



Population in China:
 1,000 (1995)
 1,120 (2000)
 1,360 (2010)
Location: Yunnan
Religion: Animism
Christians: None Known

Overview of the Ben

Countries:
 China, possibly Myanmar

Pronunciation: “Ben”

Other Names: Ben Ren

Population Source:
 1,000 (1995 AMO);
 Out of a total Wa population of 351,974 (1990 census)

Location: *W Yunnan:* Zhenkang and Gengma counties

Status:
 Officially included under Wa

Language: Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Unclassified

Dialects: 0

Religion: Animism, Theravada Buddhism

Christians: None known

Scripture: None

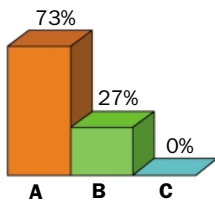
Jesus film: None

Gospel Recordings: None

Christian Broadcasting: None

ROPAL code: None

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Were evangelized but did not become Christians
C = Are adherents to any form of Christianity



Paul Hattaway

Location: The Ben are a small group, numbering approximately 1,100 people in several villages within Zhenkang and Gengma counties in western Yunnan Province. They live alongside the Wa and Lahu minority groups.

Identity: Although the Ben are a distinct people group, since the 1950s they have been officially counted as part of the Wa nationality. The Ben are not happy with this classification and unsuccessfully applied to be recognized as a distinct minority. Missionary John Kuhn was the first to document the existence of the Ben in 1945, describing them as “a Burmese tribe.”¹ The *Ethnologue* describes the Ben as an unidentified group living near the Achang.² Another scholar lists the Ben as one of many small groups in China “which need further investigation.”³ The name *Ben* may simply mean “indigenous people.”⁴

Language: No extensive research has been conducted into the Ben language. Based on the fact that they have been included under the Wa nationality, it is likely they speak a language from the Mon-Khmer linguistic family — distinct from other Mon-Khmer languages such as De’ang, Wa, and Bulang.

History: The Ben are one of several fragments of the original Mon-Khmer group many centuries ago. One author notes, “The Austro-Asiatics, including the Wa and Palaung [De’ang], spread over Yunnan before the arrival of the Dai and Yi. They were driven out of their original habitat by invaders, dispersed and split into the isolated groups which they are today.”⁵ Originally the forests where the Ben live were occupied by bears, deer, and wild pigs, but they have now been largely hunted to extinction. Today most Ben grow rice and vegetables.

Customs: The Ben live in a region abundant with natural resources such as coal, copper, iron, lead, and graphite. Young Ben men and women are free to choose

their own partners. After the sun sets, a young man will go to the home of the young woman he desires and play musical instruments to win her favor. A few generations ago marriages were arranged by parents, which often led to misery for Ben youngsters. The Ben knew little of hygiene until recently. In 1956 bars of soap were first sold in the district. Many dissatisfied customers returned to the shop demanding a refund, complaining about the soap’s awful taste!⁶

Religion: The Ben are animists, although they also have traces of Theravada Buddhism from the influence of neighboring groups. Ben funerals are scheduled on Buddhist holy days. The funeral procession is headed by a Buddhist monk who walks at the front of the people and holds a long piece of white cloth tied to the coffin. The Ben believe the monk is leading the soul of the dead person into the next life.⁷

Christianity: There are no known Christians or churches among the Ben; however, many of the neighboring Wa have converted to Christianity. There are no Scriptures available to the Ben who, though numerically small, are an unreached people in desperate need of Christ.