Does the House Hold? History and the Shape of Mien (Yao) Society

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Abstract.   This article reexamines accounts of Mien (Yao) ethnic minority populations in northern Thailand, in particular generalizations about social structure in terms of household formations. Two ethnographic accounts from the same province of Thailand during the 1960s suggest opposite tendencies in Mien household dynamics, but each makes a case for Mien society. This restudy proposes that the dynamics of the 1960s were largely specific to engagements with the regional political economy and a reworking of social relations, which led to the prominence of the household in social life. These dynamics were in and of the twentieth century, and this article draws on a contrast with the two generations immediately prior to what the ethnographies describe to situate households in relation to the shape of Mien social formations.

The query in the title of the article refers to the opposite tendencies of expansion and fragmentation reported for Mien households and the broader issue of whether household dynamics constitute a miniature version of society. At issue, ethnographically, is the characterization of the social organization of Mien (Yao) swidden farmers in northern Thailand.[1] Two anthropologists who did research with Mien in Chiangrai Province during the 1960s came to different conclusions about the shape of Mien society, each referring to patterns in household formation. One maintained that among Mien there was a marked tendency for small and transient households and settlements, and the other concluded that there was an ongoing competition for labor in Mien society, with a resulting expansion of households, which reached up to ten times the average number of household members. Both researchers and a third anthropologist discuss purchases of non-Mien children for adoptions as a significant component of Mien

social dynamics, related to a more general emphasis on increasing household production.[2] My re-analysis draws on field research with Thailand's Mien: limited surveys in 1990 and intensive fieldwork during 1992–4. It is not meant as a textual deconstruction of the ethnography of a previous era. Rather, my aim is a historical reconstruction of social dynamics on the fringes of state systems and a global trade in opium to suggest ways of reconsidering an ethnography whose analytical frameworks are no longer descriptively resonant.

Analytically and ethnohistorically, the issue concerns generalizations about society and ethnicity, which relate to increasingly common discussions of the relations between structure and agency. My case involves a historical analysis of the Mien in northern Thailand and Laos for roughly the last hundred years in order to situate these sometimes-conflicting statements about Mien social dynamics. This re-analysis is intended to suggest perspectives on previous ethnography to open equally a reexamination of ethnographic realities and the realities of ethnography. The former calls for a rethinking of society, culture, and ethnicity through a historically informed examination of strands of social life (such as, for Mien, household formations and the practice of purchase-adoptions) in political economic context (cf. Biolsi 1995; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Roseberry 1989; Sahlins 1989; Thomas 1991). The latter calls for a critical study of the assumptions of anthropological reporting about social life in relation to issues of temporality and agency (cf. Leach 1977 [1954]; Fabian 1983; Thomas 1989; Battaglia 1995).

I argue that the form and frequency of adoptions reported for Mien in the 1960s were not the feature of Mien society that earlier analyses suggest. While the logic of adoptions draws on Mien/Yao definitions of the household, which allow for and motivate the incorporation of outsiders through marriage and adoption, circumstantial evidence indicates that what is reported for the 1960s was specific to the twentieth century. My understanding of the place of adoptions in relation to Mien social dynamics draws on my analysis of historical changes in household dynamics. I maintain that the household centrality that is evident in ethnographic reporting on Mien and other ethnic groups (Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu, and Lisu) in the highlands of northern Thailand during the 1960s was not of particularly long standing. In retrospect, this marked household centrality appears to be a historically particular, local outcome of engagements with the options and constraints of a regional political economy. Two factors are fundamentally important. One is opium production and trade, and the other is the shifting ability of would-be chiefs to anchor their prominence through relations with state structures. The prominence of household-level agency

in local social life in the hinterlands appears rather limited to the period between roughly 1910 and 1970. Among the reasons for the conversion of this historically contingent feature of social and agricultural life into an ethnographic fact are the immediacy of fieldwork experiences, from which anthropologists generalize, and the predominant anthropological emphasis on structure in analyses of "tribal" social formations. Anthropologists worked with and from the voices and actions of villagers, and in general these were at the time heavily invested in the prominence of households in relation to other levels such as chiefs and villages. But in the Mien case, generalizations from the household to society are complicated by the mismatch between the two cases from the 1960s. One describes Mien households and settlements as continually fragmenting, and the other describes them as continually expanding and then generating new units, which repeat the expansionary cycle. The resonance of these generalizations is further compromised by the social differences between the 1960s, the period of classical ethnography, and Mien social life during the previous two generations.

I draw on two Mien cases from the turn of the twentieth century, one from northern Laos and the other from northern Thailand, to suggest that previous social dynamics were characterized by chiefly control in relation to tributary links with lowland states. In this context there was a sharp difference between the households of chiefs and commoners, with chiefs articulating notions of prominence in ways that set them apart from the commoner population. From the evidence that is available, it appears that during this period, adoptions were the prerogative of wealthy people. Given the structures of inequality at the time, the wealthy people were predominantly those in chiefly positions. The shift toward household centrality occurred during the colonial period, with the undoing of tributary relations. Unlike "peasant" communities, which were incorporated into colonial and national administrations, tribal communities became, in general, further separated from state structures. Simultaneous with this administrative marginalization, highland groups in Laos and Thailand became engaged with the various structures of opium production and trade. Together, the waning of chiefly power and the increasing wealth available through the proceeds of opium cultivation contributed to the maneuverability and social prominence of individual households.

This is, in broad strokes, the process that led to the household centrality that ethnographers presented as the structure of highland ethnic groups and that contributed to the frequency of adoptions among Thailand's Mien. There are important exceptions, which relate directly to the difference between the two Mien cases that are at the center of this reanalysis. One segment of the Mien population, which later was charac-

terized by very large households, had an uninterrupted relationship with state structures and a legitimate monopoly trade in opium. The village that represented the centripetal and/or inflationary tendency in Mien society, Phulangka, was the center of opium trade and administrative connection, and both factors are directly relevant to understanding the case. The other exemplary Mien village, Phale, with its centrifugal and/or deflationary tendencies, stood outside administrative links and outside the legitimate trade in opium. This outsider status contributed to the prominence of the household level; within this setting, people with leadership ambitions did not have the means to anchor their prominence through links to regional political economic structures.

Political economy does not explain household dynamics or Mien social formations more generally. It is equally important to examine the cultural factors that motivate people to act on political economic options and constraints in ways that contribute to the ethnographically manifest patterns of social formations. The reported frequency of Mien purchase-adoptions contrasts with other highland groups, so there is clearly something to the assumption that features in Mien culture contributed to this practice. But it is equally important to pay attention to the historical specificity of particular definitions of the household. This point concerns the opposite tendencies in Mien household formations in two political economic settings and (for lack of a better term) the emergence of the *superhousehold*.

Generational difference from the period of chiefly control to that of household prominence suggests that there was a change in the way ritual and leadership were articulated, from a concern with military prowess to a focus on success in farming and trade. The ethnography for both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in Mien society suggests that household heads in both areas attempted to assemble large households. In one setting these attempts repeatedly failed, while in the other they were generally successful. The commonality of the ambitions of household heads in the two settings affirms a focus on the household as the locus of cultural and social dynamics and their ethnic dimension, while the systemic variation within the Mien case reveals the potential analytical shortcomings of generalizing for ethnic groups.

In the following section, I discuss the general ethnographic tendency to ignore history in the ethnography of highland societies. This both suggests that the simplifications evident in accounts of Mien belong to a larger discursive community and shows a possible ethnographic and historical alternative. I will then provide an account of the case made for adoptions as a structural feature of Mien/Yao society. This discussion foregrounds my analysis of the historicity of household formation and the relevance of

political economy. The subsequent section concerns articulations of prominence and makes the case that in the late nineteenth century, chiefs set themselves apart from commoner populations in various ways. The argument that prominence during the period characterized by chiefly control was primarily a "one-man show" serves to highlight the specificity of the subsequent period, and this discussion is central to my critique of the analytical equation between household/village and society/ethnicity. Then I describe the processes that led to the superhouseholds, which one study presents as typical of Thailand's Mien population, and the conditions that contributed to the widespread household centrality in highland societies during the middle of the twentieth century.

History and Structure on the State's Fringes

The anthropology of mainland Southeast Asia has tended to reproduce a social divide between lowland "peasant" and upland "tribal" populations (e.g., Burling 1992 [1965]; Keyes 1995 [1977]). Peasant populations, largely wet-rice farmers, stand within states, while tribal populations, predominantly swidden (slash-and-burn) farmers, stand without. The peasants tend to adhere to Buddhism or another universalistic religion patronized by the state, while the tribals are for the most part animist. In this way, ecology, political economy, and world view are assumed to define the two main ethnographic provinces of the region. The stereotypical rendering of upland groups presents them as "traditional" in terms of culture or ecological adaptation, outside history, while that of lowland peasants places them inside history in terms of the religious and political economic frameworks of states.

   These ethnographic stereotypes are important for an understanding of approaches to society in history, as they tend to exaggerate the ethnic and/or traditional character of upland social formations on the eve of state penetration, which in the uplands of northern Thailand was in the 1960s. This rather systemic denial of history is common in the anthropology of the region, in spite of numerous analyses showing ongoing tensions and debates within upland societies and the importance of the place of uplanders within larger political economic systems (see Leach 1977 [1954]; Lehman 1963, 1967a, 1967b, 1989; Kirsch 1973; Friedman 1998 [1979]; Hinton 1983; Gibson 1986; Tsing 1993).

   Ethnographic studies of Thailand's highland groups have tended to generalize for the social organization of ethnic groups (for Lisu, see Dessaint 1972 and Durrenberger 1971; for Lahu, see Walker 1970; for Hmong, see Geddes 1976, Cooper 1984, and Tapp 1989; for Akha, see Alting 1983 and Kammerer 1986; for Karen, see Hamilton 1976 and Hinton 1976; for

Mien, see Kandre 1967 and Miles 1974; for Lua', see Kunstadter 1967, 1983a). Ethnographic collections, as an indication of the state of the field, suggest the move from "tradition" to "modernity." The essays in Walker 1975 and 1992 and McKinnon and Bhruksasri 1983, which generally focus on separate ethnic groups, are primarily concerned with traditional society, while those in McKinnon and Vienne 1989 and McCaskill and Kampe 1997 tend to focus on modernity, the negative consequences of development and state penetration. The collections edited by Kunstadter (1967), Hinton (1969), and Keyes (1979) are not as easily placed in terms of such a dichotomy. The anthropology of this region is not all in the same fold. The world of anthropology is no more uniform in terms of practice or cultural orientation than that of the uplanders it has been studying.

Attempts to bring a historical perspective into accounts of uplanders have tended to reinforce their ethnic labels and/or generalize from a sense of their contemporary position as marginalized minority groups. For instance, Alting (1983) writes about Akha as a "perennial minority group." Radley (1986) writes in a similar vein about Mong, as does Tapp (1989) for Hmong.³ While Alting and Tapp write about some of the complexities of cultural appropriations from the state, they and Radley make their cases as if social life in history comes down to two actors, the minority ethnic group and the state. This analytical framework tends to reproduce a meta-narrative about history as the gradual encroachment of the political state on the worlds of the cultural (ethnic, traditional) upland tribal groups.

In a critique of the ethnicist biases of this anthropology, Hinton (1983) suggests that cultural or ethnic differences are secondary to political and economic interests. While this is intended as a corrective to previous work, the firm notion of a choice between political economy and ethnic culture (cf. Wolf 1982) risks precluding ethnographic investigations into the (re-)production of local realities (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Sahlins 1985, 1989; Appadurai 1996). The analytical issue is not a choice between culture and power but ways of addressing the cultural politics of everyday life, which account for social formations over time and which may not reaffirm the analytical priority of an ethnic group. These concerns are fundamental to an assessment of the statements made regarding adoptions as they are strikingly ahistorical and embedded in an equation of patterns in household formation with the shape of society.

Adoptions and the Shape of Society

Mien (Yao) stood out among the upland groups of northern Thailand in the twentieth century for their purchases of people from other ethnic groups.

Ethnographic accounts from the 1960s suggest that 10–15 percent of the adult Mien population had been purchased from other ethnic groups, both upland and lowland, in the region. These accounts do not suggest that the social dimensions of this incorporation of non-Mien people concerned institutions of bondage in Mien society. Rather, the people were purchased as children, were incorporated through rituals into Mien households, and had the same rights and obligations as other household members as they grew up and married.

Such purchases of non-Mien people for adoption are no longer practiced among the Mien in Thailand. My surveys in 1990 and fieldwork in 1992–4 indicated that they had largely come to an end in the late 1960s. The halt to this incorporation of non-Mien into Mien society is only one aspect of social changes that relate to the Thai government's abrupt takeover of the highlands along the northern border. The various aspects of national integration have largely put an end to the swidden cultivation of rice, corn, and poppies, through the outlawing of opium cultivation, a general crackdown on swidden farming, and the institution of controls over forest land, which has made settlement migration virtually impossible. In light of these events, the 1960s appear as the final period of autonomy for uplanders regarding livelihood and social life. This has some bearing on understanding the apparently widespread incorporation of non-Mien into Mien society as a historically specific phenomenon.

Anthropologists indicate that these frequent adoptions of non-Mien into Mien society were not a specifically modern phenomenon, and they account for it in terms of particular features of Mien/Yao society, economy, and world view. My aim is to examine these explanations and the shape of Mien/Yao society that they assume and reinforce and to point out how the mismatches among these explanatory frameworks call for a greater attention to history and the related, tenuous shape of social formations. I suggest that while adoptions are possible in general in terms of Mien world view, in terms of articulations of ideas of household composition, there were certain changes in religion and social life in the twentieth century that facilitated the frequent adoptions. In other words, the process was specific to this time and place, and it drew on the options and constraints of a regional political economy that accentuated the agency of households as opposed to village and/or chiefly levels in Mien social formations. This household centrality is rather general for the upland groups of northern Thailand in the mid–twentieth century and coincided with the waning power of chiefs in local social life.

The logic of adoptions in the Mien context concerns intergenerational relations of exchange and obligations, both among parents and children

and among householders and their ancestor spirits. As people talk about it (to this day, even if the practice faded away in the late 1960s), the non-Mien background of children purchased for adoption is not of particular concern since they become Mien through taking part in householding and social life more generally.[4] Like brides who are brought into a household and the children of a household, adoptees are introduced to a set of ancestors (that is, the ancestors are told about them during a ceremony), and they are implicated in the exchange relations that a household has with its ancestor spirits. In a conversation with me, one of the spirit mediums made an equation between adoptees and the other children of a couple. He couched this in terms of the obligations that the couple builds up with their children. Subsequently, the children take care of them in the spirit world through offerings: "In the old days a couple would want to have five or six children, and even adopt a few more, because when you die you want to make certain that you are fed" (field notes). Kandre and Lej (1965: 131, 139–40) make much the same statement—that adoptions concern ritual connections with ancestor spirits and that parents build up obligations from their children for their old age and afterlife. Miles (1972a) makes strong connections among adoptions, matrifiliations, and marriages as transfers between households regarding the rights to people as residents and laborers. This ability to incorporate non-Mien outsiders is thus of a similar order as the incorporation of Mien spouses and children into a household as part of an economic and ritual unit. The practice appears to set Mien/Yao apart from the other upland groups in this area in terms of how they define the household as a bundle of relationships. But this abstract account of the logic of adoptions suppresses various important differences. My historical analysis is aimed at drawing out some of these differences and the importance of such information for an understanding of society in history through the household as an institution.

The ethnographic record on Southeast Asian societies shows a wide range of ideas and practices concerning the incorporation of outsiders. At one end of the spectrum is the creation of relatedness that Carsten (1995; 1997: 190–280) describes for Langkawi, Malaysia:

> A lack of interest in precisely who one's ancestors are correlates *both* with an emphasis on siblingship as the core of kinship, *and* with the fact that so many people have come to the island as impoverished migrants in the recent past. . . . kinship—conceived as similarity of attributes and substance—is created both in the present and the future through the absorption and homogenization of difference. People "mix easily." In fact, they are given no choice but to do so. Differences that characterize newcomers to the island are rapidly erased,

partly through an emphasis on conformity and similarity. Behavior, dialect, consumption patterns, house designs and furnishings, and style of dress may vary according to wealth and age, but they are not expressions of individuality. Differences of taste are actively discouraged; they are not a means of distinguishing villagers of different origins. (1995: 326)

The other end of the spectrum of incorporating outsiders concerns various forms of slavery. Watson (1980; see also Reid 1983) makes a useful distinction between closed and open systems of slavery. Closed systems are characterized by the outsider status and "kinlessness" (Reid 1983: 156) of slaves, whereas the gradual incorporation of slaves into the social order characterizes open systems of slavery. In Southeast Asia, the closed system was primarily in evidence in stratified lowland societies. In upland societies, which were sometimes stratified (Rousseau 1990), there are various ambiguities in the exact character of slavery. One example concerns Kachin in northern Burma:

Nearly all slaves were owned by the chief or village headman. In most cases the status of slave amounted to that of permanent debtor. But . . . the role of debtor in Kachin society is not necessarily one of disadvantage. His overall position resembled that of adopted son or bastard . . . of the chief, or even more perhaps that of a poor son-in-law . . . working to earn his bride. Thus by a kind of paradox the 'slave' though reckoned to be the lowest social stratum stood nearer to the chief than the members of any other named class. (Leach 1977 [1954]: 160)

In the ethnographic record for Mien, there is no evidence of slaves as a social category, but indebtedness was sometimes a vehicle for the transfer of people between households. The outsiders, Mien or non-Mien, who were incorporated became household members, either as spouses or children. The following discussion of the ethnography is meant both to highlight its problems and to show that the case calls for a historical analysis.

Lemoine (1983, 1991), who does not present figures concerning the prominence of adoptions, states that the practice was "very widespread" (1983: 203). "Every observer of the Yao has mentioned their striking propensity to adopt as many children as possible regardless of their ethnic origin, and whether or not they had their own children" (Lemoine 1991: 601). He describes the Yao practice of adoptions as an "excessive behaviour, contrary to the habits of the Han [the dominant, lowland Chinese] and other groups in the same area" (ibid.: 600–1). He accounts for adoptions as a strategy employed by the Yao to ensure their survival since by forcing the Yao to live only in the forested hinterlands, the Chinese im-

perial court was sentencing them to gradual extinction. Elsewhere, Lemoine (1983: 203) suggests that "the need for additional labour, and the problem of female sterility, encourage them [Yao] to adopt as many children as possible from neighboring communities." His explanation for the need for additional labor is that there is a general quest to accumulate wealth drawn from the proceeds of farming, so adoptions feature as an attempt to expand "the economic basis needed to support . . . the intensive religious life of the Yao" (ibid.).

Lemoine's explication of the practice of adoptions ranges from responses to politically motivated marginalization by the state in ancient China and internal reproductive problems described (without any evidence) as female sterility, both of which allegedly concern the survival of the ethnic group, to the pressures that the intensive religious life of an ethnic group places on households. This combination of cultural relativism, utilitarianism, assertions about women's infertility, and the unsupported case concerning the Chinese state's extermination policy does not lend itself to a re-analysis. There is little ethnographic grounding and no historical dimension to this Yao case. Lemoine presents the Yao as an ethnic group that adds up from the household to the collectivity and where assumed reproductive defects of women, marginalization by the lowland state, and the expenditures expected of households for rituals all come together in this "excessive behaviour" of purchasing non-Mien children for adoption.

Kandre (1967: 594, 1971: 43, 1976: 189; Kandre and Lej 1965: 132) states that non-Miens acquired through purchase for adoption comprise more than 10 percent of the adult population and a higher proportion of people not yet of marriageable age. Miles (1972a: 100) states that adoptees "account for 23 percent of the Phulangka [village] population under the age of twenty." These numbers may be roughly comparable for the two villages. But while the statistical outcome of adoptions in these two cases indicates uniformity among Thailand's Mien, I will argue that the apparent similarity masks various differences. Tending to these differences, specifically regarding variations in household formation, is not an attempt to convert the ethnography from "structure" to "history" but rather to argue that the structures of social life are in and of history and need to be placed descriptively in both local and regional contexts.

Kandre (1967, 1976; Kandre and Lej 1965) assumes historical continuity in the Mien practice of adoptions. His explanation (Kandre and Lej 1965: 132) of the practice concerns features of the Mien world view as they influence farming and social life: "The practice is not a recent development but the consequence of the operation of a particular socio-economic-ritual system which creates a permanent need of additional manpower. . . . The

focus is here on individual accumulation of liquid wealth which results in the mobilization of all available manpower for productive efforts . . . [and] creates cumulative processes resulting for instance in population expansion past the limits of [one's] own procreative capacity." Kandre (1967: 595) further asserts, "There is no evidence that this is a recent phenomenon, nor is it associated specifically with the cash income from opium production. The cause lies much deeper, in the desire to maximize household production." Though not the ethnohistorical lacuna of Lemoine's case, Kandre's case for the historical continuity in adoptions is not strong. He mentions that the grandparents of his main informant, Le Tsan Kwe (Lej Tsan Kuej), were a Hmong couple who were sold by the husband's father to a Mien household in about 1860 (Kandre 1967: 594). The couple's daughter later married a Mien man who was or later became the headman over several villages. It is possible that the man who purchased the Hmong couple was a village or multivillage headman, but Kandre does not present information on that issue. This case falls along a continuum of Mien practices of refiliation, which include marriages and the transfer of rights to children (sometimes to balance bride payments; see Miles 1972a, 1974). Another example is Stubel's (1938: 370, 371) reference to "the adoption of a son-in-law" among the Yao in Guangdong, where a Yao husband is brought into the household of the wife's parents, ritually incorporated, and thereby obliged to honor that set of ancestors. Kandre (1967: 594) suggests that transfers of adult couples were somewhat common in the past, and this may be analogous to the debt bondage that Leach (1977 [1954]) describes for Kachin during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Miles (1972a, 1972b, 1974) stresses the economic aspect of adoptions and discusses them in the context of the acquisition of spouses and the rights to a couple's children. His point is that adoptions are one of several ways in which Mien households compete among themselves for laborers. Larger dwelling groups, which can include many households, "literally pay to gain and maintain control over the productive capacities of more families than their smaller counterparts" (Miles 1972a: 194). Elsewhere, Miles (1974: 416) states that the Yao "regard labor as the scarce factor of production in their economy. Outlays for weddings and bridewealth constitute the linchpin of a mechanism whereby dwelling groups compete for manpower. The most successful corporations acquire exclusive control over a large portion of the workers in the village."

The village Miles studied, Phulangka, had 244 inhabitants in 19 dwelling groups, 107 of them in households of 15 or fewer people, and 137 in larger units, the largest having 57 people in 10 apartments. People grew rice, corn, and opium in their swidden fields. According to Miles, schedul-

ing conflicts among the three crops meant that only households with abundant laborers could take full advantage of this three-crop system, and this is what led to the inflationary pressures in household size and the attempts to monopolize the labor of a settlement. "A permanent division of the population into a prosperous minority and a relatively destitute majority does not emerge. As any dwelling group approaches poverty, matrimonial and allied transactions transfer members to wealthy [units]. . . . some [units] disappear altogether. But their place is constantly being taken by small groups which result from the fissioning of larger corporations" (Miles 1974: 291).

In this context it is worth noting that other uplanders such as Akha, Hmong, Lisu, and Lahu were similarly engaged in farming that combined these three crops. There is no evidence that there were comparable attempts to establish multiple households among these groups (see Alting 1983; Geddes 1976; Durrenberger 1974, 1983; Walker 1983). But it is unlikely that the pattern Miles found in Phulangka was general even among the Mien in Thailand. Kunstadter (1983b: 19), writing in the 1970s and drawing on the surveys of the Tribal Research Centre, gives average household size among uplanders as ranging from between seven and eight persons per household for Hmong and Mien to between five and six persons per household for Lua and Karen. Both Kandre and Miles stress that the institution of adoptions is related to pressures on household production for expenditures concerning holding onto and/or acquiring household members and for rituals that manifest and/or improve the links of the household with the spirit world. The rituals concern ancestral blessing and ensure the well-being of the householders. Mien society and world view, individual motivations, and household economic action all come together in this complex of inflationary pressures on agricultural production and include the purchase of children for adoption. Given that this appears to spell out a structure to Mien society that is centered on household economic action, it is interesting to note the difference in predominant household formations among the two cases. Kandre's generalizations for Mien society from household formations in the Phale area suggest the opposite of Miles's Phulangka case of larger households absorbing the bulk of the available laborers in a settlement:

> The Iu Mien have a tendency to spread out into small hamlets, sometimes comprising only a few households. This is to some extent symptomatic of the concept of individual enterprise which is favored in their society. Individuals are always on the move searching for better opportunities, better soils, or a more convenient social climate. There is nothing special about the Iu Mien in this regard as compared with other ethnic groups living in the same hill regions; the pattern of settle-

ment is in part conditioned by the ecological pattern of swidden agriculture. (Kandre 1967: 611)

Ethnographies from northern Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s suggest various commonalities in the upland farming of rice, corn, and opium among Akha, Hmong, Lahu, Lisu, and Mien. Other than Mien, upland groups show no signs of purchasing outsiders for incorporation. It is noteworthy that Kandre explains Mien settlement and household fragmentation in terms of the same ecological adaptation that Miles takes as explaining why Mien tend to establish multiple households. Both refer to a shared concern with wealth in the Mien world view. Mien world view and ecological adaptation, therefore, account for two different sets of household and settlement formation, and both seem to have implied about the same percentage of purchased children for adoption. From this, it is safe to assert that purchases of people did not result in a uniform social outcome and equally that Mien world view and livelihood did not imply a particular social structure.

Kandre and Miles both mention tensions regarding household formation. Kandre (1967: 601) states that household heads in the Phale area had a frustrated desire to expand their households. Miles (1974: 299) notes that while economic and religious factors contribute to the growth of extended households in Phulangka, "other economic and religious influences . . . may not only obstruct the growth of a dwelling group but also contribute to its disintegration into smaller units." This household centrality, general among the uplanders of northern Thailand in the 1960s, suggests a different set of tensions than does the Kachin case, where there were common conflicts concerning the relations between chiefs and commoners and the rights of particular people to call themselves chiefs.

This pattern must be seen in terms of the options and constraints of Thailand's upland social formations within a regional political economy whose time frame is roughly the 1910s to the 1960s. One aspect of social dynamics in the upland areas at this time was an inflationary pressure on household production, which was largely channeled into rituals and had a range of social outcomes. While Mien tended to achieve increases in household production through adoptions and extended households, other uplanders took advantage of increasing poverty among Karen, another group of uplanders, and hired them to do some of the more onerous tasks of field preparation (Keen 1973: 40; Cooper 1984: 107–10). During this time period the opportunities of opium production and trade, coupled with the erosion of tributary frameworks and an end to warfare, contributed to the waning of chiefly power. In general, upland populations responded to these conditions through social and ritual assertions of household autonomy. Herein

lies the main cause for the inflationary pressure on household production. Ethnohistorical research in this region indicates much larger villages and a more general situation of chiefly control during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hanks and Hanks forthcoming). Kirsch's (1973) discussion of social dynamics in the upland region shows how ritual mediates statements about social formation, with chiefly power being characterized by a monopoly on important rituals and more egalitarian settings by much more open feasting systems. As chiefly control waned in the northern Thai hills, feasting became more evenly distributed, and there emerged a greater pressure on households to assert themselves as social units through feasting and rituals. This feasting drew largely on the proceeds of farming. The ability to take advantage of this opening up of claims to prominence was clearly unevenly distributed, but the general shift in "structural poses" (Gearing 1958) from chiefly control to greater household autonomy is important for understanding the Mien case and its regional and historical contexts.

The history of the population that eventually settled in Phulangka indicates that the extended households that Miles found symptomatic of Mien social dynamics are particular to the twentieth century. Miles's account of a household of fifty-seven people is quite striking given that the average household size in the uplands during the 1960s and 1970s was between five and eight people. But my research revealed that the precursor to this large household of the 1960s had almost ninety people in the 1910s and about one-hundred-twenty people in the early 1940s. These dynamics were historically specific to a particular group of people and concern equally ritual practice and political economy. They included chiefly attempts to hold onto prominence in changing circumstances, which appear to have generated the inflationary pressures in householding that resulted in the social formations that Miles argued were "typical of Thailand's Yao" (1973: 77, 1974: 2).

My argument is that not only were these patterns particular to the Phulangka area, they were also played out unevenly in terms of the connections this Mien population had with a trade monopoly and administrative integration, with resulting bifurcation in household and settlement formations within this area (Jonsson 1996). But before I address the particularities of twentieth-century Mien household formations in Thailand, I want to highlight their historicity by showing that the inflationary pressures on household production were not manifest among the previous generation of Mien leaders. These leaders, who stood in occasional and sometimes long-standing tribute relations with lowland rulers, had the means to expand their households through the incorporation of outsiders but apparently did not. The chiefs about whom I have information articulated their

prominence in ways that set them apart from the general population. This is important not only for an understanding of that period but also to understand the specificity of the period of classical ethnography, when chief types acted in terms of householding and farming in ways similar to that of the commoner population.

Chiefs, Prominence, and the Household

Social dynamics among Mien in northern Laos and northern Thailand during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were framed by conditions of warfare, population movement, and client relations with lowland states. There are several cases of high-level Mien chiefs from this time. In general, these chiefs were known for military prowess, and they had titles from lowland authorities. From the cases with which I am familiar, these chiefs articulated their prominence in terms of unique ritual connections, titles, and prestige items, which set them off from the commoner population. Kandre's (1967, 1976) informants mentioned that in the old days, Mien had sometimes raided other upland villages for children (1976: 187). The most prominent of Mien leaders in northern Laos at the time, Tsew Wuen Tzo, had authority over more than a hundred villages of various ethnic affiliations (Kandre 1967). He appears to have had a long career of leading raids and undercover trade before receiving a Phaya title and taking the side of the colonial state (Izikowitz 1944). It is unclear how prominent were raids, purchases, and debt transfers in Mien acquisitions of non-Mien people for incorporation through adoptions, but I suggest that they were limited and certainly not of a scale comparable to what anthropologists reported for northern Thailand in the 1960s. This assertion draws on an apparent shift in the last hundred years of their history from a social and ritual focus on chiefs and military prowess to a focus on householders and their success in farming and trade.

As Kandre (1967: 615–6) describes high-level headmen among Mien in northern Laos early in the twentieth century, these were generally men who "started as wealthy and respected village headmen and gradually secured their reputations by skillful mediation of conflicts in the mountains. In some cases they finally established themselves as semi-feudal princes over huge collections of villages with a wide range of distinct socioeconomic-ritual systems" (for example, Mien, Lanten, Akha, Khamu, Meo, Lahu, and Kato). Kandre mentions that these positions of prominence related to connections with lowland authorities, which in Laos at the time was the colonial administration. He does not discuss what relations there might be between Mien social dynamics and such colonial or precolonial frame-

works, but he emphasizes the roles of dispute mediation, wealth, and rituals that drew on wealth in the rise of such men to power. Kandre (1967: 616–7) relates that the authority of Tsew Wuen Tzo (Tseu Uen Tsoe) "was recognized by more than a hundred villages [of various ethnic affiliations] located in the Mung Phon–Mung Mang area of Yunnan and the Mung Sing–Nam Tha area of Laos." As Kandre (1967: 619–20) describes him from the recollections of his informants, "He was intelligent and rich, had a 'good heart,' and helped the hill people and the French government. . . . Uen Tsoe spoke for the hill people [to the colonial authorities], and he also helped the French defeat the Akha, who did not obey the government." Kandre does not follow up on the contradiction that on the one hand Wuen Tzo was a spokesman for the highlanders to the French colonial rulers and that on the other he aided the French in suppressing noncompliant highland peoples. Further information on Wuen Tzo comes from Izikowitz (1944: 71–73), who visited his village in 1936, during his research among Lamet:

> The chief was a grand old man, known and respected among all the Yao of Indochina. He was well over seventy years old, and his white hair stuck out from under his red turban. . . . He was almost like a king over the Yao villages in this area. It was only a few years ago that he had led guerrilla warfare against the French, and he was known all over Indochina as among the boldest of raiders and smugglers. But then he got older and got a few clocks as decoration, and also a fine, white, uniform-style jacket with a couple of medals, and then he turned very friendly toward the French. . . . In the back of his house, he had a room that he valued highly. There he kept a collection of clocks, which he proudly showed me. . . . The clocks had originally been set for different time-zones, so they told various times. . . . Like others in this area, he relied on the sun for knowing the time of day. . . . The clocks were more a decoration and a marker of wealth and power, much like bronze drums among the Lamet. (my translation)[5]

I concur with Izikowitz's assessment that these clocks are not there to tell time but to tell status. While his comparison with the bronze drums makes this point, the two are not analogous. Among Lamet (Izikowitz 1951), bronze drums were a recognized wealth object, which marked off aristocrats from commoners. During the colonial period there was considerable trade in these as young men from the Lamet area of northern Laos hired themselves out to loggers in northern Thailand and then took their wages to the Kayah area of Burma, where they bought drums. Used for bride price and as a status marker, bronze drums in that specific historical context may have reshaped status dynamics among Lamet, at least by

making upward mobility more accessible (Jonsson 1998a; Kirsch 1973), but Wuen Tzo's collection of clocks has no such dimension. His clocks are a chief's display of his unique connection to the contours of power and privilege, a one-man show.

This digression to Wuen Tzo's collection of clocks connects to the dynamics of householding in an indirect way. The clocks convert wealth and power into a display that does not feed back into farming but rather feeds the prominence of an upland leader who has a title from lowland authorities. Tsew Wuen Tzo had the title Phaya Luang, and his sons later had the titles Chao Mai and Chao La (Table 1). Phaya Luang's sons reproduced his prominence in terms of military prowess, organizational skills, and connections to the lowland government, and Chao La was later a major in Vang Pao's CIA-supported army (see McCoy 1991; Westermeyer 1982).

The population that Kandre studied in Phale village in northern Thailand had left northern Laos in the 1940s and later, and one of the leaders of that migration told me that the reason for their move was that farming was very strenuous because of ongoing warfare. The move can be seen as a reaction against conditions of warfare, which made farming difficult (Kandre 1967: 635) and equally as a form of resistance to the related monopoly on prominence and wealth that high-level Mien leaders had in this colonial setting. Some support for that assertion comes from the manifest ambivalence about wealthy people that Kandre's (1967: 598, 604) informants express:

> Money, in particular silver, has special symbolic connotations. Fifty or sixty years ago, when my oldest informants were young, "silver was so rare that it was cut into tiny pieces. They used to say about a person who had much silver, 'This person has much silver. His life is good. He is very good.'" I have also been told that in the old times only wealth was respected, and it is only recently that the "clever" persons, for instance ritual experts, have gained respect. . . . According to Iu Mien standards, one has to be rich to get away with murder without extremely serious consequences for oneself. This is one reason why rich men are feared.

The Mien population that is the precursor to the Phulangka settlement started off as a migration group in what are now Guangxi and Guangdong provinces of southern China. At the time the group left their previous homelands, in approximately the 1860s, they were going into the unknown. Given that in their eventual settlement they were exclusively swidden farmers, which has placed them in a particular preordained ethnographic slot, it is worth mentioning that they told Western missionaries

Table 1. Precursors to Mien populations in the villages of Phulangka and Phale, both in Chiangrai Province, Thailand

First generation	Name title notes	Tang Tsan Khwoen Phaya Khiri Moves to Nan, northern Thailand Migration leader Military prowess Unique ritual link Elevated but small house Tribute in rice Opium monopoly connections Friends with Nan king	Name title notes	Tsew Wuen Tzo Phaya Luang Prominence along Laos/China borders Raider and trader Military prowess Collection of clocks Connections with colonial adminis- tration and most likely with opium monopoly
Second generation	Name title notes	Tang Wuen Lin Thao La, *kamnan* Established with his brothers an 86- person household Unique ritual link Opium monopoly connections Tribute in labor Established village of Phulangka and set up a 120-person household	Name title notes	Tsew I Fu and Tsew I Kyen Chao Mai and Chao La Prominence in northern Laos Military leaders and middlemen in monopolized opium trade Entangled on CIA- supported side in civil war in Laos
Third generation	Village notes	Phulangka Central to legitimate and controlled opium trade	Village notes	Phale Migration from Laos, partly in reaction to warfare and taxation Outside legitimate opium trade

who visited in 1915 that "in their former home in China they farmed val-ley land as well as hills" (Callender 1915: 81). This shift in livelihood is one reason I am not assuming that the patterns described in twentieth-century ethnographies convey traditional features of agricultural adapta-tion, social organization, or the articulations of fundamental aspects of world view for an ethnic group. The sojourn itself was socially constitutive;

it made the migration group a social unit through their leader-follower re-lations and through the leader's relations with a particular spirit (Jonsson 1998b, 1999).

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the social landscape across the south China borderlands was in considerable upheaval. The Opium Wars, various rebellions, and a rise in warlordism contributed to the conditions within which the ancestors of the Phulangka population moved. Lowland peoples in this region, such as Tai Lue (Moerman 1975: 152), were also on a move southward, and there was some degree of forced movement. The Yuan (northern Thai) kingdom of Chiangmai sent armies to raid surrounding domains for subjects (Renard 1980), and the Bang-kok polity had populations of what is now northern Laos rounded up and moved away from the sphere of influence of the Vietnamese court (Sanit Samakkan and Breazeale 1988). This wider context of movement, upheavals, warlordism, and forced migrations is relevant for two reasons. One is that the sojourn was not an isolated incident; it was not a migration in a peaceful setting where everyone else was firmly in place. The other is that the ongoing threat of violent confrontations had an immediate bearing on the reproduction of leader-follower relations.

The leader of the migration groups that are the precursors to the Phu-langka settlement, Tang Tsan Khwoen, is said to have been renowned for his military prowess before the sojourn, and this may have contributed to his ability to inspire a following. His prowess related to his connections into the spirit world; he had the highest level of ritual rank (*ja tze*, the third-level ordination in a ranked scheme of Taoist rituals), which granted him access to 120 spirit soldiers (Choychiang 1997: 460). Before he took off, he had purchased from another Mien man a copy of a scroll called *kia shen pong* (*jiex sen borngv*), "license for crossing the mountains." This is an im-perial edict originating far back in a Chinese past and repeatedly reissued, which grants Yao the right to move in order to find room for an expanding population and exempts them from the duties of the state's subjects, such as corvee, tribute, and having to bow to officials. Copies of this scroll are rare prestige items and can be used for striking deals with lowland rulers, assuming the currency of a reissued edict that places the Yao people outside subject relations with the Chinese court (Jonsson 1996, 2000a).

With the various markers of leadership and the success in inspiring a following, Tsan Khwoen set off into the unknown. The migration consti-tuted the social unity of the participants as well as the leadership of Tsan Khwoen; the "subject of action" (Rousseau 1995; see also Gearing 1958 on structural poses) shifted from that of separate householders or villagers to that of a multivillage migration group, centered on its leader. This ori-

entation was reinforced through a contract that the leader struck with a king's spirit, a relationship that is still maintained by his direct descendants and that reproduces the social unity of the descendants of the migration group. The leader's relationship with this spirit was proven efficacious during some of their military confrontations during their sojourn, and in this way the particular history of this group of people, their ritual life, and their social unity reinforce one another (Jonsson 1998b, 1999).

This ritual contract with a king's spirit was a novelty and is unique as far as I can tell, but it is possible to view it as within a continuum of ritual contracts, which vary in scope and reach with the social unit involved in it. Households are formed and maintained through ritual contracts with ancestors; villages imply a founder "opening the forest" and inviting the spirit of the most powerful local lowland ruler to become its guardian. This relationship is maintained by voluntary contributions to an annual offering by all the households in the settlement, and the supravillage unit of the migration group made a link to a still higher spirit. Such relations do not work automatically: the prosperity/protection that people derive from such contracts provide an immediate check on the relationship with the spirit world, but the success of Tsan Khwoen was a proof of his connection and a manifestation of his appeal as a leader. The king's spirit cult collapsed ritual and social frameworks on the leader but did not erode the household as a structural pose. It is reasonable to assume that whenever the group settled, which they did several times before the arrival at Nan, people mobilized their labor, resources, and ritual attentions toward household goals at the cost of the migration group as an acting unit. One indication of this household framework is that the only event from settled life during the sojourn of which I learned during conversations in 1992–4 concerns an attack (c. 1870s) by their lowland Tai neighbors in Muang La of northern Vietnam. During a ritual in response to an event that initiated conflict between the Tai and the Mien, the ancestor spirits of the Mien indicated unambiguously that the people had to leave the area. While the sojourn is remembered primarily in ways that reinforce the prominence of the leader, the episode from Muang La points to the continued importance of households as the subjects of action and experience, in this case through relations involving ancestor spirits. Warfare in northern Laos and the promise of a more peaceful situation within the Nan kingdom may have contributed to where the group eventually settled, and Tsan Khwoen struck a deal with the king of Nan, which anchored his prominence among his followers.

The settlement in Nan dates to the 1880s. Tsan Khwoen had initially approached the king for a permit to settle with his people in the domain and had been turned down. The king later approved the settlement. Tsan

Khwoen gave the king silver and rhinoceros horns (or elephant tusks, according to some villagers) when they made the deal. Tsan Khwoen and two other men received Phaya titles, but he appears to have ranked first among them, as he was made responsible for tribute collection among the highlanders and was made the leader of the highlanders' reserve army for the king. Tsan Khwoen had the title Phaya (Intha-) Khiri and received from the king a sword, spears, and gongs.

This group of Miens settled in Nan around the time that the northern principalities were being done out of their autonomy and tribute base by the centralizing Bangkok polity (see Ratanaporn 1989). But unlike other formerly autonomous rulers, the Nan king was allowed to hold onto some of his royal prerogatives for as long as he lived (Wyatt 1994). The king died in the 1920s and had bestowed the follow-up title Thao La on the third of Tsan Khwoen's (Phaya Khiri's) sons (Table 1; for these titles, see Ratanaporn 1989: 6). Establishing rank by giving out titles is a part of what makes a king's power. To some extent one can view the Nan king as attempting to retain his prominence by bestowing titles in the hinterland while he had lost his prerogatives, such as the ability to demand services and tribute, in the lowlands. But the king did more than give out titles. He allowed the Mien to grow opium for the Royal Opium Monopoly as of 1907. This was confined to the mountain where the Mien were centered, since then known as Doi Suan Ya Luang (Mt. Royal Opium Field), and officials came annually to inspect the fields and assess the tax. Mien and Hmong uplanders were growing opium at the time, and people outside the official framework were continually at risk of arrest. Reginald Le May, who went through this area in 1913, witnessed an aspect of this control of cultivation and trade in the arrest of "picturesque ruffians [caught] smuggling illicit opium" (Le May 1926: 229). This incident involved Hmong farmers outside the framework of the monopolized trade.

It is likely that both the king of Nan and the Mien leader benefited considerably from this controlled trade in opium. According to Western missionary accounts, Phaya Khiri made frequent visits to Nan City (Park 1907: 100), and he "was said to have 100,000 ticals laid by" (Callender 1915: 85). They also contain a reference to Phaya Khiri's architectural separation from the rest of the population and an indication that his sons were engaged in a reworking of social dynamics, which has a direct bearing on the Phulangka case: "Their houses are long, shed-like structures with wild palm-leaf roofing. Most of the houses have no board floor, but the Chief's [Phaya Khiri's] is an exception, being raised from the ground. Most of them contain more than one fireplace, each fireplace representing one family. The long house next to the Chief's in which his children and

grandchildren live has 12 fireplaces and 86 occupants" (Callender 1915: 82). If the quest for a large, extended household was a common goal among this Mien population, as Miles maintains, and largely came down to the wealth a household could muster, then Tsan Khwoen's household would have been the most visible sign of this pattern. The available evidence points in another direction but shows that extended households were emerging among the subsequent generation. Phaya Khiri's sons established a large, multiple household, and I suggest that what accounts for the prevalence of adoptions and the centrality of the household among Mien in the ethnographic record was a historically specific articulation of ritual practices and ideas of prominence, which emerged with Phaya Khiri's sons. This process concerns changes in the relations between lowland polities and upland populations as much as in the relations between chiefs and commoners in the uplands. The elements that made for Tsan Khwoen's prominence were not available to his sons, and the change in the articulations of prominence can be viewed as an attempt to hold onto power in changing circumstances. That is, the transformation of the system of Mien social relations toward the patterns that Kandre and Miles describe came about through an attempt to preserve particular kinds of leader-follower relations in new circumstances (cf. Sahlins 1981, 1985, 1989 for Hawaii).

Tsan Khwoen's prominence was a one-man show: his markers of power were not within the reach of his followers. His architectural separation from the rest of the population, considerable wealth, unique ritual contract, ritual rank, prestige items, title from the Nan king, and trade relations with the opium monopoly all manifested his unique standing and how he acted on it. As tribute from his followers, Tsan Khwoen received a basket of rice from each household every year.

The generational shift from Tsan Khwoen (Phaya Khiri) to Wuen Lin (Thao La) and his brothers indicates a change from articulating prominence in the context of armed confrontations, migration, and links to a king and to a king's spirit toward an emphasis on farming and trade (Table 1). There certainly were continuities in a title derived from the king, privileged trade connections, and a continued relationship with the king's spirit, but the difference is important. In settled conditions, the followers are likely to have focused their social and ritual life on farming and rituals at the householdlevel. The frequency of household-level rituals at the beginning of the century is evident from a missionary account from 1915, which complained about the difficulty of getting eggs or chickens from the Mien as "so many had been killed [to placate] malevolent spirits" (Callender 1915: 84–85).

Lowland Nan provided the Mien with markets for opium and rice. The market for rice was in part due to national integration, as Bangkok

had undone the tributary base of the Nan kingdom. Bangkok also posted a number of soldiers along the border with Laos, and the Mien sold their rice to the garrisons (Le May 1926: 172–3). It is possible that with the rice tribute undone, lowland farmers lowered their yields correspondingly, and this may be why the Mien were able to sell their rice. It is in this context of a market for surplus rice and for opium—and given the peaceful setting that precluded a continued emphasis on military prowess among the Mien leaders—that I view the generational shift from Tsan Khwoen to Wuen Lin and his brothers. If the Mien leader's prominence was fading because his followers were paying most attention to their own householding, Wuen Lin and his brothers outdid the rest of the population by pulling together a household of twelve families and eighty-six people. In contrast to the one-man shows of their father and Wuen Tzo, they orchestrated a one-household show, which others then attempted to emulate. This process generated inflationary pressures in the Phulangka area which redefined notions of prominence in terms of a highly successful extended household. In contrast, the Phale population, which derives from the descendants of people under Phaya Luang, did not manifest any signs of a successful redefinition of the household although the aspirations of household heads were comparable to those in the Phulangka area.

The Context of Household Centrality

One indication of the shift toward articulating prominence in terms of farming is that while Thao La received tribute like his father, his took the form of one day's labor for each household in his following. Neither he (at least after he became the chief) nor his father physically engaged in farming themselves, which suggests that both modeled their notions of prominence partly on lowland rulers. This is in contrast to other hierarchical settings, such as Kachin, Lua', and Lamet, where chiefs farmed like everyone else. But Thao La was not architecturally separate from the rest of the population like his father was. Thao La's revision of tribute from a basket of rice to a laborer for a day makes sense in terms of the shifting grounds of prominence from warfare and migration to settled conditions of farming and trade. Thao La received tribute from his own fields rather than from the fields of his followers, which indicates that his chiefly fields must have been larger than those of his father's household. While the absorption of rice and labor are both the markers of power, in this case they have different social and agricultural correlates. Thao La's tribute in labor belonged to a time of heightened emphasis on farming (for householding, trade, and rituals), while Phaya Khiri's tribute in rice was of a time when farming was

played down relative to military organizational skills and a leader's link to lowland rulers and ruler spirits.

Like his father, Wuen Lin (Thao La) had the highest (third) level of ritual rank, and he inherited the link to the king's spirit. What I learned about Wuen Lin's relations with the king's spirit concerned his ability to sustain law and order within his realm. Unlike Tsan Khwoen's (Phaya Khiri's) links to the spirit world beyond the ancestors, that is, to the celestial hierarchy of spirit soldiers and divinities to which people gain access through ritual ordinations to *kwa tang* and *to sai* rank (see Yoshino 1995; Choychiang 1997; Lemoine 1982, 1983), Wuen Lin's relations with spirits largely revolved around household prosperity. To some extent, the revision of higher-level rituals that appears to have occurred during Wuen Lin's generation turns relations to the hierarchy of spirits beyond the level of ancestors toward household goals. This makes the Taoist hierarchy of spirits an extension of ancestors' abilities to take care of a household, while it appears previously to have been a separate layer of spirits that marked off those of chiefly position or ambitions. Households, single or multiple, are ritual units with a single set of ancestor spirits. The forging of the Taoist ritual hierarchy toward an extension of ancestors turns divisions within Mien social formations from that of chiefs versus commoners as in Tsan Khwoen's time to that of superhouseholds versus ordinary/poor households in Wuen Lin's time. It is in terms of this reworking of ritual practice and household formation that Wuen Lin and his brothers set in motion a particular kind of inflationary pressure on householding. To come back to Miles's (1974: 379) case about Phulangka Mien, he states:

> Only some [dwelling groups] can retain more members than they lose through marriage; . . . in most cases the reverse situation exists. . . . Yao explain this contrast in terms of the conviction that the minority is exceptionally fortunate: that the ancestors such dwelling groups worship are benevolently inclined towards nearly every descendant whereas the more usual situation is for one out of every two or three infants . . . to be cursed rather than blessed by the dead. In other words, people employ a religious idiom to obfuscate the fact that relative poverty accounts for a group's cession of personnel to others.

As it played out in the ethnographic setting, the inflated concern with ancestral blessing provided the terms for arguing about household affiliation. People would leave a household where they were not adequately healthy or prosperous, and this provided a culturally salient framework for explaining the uneven fortunes of different households within a setting where there was radical divergence in household size.

In general terms, the concern with ancestral blessing is common to the ritual and social dynamics of upland societies in the region (Kirsch 1973). But the Mien case of Phulangka suggests a particular inflation of ancestral blessing, which drew on a conflation of ancestors and higher-level spirits (a Taoist hierarchy of divinities and soldier spirits). This reworking occurred when the sons of a chief were not able to replicate their father's prominence in terms of military prowess and instead reworked it in terms of farming and trade.[6] Their success was partly dependent on the unequal position of the highlanders toward a regional political economy, in particular the ways a trade monopoly and administrative integration played to different interests within this group of Mien. After Phaya Khiri died in the late 1920s, Thao La established himself in a new settlement on a mountain close to Chiangkham. This was Phulangka, which became the center of legitimate poppy cultivation under official inspection.[7] The area was brought into national administration as Phachangnoi subdistrict, and Thao La was made *kamman* (subdistrict headman) over five villages—Phulangka, Phachangnoi, Suanyaluang, Namkat, and Phadaeng. The monopolized opium trade required that growers and their fields be registered with a buyer and that the yield be estimated at registration. The agents would not bother with small-scale cultivators, and the result was that only larger households could take advantage of the officially protected monopoly trade. The social outcome was that extended households were a common feature in the five villages that were official settlements, and people could thus take advantage of the legitimate opium trade. Meanwhile, each of these villages had some smaller households and was in addition surrounded by numerous satellite settlements of smaller households that stood outside the legitimate trade and were continually at risk of arrest for illegal poppy cultivation.

Larger households in these registered villages thus could become wealthier, and their position may also have depended on previous wealth, since Thao La collected tax from each household for the district governor. Without the means to pay this tax, people presumably had to locate themselves outside the registered villages and outside the inflationary pressures of extended households. The social outcome for the Mien in this area was a bifurcation into poorer, small households in transient settlements outside the registered villages and, in the registered villages, better-off households attempting to outdo one another through their ability to incorporate more people. Thao La was the undisputed champion of this inflation in householding, with his household of 120 people in Phulangka. With his first and second wives, he had six sons and two daughters, and he adopted one son, whom his third wife brought up (she did not have children herself).[8] Each of his children brought a spouse into the household, and the high number

of people includes three generations. The first reduction in household size came when his fourth son left with his wife and their thirteen children.[9] The household fragmented further at his death in approximately 1964 or 1965, a year or two before Miles started his research, which subsequently conveyed Phulangka dynamics as typical of Thailand's Yao (Mien).

Opium was declared illegal in 1958, but cultivation and trade continued underground for at least another decade. There is some indication that all the opium trade to the monopoly passed through Thao La's hands. The Chiangrai politician and amateur ethnologist Bunchuai Srisawat visited the area in about 1950. He refers to Thao La as "Phaya" (conflating his title with that of his father, as some contemporary Mien villagers do) and states that "all the Yao in [the Phulangka] area are subjects of the Phaya. Any one of them who grows opium must bring it to the Phaya, as he is the agent" (Bunchuai 1950: 463–4; my translation). At least once in the early 1950s, Thao La's relatives and assistants collected opium from all over Chiangrai Province and had it sent to Bangkok.

This is not to argue that economic inequalities caused the differences in household formations in the Phulangka area. My aim is rather to point out the systemically uneven means that people had to act on the reworking of household dynamics, which started with Wuen Lin and his brothers attempting to hold onto the prominence of their father. The way administrative integration and the opium monopoly played up the interests of large and stable households in the five officially registered villages literally spells out which households in the Phulangka area had the means to purchase children for adoption.

Phale was situated outside the framework of the Royal Opium Monopoly and is thus more representative of the condition of northern Thailand's upland population engaged in opium production. But, like the Mien in Phulangka, they incorporated outsiders through purchase-adoptions into their households. The rate of adoptions in the two settings is comparable, while the social outcomes diverge in terms of household formations. Given this, it is significant that while Phulangka Mien appear to take wealth and a large household as paradigmatic for their assessment of success, Kandre's Phale informants were decidedly uneasy about wealthy people. In Phale, household heads told Kandre (1967: 601) about their desire to have large households and that these efforts repeatedly stalled because of "disciplinary problems." As the historical background of the two populations is quite similar, I interpret the difference as indicating how the dominant voices in each setting turned contingent outcomes of engagements with a regional political economy into a matter of local society and culture. In

part, this helps explain the analytical jump that anthropologists have made from prevalent household formations to the shape of society.

Only in this historical setting, between roughly 1910 and 1965, did the household become the dominant subject of action, and the difference between Phale and Phulangka is clearly related to political economic factors.[10] My reading of the historical material suggests that the initial extended household was a cultural reworking of notions of prominence, played out in the absence of warfare and migration and in the presence of particular, uneven possibilities of farming and trade. I do not want to suggest a choice between cultural and political economic factors. The practice of purchase-adoptions of children is specific to Mien in this area. To some extent ethnicity matters for addressing trends in social life in the region. But the difference between Phale and Phulangka and the variety within the Phulangka area point to the problems with explanations in terms of ethnic labels.

Adoptions through purchases from outsiders, while somewhat specific to the Mien of the northern Thai hills in the twentieth century, are not a structural feature of Mien social organization. Mien did not "have" adoptions, but better-off Mien purchased children for the purpose of expanding their households. The social outcomes varied, for reasons of unequal trade connections, differences in local articulations of ritual schemes, and a concomitant difference in the acceptance and success of extended households. These differences describe only a portion of the social arrangements pertaining to Thailand's Mien population in this time period. The immediate analytical implication of this historical specificity is that the incorporation of historical dimensions to the ethnography requires a rethinking of the social framework of the analysis (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Sahlins 1985; Thomas 1991).

The Mien material reinforces Hinton's (1983) suggestion about Karen, that ethnic groups as a people with a shared and unique language, culture, and social organization do not exist. The analytical biases of classical anthropology coincided with the official mandate of the Tribal Research Institute to produce accounts in ethnic terms, through studies of the "six main tribes" (Jonsson 1999, 2000a, 2000b). This is one instance of how certain anthropological perspectives have systemically missed the impact of the state in hinterlands such as the northern hills of Thailand. The social outcomes in Phale and Phulangka during the 1960s do not rest easily within a classical perspective, as leader-follower relations, warfare, and state-client frameworks had radically different social outcomes only a generation earlier. The quest for a supposedly traditional social organization among the so-called hill tribes of Thailand misses or edits out various

aspects of how lowland states contributed to upland cultural politics and social formations. This bias also tends to leave out various interethnic entanglements and glosses over patterns of inequalities and internal variation among the supposedly unique and separate ethnic groups. I have argued that upland social formations have in many ways drawn on engagements with lowland states and a regional political economy without being reducible to these factors.

Social Formations in History and Region

My research on the historical dimensions of uplanders' identities, social dynamics, and agricultural adaptations relates upland-lowland differences in terms of a structure derived from the state's project of hierarchy and control. As this state project was reproduced, it generated an ecological and social bifurcation between the cleared lowlands with states and their subject populations and the forested hinterlands wherein lived people who largely stood outside the state. There were various political, economic, and other relations that cut across the assumed divide, but it was reproduced from both sides in terms of cultural projects of identity formations and social relations. This structure is only one part of the making of social categories across a rather large region. This historical analysis runs counter to the assumption that uplanders and the state were firmly separate social entities with opposite agendas. The state's dealings with and definitions of highlanders point to lasting tensions among levels of the state as the main factor in these relations. At the same time, the highlanders' position beyond the state was maintained largely through dealings that highland leaders, often with titles and tribute privileges from a lowland court, had with the state.[11] This upsets the conventional dichotomy of the political state and the cultural Other by pointing to the cultural dimensions of the state's project and the sense that the distinction between uplanders and lowlanders was maintained in spite of multiple relations and fundamental tensions within both the state and upland societies. This complexity is glossed over with the analytical focus on bounded, integrated upland groups, as well as through the analytical privilege on economic and political interests as opposed to cultural factors (Jonsson 1996, 1997, 2000a).

   The way various political economic factors were incorporated into local social life through unequal farming and trade in the first half of the twentieth century spell out some of the trajectory that contributed to the situation Miles encountered in Phulangka and asserted was typical for this ethnic group. This wider context did not cause particular household formations, but it provided new options, which had local repercussions as house-

holds were constructed and reproduced in rituals, exchanges, and farming as subjects of action. These social reproductions were decidedly uneven. In this Mien case they went along with a systemic bifurcation of households and villages into, on the one hand, stable settlements of largely extended households and, on the other, more transient settlements of small and mobile households.

Both settlement mobility and the prestige maneuvers of competitive and to some extent ranked feasting largely came to an end in the late 1960s as the Thai state assertively brought highland populations into national orbits through the outlawing of swidden cultivation and settlement migration. As I mentioned earlier, some of the ethnography of the region has dealt with these processes in terms of a shift from tradition to modernity. To the extent that feasting and migratory farming constitute the cultural and social essences of the six main tribes, this is a realistic approach. My aim has been to complicate this dichotomy through an account of just how historically specific and socially uneven the supposedly traditional dynamics were. Thus, rather than reinforcing the notion of traditional peoples whose cultures have been eroded by recent state penetration, I have attempted to contextualize household centrality historically through a discussion of how leadership and householding have been played out in different contexts of farming and ritual on the fringes of the state.

My reexamination of some Mien social dynamics to contextualize contradictory generalizations about Mien society is not meant to close the Mien case but rather to suggest perspectives on previous ethnography and open equally reexaminations of ethnographic realities and the realities of ethnography. The former calls for a rethinking of society, culture, and ethnicity through a historically informed examination of tenuous strands of social life in their regional and political economic contexts. The latter calls for a critical study of the assumptions of anthropological reporting about social life in relation to issues of temporality and agency.

The case of opposite tendencies in Mien social life—one characterized by nuclear households in transient settlements and the other by extended households in stable villages—may suggest that the Mien case replicates the tensions that Leach (1977 [1954]) identified between egalitarian and hierarchic ideologies among Kachin. There is some support for such interpretation in the tensions among the interests of large and small households, and while the cases of Phale and Phulangka show different outcomes, I am hesitant to conclude that one is egalitarian and the other hierarchic. Another upland group in northern Thailand, the Lisu, has repeatedly been described as egalitarian (Dessaint 1971, 1972; Durrenberger 1971, 1983; Hutheesing 1990). Ethnohistorical research shows that between the late 1920s and

about 1950, Lisu in Chiangrai Province had a titled leader who collected taxes for state officials, and their villages were hierarchically organized as if within the state's administrative system (Hanks and Hanks forthcoming). Subsequently, after the titled leader was assassinated, most Lisu lived in small households in transient settlements beyond administrative networks. I do not know of any similarly violent reaction to Mien headmen, while the move to Phale from northern Laos may in part have been a reaction against the taxation of warfare and prominent leaders in the uplands. The Phulangka population appears to have had good relations with its leader and to have shared his ambitions for wealth and large households. But this case is problematic, as the population in the Phulangka area was systemically bifurcated into those in officially recognized villages, who had access to legitimate opium trade, and those in small and transient settlements outside these administrative and economic frameworks. Among the latter, who did not share the means for or the emphasis on extended households, people may have had ambivalent relations with their leaders. I heard from one descendant of this more marginal population that, according to his father, Thao La had been cruel and had arbitrarily had people beaten. Older people who grew up in these marginal settlements indicated general poverty, which further reinforces the sense that there were systemic differences in people's abilities to establish or maintain large households. Thus, generalizing for Mien society from Phulangka is problematic not only in relation to the situation in Phale but also in relation to other settlements in the Phulangka area.

Viewed historically, Miles's assertion that Phulangka was a typical Yao village need not imply more than that he is making a case about Yao. A speculative but more productive interpretation would be that Phulangka was a typical Yao village not because it was somehow average but because of its prominence. Its typicality, then, was more hegemonic than statistical. People in other settlements deferred to Phulangka, and if they had the means they tried to emulate its definition of success. The fear of rich people that Phale Mien people voiced to Kandre was not a feature of Phulangka discourse as far as I can tell from Miles's work and was not in evidence among their descendants when I did my research. But the unease about Thao La about which I learned from some of the marginal settlements is along the same lines and provides some support for my interpretation of the circumscribed character of Phulangka's typicality.

There is a curious reversal involved in examining the anthropology of the northern Thai hills during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While this anthropology tended to portray the societies it described as traditional, in retrospect it is this anthropology that appears rather traditional while

the hinterland social formations suggest dynamics in and of history and region that complicate notions of society. My restudy of some Mien material has been motivated by an ethnographic quest for an understanding of the history of the people with whom I worked. This is not to suggest that an understanding of the context of ethnography and ethnographic knowledge is any less important (Stocking 1983, 1991), only to acknowledge that coming to terms with the historicity of anthropological research depends partly on realizing the historicity of our research settings. There is every indication that Miles learned the same things about the past of the Phulangka population as I did. In his dissertation, he discusses their integration into administrative and political economic networks during the early twentieth century and states that, given this information, "Phulangka must have been one of the most prosperous opium communities in Thailand prior to World War II" (Miles 1974: 50). The fact that he describes Phulangka as typical of Mien/Yao in his other work (1972a, 1972b, 1973, 1990) may reveal as much about what the anthropological community considered a case as it does about the conventional steps from a village to an ethnic group in ethnographic writing.

While on the one hand, the Mien case reveals conflicts of interest between chiefs and commoners and, on the other, between the interests of nuclear and extended households, I am reluctant to frame these dynamics in terms of egalitarian and hierarchic social organizations. Largely, my reluctance stems from the implied next step of stating whether Mien society is egalitarian or hierarchic. The Mien social formations with which I am concerned show a range of outcomes, in terms of household formations and settlement stability, that do not lend themselves easily to a characterization of a society. The range of simultaneous variation in household and settlement formations in the Phulangka area is obviously related to the uneven possibilities of relations with a regional political economy. But it is equally an outcome of inequalities internal to a particular history of migration and farming on the state's fringe. This history is different from that of the Phale population, where the articulation of local ambitions in the context of a separate engagement with the same regional political economy had very different outcomes in terms of householding. The two settings display roughly the same percentage rate of incorporation of outsiders through purchase-adoption.

The generational difference in the ambitions and options of Mien leaders and the divergence in the abilities of Mien commoners to materialize particular household formations suggest that explaining Thailand's Mien social formations in the last century must draw in part on regional political economic factors. Both administrative relations and the organiza-

tion of the opium trade contributed to social dynamics in the hinterlands, but given the uneven outcomes of these engagements it is descriptively inadequate to portray Mien or other uplanders as mere adjuncts to global processes. The patterns in ritual life and household and settlement formations were Mien projects throughout, and it was in terms of Mien articulations of household composition that they turned to purchase-adoptions with considerable enthusiasm. Some of these engagements were transformative, such as the religious and social aspects of the generational shift from Phaya Khiri to Thao La and what appears to be a rejection of the trappings of strong leaders in a condition of warfare in the case of the Phale population. These transformations inform Mien histories and identities, and an anthropology that is concerned with issues of history and political economy must tend to such factors to avoid unduly attributing agency to global factors and thereby making local social formations appear "cold" when they most clearly were not.

A historical case that would only consider the Phulangka Mien population would most likely reveal persistent inequalities resulting from highland people's engagements with the state. The eschewing of chiefly power in the Phale case, as in many Lisu cases, has tended to lead to statements about structure as opposed to history.[12] Somehow, the state has tended to disappear from view when its impact is not easily read from local social formations, while the highland peoples were engaged in reproducing household and settlement formations on the fringes of the same state. But such readings may be too influenced by the immediacy of fieldwork. My analysis of the place of uplanders and the character of Mien social formations indicates that what has entered anthropology as adaptations to particular environments must be seen as the outcome of a regionwide structure. This structure, the upland-lowland divide, was reproduced from different perspectives by both upland and lowland populations. Further, the undoing of tributary relations during the colonial period contributed to a radical restructuring of hinterland social relations, most significantly by largely precluding the anchoring of upland leaders' power in connections with agents of the state. Coupled with the gradual decline in warfare, with the exception of anticolonial struggles that involved uplanders such as in Laos (McCoy 1970), these factors are important components in the histories that facilitated the household autonomy that was so pronounced in ethnographic reporting on the upland groups of Thailand. These histories are regional and involve partly global aspects of political economy (McCoy 1991), but they have been appropriated into social dynamics that are manifestly local and have played unevenly to the interests of householders and those acting in terms of larger units such as villages. Unlike Leach's (1977

[1954]) case of Kachin, the Mien case does not suggest that lineage ideologies served to integrate and differentiate supravillage units. This difference, like the differences between Mien and Lisu and among Mien cases regarding household formation, is a reminder that local structures on the state's fringes have their own historicities, which continue to pose challenges to grand theory.

Houses and households are architectural, ritual, social, and economic entities, and the literature on house societies (Waterson 1990; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995) has explored the analytical utility of this notion from Lévi-Strauss. His concern was to propose a framework for understanding cognatic societies as a way to deal with the analytical problem of "societies where 'political and economic interests' have not yet 'overstepped the old ties of blood'" (Gibson 1995: 129). As Howell (1995: 169) points out, while the focus on "the house" is of considerable heuristic value, Lévi-Strauss employed the notion in such a way that it "included virtually every kind of society and thereby lost its usefulness as a concept." In the Mien case, houses and households point to divergence, tensions, and transformations, so it is counterintuitive for a historical analysis to propose an entity such as "the Mien house" as a shorthand for a uniform society. Gibson's (1995: 148) examination of the notion of house societies in relation to the Ara of Sulawesi suggests that while "the house is a symbolic device serving as a model for an enduring social order . . . , it is also a device whereby competition for wealth and power can be carried out under the cloak of innate differences in rank." This perspective can be used to highlight the generational difference between Phaya Khiri and Thao La. The former, confident in his social distinction from his followers, was architecturally separate from them and did not himself farm. Thao La, on the other hand, while undisputably prominent, farmed through the labor of his household members and his followers, and he maintained a household that was of the same kind as that of commoners but of a scope beyond the means of anyone else. Combining the materials on the Mien populations of Phulangka and Phale does not contribute to generalizations about Mien society from the house, and in this sense the house does not hold as a condensed form of society. On the other hand, attention to houses and households in a historical and comparative perspective can contribute to an understanding of the complex historicities of hinterland social formations in their local and regional contexts. This is the analytical alternative that I propose to the previous generalizations about society and ethnicity from predominant patterns of household dynamics in a village.

Notes

1 Yao is an ethnic category that has a long history in China. Mien (sometimes Iu Mien) is a subset of Yao (see Cushman 1970; Jonsson 2000a). All of Thailand's Yao are Mien. In Laos, there are also Lantien Yao, and there is a great diversity of Yao peoples in Vietnam and China.

2 Peter Kandre studied Mien during the years 1963–65; Douglas Miles, 1966–68. Jacques Lemoine initially studied Hmong in Laos, starting around 1965, and then Mien by about 1970. In his publications, Lemoine is persistently vague on the dates of his research.

3 The current ethnographic distinction between Mong and Hmong replaces a previous one between Green/Blue and White Meo/Miao.

4 One anonymous reviewer found my characterization of Mien adoptions problematic, as it skirted the issue of whether this experience was traumatic for the children. Kandre (1967: 604) mentions a case where two brothers, twelve- and fourteen-year-old Red Lahu boys who had been adopted only a few years earlier, shot their abusive adoptive father. In general, Mien adoptions do not appear to have had such drastic consequences for either side. The reader's concerns assume that biological kinship is not problematic. Practices of adoption and fosterage are common in Southeast Asia, island and mainland, upland and lowland (see Schrauwers 1999: 311). These cases from across the region show that kinship is created, and family ties come no more "naturally" than other ties (Schrauwers 1999; Carsten 1997; Hanks 1992 [1972]: 80–92). "A Bang Chan rice grower, telling of his childhood, upbraided his parents for refusing to give him into the care of a powerful government official who wished to 'adopt' him. The storyteller commented, 'My parents could not have loved me very much'" (Hanks 1992 [1972]: 88). In his case about the highlands of South Sulawesi, Schrauwers (1999: 320) shows that "negotiations [of parent-child relations] are ongoing and always subject to review and failure." Somewhat similar to the case Schrauwers makes, the Mien case shows clearly the strategic uses of kinship in the context of regional inequalities as better-off Mien households absorb children from indebted or impoverished households. I do not think that adoptive kinship was necessarily more problematic than biological kinship in the Mien case, and both Kandre (1967) and Miles (1972a) discuss tensions and conflicts of interests in Mien households during the 1960s.

5 There is some irony in this collection of timepieces not meant for telling time. O'Connor's (1983) examination of the appropriation of Chinese ceramics by the hinterland populations of Southeast Asia provides some interesting parallels, and there are many resonances with the appropriation of European goods by Pacific Islanders (Thomas 1991; Sahlins 1994).

6 The character of changes in local ritual dynamics and the articulation of prominence is in the opposite direction from what Bloch (1986) found in his historical analysis of circumcision rituals among Merina of Madagascar; in some ways the Mien case is "from violence to blessing." Among the indications, which suggests that my case minimally applies also to the Mien of Phale, is how people acquired children for incorporation into their households. During the 1960s, this was always through purchase and thus was a direct indication of the congealed labor of a household. Kandre's informants indicated that in earlier times, other settlements had sometimes been raided for children. Thus, in that time the ability to incorporate outsiders was a measure of military prowess. The ordinations to

ritual rank among Thailand's Mien, which concern soldier spirits and a couple's status in the afterlife, have to my knowledge primarily been performed for purposes of household prosperity. Given that there is every indication that households were in general much poorer prior to the settlement in Thailand, where they benefited from opium trade in a peaceful setting, these rituals are likely to have earlier been both the prerogative of chiefs and concerned primarily with military prowess. As Yoshino (1995: 271–2) describes *kwa-tang* rituals, one of their implications is that ordained men are committed to a set of ancestors and can thus not become ritually incorporated elsewhere as uxorilocal husbands. Viewed in terms of the economics of rituals, these expensive ordinations imply that only better-off households can ensure that male heirs of the household stay linked to a given set of ancestors. The ability to hold onto household members and to acquire others for incorporation was unevenly distributed. The concern to keep household members and increase their numbers is strongly related to the dynamics of farming.

7 Since I discussed Wuen Tzo's collection of clocks, it is worth mentioning that Thao La had a grandfather clock that he was given by Bangkok-based opium traders when he established his house in Phulangka in the late 1920s. The clock now belongs to one of his grandsons, and household members rely on it for knowing the time.

8 Unlike in the Thai lowlands, where each wife runs a household, hinterland polygamy was persistently a one-household affair.

9 None of the children were adopted. The man left with his family in the 1940s, initially to join the first Mien wet-rice settlement in the area, the village of Huai Feuang; he later became a trader in the town of Chiangkham. In lowland fashion, he later established another household with a second wife in Bangkok, but in upland fashion this was with the consent of his first wife.

10 There are many parallels to this transformation away from chiefly control and toward household centrality among the upland groups of Thailand and Cambodia during roughly the same period (Jonsson 1997, 1998a, 1998b).

11 Among the important exceptions to this characterization are the cases by Gibson (1986) and Tsing (1993), where uplanders' social identity is informed by a marked aversion to dealings with the state.

12 Less hierarchic social organization in the hinterlands is often taken as an indication of autonomy from the state. The engagements of colonial states with these populations tended to favor or even create chiefs. Kirsch (1973: 32) points to an important exception, where uplanders along the India-Burma border became more egalitarian and litigious as a result of colonial entanglements.

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