their parents as different: they wear unusual clothes and have strange customs that maybe their friends would not understand and might ridicule. they no longer view their parents as people who can help them in any way. They cease to listen to them.

Many parents, on the other hand, must rely heavily on their children to help them deal with American life. Since few can read or write English, they need their children to help with welfare, training programs, housing and job applications, medical visits, all problems involving the use of English. The roles of parent and child have been reversed somewhat.

The parents do not know how Americans deal with rebellious children. In Laos children had little free time for getting into trouble. They were constantly needed to help the family at home or in the fields, or they were attending ceremonies and listening to their elders. They were learning to be like their parents.

Here the parents see that they cannot teach the children the skills they need for American jobs. They must learn that outside the family. But how do they teach their children traditional values without driving them away? They have little experience with spending leisure “quality time” with their children doing recreational things like playing ball, camping, going to ball games or movies, etc. In Laos “quality time” was hoeing the fields, pounding rice, embroidering, observing traditions. All necessary for survival in Laos and all unnecessary if not impossible here.

Many families, of course, are doing astoundingly well. There are many children doing exceptionally well in school, and a growing number have been attending American schools long enough and done well enough to enter colleges and universities. These young people are a great pride to their families and are excellent role models for their communities. These are the children who are beginning to look again at their own culture with new pride and understanding and a concern for its preservation.

No doubt with time, some of the problems seen now will solve themselves. In the next generation there will not be such large cultural, educational and language gaps between parent and child, and parents will learn how to participate in their children's American lives more. But now, there is much heartache on the part of some parents who have risked so much and worked so hard for a better life for their children.

Fuey Luang, the woman in Portland, says, “The most important thing in our culture is to love and care for each other, to be respectful, have close relationships, to maintain our culture and traditions. There are a lot of good things in our culture that need to be preserved.”

Statistics:

10/89: Calif. had 25,859 refugee children enrolled in schools. All other states had 52,000 combined.

12/89: Since April 1975, 418,691 Asian refugees have been resettled in the USA. 212,311 are from refugee camps in Thailand.

Khmer=50,413

Highlanders=53,203

Lowland Lao=72,063

Vietnamese=36,632

Mien Stats:

16,000 in USA approx.