



Population:
 27,850 (2000)
 34,350 (2010)
 42,300 (2020)
Countries: China
Buddhism: Tibetan
Christians: none known

Overview of the Ersu

Other Names: Duoxu, Ersu Yi, Tosu, Buerzi, Ersubuerzi, Lusu, Lisu

Population Sources:

20,000 in China (1983, Sun Hongkai)

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Tangut-Qiang, Qiangic

Dialects: 3 (Eastern Ersu [13,000], Central Ersu [Duoxu] [3,000], Western Ersu [Lisu] [4,000])

Professing Buddhists: 50%

Practising Buddhists: 15%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

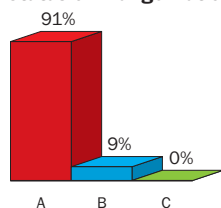
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: ERS

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

A 1983 study listed 20,000 speakers of Ersu living along the lower reaches of the Dadu River, in seven different counties of southern Sichuan Province in western China.¹ The Dadu River originates at Mount Golog on the Sichuan-Qinghai border and runs a total of 1,155 kilometres (713 mi.) before emptying into the Min River. Despite their relatively small population, the Ersu inhabit a widespread area. The main centre of Ersu habitation could be said to be Ganluo County, which is an eight-hour train ride from the provincial capital city of Chengdu.

The Ersu are officially considered part of the Tibetan nationality in China, but in the 1980s they asked the government to create a new minority, called the Xifan, and to include them under it. 'As of yet the central government has not agreed with them.'² The linguist Sun Hongkai says, 'Ersu speakers at different localities have different autonyms: those living at Ganluo, Yuexi and Hanyuan call themselves Ersu,

Buerzi or Ersubuerzi; those living at Shimian use Lusu, and those living at Muli, Jiulong and western Mianning Lisu. These different autonyms are dialectal variants of the same word, originally meaning "white people".³

The Ersu language contains three tones and three dialects, all of which reportedly contain 'great differences'.⁴ The Ersu are noted for their use of an ancient pictographic script. This has baffled and amazed scholars who have speculated on how the Ersu came to possess their unique orthography. One scholar suggests, 'Ersu is perhaps an indirect descendant of the

extinct Xixia language, spoken in a once-powerful empire in the Tibetan-Chinese-Uighur border regions, finally destroyed by the Mongols in the 13th century. A large literature in Xixia survives, in a logographic writing system invented in the 11th century, with thousands of intricate characters inspired by, but graphically independent of Chinese, the decipherment of which is now well-advanced by Japanese and Russian scholars.⁵

The origins of the Ersu are uncertain, but many Ersu themselves believe their ancestors came from Lhasa about 200 years ago. Since that time they have lived in communities alongside the Chinese, Yi and Tibetans, and they have assimilated parts of all three cultures into their own identity. The Ersu are nominally Tibetan Buddhists, though in reality few take religion seriously. 'They do not have any temples, but worship



China Advocate

in their homes. . . . The 3,000 Ersu in Mianning only have two monks, both living in Mianning City. They come to the villages to help with burials. Their last Bon temple (in Huyi) was destroyed [during the Cultural Revolution] in the 1960s.⁶

There has never been a known church or Christian among the Ersu. The Border Mission of the Church of Christ in China and the American Baptists worked among the related Jiarong people until 1949, reporting 34 converts in 1934.⁷ No outreach, however, was ever reportedly undertaken to the Ersu.