

Malimasa



Population:

515 (2000)
600 (2010)
740 (2020)

Countries: China

Buddhism: Tibetan

Christians: none known

Overview of the Malimasa

Other Names:

Population Sources:¹

500 in China (1998, Asian Minorities Outreach)

100 families in China (1998, J Matisoff)¹

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Lolo-Burmese, Naxi

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 100%

Practising Buddhists: 85%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: none

Approximately 100 Malimasa families inhabit an area near the town of Weixi, in the north-west of Yunnan Province, China.² Weixi, five hours by road from the city of Shangri-La (formerly Zhongdian), is at the point where the Tibetan and Chinese worlds intersect. The intrepid explorer and botanist, Joseph Rock, unflatteringly described Weixi in the 1920s as ‘a forlorn place of about 400 houses. . . . The town boasts a wall of mud with a few dilapidated gates.’³ The Malimasa people live in extremely remote communities. Severe snowfall often cuts their villages off from the outside world for weeks during the winter.

Sickness and disease have long plagued people in this part of China. When Rock visited Weixi 70 years ago, he reported,

‘Nowhere have I seen goiter so prevalent as here. The people carried regular pouches in their throats, like certain monkeys when they fill up with peanuts.’⁴

The other people in the Weixi region say they have considered the Malimasa as a separate people group for at least a hundred years. The Chinese authorities, however, have included the Malimasa under the official Naxi nationality.

The Malimasa language is part of the Eastern Naxi linguistic branch and is related to Mosuo. The people themselves say their vocabulary is comprised of 30 per cent Tibetan words and 30 per cent Bai words.⁵ Despite their small number, the Malimasa have their own ‘syllabary script’.⁶

The history of the Malimasa is shrouded in uncertainty, but their language suggests that they were once part of the Mosuo people who are today concentrated a considerable distance north-east of Weixi, on the Yunnan-Sichuan border. The Malimasa are still a purely matriarchal and matrilineal society—the women are in complete control of all finances, possessions and decision-making. The Malimasa wear their own traditional dress, which is

distinct from that of all other groups in the area. Women wear large turbans wrapped around their heads.

The Malimasa are 100 per cent Tibetan Buddhist. There are a number of Tibetan, Lisu and Naxi Christians in the Weixi area, but they have had little impact on the staunch belief system of the Malimasa.

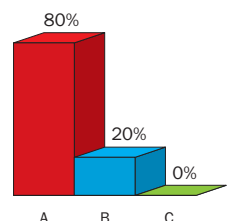
Catholic missionaries from the Grand St Bernard Order began work at Latsa Pass near Weixi in 1931.⁷ Several Protestant families also lived

in Weixi prior to 1949. The great missionary statesman Hudson Taylor, writing of China’s needs in general, stated, ‘The harvest here is indeed great, and the laborers are few and imperfectly fitted for such a work. And yet grace can make a few feeble instruments the means of accomplishing great things—things greater even than we can conceive.’⁸ Taylor’s passionate desire was that national believers would be given the leadership of their own churches and have control over their own affairs. He wrote, ‘I look upon foreign missionaries as the scaffolding around a rising building. The sooner it can be dispensed with, the better; or rather, the sooner it can be transferred to other places, to serve the same temporary use, the better.’⁹



Julian Hawken

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