

THE USES AND USERS OF THE MIAO SCRIPT

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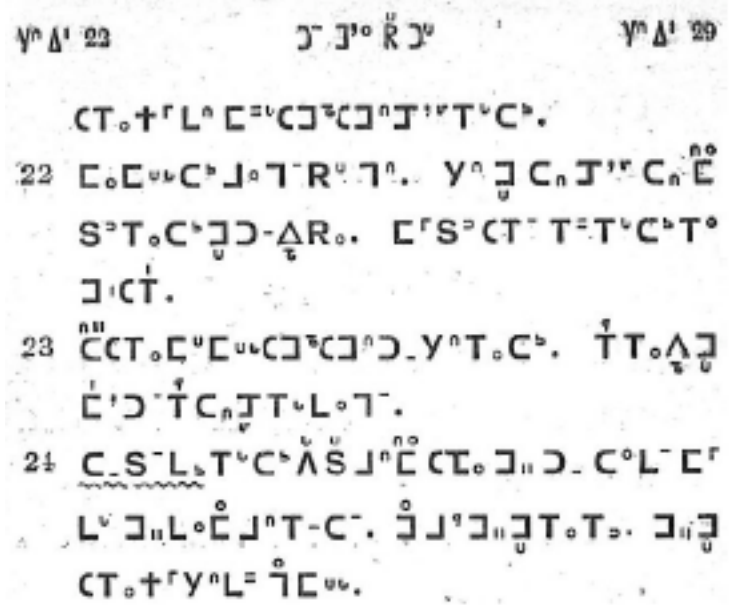
In early August, 2009, China requested that the International Standardization Organization (ISO) recognize the century-old script of several of the minority language groups in Yunnan Province, now called the Miao script and formerly called the Pollard script. The proposal was assembled by China's Yunnan Minority Language Commission and others and entitled the "Proposal for encoding the Miao script" (China L2/09-253 2009). Who uses this script? There are five minority ethnic groups that are still using the Miao script in China. Historically, there were ten groups. The total population of the five remaining groups is over 1,000,000 people. This statistic is based on the most recent population numbers recorded in the Ethnologue (Lewis 2009). Because of the low literacy rates in rural areas, the number of speakers of these five languages who can read anything, whether Miao script or Chinese, is low.

The use of the script by these groups can be thought of along a continuum from historical use to current use to future use as the script has developed. The people of the Laka (or Gan Yi), Chuan Miao, White Miao groups, and other groups used the then-Pollard script in the past. However, there is no sign that they are still using it. Ahmao (or Large Flowery Miao), Nasu (or Black Yi) and Lipo variants of the script are still in use, but mainly by the older generation. All three of these groups still using their Miao script to produce materials, and some have had recent plans to publish materials in the Miao script. The Hmong Sa (Sinicised Miao) use the older script, and have been developing their own variant of the Miao script. This work was in progress recently. There is a romanized script for the Hmong Sa, but it has not been widely used by them.

All of these Miao orthographies are based on the 1936 version of the script. The official "Chuxiong" revised version of 1988 has recognized government status but has not been widely accepted. There are also romanized scripts that are being promoted by local governments, leading to uncertainty over which script to prefer. In field interviews undertaken by one of the authors with members of the Hmong Sa ethnolinguistic group near the city of Kunming, the speakers reveal a clear preference for the Miao script on the part of those with little or no education. Speakers of all of these languages have been shown to perceive only an onset and a rhyme in their words, so the traditional Miao script, with its onset-rhyme character sequence, fits their perception well. It is easier to learn Miao script, therefore, than Latin letters, which require an alphabetic sensitivity. Hmong Sa speakers with a better education, however, stated a preference for the romanized script, since it somewhat resembles the Pinyin transliteration system for Mandarin Chinese, which is a familiar part of elementary school education in that area. The standardization of the Miao script by the ISO and the advent of Unicode support for it in these minority languages could pave the way for higher literacy rates for those who most need it and lead to a better preservation of these indigenous cultures.

Intersecting with the present process of standardization by the ISO, and the resultant Unicode support is the script's adaptability. The historic fact that the script has been adapted to languages belonging to both the Yi and Miao language groups leads to a question of its possible usefulness as a resource for building up the literacy of the speakers of the more than fifty languages that

have been recognized during the past decade in the same geographic area by Chinese and western linguists (Erard 332, Slater).

	<p>Example from: “John in Laka” in the Cambridge University Library (China 2007)</p>
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