

Jonsson, Hjørleifur (2005) *Mien Relations: Mountain People and State Control in Thailand*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. 198 pages. ISBN 978-0-8014-7284-8.

Mien is one of several signifiers of identity, along with Yao, used to refer to highlanders (a.k.a. “hill tribes”) spanning a region from southern China and Vietnam, through Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. The focus of Hjørleifur Jonsson’s *Mien Relations*, is the relational construction, structuring and restructuring of Mien identity. Jonsson’s overarching thesis is that classificatory schemes for highland peoples have been inseparable from political and economic relations between those peoples and various lowland polities, particularly (though not exclusively) incarnations of Tai/Thai states. The main points of the book are clearly and concisely argued. The work is theoretically engaged without being overly laden with obscure jargon. It is organized through seven chapters; the substantive chapters being one through five, with a separate introduction and conclusion (thus my style of referencing to follow, rather than “first chapter, second chapter, etc.”).

Chapters One and Two are framed in terms of a historical narrative. Chapter One covers “Yao origins” prior to the twentieth century, while Chapter Two brings forth the analysis over the past hundred years. Both of these chapters are superbly clear in both analysis and description. Chapter One succinctly demonstrates the complex interactions involved in the “making and reproduction of mountain peoples as a category (that) reflects one aspect of regionalization” (p. 19). Chapter Two focuses on a confluence of Western and Thai ethnography, in conjunction with national-building projects, which (re)constituted Mien and other highlanders as “ethnic groups.” In so doing, the explicitly political and relational character of highland-lowland relations was obscured by an ethnographic ideal which imaged Mien and others to be relatively autonomous “tribes” with integrated, “traditional” social systems and cultures that stood outside of (both Thai and Western) modernity and apart from political-economic relations (of inequality).

Chapter Three provides a more structural (rather than historical) analysis of the political economy of “Mien relations” with various lowlanders; mainly Thai, but also Chinese, French and others. Among a variety of concerns, Jonsson provides an implicit argument that identity structures action, in particular migration (p. 84).

Chapters Four and Five are based in contemporary (1990s) ethnographic fieldwork and accounts detailing relationships between Mien villagers and the Thai state in various manifestations. Chapter Four is not as clear analytically as the preceding chapters and could be more substantially contextualized. Perhaps this is due to a desire not to repeat too many of the ideas that Jonsson has presented with greater clarity in previous publications (2001, *American Ethnologist* 28(1):151–178; 2003, *Ethnos* 68(3):317–340). Still it contains a good deal of valuable material regarding villagers’ relationship to the state and becomes more deeply engaging theoretically toward the end of the chapter.

Chapter Five focuses on a protest over the establishment of a wildlife sanctuary near a Mien settlement. Jonsson highlights this case as an example of contemporary and fraught relations of Mien to the Thai state. In contrast to discourses that cast Mien as ethnic highlanders juxtaposed to Thai citizens, Jonsson demonstrates the varied ways in which Mien protests are mediated by self-presentation as farmers and national subjects, whose interests and desires correspond to national agendas of modernization (p. 143).

Anthropologists or scholars in related fields engaged with contemporary theory will find the themes and arguments Jonsson presents to be familiar, such as the role and critique of

ethnography, the political construction of highland ethnicity, nationalism and so on. The accomplishment of the book is in bringing these to bear on a detailed analysis of the historical and contemporary case of Mien in Thailand and of Yao and other highlanders more broadly. The central argument that a system of ranks in tributary relationships transformed into a notion of ethnicity (p. 9) is of great interest. There is undoubtedly more work to be done in this area. Jonsson lays out a persuasive case, which is sure to be a point of reference for future studies.

The book is a contribution to both Asian studies and anthropology. The clear, concise style of Jonsson's writing make the book appropriate for upper division undergraduate courses and would serve well in either Southeast Asian regional studies courses covering the important issue of lowland-highland relations or in anthropology as a solid ethnography that combines critical analysis with locally situated forms of culture, knowledge and power. It will certainly be of value in graduate level seminars and deserves to attract the broader interest of both area and disciplinary experts.

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