

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

>

Prospective LDS Outreach among the Hmong (Miao) in Southeast Asia

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: February 2012

Overview

Native to the mountainous areas of southern China and northern Indochina, the Hmong (Miao) are generally known as the Miao in China and Hmong in northern Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma. Both terms Hmong and Miao can be generally used interchangeably but not all Miao in China pertain to the same ethnic group as the Hmong native to outside of China. Hmong from Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand often regard the term Miao as derogatory and inaccurate as it means "savage" in Chinese whereas Hmong in China generally accept the designation of Miao. Worldwide estimates for the number of Hmong generally range from four to five million.

The Hmong are among the few ethnic minority groups of Southeast Asia which have received concentrated LDS outreach in immigrant communities in the United States but have no missionaries or congregations operating in their homeland. Ironically, no other Southeast Asian ethnic group in the United States has as large of a Latter-day Saint community as the Hmong as indicated by the Church operating nine Hmong-speaking congregations (two wards, seven branches) whereas other prominent Southeast Asian groups have less than half as many units, such as Cambodians (4), Vietnamese (4), Laotians (3), and Thai (1) notwithstanding each of these groups possessing similarly-sized or larger populations than the Hmong. In the United States, the 2010 census counted 260,076 individuals who identified as Hmong and California (91,224), Minnesota (66,181), Wisconsin (49,240), North Carolina (10,864), and Michigan (5,924) comprised the five states with the largest number of Hmong.[1] LDS mission outreach has occurred principally in California (San Joaquin Valley) and Minnesota (St Paul) and to a lesser extent in Anchorage, Alaska; Oklahoma; San Diego, California; and Wausau, Wisconsin.

This essay provides background information on the Hmong people, an analysis of the opportunities, challenges, and prospect for future LDS Church growth among the Hmong and Miao in Southeast Asia, and a brief summary of the successes of other Christian groups in reaching Hmong communities in the United States and in Hmong homelands.

//

History

The Hmong appear to have populated the mountains of southern China for millennia. Expansion by Imperial China under the Qing Dynasty into Hmong homelands and the imposition of taxes resulted in conflict that led to many Hmong resettling in northern Indochina between the seventeenth and late nineteenth centuries. In the early twentieth century, the Hmong instigated a revolt in French Indochina which was known as The War of the Insane.[2]

Conflict intensified between the Hmong and other ethnic groups or political entities in the twentieth century due to repression from these groups and the involvement of the Hmong in American military operations. In the 1960s, the United States recruited Hmong men in Laos to fight a "secret war" against the North Vietnamese when they made intrusions into Laos. Operations were based in Long Tieng, Laos. Many Hmong fought valiantly and exhibited friendship and loyalty to the United States in its military operations in Southeast Asia during this period. Advancing communist forces in Laos threatened the safety of many Hmong, resulting in the evacuation of tens of thousands of Hmong into Thailand. In late 1975, the communist Pathet Lao forces overthrew the Royal Lao government. The Hmong became an immediate target for aggression and discrimination by the Pathet Lao due to their involvement in American military operations, resulting in a continued flow of Hmong refugees into Thailand. The United States accepted tens of thousands of Hmong refugees between the mid-1970s and early 1980s who were resettled throughout the United States.[3] Notwithstanding the United States accepting tens of thousands of Hmong as refugees in several waves of resettlement, thousands of Hmong continued to reside in refugee camps in Thailand in the late 2000s.

Linguistic and Demographic Background

There are 34 Hmong and Miao sublanguages spoken worldwide; over two-thirds of which are native to southern China. Many of the names of these sublanguages originate from the ornate traditional clothing worn by these groups or from the geographical location where they generally reside. In China, there are 24 Hmong sublanguages spoken. Provided with the number of speakers, these languages include Hmong Njua [Green Hmong] (40,000), Miao [Central Huishui] (40,000), Miao [Central Mashan] (70,000), Miao [Chuanqiandian Cluster] (1,400,000), Miao [Eastern Huishui] (14,000), Miao [Horned] (50,000), Miao [Large Flowery] 300,000, Miao [Luopohe] (61,000), Miao [Northern Guiyang] (84,000), Miao [Northern Huishui] (70,000), Miao [Northern Mashan] (35,000), Miao [Small Flowery] (84,000), Miao [Southern Guiyang] (28,000), Miao [Southern Mashan] (10,000), Miao [Southwestern Guiyang] (70,000), Miao [Southwestern Huishui] (56,000), Miao [Western Mashan] (14,000), Miao [White] (233,000), Sinicized Miao (250,000), Miao [Eastern Qiandong] (350,000), Miao [Eastern Xiangxi] (80,000), Miao [Northern Qiandong] (1,250,000), Miao [Southern Qiandong] (500,000), and Miao [Western Xiangxi] (820,000). In Thailand, two Hmong sublanguages are spoken: Hmong Daw [White Hmong] (32,400 speakers) and Hmong Njua [Green Hmong] (60,000 speakers). In Vietnam, five Hmong sublanguages are spoken (Sinicized Miao, Hmong Daw [White Hmong], Hmong Dô, Hmong Don, and Hmong Njua [Green Hmong]) by nearly 800,000 people. In Burma, one Hmong language is spoken: Hmong Njua [Green Hmong] (10,000 speakers). In Laos, two Hmong sublanguages are spoken: Hmong Daw [White Hmong] (170,000 speakers) and Hmong Njua [Green Hmong] (100,000 speakers).

Opportunities

The size of LDS Church in many Hmong American communities presents unique opportunities to prepare for prospective outreach in Hmong homelands. Many Hmong Americans retain a vivid memory of their traditions and customs and offer exciting opportunities for the LDS Church to make inroads among Hmong in Southeast Asia if legal obstacles that diminish religious freedom in many of these nations are overcome. Hmong American Latter-day Saints regularly serve full-time missions in the United States and provide invaluable resources as translators with English-speaking leadership, cultural experts on traditional beliefs and practices, and language guides to teaching the Hmong language to non-Hmong full-time missionaries assigned to work with Hmong populations. The Church benefits from developed Hmong leadership in many locations with Hmong-speaking congregations. Some members with leadership experience can be assigned to Southeast Asia to work with Hmong communities within the confines of the law.

Hmong Americans have significantly larger families than the average family size of the United States and can potentially offer more resources to missionary work than many other ethnic groups with smaller family sizes. The 1990 census reported that the average Hmong family had twice as many individuals compared to the average white American family (6.38 versus 3.06) and that most Hmong Americans (60%) were under age 18.[4] The large number of Hmong youth offer opportunities for full-time missionary service.

The positive relationship between many Hmong Americans and the United States government appears to have improved receptivity to the LDS Church in locations where Hmong-speaking congregations operate. LDS teachings which encourage members to support their governments and be involved in civic matters may have attracted some Hmong to investigate and join the Church.

All five Southeast Asian countries with sizable Hmong/Miao populations have 10,000 speakers of Hmong Njua (Green Hmong); one of two Hmong varieties commonly spoken by Hmong Americas. Three countries (Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam) have at least 30,000 or more speakers of Hmong Daw (White Hmong); the other Hmong sublanguage commonly spoken by Hmong Americans. When permitted by government authorities, the assignment of Hmong American members to serve missions in locations with sizable Hmong Njua (Green Hmong) and Hmong Daw (White Hmong) populations may accelerate growth due to familiarity with language and cultural practices.

Challenges

Government restrictions on Christian proselytism prevent any realistic prospects for the LDS Church to initiate overt church planting and missionary activity among Hmong and Miao peoples in Southeast Asia at present. Hmong and Miao peoples continue to be widely persecuted, ostracized, and monitored by government officials due to historical conflicts and racism. Concentrated efforts by the LDS Church to target these populations may appear more suspicious compared to proselytism efforts among the dominant ethnic groups.

Regulations on religious assembly and ecclesiastical contact between foreign and native members prohibit full-time missionaries and foreign church leaders to meet with Hmong and Miao in China. In Vietnam, the Church operates under many restrictions notwithstanding small numbers of Vietnamese members serving missions within Vietnam and working through member referrals. In Laos, religious freedom restrictions impede any outreach prospects outside Vientiane. Political instability and government restrictions on foreign missionaries render any outreach potential among Hmong and Miao insurmountable at present. In Thailand, there do not appear to be any government restrictions that prevent LDS missionary activity among Hmong who have traditionally lived within Thailand. However, close government surveillance and strict regulations at Hmong refugee camps complicate any prospective efforts for missionary activity to occur.

There are two passive methods the Church can adopt to spur growth among Hmong and Miao peoples in mainland China. The

conversion of Chinese Hmong and Miao individuals abroad and their return to their homelands is a feasible method to make inroads with these populations within the confines of the law. Few Chinese Hmong and Miao appear to have immigrated, making any prospects for outreach to occur through this approach remote. The other potential method is the teaching and baptizing of Hmong and Miao converts in China through familial connections as permitted by the law. The Church has grown rapidly within China in recent years without the assistance of any foreign missionary personnel through member referral among family members. The lack of interconnectedness between Han Chinese and Miao peoples presents the greatest obstacle in following this approach as very few if any Han Chinese Latter-day Saints have any relationships with Miao peoples which would qualify under the law for sharing the gospel.

The diversity of Hmong and Miao languages and varying degrees of intelligibility between sublanguages presents a major obstacle for future outreach. LDS translations of scriptures and church materials in Hmong appear to be in Green Hmong or White Hmong as most Hmong Americans speak one of these two dialects and virtually the entire Hmong LDS membership resides in the United States. It is unclear whether available Hmong translations could be effectively utilized by Hmong groups residing in Southeast Asia today. The assignment of American Hmong missionaries to locations in Southeast Asia with Hmong or Miao populations may prove ineffective due to language barriers and cultural dissimilarities.

Conversion to Christianity has divided families and challenged converts to be true to their new faith and respect traditional beliefs. Conflict between new converts and their nonmember families can be expected if the Church initiates missionary work in Hmong/Miao populations in Southeast Asia today.

Comparative Growth

Other missionary-focused Christians report a presence among Hmong communities in the United States but few if any adherents in their traditional homelands. Some Christian groups have achieved little growth among Hmong Americans, such as the Seventh Day Adventist Church. In 2011, Adventists reported only two Hmong-speaking congregations in the United States - the largest of which had only 65 members.[5] Jehovah's Witnesses also appear to have few Hmong-speaking congregations in the United States. Some mainstream Christian groups such as Baptists and Evangelicals report sizable followings in some cities with substantial Hmong communities such as Fresno, California.

Future Prospects

Government restrictions, societal and political persecution, few if any Latter-day Saints, remote location, and language barriers prevent any active outreach campaign by the Church among Hmong and Miao populations in Southeast Asia. The conversion of isolated Hmong and Miao individuals assigned to LDS congregations in Vientiane, Laos; Nong Khai, Thailand; and in Chinese-designated branches and groups in southern China appear the most practical method that the Church can utilize to establish a presence in the traditional homelands of Hmong and Miao peoples for the foreseeable future.

[1] "Complete Hmong State Totals 2010 Census," tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/hmongstudies, retrieved 21 January 2012. http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/hmongstudies/message/470

[2] "Hmong people," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 25 January 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hmong_people

[3] "Laotian Civil War," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 25 January 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laotian_Civil_War

[4] "Hmong Americans," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 26 January 2012. http://www.everyculture.com/multi/Ha-La/Hmong-Americans.html

[5] "Visalia Seventh-day Adventist Church," www.adventistdirectory.org, retrieved 26 January 2012. http://www.adventistdirectory.org/ViewEntity.aspx?EntityID=39028