CHAPTER I

GENERAL BACKGROUND

This chapter focuses on the general background of the Yao and Lisaw hill tribes as reviewed by existing literature such as studies, essays, and research done on these tribes.

The Yao Hill Tribe

The Yao became an interesting subject for researches as early as the 1920s. In the last decade, more and more attention has been paid to these, a well known mountainous people of the world.

Ethnic and Racial Origins

Racially the Yao are generally thought to be of Mongoloid origin, as are the Thai. Believed to have originated from a common root during prehistoric times, today the Thai and the Tibeto-Burman (with whom the Yao are affiliated) are decidedly distinctive groups. The tribes of Tibeto-Burman stock are also ethnically and culturally distinct from one another: the most obvious distinction being between the original tribes of Burma (the Karen, Akha, Lisaw, and Lahu) and those originally from China (the Meo and Yao). A few sources suggest that the Yao may be actually of Indonesian origin, or be possibly a mixture of Indonesian and Mongoloid elements.\(^1\) One source concludes that the Yao are less influenced by the Mongoloid element and tend more towards their Indonesian elements.\(^2\) Also differing with the majority opinion, two sources mention the Yao as part of the Mon-Khmer ethnic group.\(^3\) It is suggested that although the Yao and the neighboring hill tribes have had repeated cultural contact with the Chinese, the Burmese, and the Thai-Shan-Laos
people, they still retain their particular racial character and show relative cultural autonomy.

**Various Names of the Group**

This tribe with its many sub-groups is widely dispersed throughout Thailand, Burma, Laos, Vietnam and China and is called by many names like Yao, Mien, Iu Mien, Min or Man, meaning “man”, and Kimmien (or Kimmun), which means “man or people of the mountain”. These names are evidently used regardless of subgroup or other divisions. In Thailand, where only Iu Mien are found, they are simply called Yao, the word Mien being little known outside the sub-group itself. They are also often only called highlanders in vernacular. The Chinese also use the term “Yao” for this tribe which means “wild dog” or “jackal,” although recently it has been interpreted also as “dog’s son”. The term “Man” (Mien or Mun), with its Chinese meaning “barbarian” originally referred to all non-Chinese people and was applied to all the mountain tribal groups. It is used at present only occasionally in reference to the Yao. The term “Man” is also used by the Vietnamese and the Laotians. Meaning “savage” in these languages, it was formerly applied to all mountain people but now designates only the Yao.

The Yao tribe is said to be divided into several groups. Most sources indicate six such divisions: The Man Coc, “Man of the Horns”, The Taio Tohaine, “Man of the Chinese Coins” or “Coin Man”, also called Man Tien, Man Deo Tien, Man Son Dau, The Can Cao Khao, “Man of the White Pants”, The Lan Ten, or Man Lan-tien, “Blue or Indigo Man”, The Man Xanh Y “Blue Clothed Man”, and The Can Ho, “Man of the Short Pants”. A number of questions arise over these divisions. The Man Coc, the largest division, is called by many names. One source suggests that
the Man Tai-Pan, Man Thanh-y, and Man Son Chi are sub-tribes of the Man Coe whereas others consider these to be merely other names as are Man Ta Pan, Man Dai Ban, Man Son Dau for this division. One reliable source also holds that the term Man Coe is of Thai origin. It is generally agreed that the same group is designated by the Vietnamese as Man Tien. However, the Man Coe are divided into three different subgroups: the Ngong Dao Mien, “Men of Great Horns”, the Ngong Nang Mien, “Man of small Horns”, and the Du Cun Mien, “Men of Round Knives.” These three groups are mentioned as being present in the regions of China, Vietnam, and Laos, but no mention of the existence of a Man Coe subdivision in Thailand has so far been made. One source mentions that the Taio Tohaine division, or Man Deo Tien or Man Tien, “Man of the Chinese Coins” or “Coin Man”, can also be called Man Dai Ban or Man Son Dau, the same as the Man Dai Ban, and Man Son Dau of the Man Coe division. The connection between these groups may be a problem of linguistics among the several languages involved or it may be an indication that the Taio Tohaine or Man Tien are part of, or a subdivision of the Man Coe. The term “Santi” or “Man Santi” is used with reference to the Can Cao Khao, the third division. Meaning “sons of the mountain”, they may be general terms used in reference to all Yao rather than names indicating one specific group. There are only two sources that mention the names of the Lan Ten or Man Lan-tien, “Blue or Indigo Man”, as the fourth division, and the Man Xnah Y, “Blue Clothed Man”, the fifth division. These are so closely related that it might simply be that these two groups may actually be one. The sixth division, the Can Ho, “Man of the Short Pants”, is also called Man Quan Coc. Apart from these divisions a number of sources have indicated other groups, but have not specified whether these are additional names for the main groups or names of subgroups. The San Tang, “Man of the Mountains”, and the Can Ban,
“Man of the High Villages”, have been mentioned as separate groups, but their names seem to indicate either a close relationship between the two or even that these may actually be other names for the main tribal group rather than a subdivision.\(^1\)

**Language**

The majority opinion places the Yao language generally within the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family. Of the two major branches within this family, the Yao language is most often placed in the Sino-Siamese branch, rather than the Tibeto-Burman branch. Although it is believed that ethnically and culturally the Yao are of Tibeto-Burman stock, yet no evidence is available about its affiliation with the Tibeto-Burmese branch of the linguistic family.\(^1\) A number of reliable sources have also placed the Yao language in the Meo-Yao-Pateng language group, considered by some authorities as a third branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. While the Meo and Yao tongues are thought to be more closely related than any other tribal languages, few conclusive comparisons have been drawn between the two, even though they are both basically tonal languages essentially monosyllabic and show strong Chinese influence. It can also be seen that the Yao vocabulary, even in its phonetic form, differs only slightly from that of the Meo dialects. Some linguists consider the Yao as belonging to a minor branch of the sino-Tibetan family called the Meo-Yao. The Meo-Yao, like the larger Meo-Yao-Pateng branch, has sometimes also been considered to be quite distinct from The Tibeto-Burman stocks by some linguists.\(^1\)

Some sources also suggest that the Yao language belong to the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family. Furthermore, some have also associated Yao with the languages of ethnic groups like Meo, Kadai, Indonesian, Mon-Khmer, and Vietnamese and consider it as
a Proto-Austric language. Still another theory is that the Yao is a Paleo-Austronesian language which has been modified by Thai, Meo, and Chinese contacts. Only one very old source suggests that Yao could be grouped with the Meo in an independent language family, called the Man family.13

One of the largely accepted opinions these days is that the Yao tribe should be seen as speakers of four different languages. These are:14

(i) Mien, a Meo-Yao of the Sino-Tibetan family.
(ii) Meo, a form of Hmong dialect from the Meo-Yao family.
(iii) Zhuang/Dong of the Tai-Kadai family.
(iv) Mandarin Chinese tinted with southern influences.

The basic Mien language is in turn divided into four major dialects:

(a) The Iu Mien, Kim Mien, Kiem Mien, Kam Mien and Kem Mien variants.
(b) The Mun, which is fairly close to the Mien and its Kim Mun and Kim Meun variants.
(c) The Byau Min.
(d) The Yau Min.

The Mien and Mun dialects are spoken by about two thirds of the total Yao population, which represents about 80-85% of the speakers of the four Mien dialects. The Mien-speaking Yao can be found in Thailand, in Laos, in Vietnam and in the Chinese provinces of Jianxi, Guangdong, Hunan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and Yunnan as well as overseas. The Mun speakers can be found today in Guangxi, Yunnan, and Hainan Island in China, as well as in Vietnam and Laos.

It is said the Yao language is not easy to understand until one grasps the general sense, since individual expressions are difficult to comprehend. Although Yao shows heavy borrowing from both Thai and Chinese, even those groups have difficulty understanding the Yao
language, The Lao understand very few words of Yao and, even the Meo cannot understand the Yao language although the two tribes are linguistically related. In addition to their own language and its various dialects, most Yao understand and speak Northern-Thai-Lao, Quanhe Hoa (the general Yao dialect), and Haw (Yunnanese Chinese), all of which serve as important trade languages in the areas of Northern Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and China. Reportedly a few subgroups in North Vietnam speak tribal Tai dialects or Vietnamese Quanhe Hoa. The Yao, Meo, and Khmu supposedly speak Northern-Thai-Lao while trading among themselves.

The Yao people have no alphabet or written language of their own, but use a script derived from Chinese characters. This script is the Yao language written in Chinese characters and called Yao, and is considered by some to be the indigenous script of the Yao. In addition, missionaries have also devised two scripts that can be adapted to the Yao language: a Romanized script and a Thai-based script. Although these scripts have not been widely accepted among the Yao, the indications are that the Yao who have been residing in Thailand now for a considerable time prefer the Thai-based script, while only the newly arrived Yao favor the Romanized one. Some experts indicate that the Yao people show a greater interest in learning the Thai-based script, despite the fact that the differing consonant system makes it cumbersome. One source did point out that enthusiasm for each script varies greatly from area to area. But a considerable number of Yao are said to be literate and the tribes-people have great respect for books. Many Yao families feel their homes are not complete without at least one book on display. However, in the settlements that were visited by us, only the house of the headman contained a book. One source, however, disagrees with the claim that
numerous Yao are literate, stating that few Yao can actually use their writing system.  

**Legendary Accounts**

According to legend, the Yao are descended from a dog. Basically the legends tell of a Chinese Emperor who offered the hand of his daughter in marriage to anyone who could do away with his most dangerous and bothersome enemy (possibly a Meo), kill him, and present the Emperor with the head. At this point the legends vary widely—some simply say a dog, Pan hu, accomplished the fact; others mention a yellow dog or a yellow serf called Pan hu, a dragon dog, a tribal chief who had a dog or wolf as a totem; or a savage servant named Pan Hou. Pan hu set out in search of the enemy, some say into foreign lands, swimming the "Great Water" before reaching his destination. When Pan hu returned, bearing the head of the slain enemy, the Emperor reluctantly surrendered the hand of his third and youngest daughter to him. According to several versions of this legend the Emperor had promised half his kingdom to the one who was victorious. As it was, the Emperor gave the newly married couple the mountainous regions of his empire. Thus the Yao inherited the hill regions while the Chinese remained in the fertile valleys and on the plains. Pan hu carried the princess to his new kingdom; some accounts mention him as again swimming the Great Water before finally reaching his destination. The princess assumed the dress and customs of the peasants and bore many children (reported by some to have been six sons and six daughters) described as human but having tails. After the death of Pan hu, the children intermarried and established the Yao people and their lineal branches.

A variation on this legend speaks of how the Emperor's daughter surrendered herself to a dog because no man wanted her. When she
became pregnant the enraged father exiled the princess to the mountains where she gave birth to a son and a daughter. The two children married, becoming the ancestors of the “men of the mountain”.

Today the Yao are a mountain tribe and although their Central Chinese origin has not been definitively proven, although largely accepted no documentary evidence has become available concerning possible origination from seaside areas. A great many of the Yao myths however mention the sea or crossing of great waters. One legend mentions how the Yao’s ancestors set off in boats to cross the sea because their own country of “Nanking” had been hit by severe drought. Several boats were lost in the crossing and those who were saved attributed their luck to a creator-god. Pieng Hung, one of the survivors, pledged always to honor and reward this god. Since then the Yao have considered themselves the children and grandchildren of Pieng Hung and hold great respect for him. An interweaving of legends seems also to have taken place over the years as the dog legend is well known and widely spread on the island of Hainan, which, according to many accounts, may be the place to which Pan hu came when he captured the Emperor’s enemy. The similarity between Pieng Hung and the various forms of Pan hu (Pieng ming Hu, Pieng hu) also suggests that perhaps the Yao ancestry has become confused over the generations; Pan hu, if ancestrally similar to Pieng Hung, may have been a human rather than a canine ancestor.17

Many of the Yao groups seem to have additional legends concerning their origin. According to stories from two of the largest divisions, the Man Coc and Taio Tohaine, the first men on earth had their eyes and mouths set vertically on their faces. They had clawlike hands in front of their body rather than at their sides (it is mentioned here that Pieng Hung was the maker of mankind). All of mankind, save for a brother and sister who survived by crawling into a large gourd, was
destroyed in a great flood lasting 7 days and 7 nights. The brother and sister married and produced a child without arms or legs, whom they later chopped into pieces. The pieces were thrown on the earth and these turned into men. The piece of the head, because they were round, rolled down the mountain into the plains and produced kings and chiefs, and hence the men of the plains govern those of the mountains.

One source narrates another legend about a man who planted a tooth that grew into a large fruit tree. A bird poked a hole in a large fruit gourd (pumpkin) and forced the children of the area to climb into the gourd. A flood followed and all mankind were destroyed except the children in the pumpkin. After the water had receded, the young people, to avoid intermarriage, slept separately. One girl became impregnated by a leaf and gave birth to another gourd (possibly a pumpkin). Many of the seeds of the pumpkin were sown in the plains and a few in the mountains; from these seeds grew the human race: the Yao and other tribes in the hills, and the Chinese and Thai on the plains.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{History and Migration}

The Yao, thought to have originated in central China, were first reported by the Chinese in the fifth century B.C. Although some sources suggest that they had been migrating south and west since 2000 B.C. Others believe that the Yao were the first of the various hill tribes to leave China, around the fourth century A.D. It is probable, however that between 1200 and 900 A.D., the Yao began moving southeast into the southern and coastal regions of China and finally southwest toward the Tonkin area. Apparently a major Yao migration began about four centuries ago as they started moving west out of the Tonkin area. They established settlements in North Vietnam and Laos, the Shan states of
Burma and eventually in northern Thailand. Several sources though date the Yao migration from China only within the last 200 years.

The southward movement was evidently caused by the effects of soil exhaustion, drought, and the menace of marauding bandits. Another important factor affecting early Yao migration was Chinese confiscation of Yao land. The migration of the Yao is described as a slow infiltration offering no occasion for violent conflict. They followed the line of the ridges of vacant highlands. But Thailand, evidently their final destination, was not reached until 1800. According to some reports the main bulk of Yao arrived as recently as the World War II. These sources agree that the majority of the Yao who came into Thailand during World War II came as a result of political and military unrest and persecution in China and Burma. The largest Yao migration has been in the past 75 to 100 years, and the Yao influx into Thailand has dropped off considerably since World War II. Sporadic migration from Laos has been noted as recently as 1956, while a few Yao even now cross into Thailand.  

Population

It is not possible to fix the exact number of the total Yao population in Southeast Asia. There is not a single reliable census from all the countries the Yao inhabited, as is the case for all the other ethnic groups. The Nationalities Affairs Commission of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region states that the Yao, of the Chinese nationality, with a population of 2.13 millions, is scattered over a vast land in more than 140 counties of the six southern provinces of China. According to the Commission reports, the Yao population in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region amounts to 1.23 million, 66% of the whole ethnic population, mainly living in the six Yao autonomous counties in the region. Twenty thousand Yao people have settled down in Hekou, Jinping, Funing, Mengla of
Yunnan province, some on the borders. There are over 100,000 Yao people in Liannan and Ruyuan, of Guangdong province with a small number of them scattered over 10 mountainous counties. Only 20,000 Yao people set up households in Guizhou province. In the south Jiangxi province there are about 10,000 Yao distributed over the mountainous area.

The Yao of Thailand are settled in significant numbers in the northern section of the country, mainly in the provinces of Chiang Rai, Nan, and Phayao. In addition to these main areas of concentration, several Yao villages have been reported in Lampang, Kamphangphet, Sukhothai, and a small number in Chiang Mai and Tak provinces. During the years of 1985-1988, according to the census of the Department of Public Welfare, Ministry of Interior, there were a total of 181 Yao villages with 4,823 households with the population of 35,652 in the whole of Thailand. The concentration of the Yao villages in Chiang Mai province is in Fang district, 150 kilometers north of Chiang Rai province, in six villages with 130 households and 1,017 inhabitants according to the 1997 census. In Chiang Rai province, the Yao population was reported as 14,712 people in 1,181 households in 70 villages in 1972, but the number has declined due to the fact that several districts in the southern region have been regrouped and officially established in 1977 in a new province named Phayao. In 1997 Chiang Rai had only 50 villages, with the population of 10,644 persons in 1,522 households. In Phayao province, there were 33 villages of 1,013 households with 6,940 inhabitants in 1997. The majority of Yao in Phayao is found in the north part of Pong district, especially the Pha-changnoi sub-district where the Yao make up almost the total population. Another big concentration of Yao villages is in Chiangkham district. The number of Yao people in Nan province was nearly the same as in Phayao province in 1997. Its population was 7,832 living in 924
households in 40 villages. The densest settlement of them is in the western part of the province. In Kamphangphet, from 1974 onwards, many villages of the Yao were established in the area of Khlonglan district and the Department of Public Welfare had to establish the Kamphangphet Development and Welfare Center in order to provide them welfare services. In 1997 there were 3,479 Yao inhabitants in 448 households in 12 villages here. Ngao district of Lampang province can be said to have a major concentration of Yao villages at present. In 1972, there were only 2,353 Yao inhabitants in 324 households living in 18 villages, and in later years, many new villages are established when several Yao families returned from Phitsanulok including Kamphangphet province. In 1997 there were 4,022 people in 574 households in 25 villages. In Sukhothai province, there were 9 villages of 139 households with the population of 1,134 persons in 1997. Almost all the villages are small, and some families are trying to look for a new place. In 1985 or 1986, 12 families moved to Muang district of Lampang and bought the land of the Thai lowlanders for establishing their village. The Yao villages in Tak province are just recently settled. The people of this area used to grow corn along side the road of Kamphangphet-Umphang. When they knew that they must be evacuated by the forestry people and the military, they tried to settle down in small clusters. Some clusters contain several tribes living together in a village but their houses form an enclave within their own tribe. There were only 6 small villages of 73 households with only 584 inhabitants in 1997.21

Settlement Patterns

The Yao have often been described as nomadic or semi-nomadic people, perpetually wandering from place to place and having neither permanent homes nor land. Recently, however, the Yao have been
showing a tendency to establish more permanent settlements, presumably thereby adopting a sedentary life. Evidently they still move their villages every seven to ten years, but only a short distance to find fertile soil. Once the soil of their original settlement has regained its fertility they may return to the same place. Quarrels between families, hopes for better living conditions, and sometimes the wish of childless couples for children, will induce families to move from one village to another. Although tribal members are free to move out of a village, singly or in a group, the Yao villages remain quite unsegmented. It is reported that the Meo and the Yao move less frequently than the Lisaw, Lahu, and Akha.

Yao settlements are found high in the mountains, often in inaccessible areas, and ladders are often necessary to gain access to a Yao village. They prefer the hilltops to the plain, as they are accustomed to the mountain air and the sparse population. One source does mention that a few Yao villages have moved, or are anticipating a move, to the plains in order to facilitate wet-rice cultivation. However, the majority seems to be permanent mountain dwellers. Although Yao villages can be located at any altitude from 1,000 feet to above 5,000 feet, but they are usually located at an elevation of 3,000-3,500 feet, often along streambeds. Their villages are often above those of the Thai but slightly lower than those of the Meo and Lisaw.

It has been seen that the Yao choose large, flat, fertile areas in the hills for their villages with the hope of eventually having a large settlement. The chosen location must be large enough to construct a certain number of houses upon arrival, with enough space for other houses to be built later. The size of the village usually depends on the cultivated land around the village. If it is insufficient for all households, the villagers have to go searching for additional arable land near by so that much time is not wasted in travelling from their homes to the fields.
Even so, they often find it necessary to build field-huts to stay in during rainy season. Evidently the selection of such sites is governed to an extent by religious rules as well. The most strictly enforced rule concerning village sites is that no village (Yao or otherwise) is allowed to occupy an area directly above another Yao village on the same mountain slope. This seems to be strictly observed, as is a ruling which forbids a house to obstruct a clear line of easy access between any other house and the local spirit shrines that are usually located on the mountain slopes above the village.\textsuperscript{22} Usually the Yao prefer not to have their houses on the mountain ridge believing that the land on the ridge is the place of the mountain spirit. This information is derived from the study of a settlement called Ban Phaduar Village, Chiang Rai, Thailand during a fieldwork trip on 3th July 2002. If a village should be moved down to the plains, however, these restrictions would no longer apply, as these rules govern only mountain living. Another factor in the site founding of a village is the proximity of good water supply. Water pipelines of bamboo often act as conduits from the water source to the village. The channels of water for domestic purposes are also used in some villages to operate the pestle of the rice pounder located at the edge of the stream. In China Yao villages reportedly often have running water in each house.\textsuperscript{23}

In choosing the location for a new village the Yao consider the surroundings carefully. In addition to the spring, there should be a forest where wood can be found for the construction of houses as well as for firewood, and good soil for cultivation. The site should not be too close to other villages. Another very important factor is the direction of the wind, for stormy winds blow often during the rainy season, and thus could easily blow away the roofs of the houses. To avoid this eventuality the mountain slope is thus the first criterion taken for consideration. The slope should be somewhat inclining, not too steep and preferably in the
form of a basin or a plain surface containing water which can be easily canalized through the bamboo aqueducts to the back part of the house. Preference is accorded to such areas as have a range of mountains at the back of the village. These ranges are called Pei ho. The first mountain at the back is called On toi, and it should preferably be lower than the mountain next to it. Each mountain, however, has a specific name, such as Guay yin shan, Wan pi shan, Shan ku shan, and Magran shan. If a site is found where there are two ranges embracing the villages on both sides, the range at the left is called Shin wang, and at the right is called Pae hoe. Even though there is no injunction that the village must be situated on the east of the mountain to catch the freshness of the sunny morning, but the majority of them are so situated. They do not settle the village on the mountain ridge either for fear of disturbing the spirit of the ridge, or for fear that as such a site on the ridge is isolated, completely open to the sun, the rain, and the wind, potable water and the windshield would be difficult to procure.

The Yao do not select the small narrow piece of land between two streams or where two streams or rivers come to be connected. It is thought that such a locality is the spot where all evil may befall, as for an instance sickness may frequently visit the villagers. More important for them therefore is to locate a site where there is a kind of community forest, known as Ho pei shan, or Ching kem. This kind of forest may be 2-3 kilometers away from the village. It is also worth mentioning that since the Yao do not like to bring water on their shoulders from below, they believe that because of this forest, they will not face the problem of water shortage. To ensure a regular supply of water, on the New Year day they organize Ching uam, a ritualistic ceremony, for help from the Chui ko hung, the high god who protects the water, as also from the Ue hoi hung. Performing this kind of ceremony, the gong and the drum are
beaten and the shawm is played while walking along the aqueduct from
the village to the water source. After seeking blessings of these two gods,
a specific measure of salt wrapped in banana leaf is placed under the first
aqueduct.

Houses

The settlement patterns of the Yao seem to differ not only from
area to area, but also among the various groups and subdivisions. A large
majority build their houses flat on the ground (the Man Coc, Sieu Pan,
and Du Cun, a subgroup of the Man Coc), while some use pilings. The
piling is found necessary only if the slope becomes too steep, in which
case the houses are built against the hillside with pilings supporting the
front. The Con Lan, Lam dien, and some of the Deo Tien build houses of
this type. As a rule the houses are carefully constructed and are
considered to be extremely durable. The houses are constructed of a
variety of materials. In China there are many stone and clay and
occasionally unburned brick structures which are usually 13 to 18 feet
high. In Vietnam the Yao live in earthen houses, made of mud and straw.
In Thailand they use wood, bamboo, and fresh straw or leaves. Most
houses have dirt floors with raised platforms for the beds. The roofs are
made of thatch or bamboo laid side by side or sometimes made into
shingles. In China the roofs may be of brick resting on a wooden frame.
They are often very steep, and rainwater is conducted through bamboo
pipes along the roofline into a well, where it is saved until needed.24 The
houses of the Yao in Thailand are most often rectangular in shape,
containing three, five, or sometimes seven rooms. However, if the
settlement area is mountainous, there may be only one to three rooms.
There is often a roof ledge projecting 7 to 8 feet above the ground. The
front door on the downhill side is rarely used. Normal entrance is through
a rear door or possibly two side doors, with the front “spirit” door kept as the entrance for spirits and for use on ritual occasions such as weddings and funerals. Within the house there are often partitions separating the various areas. Strangers are traditionally welcomed in the main foyer, a small room off the center. The interior is usually dark and often quite smoky, since only a little air and light pass into the house from badly jointed doors and a few holes in the loose structure. As in China the kitchen area is often set in one corner and consists of a work area and a one-foot high clay stove. Smoke is allowed to circulate freely in the room with no provision for ventilation. In summer this provides protection against mosquitoes and everyone, including guests, sleeps near the fire. Iron cooking pots, small teapots, wine decanters, and the baskets of vegetables are usually lined up against the wall. Wine goblets, dishes, and chopsticks are usually stored in baskets placed either on the ground or hung from the wall. Along the sides of the structure are bamboo platforms or partially floored attics. These platforms, usually covered with straw, are used for sleeping. In many areas, however, the entire family, excluding the elders, sleep in a circle around the fire. On one wall of the main room there is usually an altar shelf, where the ancestral spirits are fed and honored. When a new house is built the spirits of the owner’s grandparents are invited to join the feast and the ceremony blessing the new home. During the ceremony the ancestral spirits are asked to drive away any spirits that may have previously inhabited the area. The furniture and utensils of the Yao are simple, but usually well made. The Yao in Vietnam, and eastern Laos are obviously influenced by the Chinese, since their houses, furniture, tools, and utensils are quite similar to those of the Chinese. (Figures 1.1 to 1.2, p. 38)
Figure 1.1 The Yao house.

Figure 1.2 The Yao house plan.
Besides these there are often other structures in the village such as shelters for the horses, buffalo, pigs, or goats, and possibly a hut with overhanging beams to serve as a granary. These are sometimes attached to the main house. There also may be a fenced-in area for a small garden or vegetable patch. The land around the houses is well cleared but no fences are built. The animals are allowed to run free, and are often responsible for a great deal of filth in the village. Because most sources disagree over the cleanliness and neatness of these settlements, it becomes apparent that sanitary conditions vary from village to village.

**Family Structure**

Yao social structure is basically founded on a nuclear family group: man, wife and their children. The Yao are, however, also inclined towards an extended family which often includes the younger brothers of the father, and sometimes parents and grandparents. When the grandparents die the children form their own households and will in turn be cared for by their children. One early source reports that when more than one family lived under the same roof, each often retained its own separate foyer or household within the house. There is however, no separation by age or generation within the household. All members take their meals together and sleep together in the main room. Sometimes the senior couple may sleep in an allotted section of a large partitioned house.

The father’s authority over the children is absolute til they have left the family unit. The wife usually has a word in most family matters. Quarrelling and struggles for authority are nipped early; politeness is “institutionalized” among the household members. The patriarchy is most pronounced in relation to inheritance customs. The sons of the family divide the land and material objects left by their father equally. If there are married daughters but no sons in the family, the sons-in-law will
inherit the family possessions. If a couple is childless the inheritance will go to a male relative, in direct line if possible, but if not, to a male in-law.\textsuperscript{26}

**Clan System**

The Yao have clans, but the exact nature of these clans is arguable. One reliable source puts forth the clan as the largest of the ritual descent groups.\textsuperscript{27} Membership is inherited patrilinearly for life, members being descendants of a common ancestor. However, the source goes on to say that these clans and their larger subdivisions do not keep genealogies, have no internal organization, and are not unilocal. Another source\textsuperscript{28} goes on to suggest that there are twelve clans, or patriclans, although not all are found in Thailand. The clan structure is further clarified by saying that the pertinent unit in marriage is the patrilineage, a narrower unit within the patriclan. The clans are not organized, nor is their geographical location demarcated. Each clan maintains a particular style of ritual behaviour, and even among some sub-clans there are distinctive ways of carrying on Yao rites. One clan, for example, uses ropes when capturing a pig for ritual sacrifice, while another uses a basket. The twelve clan names, as available from documentary evidence in the Yao passports are: Pieun, Ch’in, Yieun, Le, Tang, Chiuh, Chiu, Ho, Tong, Pum, Lwi, and Chiang, written in Chinese characters.

**Religion**

The Yao practice an animism that has been strongly influenced by Chinese culture. They believe that their wellbeing is regulated by animistic spirits, the most powerful being those of the water, the sky, and the mountains. The sphere of influence of these spirits includes a man’s health, wealth, success, and happiness. It is believed that the ancestral spirits are capable of protecting the tribal member from these spirits of
nature. Thus the greatest attention in religious ceremonies is paid to the ancestral spirits. These spirits are held in great reverence and many sacrifices are made to them.

Among some subgroups there are specific gods that are worshiped, apparently the result of White Tai influence. These gods include the Emperor of Jade (Nhu hung or Nhu tay), the King of Dragons (Lung hung), the God of Thunder, and the God of Hell. The Man Deo Tien and the Man Dai Ban of Vietnam are said to worship the same gods and several others.

Special services may also be held at the time of sowing, harvesting, sickness, or housewarming, in addition to the usual ceremonies at the time of birth, death, and wedding. The ceremony for a good crop is held shortly after the burning of the land, but before the seeding. The spirits are offered some of the produce of the harvest if it is a good one.

Before the shooting of any animal the spirits must be informed, as it is believed that all animals belong to the spirits. Paper money may be sacrificed to the spirits in return for the animal. The money is usually burned, thus passing into the world of spirits. During illness, sacrifice and feasts may be held to chase away the evil spirits. When a new house is erected in the village a special feast and ceremony are usually held, the purpose of which is to invite the ancestral spirits into the new home and to chase away any evil spirits. The Yao evidently believe that their life cycle depends upon maintaining the favor of the spirits. If they are to lead a happy prosperous life they must continually sacrifice to the spirits to ensure their help in avoiding misfortune.

Sacrificial rites have been passed down through generations of Yao and many show a strong Chinese influence. The Yao are said to have very crude idols, often of plaster or painted cardboard. Worship consists of chants and rhythmical dances, and firecrackers are sometimes used. They
also have altars where food is offered and incense burned. Before each ceremony gongs and drum are beaten so that the spirits will know the sacrifice is taking place. Each household has a special altar to their family ancestors (Figure 1.3, p. 42), and the members make sacrifices at this altar at regular intervals.

One source suggested that the Yao religion borders on shamanism. The shaman is held in high esteem by the villagers, and among some Yao it is felt that only the shaman has the power to contact or influence the ancestral spirits, and he will act as a go-between for the people to express
their needs and desires to the spirits. It is reported that in some Yao groups in northern Thailand the shaman not only acts as a go-between in religious matters but also acts as counselor, judge, and arbiter in village disputes. During religious ceremonies sacred books be- speaking the Yao’s heritage are often read aloud by the shaman. Before becoming shamans the young men are tested on the contents of these sacred books, and often they must appear before a jury of elder shamans to be accepted in the order. The shamans must go through a course of instruction from older religious leaders to learn the most effective methods with which to contact the spirits. (Figure 1.4, p. 43) During this training they usually learn to read Chinese characters and acquire several sacred books that may later be used to instruct younger villagers. A mature and learned shaman must pay a price before being accepted as qualified to give instruction. A younger shaman must also pay to receive instruction—the price is often a rooster, rice-paper, and a small amount of currency.

Figure 1.4 The Yao shaman.
Yao beliefs about the soul and an afterlife show the influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Specifically those Yao in the northern areas of Vietnam and Laos who are closest geographically to the Chinese influence and who may have become strongly sinicized show marked influences of Confucianism and Taoism. They believe in the soul and its survival, the transmigration of souls, and transformation to another form of life. It has been pointed out that after death, among some Yao, it is customary to place a piece of money in the mouth of the dead to appease the dogs guarding the gates of Hell. In Thailand the official religion is Buddhism and a few of the youth of the Yao tribes are beginning to be assimilated into the Buddhist tradition.  

Christian missionaries began work among the Yao and other hill tribes as early as 1890-1906. By 1932 the Gospel of St. Mark had been translated into the language of the Yao. The missionaries devised a script, using the Yao dialect, which the people could be taught to read and write. In the area of Mae Chan missionaries have established schools to teach the Yao to read and write this script and have taught them prayers and hymns. A reliable source, however, states that less than 200 Yao have been converted to Christianity.  

Birth

Yao believe that during a woman’s pregnancy the souls of the unborn baby do not yet reside in the fetus, but in various locations, depending on the month of the year. During the first and seventh months, the souls reside in the door of the house. The second and eighth months they live in the stoves. The third and ninth months find them in the rice pounder and the maize mill, and during the fourth and tenth in the floor near the altar. During the fifth and eleventh months the souls live in the mother’s body, and during the sixth and twelfth in the mother’s bed.
Precautions must be taken to prevent miscarriage and deformity. For example, Yao will not strike the door or rice pounder with a knife of any kind. They are careful not to spill water on the fireplace, nor will they enter the bedroom of a pregnant woman for fear that the soul of the unborn infant might be frightened away.

If a girl should become pregnant before marriage the boy need not take responsibility for the child. The mother’s family usually welcomes the child as a future helper. If the boy should decide to marry the girl the bride price is often larger than usual, as the girl has proven herself to be a fertile asset.

Once a women starts to show her pregnancy she will begin abstinence from sexual relations. No other preparations for the birth are recorded. A Yao woman is usually helped in her labor by her husband and possibly an elderly relative and a midwife. The midwife is paid for her help with a few gifts, often consisting of food. Friends and neighbors do not send gifts of congratulations.

After the child is born the mother is fed dates, chicken, and chicken eggs, and she must abstain from the meat of male animals for 3 days. She must remain still but not sleep for these 3 days. It is said that the mother is not given medicine of any kind, although one source does mention that the husband collects medicinal herbs for her. During this 3-day period, prayers and sacrifices are offered to the ancestral spirits.

Among the Man Ta Pan sub-group, husband and wife live separately for a period of 3 or 4 months before and after the birth. The mother must abstain from eating the meat of chickens and grease prior to the birth. She may not sew or embroider in the house, only out in the sunlight. The expectant mother’s home is designated by a bunch of dried leaves or grass hung from the front door. Old women of the village aid the women during the birth. The mother is allowed to eat eggs, ginger,
and rice before she nurses the baby, and continues this diet for the following three days. She may have no water, only a little wine and the eating of the meat of male animals is forbidden. On the third day after the delivery the child’s birth is announced and a cock is sacrificed to the ancestors. If it is a boy he is named after his great-grandfather. Girls are named according to their birth rank, for example, first, second, last.

The child frequently sleeps with the mother as an infant, while during the day he is carried on her back held by means of two cloth straps while she works in the house or fields. Among most of the Yao groups, at the age of one month the child’s head is shaved and then a tuft allowed to grow on the top. The child is often not given a name until the age of 6 or 7 years. Furthermore these names may be changed later if they seem ill suited or for any other reason.

It is important that every family have a boy to carry on the family line. If there is no boy born to a couple they either adopt or buy a son, or the husband may take a second wife in the hope that she will bear him a son.

**Death and Burial**

The mortality rate among the Yao is very high. Very few people live to become grandparents; in one study only 7 households out of 22 were headed by grandparents or a surviving senior member of the family.32

Among some of the Yao subgroups, specifically the Man Deo Tien, there is a belief in metamorphosis. It is believed that after death they turn into a tiger and that the Lao are turned into animals that eat human flesh. Lazy children will be turned into monkeys and must flee to the forests, where they take up residence in the trees and never come down.
The Yao believe in the existence of the soul and its immortality. They break the soul down into two distinct parts: one remains planted under the altar of the ancestors; the second submits to the law of successive rebirths. If the person has spent a good life his soul will be reborn in a new body, while if he has been evil the soul will pass into the body of a chicken, pig, or some other lowly animal.

Apparently, the Yao in Thailand usually cremate their dead. After death the body is clothed in everyday clothes and laid in a coffin. Some personal objects used during life may be placed in the coffin with the body. The coffin will lie in state in the house for only a short time, usually less than one full day. Since it is believed that the soul of the dead has to walk westward to reach its new home, the removal of the coffin is usually delayed until the sun has set. Four men then carry it to the place where it is to be cremated. A procession of relatives and friends follows. A Yao holding burning incense in one hand and throwing paper money along the way with the other hand often leads the group. The immediate family follows directly behind the coffin. The mourning dress is white, undyed cloth, with small bundles of copper coins usually carried or tied to the clothing. The coffin is taken to a site not far from the village and placed on a previously erected stone base. A straw roof is erected over the site, and the coffin is left there, often for three or four months, until the time of cremation. At this time the straw roof is lowered, broken up on the coffin, and set on fire. The ashes are put into an urn immediately after the fire has died down and the area is leveled. The same spot is never used twice for cremation. The jug or urn in which the ashes have been placed is buried in a special stone grave, which has been previously selected with the assistance of the shaman or fortune-teller.

A number of Yao groups in China have begun to bury their dead in caskets in the ground. The gravesite is usually chosen by the egg-
throwing oracle: an egg is thrown, presumably by the shaman of the village or possibly an honored family member, and the deceased is buried where the egg breaks. It has also been reported that the dead have sometimes not been buried for a period of three years, but merely laid out in a jungle clearing, the remnants being burnt after the three year period and then buried in an urn. There are several other rituals which may be followed after the death of a Yao. Among the Quan Trang a tooth, toenail, fingernail, and a piece of hair are taken from the deceased. These are all put into a small white urn, which is then wrapped in a piece of white paper. A priest, or shaman, and the family take the urn with them in search of the right place to bury the remains. Once they select a site, two cocks will be brought to the site; the throat of one is cut and it is thrown into the air. The urn is buried where the bird falls. The place is visited in a few days and if the deceased is not happy with the site, the urn, which was buried with the dead man, will be returned to the surface. It has been recorded that in olden times these people cremated their dead, kept no records of the burial of the urn, and used no markers to indicate the place of burial.

Among the Man Tien sub-group, the deceased is washed and then dressed in his best clothes, a piece of silver is placed in his mouth, and the body placed in the middle of a room. A short ceremony of prayer and torch burning, probably conducted by the village shaman, is traditionally followed by a procession to the gravesite. The burial place in this case is chosen by the eldest son of the deceased, with the aid of the spirits. The coffin, usually made of planks or a tree trunk, is lowered into the ground, and the first shovel of dirt is put in by the oldest son, followed by the others in the party. All utensils used during the ceremony are burned. A rock bearing his name is placed at the side of the head of the dead man. A spirit house is built close to the grave to keep the body from harm.
The burial ceremony among the Man Coc sub-group is somewhat similar to that of the Man Tien. The body is laid at the foot of the altar (presumably the ancestral altar in his home) for a period of three days, during which time the shaman says prayers and incense is burned to purify the deceased. The relatives mourn the dead by not eating meat, by lamenting, and by playing music. A cock is killed at the time of burial, but the exact significance of this act is unclear. A procession of men, women, and children walks with the coffin to the gravesite and the shaman prays over the grave and coffin, finally ending the ceremony by putting dirt into the grave. Friends and neighbors of the deceased then finish the burial.

**Special Ceremonies and Entertainment**

Unique among the Yao are their merit-making ceremonies, called ‘ordination’. The first rite is called ‘Hanging the Lanterns’ or Kwa tang, and the second rite Tou sai. The first rite or Kwa tang is usually performed for a boy before the age of 20. Lasting for two days, the ceremony introduces him to the Taoist pantheon and guarantees him entry into the realm of the ancestors when he dies. It also marks him as a true Yao, one who can take part fully in all ceremonies and rituals. The second rite, Tou sai, the ordination to the highest rank of the priesthood, lasts for seven days. It is much more complex than the first rite, and requires the assistance of several high-ranking Yao priests. During the ceremony it is forbidden for those being initiated to eat certain types of food, especially meat and fat, or to have sexual relations. Part of this complicated ceremony calls for the initiates to climb a ‘sword ladder’, the rungs of which are made of wooden swords. The ‘master priest’ leads the way and the postulants follow. Often many men, up to forty in some instances, hold the ceremony at the same time to save expenses.
Women attend the ceremonies dressed in all their finery, and share in their husband’s promotion. They are included in a special feast at the conclusion of the rite, and receive a new name which bestows a higher status on them.

There are two ceremonies in which the entire village participates. The first is held in honour of the guardian spirits of the area. Everyone must contribute towards the purchase of pigs, chickens, paper money and liquor used as offerings. It is a one-day ceremony, following which no one may enter or leave the village for three days. Tree branches are placed on the paths at each entrance to the village to keep visitors out.

The second one-day ceremony is not closed to outsiders. The purpose is to beg forgiveness of the guardian spirit of the mountain for allowing domestic animals to search for food in his territory. It is held at times when problems arise, such as, death of livestock, women having difficulty dyeing cloth, or liquor not turning out well.

For entertainment, the Yao celebrate weddings, funerals, and New Year with feasting and drinking rather than singing and dancing. The New Year celebration is held for 3 or 4 days during the end of January or the beginning of February. The women wear special dress (if they do have a change of clothing), pigs and chickens are killed, food and cakes are prepared, and liquor is made ready for the occasion. The festivities include gun firing, gong beating, singing, and visiting each individual house in the village. Among the Man Tien sub-group, the third day of the fifth month is also celebrated by feasting: this festival is held in memory of the ancestors. On the 15th day of the eighth month they hold the feast of the lanterns for the children of their villages. It is reported that the Yao in China celebrate festivals on the same day as the mainland Chinese. They are known to celebrate the feast of Sing Ming, the feast of the King of the Dragons, and the Buddhist feast of the fourteenth day of the
seventh moon (the day of the deliverance of souls). Among the Dai Ban sub-group the biggest celebration is the Day of Fast which they call Chau dang. This is celebrated every seven years among the more wealthy tribe people, and only every ten years among the poor.

Some Yao subgroups are considered to be quite talented musicians, especially the Dai Ban of Vietnam and Laos. They use musical instruments such as the lute (borrowed from the Chinese), a flute-like instrument, gongs, cymbals, and drums. Although they dislike loud music making, except possibly on special occasions, they do enjoy these activities in moderation as a means of courtship and merriment. The Yao also enjoy story telling which seemingly is the main event in the evenings when they visit their neighbors.34
The Lisaw Hill Tribe

Ethnic and Racial Origins

The Lisaw or Lisu are a Mongoloid people of Tibeto-Burman origin. It is probable that they are of Lolo extraction, or at least are closely related to this Tibeto-Burman group. While definite information is lacking, the original home of the Lisaw may have been to the northwest of Yunnan or in Tibet. From this region, the Tibeto-Burman peoples gradually migrated southward into the Salween Valley, and subsequently into Burma and Thailand.

In addition to close ethnic ties with the Lolo, the Lisaw share some linguistic and cultural ties with the Lahu and Akha tribes who also belong to the Tibeto-Burman sub-branch of Sino-Tibetan family of language, unlike the Yao who belong to Meo-Yao sub-branch.

Various Names of the Group

The Thai refer to this group as the Lisaw or Hkeh-Lisaw, while the tribesmen themselves use the term Lisu. Like the Thai, the Shan, a minority group who live in Shan state of Burma, call the Lisu the Lisaw, although they sometimes use the terms Chenung, Che-Li, or Yaw-yen. The Burmese generally use the term Yaw-yen. The Chinese also often use the word Lisaw in reference to the Lisu, but they also use the term Lu-Tze in reference to the Lisaw living in the upper Salween Valley. This latter name is derived from the Chinese name ‘Lu’ for the Salween River. These Lisaw are also referred to as Yeh-jen, which in Chinese means “wild people.” The British have borrowed the Burmese term Yaw-yen for Lisaw, or its alternate spelling Yawyn, and this term is used in most British sources, while the Kachins, a minority group who live in the border of Burma, also use the term Yaw-yen in reference to the Lisaw.
Alternate spellings for the term Lisaw include Lissaw, Lishaw, Li-shaw, Li-hsaw, and Lee-shaw. The word Yaw-yen is also spelled Yawyin, Yawyen, or Yaoyen.

The Lisaw are divided into three general subtribes: the White Lisaw or Pai (alternate spelling—Pe), the Flowery Lisaw or Hua (alternate spelling—Hwa), and the Black Lisaw or He.37 The Black Lisaw are often referred to in Western studies as the “Independent Lisaw”. At present most of the Flowery Lisaw are to be found in Thailand.

Language

The Lisaw language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. However, a considerable number of words from Chinese, Tai, Burmese, and various hill tribe languages have been added to this parent stock. Linguistic borrowing has been more prevalent among the southern Lisaw groups than among those living in the north. Words taken from Chinese are largely borrowed from the Yunnanese dialect and primarily are words expressing cultural ideas.

The Lisaw language includes several dialects, with the He, Hua, and Pai subgroups each having its own dialect. Although grammar and structure are similar, one source notes that approximately 40 percent of the Lisaw vocabulary varies from dialect to dialect, which may create some intratribal communication difficult.38 Although there are a few polysyllabic words, the Lisaw language is virtually monosyllabic, with each syllable consisting of an initial consonant followed by a vowel. There are no Lisaw syllables that end in a consonant. There are about 250 separate sound combinations in the Lisaw list of syllables. Lisaw language, unlike Yao, is more complex and intricate, and is a tonal language, with six tones: these include two upper tones, two middle tones, and two lower tones. The first tone is high and even; the second is
high, abrupt, and rising; the third, medium and even; the fourth is slightly lower than the third; the fifth is low and even; and the sixth is low and abrupt. The usage and differentiation of these tones is important in preventing ambiguity.

Grammatical structure does not, in most cases, compare with English construction. For example, the positioning of words and the use of classifiers that define and modify are of particular importance in shaping the meaning of a sentence. Moreover, Lisaw forms vary according to social context, with differing forms of expression for different people, such as brothers, sisters, relatives, parents, friends, and guests. These differing forms reflect the highly important clan ties as well as blood ties. The Lisaw are reputed to be rather good linguists. Many of the Lisaw in Thailand are reported to be fluent in Lahu and Yunnanese Chinese, and a small number in Shan, Lao-Thai, and Akha. From the research fieldwork in Chiang Rai, Thailand, it has come to be known that most of the older Lisaw can speak Yunnanese while a few can speak Mandarin Chinese (main Chinese). Today a large number of young Lisaw attend the Thai Government school, and are thus becoming both fluent and literate in Thai.

Until recently the Lisaw did not apparently have a written language. While there is one mention of a form of hieroglyphic used by the Lisaw sorcerers, no written form has been in general use. Recently a Lisaw script has been devised by Christian missionaries in China, Burma, and Thailand. The script was created by Rev. J.O. Fraser of the China Inland Mission. The number of Lisaw acquainted with the Fraser script, and able to use it, is unknown. However, significant efforts to encourage the tribes to learn and employ the system have been made in Thailand, China and Burma.
Legendary Accounts

The traditional Lisaw legend of their origin centers on a brother and sister who were the only survivors of a worldwide drought. They lived in a water gourd, and faced with the prospect of starvation, the boy made repeated appeals to the sky god, Wu Sa, for rain. When their requests were granted, and the earth once again became fertile, the brother and sister were then faced with the problem of continuing the human race. After much discussion on the question of marriage, the sister agreed that they would marry if two halves of a millstone, rolled down opposite sides of a mountain, should be found joined together. The halves of the stone were found joined, and the couple married. The sister soon became pregnant, but gave birth to a water gourd instead of a child. The brother questioned the sky god concerning this strange occurrence, and was told that within the gourd were 101 languages (or ethnic groups) and 201 people. The couple carefully opened the gourd and 100 women and 101 men were released. One couple released from the gourd became the forebears of the Lisaw. The one man without a partner was an Akha, who was enjoined by the sky god to enter the jungle and marry a monkey. Thus, in Lisaw eyes, the Akha are descendants of a monkey and are only partially human.

Another version of this legend states that there was a great flood, and the brother and sister were saved by seeking refuge in a large pumpkin. After they floated in the pumpkin for many days the flood subsided, and the couple resolved the problem of marriage in a manner similar to that described above. The sister gave birth to nine sons, who, when grown, went forth to establish the various races of man. This Lisaw version is a bit similar to a Yao story, which speaks that all of the perpetuation of human race by a Yao brother and sister who survived a great flood by crawling into a large gourd.
Other Lisaw legends deal with migrations and with many battles and struggles with their neighbors, particularly the Chinese. A few also deal with innovations brought about by contact with the Chinese.

**History and Migration**

While the exact geographic origin of the Lisaw is unknown, it seems probable that the Lisaw are splintered from racial stock that originally inhabited areas in Southwest China. The migration of the Lisaw, and of many other segments of this original stock can be traced for the last 2,000 years. It appears that the migration that took place at various times, has involved various groups and somewhat differing areas, and has been varied in intensity. Much of the migration into the Southeast Asian area has been in comparatively recent times.

According to one source, the Lisaw split into two branches with an eastern branch descending the Yangtze River valley and settling along the tributaries of the river. The southern migration of the Lisaw may thus represent only one branch of the Lisaw. It is relatively certain that the Lisaw moved slowly down through Tibet and Yunnan following roughly the course of the Salween valley. The migration along the Tibeto-Chinese border followed the mountain ridges, with settlement taking place along the mountain crests and in valleys of higher elevation. In many cases the migration was the result of Chinese pressures, with population growth and soil depletion perhaps being additional factors.

The Lisaw moved down from the Yunnanese area into the Shan States in Burma and finally into Thailand. Their entry into Thailand probably began no earlier than 150 years ago, with the bulk of this migration occurring during the 20th century. Their movement into Thailand proper has been gradual, and most recent migration has taken place after World War II.
All of the Lisaw subgroups currently found in Thailand came from Burma. Much of the southward migration from China and Burma has been triggered by political unrest in these areas. Although this migration has largely followed the Salween River, in Thailand although some groups have settled away from the river area. It seems probable that this current southward migration trend will continue into the future, and that additional Lisaw will enter northern Thailand.

However, contact between the Lisaw and the Chinese has not always involved only conflict, for there has been some intermingling and some intermarriage. The Black Lisaw living in the upper Salween Valley have been the least Sinicized, because effective Chinese administration in this region was established only after World War I and these Lisaw have had fewer dealing with the Chinese. The reverse is true of the Lisaw farther south, with intermarriage being fairly common and the adoption of Chinese customs and dress being fairly widespread, particularly in the Burmese Shan States and in Thailand.

Population

In 1964 the total Lisaw population was found to be in excess of 400,000, with 317,000 of these living in China, 17,300 in Thailand in 1963, and 19,865 in Burma in 1950.43

It has been found by Paul and Elaine Lewis44, that after 1958 there is approximately, an annual increase of almost 3.6% in Thailand in the Lisaw population. Most of this was natural, as immigration of Lisaw during this time was minimal. In mid-1983 there were approximately 18,000 people living in some 110 villages in Thailand. According to the census of the Department of Public Welfare, Ministry of Interior, there were 128 Lisaw villages with 4,119 households with the population of 25,251 in 1990.45 In Burma they numbered around 250,000, and in China
about 500,000. There are several hundred households in northeast India, but none in Laos or Vietnam.

Lisaw in Thailand tend to be quite different from those in northern Burma. This is partly due to their isolation from the main population further north for several generations. Moreover, the Thai Lisaw have intermarried with Yunnanese over a considerable period, and often refer to themselves as “Chinese Lisaw”.

**Settlement Patterns**

The vast aggregate of Lisaw migration and settlement in Thailand has taken place along mountain ridges at elevations of 5,000 feet or more above sea level: they seem to prefer to settle in areas over 6,000 feet. One consideration has been the fact that most of the arable lowlands were already being farmed by other peoples when the Lisaw arrived in Thailand. Another major factor was the Lisaw’s lack of resistance to malaria, prevalent in Thai lowlands: the children being particularly susceptible to this disease. There is a Lisaw folk saying that makes the fear palpable: “If you are not afraid to go hungry, go up and live in high altitudes; if you are not afraid of death, go down and live in low altitudes.” Finally, the Lisaw favor the higher altitudes because they prefer the cooler climate.

In addition to altitude, several other factors condition the location of a Lisaw village. The availability of wood for construction and a nearby source of water are prime considerations: water, in particular, has a special importance in the determination of village locations. The Lisaw also seek large level areas, with the expectation of establishing large settlements, and a region with an abundance of fertile land. Finally, the Lisaw seek isolation for the village as a means of protection for the settlement.
Although some Lisaw villages may move from one location to another every 3 to 4 years, larger settlements may occasionally remain stationary for as long as 40 or 50 years. One factor in the movement of Lisaw villages is the death of the headman. While the death of a regular member of the village does not require a change in village location, the probable dependence on personal loyalty to the headman will generally cause the entire village to move in the event of his death. The size of an average Lisaw village varies, ranging from 18 to 62 houses, with the average village consisting of 37 houses. Some sources have noted villages with as few as 4 or as many as 100 houses. Most estimates place the size of the average Lisaw nuclear family at six or seven members, although two sources note households with an average of 12 persons to a house.46

Aside from the houses, a village generally contains trellises covered with pumpkin vines. Livestock are either quartered under the houses, or apart from the houses in corrals or sties. The exact layout and organization of a village depends on the topography of the area and on the size of the village. Information on a standard pattern or overall layout is not available.

Houses

Lisaw dwelling in Thailand is of two types: a raised house built on stilts or pilings and a ground-level type of dwelling. The stilt type of house is more prevalent among the northern Lisaw (particularly the Black Lisaw), but a few are found as far south as Chiang Rai Province.

The stilt home is built on wooden pilings that generally raise the house from 3 to 4 feet above the ground. The walls are either of woven bamboo or of bamboo slats. Roofing is of thatched grass, and frequently the home is surrounded by a fence to prevent the cattle from eating the
thatching. There will often be a small veranda in front of the house. Most stilt houses have two or three rooms, though poorer families may have only one large room.

The Lisaw houses built on the ground have floors of hard-packed mud and are often cold and damp. (Figure 1.5, p. 61) Thus, most family activities take place around the central stone hearth. The walls, both interior and exterior, are of woven bamboo. The house is generally divided into three rooms; the middle room, called Htang waw ch, contains the hearth, and the bedroom and kitchen are side rooms. The primary advantage of these ground-level houses, patterned on the Chinese style, is that they afford protection against wind and storms. The size of the house depends on the number of people living in it. Small children sleep with their parents in the main bedroom. Children from the age of about 10 to puberty sleep on the guest platforms, girls on one and boys on the other. When there are guests the girls go to the house of a relative to sleep. Girls who have reached puberty are given a bedroom of their own. A married son living with his parents has a separate bedroom for his family. Lisaw welcome guests into the main room of the house, and look after their needs. They expect the guests to stay out of the bedroom, not to interfere with the ancestral altar, and not to sleep with their heads toward the fire. (Figure 1.6, p. 61)

In the stilt home, the bed is often a mat on the floor; other furnishings include a low table mounted on the wall and several storage bins. In the center of the house is a stone hearth, often with an iron pot hanging over it. The hearth is surrounded by small logs as rough stools, and this area is used both for work and for social occasions.
Figure 1.5 The Lisaw house.

Figure 1.6 The Lisaw house plan.
Family Structure

The basic social units among the Lisaw are the family and the village. The Lisaw family unit is apparently nuclear, consisting of husband, wife, and unmarried children. It is probably also patrilineal, since names and inheritance both follow the male line. Although property is equally divided among sons, daughters traditionally receive no inheritance because they are expected to benefit from their bride price and wedding gifts.

Clan System

There seems to be some disagreement as to whether the Lisaw have clans. Although one recent report claims the Lisaw do not have a clan system, another source states that the entire Lisaw tribe is divided into twelve exogamous clans. Other sources seem to substantiate the latter claim, one stating that clan loyalties are strong and provide a limited form of tribal cohesion, and another listing a series of names for the clans. This last report, written by two early observers, claims that Lisaw clans are generally named after animals, plants, or forest products, and it gives the following names for the principal clans: Wo-Pa, No-Pa, Lama, Tze-Pa, Wa-Pa, La-Pa. Nur-Pa, Pia-Pa, Ch-ih-Pa. Li-Pa, She-Pa, and Nu (or Lu-Pa). Two other sources discuss clan marriage regulations, indicating that the Lisaw do have clan divisions, and another source, discussing incest taboos, mentions the patriclan, suggesting that the clans are patrilineal.

One source reported that kinship is based on a system of patrilineal clans. Six of them are traditionally Lisaw, and have Lisaw names: ‘Honey’ (Bya), ‘Wood’ (Suh), ‘Fish’ (Ngwa), ‘Bear’ (Wu), ‘Buckwheat’ (Gwa), and ‘Hemp’ (Dzuh). The Honey clan is the largest, and has three segments. There are further nine principal clans which have evolved from...
intermarriage with Yunnanese: Li, Yang, Wang, Tao, Wu, Ts’ao, Ho, Cu, and Cang. Of these the Yang and Li are the largest.51

There are no formal heads or chiefs, but the oldest male member of a clan is accorded a place of special respect by the clan members of that village. He may be called upon to arbitrate disputes within the clan to keep the matter out of the headman’s jurisdiction. At festivals, such as the New Year, this respected elder is accorded special honor by those in his clan.

Religion

The Lisaw religion is primarily a blend of indigenous animism and ancestor worship borrowed from the Chinese, although some Buddhist and Christian elements can also be traced. The Lisaw believe that the world is full of spirits, like the Yao who also believe in spirits and ancestors, some of which are good and others bad. However, both good and bad spirits are capable only of wrath when offended. The primary emphasis of their religion is on the propitiation of the spirits and the souls of the dead, based on fear of these entities rather than on any pure form of worship. This propitiation is carried out through a series of sacrifices usually through offering of the food at various times, in different manners, for different objectives. Other than during sacrifices, the Lisaw’s daily objective is to remain “unseen,” or away from the attention of the spirits.

Among the pantheon of Lisaw deities there are seven major or chief spirits, as listed below:

1. Wu-Sa, also called Makwa or Makara. Wu-Sa is the principal Lisaw deity. He is considered to be the creator of the world and chief god and is called the heavenly king or lord of heaven. He is also the sky god and can deliver a person from any evil.
2. Misi, is the principal spirit of the jungle, forest, and hills and must be propitiated if animals are lost. Misi is said to be the most wrathful of all the spirits.

3. Mina, is the spirit of the earth and soil and receives offerings at harvest time.

4. Mihi, is the spirit of the wind.

5. Muhu, is the lightning demon.

6. Chyi, is the spirit of healing and is propitiated with animal sacrifices.

7. Hini, also called Ni high, are the ghosts or spirits of the ancestors who play an important role in family affairs such as birth, marriages, and death. The Hini are also the household spirits.

Lesser Lisaw deities include the spirits of the village—called the guardians—the spirits of fields and crops, and the water spirits. Because water spirits are thought to be easily offended, the crossing places for streams are carefully selected and limited in number.

Each Lisaw village generally has at least one sorcerer, called either Tongpa or Maw-pi, to carry out the religious functions within the village. The practitioner’s primary duties include exorcism, the supervision of rituals (including those related to birth, weddings, and funerals), the treating of illness, and the planning of sacrifices. The practitioner also manufactures charms and amulets designed to ward off misfortune and illness. He generally receives only a meal in payment for his services.

Lisaw religious leaders seemingly do not have the power or status of the political leaders and their power is generally limited to religious concerns. This is in part due to the lack of an established priestly class, since traditionally any young male Lisaw willing to learn the religious language could become a practitioner.
While the vast majority of Lisaw are animists, there may be a few followers of Buddhism. A 1950 source states that at that time there were 107 Buddhists among the Lisaw population, but it is unclear as to the location of these tribespeople. Buddhist elements in Lisaw religious life appear to be primarily of Chinese origin and involve Chinese rituals. Special emphasis is reportedly placed on the Buddhist concept of merit.

Initial Christian missionary activity among the Lisaw was centered in the China Inland Mission, which worked with the Lisaw and other tribes in Yunnan and Kweichow as early as 1910. Since the expulsion of missionaries from Communist China, the activity of this group has been concentrated on the Lisaw in Burma and Thailand. In 1958 there were 28 missionaries working in nine centers in Lisaw areas of these two countries. These missionaries also dealt with several other tribal groups. The primary effort of the China Inland Mission program has been directed toward the Lisaw in Burma, and there has been a higher degree of effectiveness there than among the Lisaw in Thailand.

One of the prominent missionaries among there was J.O. Fraser, who created the Lisaw script. Other missionaries have employed this script for translations of various texts into the Lisaw language. Orville Carlson, an important figure in Southeast Asian missionary activities, has been the superintendent of the program among the Lisaw in Burma in recent years.52

Birth

A Lisaw mother delivers her baby either in her bedroom or close to the main fireplace. One or more village women help her. If the labour is extended, an offering may be made to one of the ‘bad death’ spirits to facilitate the birth. The woman must not drink cold water, for fear her blood might become cold, making her unable to deliver.
After delivery she must lie by a ‘mother-roasting fire’ for a month. For seven days a taboo sign is kept outside the door to prevent visitors from entering. During this period the baby is not considered a human being, but still belonging to the spirit world. The placenta is either placed high in a tall tree in the jungle, or buried in the spot where the ‘mother-roasting fire’ is built.

The day after the birth of the child the family kills a pig, and the priest makes offerings of pork and other items to the village guardian while praying, ‘By your blessing we have a new baby. Look after the village and let nothing happen to it. Give the child your blessing. We ask you for a name for him. Let him become big, like a huge cucumber. May he have no sickness. Give him long life and much power’. The village priest then returns to the house where the child was born, and while making offerings to the ancestors prays to them in a similar way.

After the offerings and prayer, a low table is brought in with a bowl of water and two bowls of liquor. The priest drops an Indian rupee into the water, then uses two cowrie shells to divine a name. The question of why an Indian rupee was thrown in water was raised before many priests but they were unable to give any satisfactory explanation. It is possible that this practice was derived from a local custom. The area of Siam/Thailand had a long historical association with India and the use of Indian coins must have been familiar to the locals, and these became imbued with some kind of totemic significance for them. As he calls out names, first using those of the more famous ancestors, he drops the shells into the water. When one of the shells falls with the closed side up and the other with the open side up, the name just called becomes the official name of the child. For everyday use, however, the child is usually called by a Lisaw name indicating its birth order.
Seven days after the birth the mother is purified by a “sizzling the body” ceremony. She sits inside a tent of blankets on an overturned pig trough, thereby imparting fertility to the livestock. Water containing lu khwa leaves is then poured on hot rocks, and the woman is engulfed in steam. After this ceremony she may again drink cold water, and cook for herself, although not yet for her husband.

At the end of one month the ‘mother roasting fire’ is extinguished, and the ancestors are informed of the new member of the clan. If the baby has been ill or weak, a ‘soul calling’ ceremony is performed. The mother now returns to normal life. She can cook for the family, carry water, and use tools, which were earlier taboo to her.

An unwed mother often rears the child herself, but most Lisaw ostracize such a mother. If the girl’s father discovers who has fathered the child he will fine him, and force the father to accept the child thus enabling his grandchild to belong to its father’s clan. If it is not known who the father was, the child will remain clanless until grown up. A boy can then request a bowl from the altar of a household belonging to a clan different from the one in which he was reared, thus becoming accepted in Lisaw culture.

A Lisaw woman who dies in childbirth is considered to have died a ‘bad death’—the same as being killed by lightning, a leopard, or smallpox. Her body will not be buried, but cremated.

Death and Burial

The Lisaw view death as the beginning of entry into the kingdom of the spirits. However, the journey from the grave to this kingdom is long and dangerous, with nine hills and streams to cross and, because success is not certain, great care must be taken to appease the spirits so that the dead may live on in the spirit world.
Traditionally when the Lisaw thought that the death was imminent, a dying person was given nine grains of rice and nine small pieces of silver to swallow. In the case of a woman, seven of each item were used. These were believed to sustain the soul of the deceased and to aid it on its way to the spirit kingdom. As soon as tribesman dies, two of the people watching over him call out to the spirits, using the man's spirit name, and askes them to accept him and return him to his ancestors.

The funeral ceremony may occur at different times in different areas. While some sources state that the body is retained until after harvest so that a proper feast can be given, another notes that burial takes place within 2 to 3 days of death, and a little divination is used to select an auspicious date. The funeral ceremony generally includes a feast and is an occasion for everyone to wear his finest clothes. Except for children, the dead are usually placed in wooden coffins. During the funeral ceremony many villagers help carry the coffin to the gravesite and offerings are made to the spirits along the route.

Lisaw graves may be of several forms, the most common being a shallow trench lightly covered with earth. However, some graves are permanently marked with stones or with large dirt mounds covered with thatch grass. They often have the deceased's crossbow and knife suspended above the site. In some cases, rice and a large jar mark the grave and serve as offerings to the spirits.

The Lisaw mourning period lasts for 3 years, and rice, wine, and water periodically brought to the gravesite as offerings to the spirits and ancestors. At the end of the third year it is felt that the deceased has completed his journey to the spirit land and needs no further care by the living.
Special Ceremonies and Entertainment

The most important festival is that of the New Year, when they celebrate the turning of the old year to the new one. Lisaw call New Year "Ko shy ha shy". The preparations for New Year intensify in January. Many hours and considerable sums of money are devoted to the making of new outfits for the young people. Silver ornaments are cleaned, and silver buttons are sewn onto the clothing. Quantities of liquor are distilled, each step in the process being punctuated by shooting a gun.

The New Year festival begins with the announcement by the village priest that on the following day they must make ‘rice cakes’ (papa). The household of the village priest is the first to make the cakes then a gun is shot as a signal that the other villagers may start making theirs. Each family gathers around its pounder and together makes the cakes to be used as New Year offerings, and to be eaten by the family later. During the day the young people make excursions to the fields to collect large quantities of vegetables, and men from each family go to the jungle and cut a New Year tree (leh dzuh). After sunset the priest calls out from the guardian spirit shrine that the sun has set, then each family ceremonially plants its tree in front of the house. The ‘Old Year’ celebration is observed, in preparation for which each house is ‘purified’ by being swept thoroughly and having all leftover food discarded. In the evening every person in the household puts a hard-boiled egg and a cotton string in a basin of uncooked glutinous rice. The oldest man in the household takes the basin outside and calls the souls of the household members to enter it, then takes it back inside, gives an egg to each person to eat, and ties the string around the necks of adult family members and the wrists or elbows of children and guests. Later in the evening the senior priest goes into a trance for his household and the village as a whole. While in the trance he blows fireballs of lard, and
sprays water from his mouth in order to drive the ‘bad’ of the Old Year away, so that everything will be clean and good for the New Year. The spirits speak through him, emphasizing that everyone must make a break with the old, so as to enter into the New Year free from sickness and evil. He says such things as, ‘People, don’t separate. Wherever you go, whatever happens, stay together and be united’. This theme is expressed in other ways as well, because there may be families who plan to leave the village soon after the New Year. Later that night people congregate at the village priest’s house. While elders drink and sing, young people first dance around their New Year tree then go in procession from house to house throughout the night, dancing around each tree, thus ‘sweeping out’ the bad and impure elements from the entire village. At cockcrow the next morning, women from the village priest’s house go to the water source and make offerings of joss sticks, rice cakes, and pork, and bring ‘New Year water’ back to the house. This ‘new water,’ considered to be special, is used to fill the cups on the ancestral altar, and to cook offerings for the ancestors. The priest and his wife wash their faces with some of this water by their New Year tree to ‘wash away the evil of the old year’. Later that morning men from each household go to the village shrine with the priest to present offerings of rice cakes, liquor, and pork to the guardian spirit. During the offering the priest prays, ‘like a stream, like clear water, let us have no trouble or sickness. Let us not separate. Come receive this offering. Sha-a-a’’. Later similar offerings are sent to the priest by each household. He arranges these on the platform under his altar, and then prays again in the same fashion. Strings are tied to the necks of those present, then dancing resumes. Some of the elders inside the priest’s house sing songs asking for unity, good health, and other blessings for the New Year. On New Year’s day there is almost constant dancing around the village priest’s tree. The music is provided by men
playing either musical gourd pipes or lutes, the types of dancing varying according to the instrument used and the tune played. At the celebration the headman and other adults start the dancing in the morning; younger children join in later. It is not until early afternoon that young women, who have spent the morning hours dressing in all their finery come to the dance area. Towards evening the young men, also in their finest attire, join in. The next day the site of the dancing shifts to the headman’s house and continues all day. Two or three men in the village are appointed as ‘idiots’ (paka) who tease those who are not dancing to get them back into the group whenever the number drops too low. They throw dirt on people, grab their drinks, and generally carry on to make it a happy, festive occasion.

During the celebration it is important for the villagers to maintain friendly relations. Quarrelling and bickering are taboo. There is much visiting with clan members and friends. Earlier the Lisaw used to put up a ‘taboo sign’ (Ta leo) at the entrance of the village during the New Year celebration so that no outsiders would enter. Since the 1960s the Lisaw have gradually dropped this, and visitors are no longer prohibited.

At the dawn of the next day the village priest announces that the ‘sun has risen’, and the New Year celebration is over. Each family ties a piece of pork and two rice cakes to its New Year tree and casts it out into the jungle, ending the festival.

Another important ritual in each Lisaw village is the annual ‘tree renovation ceremony’, similar to those held for the ‘Lord of Land and Water’ by Karen and Akha groups. The priest leads the elders to the compound of the guardian spirit shrine above the village; they clean up the area and build a new fence. They carve miniature wooden weapons, such as guns, crossbows, swords, knives, spears, and clubs, for the guardian spirit to use in defence of the village against evil. In the evening
the elders bring trays of eggs and other food to offer at the shrine. While they pay obeisance with their foreheads to the ground, the priest chants a prayer to the guardian spirit.

After dark the children parade these offerings through the village. Calling to the spirits in high-pitched voices, they go in procession along the trail leading from the village, just beyond the taboo signs which have been erected to keep outsiders away. There the trays are overturned, and the eggs broken. The children then run back to the village as fast as they can, while the evil spirits which have followed the procession feast on the food. As the taboo signs prevent them from returning, the village is finally purified of these evil spirits.55

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