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MONG HISTORY AND CULTURE

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This article provides some brief overview of the Mong history and culture. It will contain discussion on the origin of the Mong dating back to the Great Flood and the confusion of languages, where the Mong was originated until the 20th century. It will also discuss the Mong culture that includes their ways of life, e.g., family and clan, daily life, values, gender roles, food, dress, music, arts and crafts, naming, agriculture, spirituality, festivities like the Mong New Year Celebration, marriage ceremony and rituals during their funeral ceremonies.

From time immemorial, the Mong as a people have existed for over 5,000 years in China. The Chinese referred to them as the “Miao.” The Laotians and the Thai called them “Meo.” However, they call themselves “Mong.” They are close-knit ethnic people with a total population of 10 million. They speak a pre-Sinitic language, called the “Mong-Mien,” within the Sino-Tibetan language family. For more information about the Mong language, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999; Thao, 1999 in Park & Chi (eds); Thao & Yang, 2004).

The origin of the Mong is unknown. However, four theories of their origin emerged at the turn of the century. These theories proposed that the Mong might have come (1) from Mesopotamia, (2) from the South, which could be India, Burma or Tonkin, (3) from China, and (4) from Siberia (Russia). Though their origin remains inconclusive, most researchers conclude that they were in China before the Chinese. For more information about the origin of the Mong, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Savina, 1924; Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999).

Mong history is dated back to the confusion of language in Ta Soa. Savina asserted that the Mong belonged to a subgroup of the Turanians (a Caucasoid people) originating from the Pamir in Central Asia that was forced out by the Aryans. They migrated through Turkestan, Russia, Siberia, Mongolia, Manchuria, Honan, Tibet, and the Yellow River. For more information about the Mong history, readers are encouraged to read *Hmong: History of a people* (Quincy, 1995; Quincy, 1988).

History tells us that the relationship between the Mong and the Chinese had not been smooth. During the Shang Dynasty (2497 BC), Tseu-You led the Mong to attack on encroaching

Chinese Hoang-ti (later known as the Yellow Emperor) of the Shang Dynasty. Hoang-ti reorganized the Mong into the eight-family system still known until today as Mong Si, Black Mong, Mong Dlang, Mong Sua Fang, Mong Yuapa, Mong Yochua, Flowery Mong, and Mong Lahau, according to the colors of their costumes. During 1028 BC-257 BC, the Chou Dynasty sent the Mong to Southern Kansu as a political buffer in an unsecured location controlled by “The White Wolf.”

During 206 BC-220 A.D., the Han Dynasty directed a “southern pacification policy” to the Mong. Around 618 A.D., the Tang Dynasty launched a campaign to reconquer all territories previously lost to the Mong and brought a great deal of their territory under Chinese administrative control. During 907 A.D., the Sung Dynasty proposed a fake marriage of a Mong princess, *Ngao Shing*, to a Chinese prince next in line for the throne and imposed a policy of fight and flight to the Mong. During 1368-1644, the Ming Dynasty continued to oppress the Mong and as a consequence a “Mong Wall” (smaller than the Great Wall) was built on the Hunan-Kweichow border to prohibit the Mong to trade with the Chinese. During 1644-1911, the Manchu Dynasty imposed heavy taxes on them and continued to suppress them. For more information about the Mong history, readers are encouraged to read *Hmong: History of a people* (Quincy, 1995; Quincy, 1988).

In the late 17th century, the Mong migrated to Laos by way of Vietnam, to Myanmar, and Thailand, but the influx of their migration did not begin until 1810-1820 (Mottin, 1980). The Mong from the basin of the Hoai sprawled through Hupeh, Kiang-Si, and Hunan, the Blue River. From the basin of the West River, they continued their journey to the northeast as far as Kweichow. Kweichow was the base of the Mong concentration where they used to migrate to other provinces, such as Kiangsi, in the south to Kwangtung, in the north to Szechwan, and in the west to Yunan. For more information about the Mong history, readers are encouraged to read *Hmong: History of a people* (Quincy, 1995; Quincy, 1988) and *History of the Hmong* (Mottin, 1980).

In 1884, France and China signed the Treaty of Tien Tshin. The Mong in Laos assisted France to push the “Black Flags” back to China. However, between 1917-1922, their relationship deteriorated. The French imposed heavy taxes on the Mong. As a consequence, Pang Chay Thao led the Mong to revolt against the French, known by the Mong as “*Pang Chay War*,” known by the Laotian as “*Rog Phi-ba*” (The Mad War), and known by the French as “*La Guerre des Fous*,” translated into “the War of the Mad People” in English. For more information about the Mong history, readers are encouraged to read *Hmong: History of a people* (Quincy, 1995; Quincy, 1988; Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999).

During 1941-1945, the Mong were involved in World War II. However, the majority of them knew this war as “*Rog Yivpoos*” (The Japanese War). In 1946, it was the beginning of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. Between 1963-1975, those in Laos were involved in “The U.S. Secret Army in Laos” as part of the Vietnam War. In 1975, they migrated to the refugee camps in Thailand. In 1976, they began their resettlement in the Western countries, e.g., the US, France, Germany, French Guiana, Canada, and Australia (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999). For more information about the origin of the Mong history in Laos, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999).

Family and Clan. Culturally, as the basic nurturing institution, Mong family is the most important unit in the society. It consists of all the people living under the authority of a household. It is unique in that it is organized strictly on the patriarchal side or from the father's side. Besides the importance of the family and extended family, they place emphasis on the clan system that originated from a common last name. The clanship is considered to be their basic social and political organization. A Mong at birth automatically takes on his or her father's clan name and remains a member for life, except for the women who get married and assume new identities in their husbands' clans. For more information about the origin of the Mong culture in Laos, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999; Thao & Yang, 2004).

The origin of the clan remains a mystery. Their legend refers to the clandestine origin to a child of incest born from a brother and a sister dating back to the Great Flood. Shaped like an egg, the offspring was cut into 12 different pieces by its parents. Then, the 12 pieces became the 12 different traditional clans. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999).

Daily Life, Values, and Gender Roles. As mountain dwellers, life was very harsh. In order to survive, they had to work very hard from dawn to dusk throughout the whole year. Each member has very specific tasks to perform. Everyone is very committed to work very diligently to contribute to the welfare of the family: the father and mother for breadwinning for all the people living under the household, but the father takes more responsibility for heavy work outside the home and the mother takes more responsibility for work inside the home and outside the home such as working in the field, children for tedious and simple manual labor work, and grandparents for child caring and educating the young. They all take part in the production of crops, such as cultivating the land, planting the crops, weeding, harvesting, and storing food. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999).

In addition, the spirit of collectivism is a very important value for the Mong. The notion of division of labor is obviously very important within the family, between members of the villages, and between villages and villages. This is closely related to the social and political patterns of the Mong society. They always provide mutual assistance to one another within the same family, to their extended families, to members of the same village and other villages as well. This free labor exchange has long existed within the traditional cultural realm and values of the Mong. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999).

Food. The main food for the Mong is the steam rice, chicken, pork and vegetables. Other foods are green beans, tofu, and other green vegetables. The Mong who grew up from Southeast Asia do not drink milk as one of their regular diets. In fact, their children may not be able to digest milk. The Mong eat three meals a day: breakfast, lunch and dinner. The Mong do not eat bread, dairy products, butter and milk as part of their diet. Contradictory to the Chinese, the Mong do not use chopstick, but instead they use spoons and forks.

Dress. Today, most of the Mong dress in typical western clothes. Mong women were skilled in clothes making and Mong males became very skilled jack-of-all-trades, e.g., blacksmith, silversmith. They made all their clothes by hand from hand dyed hemp fabric. Traditional Mong males wear loose-fitting black pants folded across the waist that are very full in length, having narrow opening for the ankles with a wide crotch falling mid-way between the calves and the ankles. They wear collarless short jackets made out of black cloths leaving a bare midriff. In contrast, most of the Mong women fully dressed in western clothing. Some of them may still have worn Laotian dresses made out of cotton and silk. Their attire consists of a skirt, a blouse that opens at the front and has embroidery on the back, an apron that covers the skirt at the front, and leggings. Traditional Mong women wear knee-length pleated skirts of hand-woven hemp covered with batik patterns drawn with beeswax and indigo dye along with a long black or colorful apron in the front. The bottom of the dress is a strip of plain cloth bordered with bright-colored cross-stitch embroidery and appliqué of various colors. Despite her additionally familial responsibility, it normally takes a Mong woman the whole year to complete her handmade skirt.



Fig. 1. Gaozong & Chee-Ah C. Thao (1990)
Dressed in Mong Costumes, 1990

Music. The Mong people are very musical by nature. Music could simply be made out from leaves. Mong young men and women use leaves to communicate with one another through blowing the leaves to make music and send their love messages through their lips. Their musical instruments include various kinds of bamboo flutes. Bamboo flutes have long been attached to the cultural and spiritual of the Mong. They contain the musical essence of the Mong countryside with the tranquility of the seasons. In addition, one of the most notable wind musical instruments is the “*Qeng*.” It is made of several bamboo tubes, arranged closed together with one end connected to a wooden sound box. “*Qeng*” is used for courting, dancing, and conducting New Year celebration as well as funeral ceremonies. In close proximity, the Mong young men and women use harps (“*Ncaas*”) to express their feelings for their partners. In addition, they also improvise their love songs (“*Lugtxaj*”) at various occasions, but especially during the New Year celebration. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999) and *Roars of traditional leaders* (Moua, 2012).

Arts and Crafts. The Mong are very well-known for their arts and crafts, such as “*Paaj Ntaub*” (pronounced “Pang-Dau”) that have been incorporated into various costume design, such as caps, jackets, baby carrying cloths, aprons, skirts, turbans, bags, men’s sashes, flower cloths, quilts, baby carriers, covering for altars and beds, pillow cases. Nowadays, Mong “*Paaj Ntaub*” has become one of the most distinctive features of the traditional Mong culture. Along with the

beautiful embroidery as mentioned previously, Mong males also melted down silver to decorate their clothing and made jewelry from them to add to the Mong clothing as well. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Mickey, 1947; Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999).

Naming. Mong names are very short, e.g., Bee Thao, consists of two parts in the following order: first name (Bee) followed by clan name (Thao). They do not always have a middle name. Originally, the 12 Mong clans consist of the following: Chang, Hang, Her, Kue, Khang, Lee, Moua, Song, Thao, Vang, Xiong, and Yang. Then, later some additional clan names were added to the Mong clan system, including Cheng, Chue, Fang, Lor, Phang, and Vue. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999).

One of the most distinctive features in the naming system of the Mong, is that when a Mong male got married and has the first child, the Mong normally conduct a naming ceremony, called “*Tis npe-laug*” transliterating into “Adult Naming Ceremony” in English. This is to signify that he is no longer an adolescent, but a full adult with full familial responsibility. Some of the adult names that can be added to the given names are: Chang, Cher, Chong, Nha, Nom Se, Xeng, Wang, etc. For example, these adult names could be added to the given name, e.g., Nha Bee Thao.

Agriculture. Economically, as mountains dwellers, they make their living on a traditional, self-sufficient, and agricultural economy (farming) at the subsistent level. They grow rice, corn, maize, potatoes, pumpkins, cucumbers, watermelons, and other crops. Adequate food is grown for their families with some extra for sale. They also raise livestock, e.g., chicken, ducks, pigs, cows, and fish for protein, water buffaloes to help plow the fields and cultivate the land, horses and donkeys for transportation and fighting bulls for entertainment.

Spirituality. In terms of religion or spiritually, the Mong were traditional animists. Animism is a belief system comprising of supernatural power, ancestor worship, superstition, spirit worship, and shamanism. Traditionally, the supernatural power was referred to “*Yawm Saub*” (God), ancestor worship to “good” house spirits that provide protection to the Mong families, superstition and spirit worship to the evil spirits of nature that are capable to cause physical and psychological harm to the Mong in the form of illness, nightmares, and, to a certain extent, death, and shamanism to the means of communication between the Mong and the spiritual world.

Mong shamans normally perform rituals to find out the cause of illness in order to treat the effects. By performing rituals with animal sacrifice, they relate the messages from the spirits to the individuals involved. There are also times when shamans have to perform exorcism of evil spirits as well. Though standardization in the Mong religion does not exist, Mong rituals tend to center around the practices that their ancestors have passed onto them from generation to generation within the context of oral tradition. Clan and lineage variation also occur within and between clans. Therefore, you will not see temples, churches, or mosques like the Buddhists, Christians and the Muslims. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999).

They also believe in life after death or reincarnation. With proper guidance from the Mong musicians who perform the funeral ceremony, they believe that the souls of the deceased will return to their ancestors back to their birthplaces for reincarnation, where their new bodies will become new members of the Mong families.

With respect to religious change, a substantial number of the Mong have been converted to Christianity since 1950s.

Festivities ~ The Mong New Year Celebration. Throughout the year, everyone in the Mong family works very hard to contribute to the family. The only time that the Mong have some rooms to breathe is during the New Year celebration. During this time, Mong young men and young women will dress in their newest beautiful traditional costumes with their decorated silver necklaces in the village quad (now in public parks or fairgrounds), where they have the opportunity for courtship and meet their future spouses. To initiate their conversation, a tossing ball game was established for them to get acquainted. Then, relationship will develop; vows may be exchanged, and then, later they end up in marriages. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999) and *Roars of traditional leaders* (Moua, 2012).

In Mong culture, two terms are associated with the Mong New Year celebration. One term is “*Pebcaug*,” transliterating “Thirtieth” in English and “*Nojtsab*,” as “Celebration.” The “Thirtieth” coincides with December 30th or December 31st or the last day of the year of the Lunar calendar and “*Nojtsab*” with the first day of the New Year. When the Mong arrived in the U.S., their New Year celebration has been altered due to weather conditions in certain states and the availability of the facilities where they could hold the celebration. Therefore, they celebrate their New Year between Thanksgiving and the New Year’s Day.

If the Mong are still animists, during the eve of “*Pebcaug*,” they slaughter a chicken per family to perform a New Year ritual. This ritual is limited to members of the immediate family to wish one another a Happy New Year. In the following day, which is the New Year’s Day, each Mong family slaughters their New Year pig (“*Npua-tsab*”) that they raise throughout the entire year for this special New Year celebration. Each family invites the whole village to dine with them one family after another. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999; Thao, 2006) and *Roars of traditional leaders* (Moua, 2012).

Marriage. In the Mong culture, marriages are not allowed for people of the same last name. A Mong male must carefully select his spouse from other clans – an exogamy system. Marriages are absolutely forbidden between Mong males and Mong females of the same lineage and of the same clan. It is a taboo for them to marry someone from their own clan. Instead, Mong young men must bring in someone from the outside. Selecting the right spouse is the most important aspect for a young Mong because the elders from his family need to give consent for the marriage as well. After all, they do not only marry to their spouses, but to their whole families and their clans as well. A marriage certificate does not mean as much as the bond between the two families that guarantee the marriage of the couple. That is the reason why there was a very low rate of divorce in the Mong society. In marriage, the Mong stress love, faith-

fulness, and long-lasting relationship of the marriage in sustaining the Mong culture. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999) and *Roars of traditional leaders* (Moua, 2012).

When a Mong woman gets married, she keeps her maiden name. However, she is detached from her clan and loses all the rights provided to her from her original clan. Though she still has connection with her own family and her clan, she will assume a new identity within her husband's new clan. She will be embraced in the new family and clan, and will enjoy all the privileges and rights guaranteed to her under the auspices of her husband and his clan. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999) and *Roars of traditional leaders* (Moua, 2012).

Funeral. The purpose of the funeral for the Mong animists is to guide the soul of the deceased to return to their ancestors or in another sense, to get to their birthplaces of their ancestors for reincarnation with the guidance of a “*Qeng*” musician. When a Mong family member dies, a gun is fired three times and their family members wait to announce to the public about his or her death. Then, water is boiled to wash and dress the deceased in special burial clothing. The members of the family, known as “*Tsev xyomcuab*,” will notify their extended families. Key individuals who conduct the funeral rituals include a spiritual guide, a feeder of the corpse, a “*Qeng*” musician, a drummer, a settler of the debt, others assigned as funeral director, coffin maker, firewood, cook, and finance, for example. The last night “*Mo qhua-txhwg*” is considered to be the most important night of the funeral. If an older person dies, several generations of the deceased must be present and sit in front of the corpse the entire night until dawn. One of the two individuals will recite poems, known as “*Txivxaiv*” (a form of rich oral literature genre in the Mong culture only performed at the funeral site) to counsel or sermonize the family members of the deceased to be good law-abiding citizens (Thao, 1997) and bless them with poems known as “*Foomkom*” (another form of rich oral tradition genre in the Mong culture. Again, this is only performed at the funeral site to bless the family members of the deceased. Then, the following day, the corpse will be buried. The Mong who are Christians follow the Christian way of funeral and burial. For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999; Thao, 2006; Moua, 2012). For more information about the Mong culture, readers are encouraged to read *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 2023; Thao, 1999; Thao, 2006) and *Roars of traditional leaders* (Moua, 2012).

To conclude this part, the Mong, coming from a semi-traditional life style, adjusted amazingly well in a high technological society. The younger Mong have made tremendous progress within a relatively short time. Known for their intelligence, adaptability, and love of freedom, the Mong will continue to adjust as a community. Through hard work, determination, and perseverance, the Mong will successfully integrate into the mainstream society and will advance to their full potential and contribute greatly to the advancement in the country where they live.

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