

[britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com)

Hmong -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia

Nicholas Tapp

8-10 minutes



Hmong, Hmong woman in traditional clothing, Laos.© Muellek Josef/Shutterstock.com ethnic group living chiefly in China and Southeast Asia and speaking Hmong, one of the Hmong-Mien languages (also known as Miao-Yao languages). Since the late 18th century, the Hmong alone among the Miao groups have slowly migrated out of the southern provinces of China, where about 2.7 million still remain. See *also* China: People. Some 1.2 million have moved into the rugged uplands of northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and the eastern parts of Myanmar (Burma). More than 170,000 live in the United States and nearly 20,000 more in France (15,000), Australia (2,000), French Guiana (1,500),

Canada (600), and Argentina (600). (See Researcher's Note: Hmong population figures and self-name.)

The original home of the Hmong is thought to have been in the Huang He (Yellow River) basin of central China. They were slowly driven southward and marginalized by the expanding population of the Han Chinese.

Traditionally, the Hmong practiced the shifting cultivation of unirrigated upland crops; buckwheat, barley, and millet were grown at the highest altitudes, and rice and corn (maize) at lower elevations. Virgin forest was cleared and burnt off for the planting of new fields; when soil fertility declined (usually after several decades), the entire village would relocate. New villages could be a considerable distance away from a group's previous locale. In the late 19th century the opium poppy was introduced into the highlands by outside traders, and the Hmong began to cultivate it in an integrated cycle together with corn and dry rice. They sold opium to itinerant traders, usually Chinese, in return for silver. The silver was used in bridewealth payments, and the trading system often involved a loan against a future opium harvest.

By the late 20th century, shifting cultivation had become impracticable except in a few remote areas. In response to government programs in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, the Hmong have now largely abandoned shifting cultivation and opium production. They have instead turned to the permanent-field cultivation of crops such as corn or the gardening of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, which they sell in lowland markets.

Hmong society is organized through a number of patrilineal clans with Chinese surnames such as Li, Wang, and Yang. Smaller descent groups within these clans comprise people united through a known common ancestor and shared ancestral rituals. Surname exogamy, or outmarriage, is still strictly observed: a Li man may not marry a Li woman. An ideology of brotherhood unites the men of a particular clan, so that a man of the Li clan may expect to find hospitality from other Li "brothers," wherever they may be living. The role of women in traditional clan culture is more ambiguous; their spirits were cared for in the afterlife, but their social status was low.

Clans bridge the broad cultural divisions that are thought to reflect the migration of different groups of Hmong from central China. The two main cultural divisions of the Hmong in Southeast Asia are the White Hmong and the Green Hmong, which may refer to the colour of women's clothing. The

White Hmong and the Green Hmong traditionally lived in separate villages, rarely intermarried, spoke different dialects, had different forms of women's dress, and lived in houses of different architectural patterns. By the late 20th century there was greater proximity between the cultural groups—more intermarriage occurred and mixed settlements had become commonplace—yet the sense of difference between the divisions still remained strong.

Hmong cultural life and religious beliefs are extremely rich, like the embroidery and love songs for which the Hmong are noted. At marriage the bride joins her husband's household. The sequence of events at a wedding is carried through by a series of songs marking each moment of the bride's transition, sung by two go-betweens appointed respectively by the bride's and the bridegroom's side. A certain amount of bridewealth, traditionally in silver, must be paid by the family of the groom to the family of the bride. This payment acts as a sanction on her behaviour; if it can be shown that she has misbehaved (for example, by cheating on her husband or by running away for no good reason), the husband's family can demand its return. Female suicides, often by swallowing opium, were quite common. A man may have more than one wife; co-wives live together in the same house and treat their children equally.

The New Year, which starts on the 30th day of the 12th lunar month, is a time for honouring the family's ancestral and household spirits, and for the family to remain together, but also for visiting other villages and playing communal games. In Southeast Asia rows of unmarried boys and girls play catch with a cloth ball, while in China there is the beating back and forth of a feather shuttlecock. These games may lead to further meetings between a young couple and eventually to marriage.

In cases of serious sickness or misfortune, a shaman is invited to the house, where he enters a possessive trance in order to visit the otherworld and locate the missing soul of the patient. Every person has a number of souls who may wander away from the body or be trapped by evil spirits, causing illness, and it is the shaman's job to diagnose this and to retrieve the soul (see shamanism; soul loss).

Funeral rites may last several days, and there is a series of mortuary rituals that takes place some years after a death. A drum is beaten, the reed pipes are played, and a special ritual expert is invited to sing the song “Opening

the Way,”” which will guide the reincarnating soul of the deceased back to the original village of ancestors, from where it will be reborn. The corpse is buried, usually in a place selected—like the sites of villages are—according to the Chinese system of geomancy (feng shui).

Sometimes a shaman acts as a political leader, as there is no specifically Hmong political institution above the level of the village or local descent group. From the late 19th through the 20th century the Hmong have periodically risen up in armed revolt against colonial and postcolonial authorities, a response to the exploitation and hardship imposed by more dominant peoples. Often these rebellions have been associated with the belief that a messianic leader of the Hmong is about to be born, the imminence of which is announced by a prophet who validates his claim by “discovering” a form of writing for the Hmong language. There is no traditional form of writing for Hmong, but legends explain how they lost their writing at the dawn of time and describe the circumstances under which it will one day be restored. Although a variety of scripts are now in use for the language, messianic movements persist.

In the 20th century the Hmong of Southeast Asia were divided by the conflicts between communist parties and states. In Thailand, where many Hmong joined the Communist Party during the 1960s, they earned a reputation as enemies of the state for that reason. Decades later, many Hmong in Thailand still continue to lack citizenship rights or proper titles to the land they cultivate.

In Laos many Hmong sided with the opposition to the communists; after the Revolution of 1975, more than 100,000 fled from Laos into refugee camps in Thailand, from where they were resettled to countries including the United States, Canada, France and French Guiana, Australia, and New Zealand. Many families were split apart in these resettlements. Some diasporic Hmong have begun tracing family roots and tracking down relatives while revisiting their homelands in Thailand, in Laos, to a lesser extent in Vietnam, and even in southern China, which their families may have left two centuries ago. New contacts have been formed across the Hmong global community through the use of audio- and videocassettes and increasingly through the Internet. Indeed, these technological advances have been crucial in forming a new sense of transnational community among the geographically distant groups of Hmong.