

SUBGROUPING OF MIENIC LANGUAGES: SOME OBSERVATIONS¹

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1. Introduction

The Mienic languages constitute one of the two main branches of the Hmong-Mien (or Miao-Yao) language family. There have been numerous attempts to link the Hmong-Mien language family with others. Chinese linguists consider that Hmong-Mien is a subfamily of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Benedict has put forward a controversial proposal, called the Austro-Tai hypothesis, that Austronesian, Kadai and Hmong-Mien are all related (1975). Later this hypothesis was expanded to include Japanese (Benedict 1990). These are just the two most well known of the numerous attempts to link the Hmong-Mien language family with others (other proposals are listed in Huffman 1986:574 and Voegelin and Voegelin 1977:228). The most recent proposal comes from Peiros (1998), who presents evidence linking Austroasiatic and Hmong-Mien. None of these proposals are generally accepted and most western linguists simply note this and do not discuss the issue in detail.

Approximately 706,000 speakers of Mienic languages live in China (Wang and Mao 1995:13–16), 474,000 in Vietnam (Dang et al. 1993:149; 2000:183), 22,665 in Laos (State Planning Committee 1997:15), 40,000 in Thailand and 25,000 in Western countries (Purnell 1999). This gives a total of 1.27 million speakers.

2. Subgrouping

The study of Mienic languages is still in its infancy. Only Iu-Mien as spoken in Thailand has been described in any substantial detail. There is a phonology (Purnell 1965), some dictionaries (Lombard and Purnell 1968; Panh 1995; Purnell et al. forthcoming) and a grammar of this language (Court 1986). There are sketch phonologies, grammars and dictionaries of some of the others (Chao 1930; Downer 1961; Mao and Chou 1972; Mao et al. 1982; Mao et al. 1992; Savina 1926; Shintani and Yang 1990; Solnit 1985; Wong 1939). Reconstruction of the proto-languages has received the most attention (for a comprehensive discussion of previous work on Hmong-Mien historical phonology, see Niederer 1998).

Four different subgroupings of Mienic languages have been published. As the earlier subgroupings have influenced the later we will discuss them in chronological order. However, comparing and assessing reconstructions and subgroupings of Mienic languages is complicated by the use of different data sets and a profusion of language names. Four language names commonly occur with minimal variation in their names: Iu Mien, Kim Mun, Biao Min and Dzaio Min. However in addition to these names many others are used with most authors using completely different ones. Describing a language by giving the place where the data was collected is, in general, insufficient to identify it uniquely as Mienic peoples have migrated so much that their languages are quite interspersed. Nevertheless in this paper we make some attempt to reconcile the various language names.

Purnell 1970

The first subgrouping of Mienic languages was proposed by Purnell in his reconstruction of Proto-Hmong-Mien (1970:137). Purnell's pioneering study was seriously limited by the lack of quality data available except for the Chiengrai variety of Iu Mien (1970:2-3, 115). Nevertheless his subgrouping has stood the test of time. In brief, the Iu Mien group preserves the voiceless sonorants while the Kim Mun group has merged them with the voiced ones (1970:136).

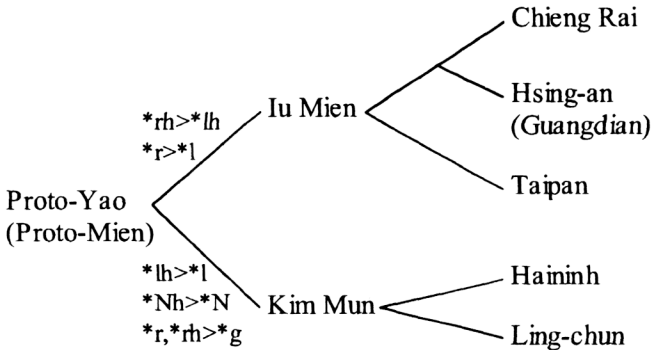


Figure 1: Subgrouping proposed by Purnell (1970:137).

In Figure 1, as in subsequent diagrams, we have used the author's original language names. The names in parentheses serve to reconcile the names used by the different scholars, or by the same scholar at different times. Some phonological changes are listed on the tree

diagram as well. These are some of the shared innovations that form the basis for the subgrouping.

In China, Yao is the name of an officially recognised minority nationality, which includes mother tongue speakers of Mienic, Hmongic and Tai-Kadai languages. Mien ‘people’ is an autonym of the speakers of Iu Mien, the largest Mienic language. The autonoms of the other Mienic languages include cognates of this term. Hence this name for this group of languages is to be preferred.

Hsing-an is the name of the county in Guilin Prefecture, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region where the data for this variety was collected (Mao and Chou 1972:240). In Chinese this is written 兴安 (Mao and Zhou 1962).² Comparison of the Mien wordlist in (Mao and Zhou 1962:147) with the Guangdian wordlist in (Wang and Mao 1995:13–16) reveals an almost exact match once the difference in the way of marking the lengths of vowels in the different sources is taken into account.³

Mao, Meng and Zheng 1982

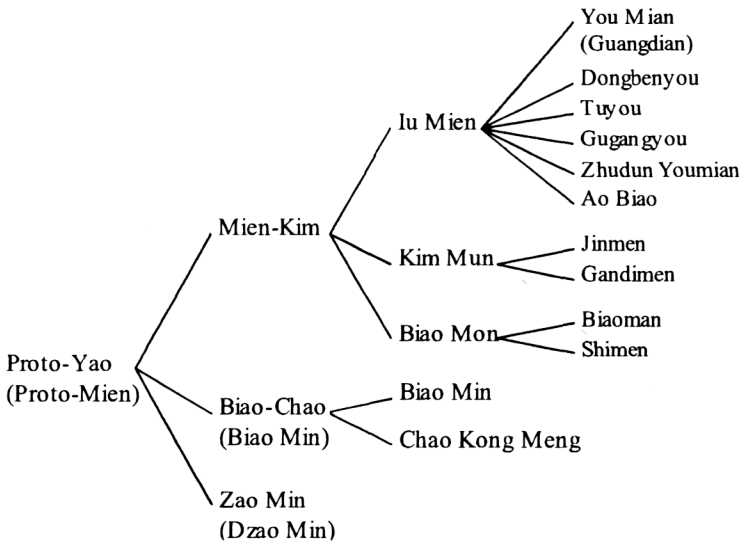


Figure 2: Subgrouping proposed by Mao, Meng and Zheng (1982:61).

This subgrouping was arrived at by considering a combination of the following three factors: vocabulary, phonetic differences and grammatical characteristics (Mao et al. 1982:61). It is not based on an historical reconstruction. The languages on the far right are listed

in the footnotes not in the body of the text. It has been followed (except for the details in the footnotes) by Strecker (1987:3) and has been widely quoted in the literature. In this subgrouping Ao Biao, L-Thongkum's Muen, is part of the Iu Mien group (Mao et al. 1982:62 footnote 1).

L-Thongkum 1993

This subgrouping is based on data personally collected by L-Thongkum in Thailand and China and her subsequent reconstruction (1993:170). The reconstruction is based on 351 cognates from a list of 500 words (L-Thongkum 1993:166).

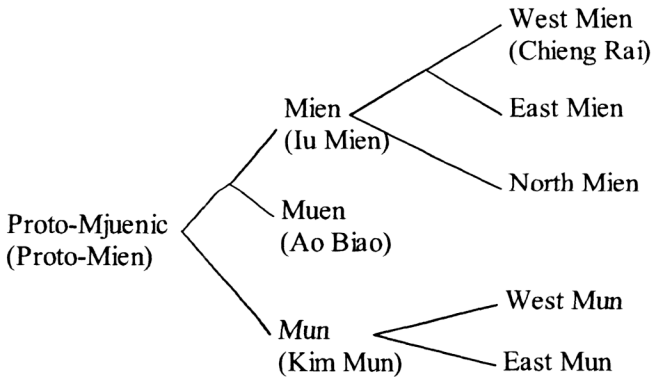


Figure 3: Subgrouping proposed by L-Thongkum (1993:170).

The Mienic language spoken in Thailand is homogenous (L-Thongkum 1993:163). Hence we can equate Purnell's Chiengrai variety with L-Thongkum's Western Mien—data from both of which was collected in northern Thailand. L-Thongkum's states that the language she calls Muen is spoken by the Ao Yao and that the data was collected in Jīnxiù (金秀) county, Guangxi province (1993:164). The language that these people speak is called Àò Biāo (坳标) and there are a little over a thousand speakers living in Jinxiu county (Mao et al. 1982:7, 9 footnote 1).⁴

This tree looks remarkably similar to that of Purnell's above. However this similarity may be coincidental as it is unclear how similar the languages without names in parentheses in the two subgroupings really are.

East and West Mien are characterised by their retention of Proto-Mjuenic voiceless sonorants. In North Mien, Mun (Kim Mun) and Muen (Ao Biao) the reflexes of voiceless sonorants are voiced sono-

rants. North Mien is characterised by the loss of final nasals with corresponding nasalisation of the vowel. No other Mienic language shows this characteristic.⁵ It also tends to retain initial consonant clusters and have fricatives corresponding to East and West Mien affricates (1993:167). Mun (Kim Mun) is characterised by the loss of voiceless sonorants. L-Thongkum states that Muen (Ao Biao) consonants and vowels are similar to those of Mun (Kim Mun) whereas the tones are the same as in Mien (1993:170). Clearly the position of Muen in this subgrouping is based on the similarity of the tones rather than that of the segments. This seems very unusual given that in this area tones are historically derived from segments and are much more variable and open to change than segments.

Wang and Mao 1995

This subgrouping is based on the largest scale reconstruction of Proto-Hmong-Mien to date by two of China's foremost Hmong-Mien scholars. The subgrouping, reconstruction and the wordlists they are based on are found in Wang and Mao (1995). The subgrouping itself is on page 3. This book has no reconstruction for Proto-Mien, or any other proto-language intermediate between proto-Hmong-Mien and the present day languages. This subgrouping should be regarded as superseding Mao, Meng and Zheng's 1982 subgrouping. This is because it is the same Mao in both sources and this subgrouping is more recent and based on more data.

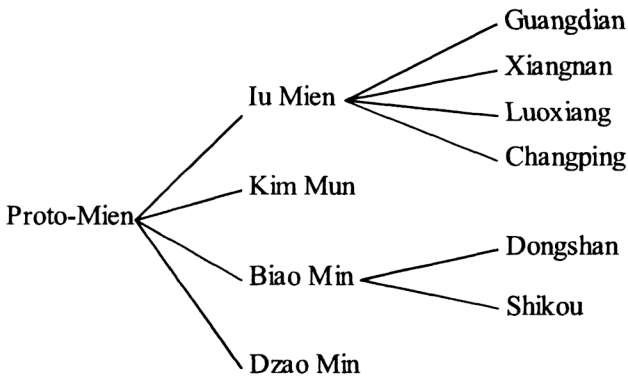


Figure 4: Subgrouping proposed by Wang and Mao (1995:3).

The distinctive characteristics listed by Wang and Mao consist mostly of different treatment of 1) final consonants, and 2) voiceless sonorants, or 3) whether or not length is a distinctive feature of vow-

els, and 4) whether or not there is tone sandhi (Wang and Mao 1995:13–16)

3. Distinctive Shared Innovations

Purnell's 1970 study revealed that one of the keys for the sub-grouping of Mienic languages lay in their differing treatment of voiceless sonorants: nasals, laterals, rhotics and approximants. In general Iu Mien languages retain voiced and voiceless reflexes of these and the Mun languages only have voiced reflexes of them.

Our investigations have revealed that there is another very distinctive set of correspondences that is crucial for classifying these languages. That is the treatment of laterals and rhotics. In this paper we argue that these innovations are more distinctive than the voicing of voiceless sonorants and that the genetic subgrouping of Mienic languages should be based primarily on these shared innovations and secondarily on those of the voicing of voiceless sonorants rather than primarily on the voicing of voiceless sonorants as has been done in previous proposed subgroupings.

In Table 1 we have listed the key correspondences of initial consonants. Each column has three names. All are different forms indicating the names used in Wang and Mao (1995). The first row is Latin initials that abbreviate the pinyin of the language name. The second row gives the names of the languages in Chinese characters. The third row gives the names used in the listing of the correspondences, as some of these are different from the language names. Note that the languages are presented in a different order, which better reflects our subgrouping proposal. The vertical double lines that appear between some columns indicate that these languages are more different from each other than those with just a single line between the columns.

The first column gives a name to each proto-phoneme. We assume that *mh and *nh were realised as voiceless nasals and that *L and *Lh were laterals distinguished by voicing and/or frication. *R is reconstructed by Purnell and L-Thongkum as [r] and by Wang and Mao as a retroflex lateral. Whatever the place of articulation, we assume that the *R sounds were retroflexed, with a coarticulation of the dorsum raised towards the velum. The sound changes that yielded a velar stop involved the simple loss of apical articulation. The apical reflexes in other languages are mostly simple mergers with the corresponding laterals.

PMien	GD	XN	DS	SK	LX	KM1	KM2	CP	ZM
	广滇	湘南	东山	石口	罗香	金门	金门	长坪	藻敏
	江底	湘江	东山	三江	罗香	梁子	览金	长坪	大坪
*m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
*mh	m̥	m̥	m̥	m	m̥	m	m	m	m
*n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
*nh	n̥	n̥	n̥	n	n	n	n	n	n
*ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ
*ɲh	ɲ̥	ɲ̥	ɲ̥	ɲ	ɲ̥	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ
*Lh	ʎ	ʎ	ʎ	l	l	l	l	l	l
*L	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l
*Rh	ʎ	ʎ	ʎ	l	g	g	g	ð	dz
*R	l	l	l	l	g	g	g	ð	dz

Table 1: Correspondences of some sonorants in Wang and Mao (1995).

Table 2 summarises the correspondences of final consonants. Wang and Mao state that they have not marked glottal stops in their transcriptions because their presence is obvious as they only occur in the checked tones 7 and 8 (1995:13–16). Therefore glottal stops have been placed in the correspondences but it is possible that some of these have further lenited to the point of deletion. As you can see there is little change in most of these. Certainly there is little shared innovation. There are three possible shared innovations: 1) *-m>n in Dongshan and Shikou and 2) lenition of final stops in Xiangnan and Shikou, and 3) lenition of final *k in all Mienic languages. This last change is of no value for subgrouping as it has taken place in all the languages. We regard the change in place of articulation of the nasals as being more important than the lenition of the final consonants, as what has happened at one place of articulation could easily happen to related phonemes at other places of articulation. The lenition of the final velars in all the languages supports this contention.

PMien	GD	XN	DS	SK	LX	KM1	KM2	CP	ZM
*-p	p	ʔ	n	ʔ	p	p	p	p	p
*-t	t	ʔ	n	ʔ	t	t	t	t	t
*-k	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ
*-m	m	ɲ	n	n	m	m	m	m	m
*-n	n	ɲ	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
*-ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ
*-ŋ̥	ŋ̥	ŋ̥	∅	ŋ̥	ŋ̥	ŋ̥	ŋ̥	ŋ̥	ŋ̥

Table 2: Correspondences of syllable final consonants in Wang and Mao (1995).

In Table 3 below you can see the same mismatch between the voicing of sonorants and the change in the place of articulation of the laterals and rhotics that was found above in Table 2.

PMien	E.Mien	W.Mien	N.Mien	Muen	E.Mun	W.Mun
*m	m	m	m	m	m	m ɲ
*hm	m̥	m̥	m	m	m	m
*n	n	n	n	n	n	n
*hn	n̥	n̥	n	n	n	n
*ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ
*hɲ	ɲ̥	ɲ̥	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ
*l	l	l	l	l	l	l
*hl	l̥	l̥	l	l	l	l
*r	l	l	l	g	g	g
*hr	l̥	l̥	l	g	g	g

Table 3: Correspondences of some sonorants in L-Thongkum (1993).

In Table 4 below you can see that in this case there is no mismatch between the voicing of sonorants and the change in the place of articulation of the laterals and rhotics that was found above in Tables 1 & 3. These correspondences are from Purnell's thesis.

PMien	Chiengrai	Hsing-an	Taipan	Haininh	Ling-chun
*m	m	m	m	m	m
*mh	mh	mh	mh	m	m
*n	n	n	n	n	n
*nh	nh	nh	nh	n	n
*ñ	ñ	ñ	ñ	ñ	ñ
*ñh	ñh	ñh	ñh	ñ	ñ
*l	l	l	l	l	l
*lh	lh	lh	lh	l	l
*r	l	l	l	g	g
*rh	lh	lh	lh	g	g

Table 4: Correspondences of some sonorants in Purnell (1970).

Proposed Subgrouping

The three subgroupings described above that are based on reconstructions, i.e. excluding (Mao et al. 1982), all posit an opposition of voiced and voiceless nasals and liquids for Proto-Mien, subgrouping the daughter languages according to their loss/retention of this distinction. In contrast we suggest that the merger of these voiced and voiceless series is not a significant phonological innovation—it may

occur independently by linguistic tendency, or alternatively may reflect areal changes.

Our argument that the shared innovation of the shift in place of articulation of the rhotics is more important for subgrouping than the merger of voiced and voiceless nasals and liquids has three strands. The first strand is that the proposed subgrouping which is based on this key shared innovation is more internally consistent than the subgrouping based on the merger of the voiced and voiceless nasals and liquids. The second strand is that this change is more important than that of the voicing of the sonorants. The third strand is that this innovation reflects areal changes and so is not as important as previous studies have assumed. While none of the strands of the argument is completely compelling when considered alone, taken together they constitute a strong argument for our proposed subgrouping.

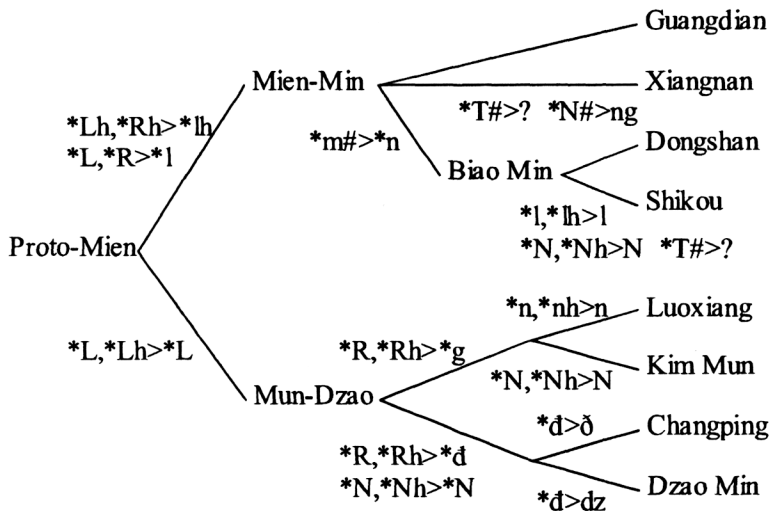


Figure 5: Subgrouping based on the treatment of rhotics.

Lh	voiceless lateral
Rh	voiceless rhotic or retroflex lateral
N	nasal
T	stop
#	word boundary
d	voiced apical obstruent
ng	velar nasal
?	glottal stop

Table 5: Symbols used in the above proposed subgrouping.

The first strand of our argument is that the subgrouping based on the shared innovations of the rhotics is more internally consistent than the one based on the innovations to the voiceless sonorants. In Figure 6 below is the subgrouping based on the assumption that voicing of sonorants is the more important shared innovation. As is easily seen this subgrouping is no simpler than the one based on the shift in place of articulation of the rhotics in Figure 5 above. Neither subgrouping has preserved the group of the four varieties that Wang and Mao suggest together comprise the Iu Mien language. The subgrouping based on the loss of the voiced/voiceless opposition in the nasals and liquids has in addition split up the two varieties that in Wang and Mao's subgrouping comprise the Biao Min group: Dongshan and Shikou.⁶ Our proposed subgrouping preserves their Biao Min subgrouping. Also other subgroups seem to have more in common with each other in our proposed classification than in the alternative. This makes it somewhat more consistent than the alternative subgrouping.

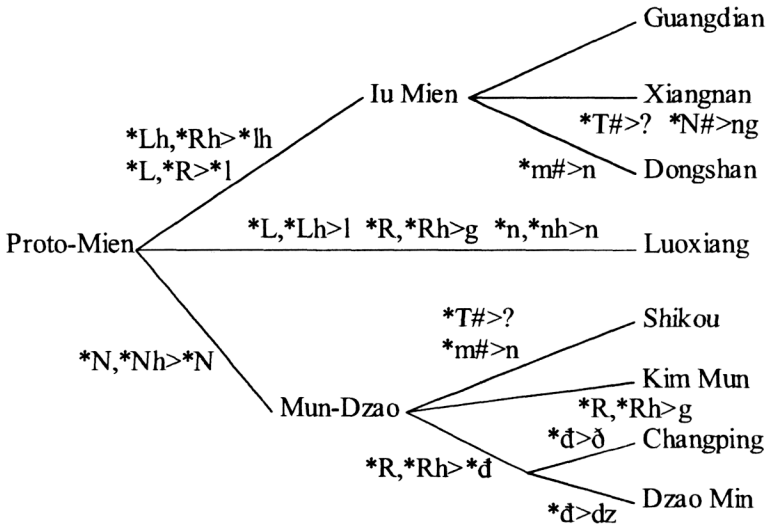


Figure 6: Subgrouping based on the voicing of voiceless sonorants.

In our suggested subgrouping (Figure 5) the voicing of sonorants occurs in various places. In the subgrouping shown in Figure 6 the change in place of articulation of **R* and **L* occurs in multiple places. Significant shifts in place of articulation are more unusual than changes in manner of articulation and so the innovation in manner of articulation is more likely to occur independently than the

innovation of shift in place of articulation. This is the second strand of our argument.

The third strand of our argument follows on from the second. We argue that there is indeed an areal tendency for voiceless nasals and liquids to become voiced and we present evidence that this innovation has in fact occurred independently in this linguistic area. The languages of wider communication in the areas where Mienic languages are found are various Chinese dialects (particularly southwestern Mandarin and Cantonese). Neither Modern Standard Chinese nor Cantonese have voiceless sonorants.⁷ But all recent reconstructions of Old Chinese reconstruct voiceless sonorant initials (Ratliff 1999:368). Proto-Min is also believed to have had voiced and voiceless nasals which have voiced reflexes in all present day varieties of Min (Norman 1988:230).

The most compelling evidence that the voicing of voiceless sonorants is an areal feature is that the loss of voiceless sonorants is currently occurring in the Chiengrai dialect of Iu Mien. In Iu Mien spoken by those younger than twenty five in Thailand the voiceless sonorants are merging and becoming 'h-like' sounds (L-Thongkum 1994:920). Speakers over twenty-five still retain the voiceless sonorants. This change is clearly the result of language contact with Thai (L-Thongkum 1994:920).

Comparison with other Classifications

Our proposed subgrouping has much in common with previous proposals. If the additional languages in our proposal are ignored then there is no essential difference between our proposal and Purnell's. This is because in his data the two shared innovations that we have discussed give the same subgrouping. The difference between our subgrouping and L-Thongkum's is that we would group Muen (Ao Biao) with the Mun languages. L-Thongkum notes the similarities in segments between Muen and Mun but regards the similarities in tone systems as the more significant. Our subgrouping is most different from that of Wang and Mao (1995). As comparison with the relevant trees shows we have grouped Biao Min with the Iu Mien languages and Dzao Min and one of their varieties of Iu Mien with the Mun languages.

4. Conclusions

In this paper we have examined some recent data on Mienic languages and proposed a new subgrouping of these languages based on two significant shared innovations in the initial consonants. These innovations are: 1) the voicing of voiceless sonorants and 2) the

change in place of articulation of proto-Mien *L, *Lh, *R and *Rh. All previous classifications have noted the importance of the first shared innovation in distinguishing Mienic languages. Until this paper little attention seems to have been paid to the second shared innovation for subgrouping. We have argued that the second be used as the primary basis for classifying Mienic languages and the first shared innovation given a secondary role in the subgrouping. The evidence given in this paper is certainly suggestive, but by no means is it conclusive. Clearly further work remains to be done. In particular all of the correspondences need to be re-examined in light of this new subgrouping to see if they are more consistent with it or with the alternative subgrouping based on the loss of the voiced/voiceless opposition in liquids and nasals. This work also highlights an important methodological consideration. That is to say that we cannot be confident about the classification of languages without having looked at all the data—so in respect of languages that are poorly documented we run the risk that our classifications are artefacts that are skewed by lack of data. It is quite possible that we lack the crucial piece of data. In this case it was the inclusion of Dzao Min data in the correspondences, which is the reason why the proposed subgrouping is significantly different to some of the previous proposals.

We have also paid significant attention in this paper to drawing connections between the languages that various people have used in their reconstructions. The difficulties involved in doing this and the wide variety of different languages used in the different reconstructions make clear that much work remains to be done in describing the history of the Mienic languages. We trust that this paper is a helpful contribution to our as yet quite limited knowledge of these languages.

Notes

¹ We would like to thank, Michael Boutin, Jerry Edmondson, Herbert Purnell, Martha Ratliff and Lawrence Reid for valuable comments on this paper during the conference. Any remaining errors are, of course, our responsibility.

² Hsing-an is the Wade-Giles romanised form. In pinyin romanisation it is Xīng'ān.

³ In (Mao and Zhou, 1962) vowels marked as short correspond to unmarked vowels in (Wang and Mao, 1995) and unmarked vowels correspond to vowels marked as long (with few exceptions). How-

ever Purnell found only found contrastive length in [a] (1970:119). Wang and Mao essentially agree stating that in some places quite a few vowels contrast in length but in most places only [a] contrasts in length (1995:14).

⁴ Despite the resemblance of the names this language should be distinguished from Biao Min which is not listed as being spoken in Jīnxiù (Wang and Mao, 1995:15–16).

⁵ We must agree with L-Thongkum when she states that it is a great pity that less data was obtained from North Mien (1993:166 note 4).

⁶ From the evidence of place names it seems likely that Biao Min has been broadened to include Mao, Meng and Zheng's (1982) Jiaogongmian. This would then correspond with their Biao-Chao. Dongshan would then correspond with the original Biao Min and Shikou to Jiaogongmian. These conclusions are, however, tentative.

⁷ Jerry Edmondson pointed out at the conference that some other Chinese dialects in this area do have voiceless sonorants. These dialects are, however, less prestigious.

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