



Paul Hattaway

**Location:** Approximately 55,000 Lawa live in Yongde and Zhenkang counties in southwest China's Yunnan Province. Their communities are located in thickly forested areas on the outskirts of the Ximeng Mountains. In addition, 30,000 members of the Bulang nationality also speak Lawa as their mother tongue.

**Identity:** The Lawa were also known historically as the *Tame Wa*. They assimilated more quickly to the cultures of surrounding peoples than did the Kawa, or Wild Wa, who live in isolated communities at least 1,500 meters (5,000 ft.) up in the mountains.

**Language:** The Lawa language in China is not intelligible with Lawa spoken in Thailand, which has "surprisingly great dialect differences."<sup>1</sup> Despite their relatively small population, the Christian ministry

*Gospel Recordings* has produced cassettes in seven different Lawa dialects in Thailand alone.<sup>2</sup> The Lawa now use a Roman script, but in the past they communicated by engraving bamboo strips or sending objects to other villages. "Objects used implied specific meaning or feelings. For instance, sugarcane, banana or salt meant friendship, but pepper meant anger, feathers urgency, and gunpowder and bullets the intention of clan warfare."<sup>3</sup>

**History:** The Lawa are a part of the great Mon-Khmer race of Asia, which includes ethnolinguistic groups ranging from India to the Philippines.

**Customs:** Having adopted Theravada Buddhism under the influence of the Tais many centuries ago, the Lawa became a more gentle people than their head-hunting cousins in the

mountains. The Lawa's Buddhism is cloaked with traditional animistic and polytheistic rituals, as well as with ancestor worship.

**Religion:** In addition to their adherence to Buddhism, the Lawa believe in "house spirits, local spirits, and the spirits of the iron mines. They also rely heavily on witchdoctors. Many deities are regarded as disembodied spirits of ancient heroes."<sup>4</sup> Christian churches are also found in many Lawa villages in China.

**Christianity:** The 10,000 Lawa Christians in China first received the gospel in the 1920s from William Young of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and later from his two sons: "Young succeeded against all odds to win the crude Wa tribe to Christianity."<sup>5</sup> The Lawa's conversion was attained not only by preaching and words, but by Young's self-sacrificial concern for the people. Historian T'ien Ju-K'ang recorded: "At the onset he was fiercely opposed by the Wa who threatened to cut off his head if he ever dared to approach their settlement again. Once in 1924, Young discovered the body of a dying woman lying in a ditch outside a village. She was apparently a victim of smallpox who had been left for dead. Young immediately erected a shed and brought in the woman for treatment, washing her sores continuously for three days. To draw out the puss, Young did not hesitate to use his own mouth. His devotion and compassion opened the hearts of countless Wa to receive his message."<sup>6</sup>



#### Population in China:

45,000 (1990)

55,000 (2000)

67,300 (2010)

**Location:** Yunnan

**Religion:** Buddhism

**Christians:** 10,000

## Overview of the Lawa

#### Countries:

China, Myanmar, Thailand

**Pronunciation:** "Lah-wa"

**Other Names:** Western Lawa, Mountain Lawa, Lava, Luwa, L'wa, Lavua, Tame Wa

#### Population Source:

45,000 (1990 J.-O. Svantesson);

Out of a total Wa population of

351,974 (1990 census);

14,000 in Thailand

(1993 P. Johnstone);

Also in Myanmar, and Thailand

**Location:** *W Yunnan:* Yongde and Zhenkang counties

#### Status:

Officially included under Wa

**Language:** Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer, Palaungic, Western Palaungic, Waic, Lawa

**Dialects:** 0

**Religion:** Theravada Buddhism, Animism, Christianity

**Christians:** 10,000

**Scripture:** New Testament 1972; Portions 1961

**Jesus film:** None

#### Gospel Recordings:

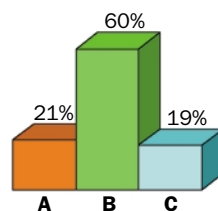
Lawa: Chang Maw #02187

Lawa: La-ooop #01154

**Christian Broadcasting:** None

**ROPAL code:** LCPOO

#### 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