

The Myth of Sonom, the Hmong King

By

**Robert Entenmann, Ph.D.
St. Olaf College**

Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 6, 14 Pages

Abstract

This paper discusses the inaccurate designation of Sonom, an important figure in 18th century Chinese history as a “Hmong king.” The myth of Sonom as a Hmong historical figure has gained currency through its inclusion in several widely read written works related to Hmong-Americans published over the past decade. The article clarifies the actual historical identity of Sonom and the likely route by which he became misidentified by some writers as being of Hmong origin.

Introduction

Over the years many of my Hmong students at St. Olaf College have known about “Sonom,” the “Hmong king,” and have believed that the Hmong in eighteenth-century China lived in a Hmong kingdom.¹ Most of them have learned about Sonom from Anne Fadiman’s *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, certainly the most widely read book on the Hmong experience in America. In turn, Fadiman’s account of Hmong history relies heavily on Keith Quincy’s *Hmong: History of a People*, the only easily available English-language study of Hmong history.²

Unfortunately, the belief that a Hmong king named Sonom ruled over a Hmong kingdom is not borne out by the historical record. Sonom existed, but he was not Hmong, nor were the people he led. To deconstruct this error, let us begin by examining the accounts in Fadiman and Quincy.

Fadiman writes: “In 1772, a small army of Hmong squashed a large army of Chinese in eastern Kweichow by rolling boulders on their heads while they were marching through a narrow gorge. The Manchu emperor, Ch’ien-lung, decided he would be satisfied with nothing less than the extermination of the entire Hmong tribe, a goal whose unsuccessful pursuit ultimately cost him twice what he had spent conquering the entire kingdom of Turkestan. Ch’ien-lung

dispatched another general to the Hmong regions. After many months of sieges and battles, the general told Sonom, the Hmong king of greater Kin-tchuen, that if he surrendered, his family would be spared. Sonom swallowed this story. When he and his family were brought before the emperor, they were chopped to bits, and their heads were placed in cages for public exhibition.”³

This incident is the subject of Quincy’s vividly written first chapter, entitled “Ch’ien-lung’s Revenge.”⁴ The chapter begins as follows:

“The Year was 1776. After a three-year campaign in the field, General Akoui entered Peking at the head of his victorious army with 250 prisoners in tow. Though weary, the general had good reason to be pleased that day. Among his prisoners was Sonom, the twenty-one-year-old Hmong king of greater Kin-tchuen, as well as the young king’s immediate family and the principle members of his court.

“The Manchu emperor, Ch’ien-lung, had demonstrated his appreciation by traveling ten miles from the imperial capital to greet the returning general. For even though Akoui’s victory was minor in comparison to many of the empire’s other triumphs, it was one the emperor had anticipated with relish. Now with the Hmong king in his grasp, Ch’ien-lung would have his revenge. It would be swift and terrible.”

These accounts are essentially accurate in most respects. Indeed, in both cost and duration, China’s conquest of the Kin-tchuen -- or, in the contemporary standard spelling, Jinchuan 金川 -- was one of the great military conflicts of the eighteenth century, anywhere in the world. Between 1747-1749 and 1771-1776, the Qing dynasty that ruled China fought two campaigns on the Chinese-Tibetan frontier.⁵ These wars cost the Manchu government perhaps 70 million taels, or 93 million ounces of silver.⁶ The Ch’ien-lung [Qianlong 乾隆] emperor (r. 1736-1795) calculated that the cost of the Jinchuan Wars was more than twice the amount spent to conquer Xinjiang or Chinese Turkestan, a vast area perhaps twenty times larger than the Jinchuan region.⁷ “Pacifying Yili, securing the Hui region, those were great endeavors!” the emperor

declared. “Yet the cost did not reach thirty million taels, nor did it take five years. But those two wars with those little Jinchuan bandits [ci liang Jinchuan xiaokou 此两金川小寇], whose land does not cover 500 li, and who number fewer than 30,000, cost us seventy million taels and took five years!”⁸

The first Jinchuan campaign ended inconclusively. It was bitterly fought, with great casualties on both sides, including three Qing military commanders executed for their incompetence. In a negotiated settlement in 1749, the Jinchuan rulers nominally submitted and pledged to send tribute to the Qing court, but they remained in control of their region.⁹ Two decades later the Qing launched a second war against the Jinchuan, who defended their homeland by constructing fortified stone towers, some of which survive to this day.¹⁰ One Qing general, in fact, described them as small cities.¹¹ In 1773 the Jinchuan inflicted a disastrous defeat on Qing forces, killing Wenfu 温福, the Manchu commander. Finally, in 1776, with the aid of a Portuguese Jesuit cannon maker, Qing forces commanded by Agūi (1717-1797) triumphed.¹² The Jinchuan leader, Sonom, was captured and executed, and his people came under Qing rule.

One can see why this story of heroic sacrifice and resolute resistance to oppression and subjugation appeals to Hmong-Americans. Sonom appears to be a Hmong national hero who, unlike contemporary or recent Hmong leaders, can appeal to all Hmong, regardless of clan or political faction. The story also suggests that the Hmong, like most other American ethnic groups, once had a nation-state of their own with which they could identify.

It seems curious, however, that Sonom is not mentioned in Chinese-language works on Hmong or Miao 苗 history and that Hmong in China are generally ignorant of his story and of the Jinchuan Wars.¹³ The reason, simply, is that Sonom and the Jinchuan Wars have nothing to do with the Hmong. Fadiman and Quincy, among others, have perpetuated a mistaken identification of Sonom and his followers with the Hmong.¹⁴

About 100,000 Jinchuan people still exist. They are better known by their Tibetan name, the Gyarong (rGyal-rong).¹⁵ According to one scholar, the Gyarong are not, strictly speaking, Tibetan, although the Chinese state classifies them as members of the Tibetan ethnic group. In any case, the ethnic designation of Tibetan or Zangzu 藏族 is not precise, and one might regard the Gyalrong as a subculture within the Tibetan ethnicity. The Gyalrong call themselves /kəru/ in their own language, a branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family related to standard Tibetan. The Gyarong believe their language is an archaic dialect of Tibetan. They have long been in contact with the Tibetans and have been, to a large extent, assimilated into Tibetan culture.¹⁶

In the eighteenth century, the Gyarong were self-governing, ruled by hereditary chiefs. Although they considered themselves ultimately subordinate to the authority of the Dalai Lama, they were adherents of a form of Bön, the indigenous pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet. Jinchuan rulers claimed religious authority. Indeed, conflict between the Bön clergy and the dominant Gelugpa (dGe-lugs-pa), or Yellow Hat, school of Buddhism -- of which the Manchu emperors were patrons -- was one of the motivations for the Qing conquest of the Jinchuan.¹⁷ The Qing victory over the Gyarong resulted in the execution of a number of Bön monks and forcible conversion of the population to Gelugpa Buddhism.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Bön religion was not stamped out among the Gyarong, and there are still Bön adherents in the region today.¹⁹

How did Sonom 索諾木 - or bSod-nams to use the Tibetan spelling of his name -- and his people come to be associated with the Hmong?

While reading Keith Quincy's account, I was struck, even before recognizing the conflict he describes as the Jinchuan Wars, by his spelling of Chinese and Manchu names: Akoui for the Manchu general Agūi, Kin-tchuen for Jinchuan, Le Tsong-tou for Li Zongdu 李總督. (Zongdu is actually a title, usually translated as governor-general, but Quincy apparently assumes that it is a personal name.) These spellings follow eighteenth-century spelling conventions used by French missionaries in China.²⁰

Quincy's book lacks footnotes to document his sources, a remarkable omission for a monograph published by a university press, but his bibliography cites the *Histoire des Miao* by François Marie Savina (1876-1941), a French Catholic missionary of the Société des Missions-Étrangères de Paris.²¹ Savina, who worked among the Hmong in French Indochina early in the twentieth century, wrote the first account of the history of this people in any European language. He, in turn, reprints in its entirety an account of the Jinchuan Wars by Joseph-Marie Amiot (c. 1719-1793), a Jesuit serving at the court of the Qianlong emperor.²²

Amiot's account is the ultimate source for all Western-language works that assume that Sonom was Hmong or, in Savina's older nomenclature, Miao. Throughout his narrative of the conflict, the word Amiot uses for the Gyalrong people is Miao-tsée (Miaozi 苗子) – les Miao-tsée du petit et du grand Kin-tchouen - whom he characterizes as “semi-savage” (un peuple demi-sauvage).²³

The relationship between the word “Miao” (or “Meo”) and the Hmong people remains a complicated and controversial one.²⁴ Most Hmong in the United States regard the word “Miao” as derogatory. The Hmong-American scholar Yang Dao asserts that the term is pejorative, and it has certainly been used that way in China and Southeast Asia.²⁵ Nevertheless, it is not inherently so, and “Miao” (Miaozu 苗族) is an official designation of the fifth largest of the 56 recognized nationalities in China. They number over nine million people, only some of whom call themselves Hmong in their own language. Hmong in China, when speaking Chinese, refer to themselves as Miao and generally do not seem to resent the word.²⁶

Yet “Miao” is even now not a precise ethnonym, since it encompasses peoples speaking related but not mutually intelligible languages.²⁷ Before the twentieth century the word was even less precise and was often used in a derogatory way.²⁸ Han Chinese used the word “in an extremely vague and general way to refer to uncultured southwestern peoples” or “all southern tribes considered beyond the pale of civilization.”²⁹ An early twentieth-century Chinese-English

dictionary reflects this usage in its definition of “Miaozi” as “wild aboriginal tribes found in Kueichou [Guizhou] and elsewhere.”³⁰ In the eighteenth century, Qianlong’s court “broadly designated almost all minorities as ‘Miao people’ (Miao min) [苗民], although it was capable of also refining the term ‘Miao’ to refer to the rebellious aborigines of eastern Kweichow [Guizhou], centered on Ku-chou [Guzhou].”³¹ Joseph Amiot, who served at Qianlong’s court, shared that broad and loose use of the term. He was certainly not a modern ethnographer, and the exact culture, language, or ethnic classification of the Gyalrong people did not concern him. It should matter to us, however.

My concern is simply historical accuracy. The ancestors of Hmong-Americans lived in China until the nineteenth century. Because until recently the Hmong lacked written historical records of their own, it is necessary to reconstruct their early history in China from Chinese records. Some historians in China, including Hmong scholars, have begun this task.³² Quincy, however, does not read Chinese -- or any of the relevant languages other than French -- and is evidently not trained as a historian.³³ He seems unaware of the loose way the word Miao was used in Chinese sources, and for that reason his book does not offer a reliable history of the Hmong in China. Savina, though he studied Chinese, was unfamiliar with Chinese history and the subtleties of Chinese vocabulary.

One way a people defines itself is through its history. In this case it was not the Hmong themselves who misappropriated Sonom and the Gyarong as part of Hmong history. This mistake originated eighty years ago when a French missionary historian misunderstood one of his sources. Quincy, Fadiman, and others carelessly passed on the error. Some Hmong in America, depending on unreliable secondary sources written by outsiders rather than on their own traditions, have appropriated Sonom as one of their own. Fortunately, this mistake is a recent one and, in all probability, is not deeply rooted in the Hmong-American cultural psyche, although it does appear in some websites devoted to Hmong history and culture. The Hmong, like all ethnic

groups, take pride in their history. It is important, however, that their historical memory be as accurate as possible.

About the Author: Dr. Robert Entenmann is professor of history and Asian studies and chair of the Department of Asian Studies at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, where he is faculty advisor to Hmong Culture Outreach, a student group. His research focuses on early modern Chinese social history, and he has published several articles on Chinese Catholics in eighteenth-century Sichuan

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented on October 1, 2005, at the 53rd annual meeting of the Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs in Minneapolis. I am grateful to Roger Jackson, Robert Jenks, Gary Lee, Mai Na Lee, Gordon Marino, Frank Osanka, Louisa Schein, Nicholas Tapp, Thomas Williamson, Alexander Woodside, Yuepheng Xiong, and Dao Yang for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am responsible, of course, for any errors of fact or interpretation.

² “My indispensable historical reference,” Fadiman writes, “was Keith Quincy’s lucid and comprehensive *Hmong: History of a People* [Cheney, Washington: Eastern Washington University Press, 1995].” Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 294. Fadiman also relied on François Savina, *Histoire des Miao* (Paris: Société des Missions Étrangères, 1924), which is discussed below.

³ Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, p. 16. Beside the inaccuracies discussed below, it should be noted that the “army of Chinese” in Kweichow [Guizhou] was actually a Manchu army, the Hmong are not a “tribe,” and the incident there had nothing to do with

Sonom. Moreover, Turkestan is a term that refers to the Turkic-speaking parts of Central Asia, rather than a specific state. There was never a kingdom of Turkestan, and only the eastern part of Turkestan was incorporated into the Qing empire as Xinjiang.

⁴ Keith Quincy, *Hmong: History of a People*, pp. 3-15.

⁵ See the accounts of the Jinchuan Wars in Dai Yi 戴逸 and Hua Li 华立, “Yichang depuchangshi de zhanzheng: lun Qianlong chao Jinchuan zhi yi” 一场得不偿失的战争: 论乾隆朝金川之役, *Lishi yanjiu* 历史研究 3 (1993), pp. 30-41; Roger Greatrex, “A Brief Introduction to the First Jinchuan War,” in P. Kværne, ed., *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th International Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Fagernes 1992* (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994), 1: 247-263 (citations are from the version reprinted in Alex McKay, ed., *The History of Tibet*, 3 vols. [London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003, III:615-632]); Erich Haenisch, “Die Eroberung des Goldstromlandes in Ost-Tibet: Als Beitrag zur chinesischen Kolonialgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts,” *Asia Major* 10 (1935), 262-313; Patrick Mansier, “La Guerre du Jinchuan (Gyal-rong): Son contexte politico-religieux,” in *Tibet: Civilisation et Société* (Paris: Editions de la Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1990), pp. 125-141; Dan Martin “Bonpo Canons and Jesuit Cannons: On Sectarian Factors Involved in the Ch’ien-lung Emperor’s Second Goldstream Expedition of 1771-1776, Based Primarily on Some Tibetan Sources,” *The Tibet Journal*, XV, 2 (1990), 3-28 (citations are from the version reprinted in Alex McKay, ed., *The History of Tibet*, III:633-647); Joanna Waley-Cohen, “Religion, War, and Empire-Building in Eighteenth-

Century China,” *International History Review*, 20, 2 (June, 1998), pp. 336-352; Wang Gang 王纲, *Qingdai Sichuan shi* 清代四川史 (Chengdu: Chengdu Keji daxue chubanshe 成都科技大学出版社, 1991); Wei Yuan 魏源, *Shengwu ji* 聖武記 (1842); and Alexander Woodside, “The Ch’ien-lung Reign,” in Willard J. Peterson, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 9: Part One: The Ch’ing Empire to 1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.230-309.

⁶ Martin, “Bonpo Canons and Jesuit Cannons,” p. 138. Greatrex, “A Brief Introduction to the First Jinchuan War,” gives slightly lower figures, totaling 61 million taels, for the two campaigns (p. 615).

⁷ Woodside, “The Ch’ien-lung [Qianlong] Reign,” p. 263. Both Knight Biggerstaff (biography of A-kuei [Agūi 啊桂] in Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period (1644-1912)*, 2 vols. [Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943], I: 8) and Mansier say that Xinjiang was twenty times the size of Jinchuan (“La Guerre du Jinchuan (Gyal-rong),” p. 125; Greatrex (p. 615) says it was almost ten times the size. I think Mansier’s and Biggerstaff’s estimates are more accurate, but both estimates give a sense of the magnitude of the difference.

⁸ *Pingding liang Jinchuan gaocheng taixue peiwen*, as quoted by Dai Yi and Hua Li, “Yichang debuchangshi de zhanzheng,” p. 30.

⁹ Dai Yi and Hua Li, “Yichang debuchangshi de zhanzheng,” p.30 ff.

¹⁰ See the photographs in Haenisch, “Die Eroberung des Goldstromlandes,” p. 301, and Theodore and Kermit Roosevelt, *Trailing the Giant Panda* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1929), p. 116.

¹¹ Zhang Guangsi 張廣泗, memorial of the 9th month of the 12th year of Qianlong (1747), cited by Dai Yi and Hua Li, “Yichang debuchangshi de zhanzheng,” p. 32.

¹² The Jesuit cannon maker was Felix da Rocha (1713-1781), employed by the imperial court. Martin, “Bonpo Canons and Jesuit Cannons,” p. 640; Waley-Cohen, “Religion, War, and Empire-Building,” pp. 346-347. I transcribe Manchu names according to the Möllendorf system and Chinese names according to the *Hanyu pinyin* system.

¹³ See, for example, Part 4, Chapter 4, of Wu Xinfu 伍新福 and Long Boya 龙伯亚, *Miaozushi* 苗族史 (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe 四川民族出版社, 1992), which deals with the Hmong (Miao) Uprising at the end of the Qianlong reign but does not mention the Jinchuan Wars at all. Wu Xinfu, a member of the Miao nationality, also ignores the Jinchuan Wars in his later work, *Zhongguo Miaozu tongshi* 中国苗族通史, 2 vols. (Guiyang: Guizhou minzu chubanshe 贵州民族出版社, 1999).

¹⁴ This identification of Sonom and the Jinchuan with the Hmong can also be found in Hugo Bernatzik’s ethnography, *Akha and Miao: Problems in Applied Ethnography in*

Farther India (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1970), p. 21, and Jane Hamilton-Merritt's book on the war in Laos, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 5, both of whom rely on Savina. The story was repeated in "This is Home: The Hmong in Minnesota," a feature on Minnesota Public Radio, in a March 9, 1999, broadcast, which can be found on-line at http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/199903/08_nymanl_home/hardwork/index.shtml

¹⁵ The Tibetan transcriptions in parentheses follow the system devised by T. V. Wylie, "A Standard Transcription of Tibetan Transcription," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 22 (1959), pp. 261-267. It reflects spelling conventions for written Tibetan but not the spoken form. rGyal-rong is short for rGyal-mo tasha-ba rong.

¹⁶ Mansier, "La Guerre du Jinchuan (Gyal-rong)," p. 128; also footnote 6, p. 139.

¹⁷ Waley-Cohen, "Religion, War, and Empire-Building," *passim*, and Woodside, "The Ch'ien-lung Reign," p. 262.

¹⁸ Waley-Cohen, "Religion, War, and Empire-Building," pp. 348-349, and Woodside, "The Ch'ien-lung Reign," p. 263.

¹⁹ Mansier, "La Guerre du Jinchuan (Gyal-rong)," p. 138.

²⁰ Quincy somewhat anglicizes “Kin-tchouen” as “Kin-tchuen.”

²¹ Francois Marie Savina, *Histoire des Miao*. See the entry on Savina in Gérard Moussay and Brigitte Appavou, *Répertoire des Membres de la Société des Missions Étrangères 1659-2004* (Paris: Archives des Missions Étrangères, 2004), p. 370. Quincy also cites Jean Mottin, *The History of the Hmong (Meo)* (Bangkok: Odeon Store, Ltd., 1980), which also repeats Savina’s account of Sonom and identifies him as Hmong.

²² “Lettre du P. Amiot, Missionnaire de la Chine, sur la Réduction des Miao-tsée, en 1775,” *Mémoires concernant l’histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, &c. des Chinoises*, 15 vols. (Paris: Nyon, 1776-1791), III:387-422. See the entry on Amiot at website of the Ricci 21st Century Roundtable on the History of Christianity in China, <http://ricci.rt.usfca.edu/biography/view.aspx?biographyID=205>

²³ “Lettre du P. Amiot,” p. 387.

²⁴ See for example Joakim Enwall, “Miao or Hmong?” *Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter*, 17 (June, 1992), <http://www.peopleteams.org/miao/MiaoHmong.htm>; Mai Na M. Lee, “The Thousand-Year Myth: Construction and Characterization of the Hmong,” *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2,1 (Fall, 1997), http://members.aol.com/hmongstudiesjrn1/HSJ-v2n1_Lee.html; Yang Dao, *Hmong at the Turning Point* (Minneapolis: Worldbridge Associates, 1993).

²⁵ Yang Dao, *Hmong at the Turning Point*, p. xvi.

²⁶ See Louisa Schein's discussion of this controversy in *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. xiii. The population figure for Miao in China is found in the appendix to Colin Mackerras, *China's Ethnic Minorities and Globalisation* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

²⁷ A Chinese-Hmong dictionary defines Miao zu as Hmub (Hmong), but this is actually a dictionary of the "eastern Guizhou dialect" (*Qiandong fangyan* 黔东南方言). *Han Miao cidian* 汉苗词典 / *Diel Hmub Cif Dieex* ([Guiyang]: Guizhou minzu chubanshe 贵州民族出版社 / Guib Zeb Minf cuf cuf baix seed, 1992), p. 211. In Eastern Guizhou the speakers of this language refer to themselves as Hmu, however. In southern Yunnan and western Guizhou they call themselves Hmoob or Hmub (Hmong). (Private communication from Louisa Schein, February 28, 2005)

²⁸ See the discussion in Chapter 9: "'Real History' and the Theory of Ethnic Categories" in Nicholas Tapp, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 167-179; Ruey Yih-fu, "The Miao: Their Origins and Southern Migrations," *Proceedings of the International Association of Historians of Asia* (Second Biennial Conference; Taipei, 1962).

²⁹ Nicholas Tapp, *The Hmong of China: Context, Agency, and the Imaginary* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001), p. 9; Robert Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Control in Guizhou: The “Miao” Rebellion, 1854-1873* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 29. Note the use of parentheses around “Miao” in Jenks’s subtitle, which he uses because of the ambiguity of the word.

³⁰ Herbert A. Giles, *A Chinese-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1912), p. 973. “Miaozi 苗子” – which has a pejorative connotation – must be distinguished from “Miaozu 苗族” (Miao nationality), which does not.

³¹ Alexander Woodside, “The Ch’ien-lung Reign,” p. 254.

³² See for example Wu and Long, *Miaozushi*, and Wu, *Zhongguo Miaozu tongshi*.

³³ Nicholas Tapp’s harsh criticism of the book as “extraordinarily inaccurate and utterly misleading” is fully justified. See his review essay, “The State of Hmong Studies,” in Nicholas Tapp, Jean Michaud, Christian Culas, and Gary Yia Lee, eds. *Hmong/Miao in Asia* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2004).