

More than two million members of the Bai ethnic group live in south-west China. They primarily inhabit the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture in central Yunnan Province. Dali has been continuously inhabited for 3,000 years. More than 120,000 Bai are located in Guizhou Province.¹ Smaller numbers of Bai also live in Sichuan and Hunan provinces.²



David Treat

The Bai helped established the powerful, far-reaching Nanzhao Kingdom, which was centred south of Dali. The kingdom grew so strong that they were able to defeat the Tang Dynasty armies in the mid-700s. The kingdom flourished for 400 years until it collapsed in the 10th century and was replaced by the Kingdom of Dali. Dali, in turn, lasted until AD 1252, when it was overrun and destroyed by the all-conquering Mongol armies. Yunnan—the home province to the majority of Bai—was devastated by a plague, which began in Dali and lasted from 1812 to 1903. The population of Yunnan was reduced from eight million to three million. During the many centuries the Bai have inhabited Dali, they have gradually assimilated to Chinese culture. Dali has always been famous for its prolific supply of marble, which gave the people their name (*Bai* means ‘white’ in Chinese). Some of the

marble used in the great Taj Mahal of India was obtained in Dali and transported over the Himalayas.

Although the Bai have been given status as a minority nationality in China, they are one of the best assimilated to Chinese language and culture of China’s 55 official minorities. In the past, various experts questioned

whether the Bai were any different from the Chinese at all. ‘During the 1940s . . . the Bai people denied their non-Chinese origin and would show offense if regarded as a minority.’³ Others commented, ‘The Bai like to be called Chinese’;⁴ ‘The Bai nationality as an ethnic label was unknown to the Bai themselves until late 1958’;⁵ and, ‘The Bai are not quite a minority, but not quite Chinese either.’⁶

The Bai speak a language from the Tibeto-Burman family.⁷ In the 8th century they possessed their own script, which expressed Bai words by means of Chinese characters. This script is now extinct. Sixty per cent of Bai vocabulary today is Chinese.⁸ There are four Bai dialects, all of which ‘could be separate languages’.⁹

Many Bai people are followers of Mahayana Buddhism, unlike

other Buddhist groups in Yunnan such as the Lu, Tai Mao, Palaung and Bulang who are Theravada Buddhists. The Bai mix their Buddhism with Daoism and ancestor worship, yet many still reply ‘Buddhism’ when asked what their religion is.

George Clarke of the China Inland Mission was the first Protestant missionary to the Bai in 1881. Recent estimates of Bai Christians include figures of 20,000;¹⁰ 30,000;¹¹ and 50,000.¹² Most of the Bai believers live in rural areas in the mountains and in Fugong County to the west.¹³ Most Bai, however, have yet to receive an intelligible gospel witness. The words of John Kuhn 60 years ago remain true today, ‘No wide-spread work of evangelization will ever be done among them until the message is taken to them in the Bai tongue.’¹⁴



Population:

1,915,200 (2000)
2,470,600 (2010)
3,043,800 (2020)

Countries: China

Buddhism: Mahayana

Christians: 50,000

Overview of the Bai

Other Names: Pai, Minchia, Minkia, Dali, Labbu, Nama, Leme, Baini, Baizi, Baihuo

Population Sources:

1,594,827 in China (1990 census)

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Bai

Dialects: 4 (Dali, Jianchuan, Lanbi, Bijiang)

Professing Buddhists: 50%

Practising Buddhists: 20%

Christians: 2.6%

Scripture: none

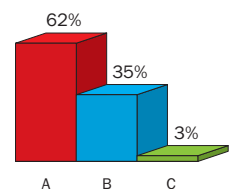
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: Bai: Dali

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: PIQ

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians
C = Are adherents to some form of Christianity