



**Population in China:**  
 5,000 (1999)  
 5,120 (2000)  
 6,430 (2010)  
**Location:** Yunnan  
**Religion:** Animism  
**Christians:** None Known

## Overview of the Popei

**Countries:** China  
**Pronunciation:** "Poh-pay"  
**Other Names:** Shuiyi, Shuiyipuo, Water Yi, Shui Yi, Shuitian, Shuiyizu, Shuitianyizi  
**Population Source:** 3,000 to 5,000 (1999 J. Pelkey); Out of a total Yi population of 6,572,173 (1990 census)  
**Location:** N Yunnan: Chuxiong Prefecture: Dayao and Yongren counties; Lijiang Prefecture: Huaping County  
**Status:** Officially included under Yi  
**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Burmese-Lolo, Lolo, Northern Lolo, Yi, Central Yi  
**Dialects:** 0  
**Religion:** Animism, Daoism, Ancestor Worship  
**Christians:** None known  
**Scripture:** None  
**Jesus film:** None  
**Gospel Recordings:** None  
**Christian Broadcasting:** None  
**ROPAL code:** None



Target Ministries

**Location:** Between 3,000 and 5,000 Popei people live in the northern part of Yunnan Province close to the border with Sichuan Province. About 1,000 Popei live in several villages in Huaping County which is part of Lijiang Prefecture. In addition, the Popei live in Dayao and Yongren counties of Chuxiong Prefecture. Other small pockets of Popei live scattered throughout the area. The Popei live in mountainous areas, alongside members of many other Yi subgroups such as the Eastern Nasu, Western Lipo, and Lopi.

**Identity:** The Popei have been officially combined with dozens of other distinct ethnolinguistic peoples to form the Yi nationality in China. The Popei are widely known by their Chinese name, *Shui Yi*, meaning "water Yi." The *Popei* (Shui Yi) are often mistaken for the *Shuitian* (Watery Fields) group, but the two groups are distinct and speak separate languages. *Popei* is this group's autonym.

**Language:** An official publication of the Lijiang Naxi Autonomous Prefecture states that the Popei are a distinct people group with their own language.<sup>1</sup> The Popei used to be more populous, but due to intermarriage with other tribes they have largely been assimilated. Jamin Pelkey states, "The

Popei language reportedly shares 86% lexical similarity with the Central Luoluopo language but this comparison is based on a scant 29 word vocabulary list."<sup>2</sup>

**History:** Today's various branches of the Yi people, including the Popei, are believed to have come from common stock. Legends and records written in the ancient Yi script show that the Yi society was once matriarchal. The *Annals of the Yis in the Southwest* records that in ancient times the Yi people "only knew mothers and not fathers... and women ruled for six generations in a row."<sup>3</sup> As the Yi splintered into numerous divisions and migrated throughout

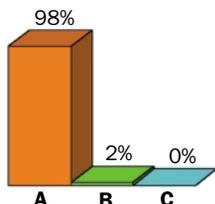
southern China, each group gradually developed its own language and culture.

**Customs:** Although small in number, the Popei celebrate many traditional Yi festivals. Some of these include the Garment Contest Festival which takes place in Zhijie Township of Yongren County every February; and the Get-Together of Princes Festival which is held in Longjie Township of Dayao County on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month. The people throw water over each other, sing, dance, and create an edible "prince" which they bake and eat.

**Religion:** As the Popei were gradually absorbed by the Han Chinese, they adopted many of the Han's Daoist and ancestor worship rituals.

**Christianity:** The region inhabited by the Popei is one of the least evangelized in all of Yunnan Province. Various hidden tribes and groups in the area are locked away by remote mountains and rushing streams. Roads into the area were only constructed in the 1950s. Before then access was only possible by foot or on horseback from the nearest town. The result is that today there are no known believers among the unevangelized Popei. The nearest churches are among the Nasu and Lipo in Wuding.

### 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