

THE HILL TRIBES OF NORTHERN THAILAND

BY

GORDON YOUNG

The Origins and Habitats of the Hill Tribes Together with Significant
Changes in their Social, Cultural & Economic Patterns.

MONOGRAPH NO. 1



THE SIAM SOCIETY

BANGKOK 1962

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(A Socio-Ethnological Report)

ILLUSTRATED

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First Edition :

Prepared Under the Auspices of the Government of
Thailand and the Cooperation of the United States
Operations Mission to Thailand, May 1961.

Second Edition :

Published by the Siam Society, Bangkok, 1962.



Red Labu Girl



Typical Hilltribe (Meo) Village

PREFACE

OLIVER GORDON YOUNG is well qualified to speak with authority about the Thai hill tribes. He was born among them, has lived with them most of his life and probably has more intimate, first-hand knowledge about them than any other living person. He has travelled and hunted through all the northern Thailand country which the hill tribes inhabit, has been on every mountain range and visited every tribe about which he writes.

He knows the Lahu tribe best and speaks their dialect most fluently. In fact, he spoke no other language until after he was seven years old. He is an honorary chieftain of the Lahu tribe. They have conferred upon him the highest of Lahu titles, that of Supreme Hunter, which he earned by fulfilling all of the Lahu requirements.

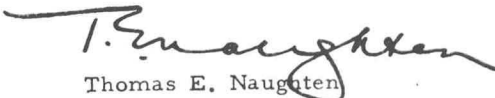
He was born in 1927 in a Yunnan China mission house which was seven days by mule to the nearest field hospital and 12 days to the nearest road head. Gordon's father, Harold M. Young, was a Baptist missionary and Gordon travelled with him through northern Burma and Thailand as missions were established among the Lahu and Wa tribes. During his childhood he became acquainted with the Wa, Shan, Kachin, Yunnanese, Lahu-shi and Lahu-na tribes and learned enough of the dialect of each to be able to communicate with them. Living with these people he learned a great deal about them and developed a great love of nature and for hunting-training which qualified him as a field collector of animals for museums around the world and as an animal dealer.

Gordon Young is the third generation of Youngs to live and work with the hill tribes. His grandfather, William M. Young arrived in north-east Burma in 1898 to work among the people as a Baptist missionary. He made his first converts among the Shan and Wa people in 1900. Gordon's father, Harold, and his uncle, Vincent, were both born in Kengtung, Burma. His father and uncle, with the help of the Reverend Jim Telford, worked out the Lahu romanized

script about 1925 and some eight years later his uncle did the same thing for the Wa tribe.

Gordon was educated in Burma and India and earned his degree in animal husbandry from California State Polytechnic College. He served two years with the U.S. Seventh Division in Korea. In 1950 he met and married Peggy Karoleski, a California girl. The Youngs live in Chiangmai with their four daughters, all of whom speak Thai fluently. Gordon's father and mother, who are now retired, also live in Chiangmai.

All the material in this report is based on personal observation and knowledge except for an occasional reference which is noted. His lifelong acquaintance with the life and habits of the hill tribe people gives this report a validity which is rare indeed!


Thomas E. Naughten
Director

FOREWORD

The purpose of this report is to augment understanding and published information on minority ethnic peoples, more specifically, the hill tribes of northern Thailand. In recent postwar years, there have been significant changes affecting the social, cultural and economic patterns of the hill peoples. New tribes have come, population has increased, villages have moved and relocated in new areas.

Today, twenty tribal subdivisions of mountain people are represented within the northernmost one-fifth of Thailand's geographical boundaries. Totalling approximately 200,000 people, the hill tribes are distributed throughout the rugged mountainous areas of this region, from elevations of 2,000 feet to over 7,000 feet. With few exceptions, these non-Thai ethnic peoples are slash-and-burn hill farmers, believing in animistic religions, and having changed little from the social customs and mores practiced by their forefathers centuries ago.

There are those groups among the hill tribes who have lived in Thailand for more than twenty years, and yet, incredibly, have never seen a Thai man. The author would like to recall an incident while visiting an Akha village as recently as November, 1960.

It was no surprise to the author to be informed by the Akha headman that he was the first American to visit that particular village. The real truth of their isolated society was made clear when the Akha chieftain inquired, with equal curiosity, as to the "tribe" to which the author's two Thai companions belonged. When he learned that these gentlemen were Thais, the chieftain's amazed retort was, "Oh, so this is what the Thai men look like!"

In this report, the author presents some of the more pertinent aspects of the hill tribes in northern Thailand as he has been privileged to see them. The objective is an overall review of current social, cultural and economic conditions, together with a brief analysis of the historical and ethnic background of each tribal subdivision.

While this report is by no means a work of formal ethnology, the author has found it unavoidable to include some terminology more suitable to students of ethnology. This slight inconvenience to the lay readers might be justified in view of the necessity, at times, to further clarify tribal origins, and establish a more realistic classification of the different tribes.

Since there is no existing census on the hill tribes of this region, the author has made population estimates based on known villages of the various tribes. The average persons per house, and houses per village have been worked out by studying representative villages of each tribe.

Of the three main ethnic divisions (Tibeto-Burmese, Wa and Yao-Meo-Pateng) represented among the northern hill tribes, the author has classified the various subdivisions into 20 groups or tribes. Their linguistic affiliations serve as the primary criterion, and in several cases, the author uses the tribe's own name for themselves rather than the name or names which have been given them. This was necessary in order to remove misnomers, inaccurate tribal designations, and an unreasonable splitting of ethnic hairs.

Available published material is not only limited, but often dated or inaccurate. The author has therefore collected much of the information for this report during his travels between August and December, 1960, and has drawn from his observations over many years of working and living among the hill tribes. Statistical data was collected through the excellent cooperation of the Thai Border Patrol Police, Area No. 5, various Changwad and Amphur officials, missionaries and through visitations to representative villages of each tribe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author expresses his deep gratitude to the various agencies of the Government of Thailand and to the United States Operations Mission to Thailand, without whose help and encouragement, this report could not have been accomplished.

Many individuals have contributed appreciably to the successful conclusion of this report. The author wishes particularly to acknowledge the enthusiastic support given him by the Ministry of Agriculture/USOM Coordinator, Nai Boon Indrambarya, and the cooperation and assistance rendered by the officers and enlisted men of the 5th Area, Border Patrol Police. Special thanks are also extended to Rev. Ernest Hiembach of the O.M.F. Mission, Rev. Andrew Yousko of the A.B.M. Mission and Mr. Garland Bare and Mr. Leland Calloway of the C. of C. Mission, for their constructive criticisms and valuable information on the Htin, Yao, Meo, Kha Mu, Karen and Kha Haw tribes.

