

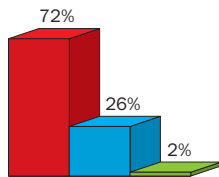


**Population:**  
 36,064,000 (2000)  
 40,752,000 (2010)  
 44,541,900 (2020)  
**Countries:** China, USA, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom  
**Buddhism:** Mahayana  
**Christians:** 400,000

## Overview of the Xiang Chinese

**Other Names:** Hunanese, Hunan Chinese, Hsiang  
**Population Sources:**  
 30,850,000 in China (1987, *Language Atlas of China*)  
 also in USA, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom  
**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Chinese  
**Dialects:** 9 (Changsha, Changde, Xiangtan, Yiyang, Yueyang, Linxiang, Shaoyang, Yungshun, Shaungfeng)  
**Professing Buddhists:** 30%  
**Practising Buddhists:** 5%  
**Christians:** 1.1%  
**Scripture:** none  
**Jesus film:** available  
**Gospel Recordings:** Chinese: Hunan Xiangtanghua  
**Christian Broadcasting:** none  
**ROPAL code:** HSN

## 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

Approximately 37 million speakers of Xiang Chinese—or Hunanese—live in China.<sup>1</sup> The majority are located in Hunan Province. Others inhabit 20 counties of eastern Sichuan and parts of northern Guangxi and northern Guangdong provinces. There are undoubtedly tens of thousands of Xiang Chinese living in countries around the world, but no record exists showing their dispersion or how many live in each nation.

The Xiang are traditionally acknowledged as the most stubborn and proud of all Chinese peoples. One 1900 report stated, 'The people themselves . . . are the most clannish and conservative to be found in the whole empire, and have succeeded in

keeping their province practically free from invasion by foreigners and even foreign ideas.'<sup>2</sup> In 1911 the Xiang were described as 'the best haters and best

fighters in China. Long after the rest of the empire was open to missionary activity, Hunan kept its gates firmly closed against the foreigner.'<sup>3</sup>

Xiang is a distinct Chinese language undergoing transition. It is exposed to Mandarin from several directions. Different Xiang dialects 'exist all along the Gan River drainage system in Jiangxi, although most of them are mutually intelligible, at least on a fundamental level. Ethnolinguists divide Xiang into two so-called dialect groups [Old Xiang and New Xiang] although the two are not readily understandable to one another.'<sup>4</sup>

Comparing Xiang with other Chinese languages, one scholar states, 'None of these so-called dialects is mutually intelligible with any other. The people who speak them may very well be united by their Han descent and their shared eclectic mix

of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian religious beliefs, but they cannot understand one another's spoken languages, which should render them members of different ethnic groups.'<sup>5</sup>

Recently there has been an upsurge in religious interest in Hunan, as people seek to fill the spiritual void in their hearts. 'A monastery in Hunan . . . has witnessed tens of thousands of pilgrims arriving to worship the three "gods" of Communist China—Chairman Mao, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De. This pilgrimage has set alarm bells ringing in the local government over the revival of superstition.'<sup>6</sup> About a third of Xiang Chinese profess to be Buddhists



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(especially elderly people), although the number of people who practise Buddhism is perhaps no more than one-twentieth of the population.

In 1861, the Welsh missionary Griffith John met a Hunan military mandarin, who 'boasted of the glory and martial courage of the Hunan men, and said there was no danger of their ever believing in Jesus or of His religion taking root there.'<sup>7</sup> The pride of the Xiang has made them the most unreached of all Han Chinese peoples. Today, only about one per cent—or 400,000—Xiang are Christians. Mandarin-speaking house-church Christians in China have struggled to penetrate the Xiang with the gospel because of linguistic and cultural barriers. Because of internal strife, the Hunan church has been described as a 'disaster area'.<sup>8</sup>