

Location: The Global Evangelization Movement listed a 1995 population of 36,677 Cao Lan in China.¹ In addition, more than 114,000 live in northern Vietnam where they are known as *San Chay*. The Cao Lan are located along the Yunnan-Vietnam border in Xichou County. In Vietnam they inhabit the lower Red River area, with communities in seven different provinces: Tuyen Quang, Bac Thai, Ha Bac, Quang Ninh, Yen Bai, Lang Son, and Vinh Phu.

Identity: The Cao Lan are officially considered part of the Zhuang nationality in China. They speak a distinct language — different from other Zhuang varieties — and possess their own set of customs and traditions.

Language: Cao Lan is part of the Central Tai linguistic family. “The Cao Lan, a Sincized group, consists mainly in various areas of the delta of northern Vietnam; it is also found in smaller numbers in China.”² It is possible that the Cao Lan language in China is what linguists label the *Yan-Guang* dialect of Southern Zhuang.³

History: The Cao Lan in Vietnam migrated from southern China in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁴ Cao Lan communities are divided into various family lineages, each clan having their own peculiar customs and their own protective spirit.⁵ The Nung and Cao Lan joined with a powerful Hmong army in northern Vietnam in the 1860s. They took possession of large tracts of land and raided

Buddhist temples of their gold. The Cao Lan were deceived into following Sioung — the charismatic, self-proclaimed Hmong king.⁶

Customs: Strict morality codes are practiced among the rural Cao Lan. Women must observe strict rules and customs. Whenever a woman encounters a man in a social position superior to her husband’s, she is required to hide behind bamboo.⁷

The Cao Lan were traditionally buried when they died but, due to a lack of land, the government has recently begun demanding that the dead be cremated instead. Traditionally, when the body was placed in the coffin, seven coins were added for a man and nine for a woman. The coins represent the *Khue* star which they believe guides the person’s soul to his or her ancestors in the other world.

Religion: Spirit worship takes a major place in the lives of the Cao Lan population. Each branch of the nationality worships a different spirit such as the spirit of the river, the trees, the crops, etc. Elaborate festivals include the playing of



Paul Hattaway

castanets, copper bells, drums, cymbals, and wind instruments.

Christianity: In China, as well as in Vietnam, the Cao Lan are unreached with the gospel, although 26 families in Vietnam came to Christ in 1999. Very few have had any exposure to the Christian message and the name of Christ remains unknown. Northern Vietnam and southern China have been Communist strongholds for three generations. There are no Scriptures, gospel recordings, or *Jesus* film currently available in the Cao Lan language, and no Christian ministries or Western mission organizations are known to be targeting them.



Population in China:

36,677 (1995)
40,270 (2000)
48,150 (2010)
Location: Yunnan
Religion: Animism
Christians: None Known

Overview of the Cao Lan

Countries: Vietnam, China
Pronunciation: “Cow-Lahn”
Other Names: Man Cao Lan, San Chay, San Chi, Lan-San Chi, Hon Ban
Population Source: 36,677 (1995 GEM); Out of a total Zhuang population of 15,489,630 (1990 census); 114,000 in Vietnam (1989 census)
Location: SE Yunnan: Xichou County

Status: Officially included under Zhuang
Language: Daic, Tai, Central Tai
Dialects: 0
Religion: Animism, Polytheism, Ancestor Worship
Christians: None known
Scripture: None
Jesus film: None
Gospel Recordings: None
Christian Broadcasting: None
ROPAL code: MLC00

