

Han Tai

Approximately 60,000 Han Tai people inhabit the mountains of Mengyuan County in the Xishuangbanna Prefecture of China's Yunnan Province. 'The area contains 539 species of wild animals and birds, including elephants, wild oxen, tigers, leopards, bears, wild boar, gibbons and monkeys.'¹

Although the Han Tai have never previously appeared in Christian research lists, they are a people group with their own customs, self-identity and language.

While neighbouring Lu (Shui Tai) women wear long, colourful sarongs, and put their hair up in buns, 'Han Tai women wear black, hand-woven sarongs with a bright blue fitted blouse and black turban'.²

Over many generations, the Tai race slowly began to separate and form distinctive traditions and languages.

They 'eventually evolved into two groups: the lowland farmers or *Shui Tai* and the mountain nomads, or *Han Tai*'.³ The Han Tai speak their own distinct language. Most (except those living in more isolated villages) are also able to speak the regional Lu language, which serves as the lingua franca throughout the region. The Han Tai speak Lu to outsiders but continue to speak their own language in their villages.

In contrast to the dominant Lu, whose homes are built on stilts, the Han Tai build their homes flat on the ground, often in a long row of houses in which several families live. The Han Tai celebrate the annual *Songkran* festival. People splash water over each other, believing that it cleanses

the sins of the past year. A Tai legend tells about a powerful fire-breathing demon who was defeated by Yidanhan, a beautiful Tai maiden. 'One night she made a special feast for the demon and got him drunk. . . . He told her that if someone was able to pull a hair from his head and wrap it around his neck, his head would fall off and he would die. Yidanhan did this, but the demon's head rolled away and set everything on fire.

The Tai splashed water on the demon's head to quench the fire, and to wash the blood from Yidanhan's clothes.'⁴

The majority of Han Tai believe in Theravada Buddhism, mixed with spirit worship. During the Cultural Revolution, the Han Tai suffered much persecu-

tion. Cadres even dug up the skeleton of a revered Buddhist abbot and used his bones as fertilizer, in a bizarre bid to provoke the people and destroy their faith.⁵ Pa Ya Shanmudi, the legendary Tai folk hero, laid down several commandments to ensure the survival of his people. One of these instructs each village to build a shrine, called a *zaixin*, as the symbolic heart of the community. 'It serves as a ritual center. . . . To destroy it or obstruct access to it would be the height of sacrilege.'⁶

An evangelist won a small number of Han Tai Christians who live in the Mengyuan area to Christ in recent years. In the 1960s, the fanatical Red Guards killed many of the Tai church leaders in Xishuangbanna.



Julian Hawken



Population:
55,500 (2000)
70,700 (2010)
87,100 (2020)
Countries: China
Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: 200

Overview of the Han Tai

Other Names: Han Dai, Dai: Han, Dry Land Dai, Mountain Dai

Population Sources:
50,000 (2000, P Hattaway [1996 figure])

Language: Tai-Kadai, Kam-Tai, Be-Tai, Tai-Sek, Tai, Southwestern, East Central, Northwest

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 80%

Practising Buddhists: 30%

Christians: 0.3%

Scripture: none

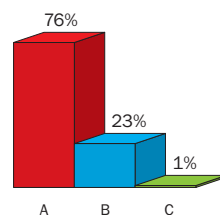
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: Han Dai

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: none

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