

A widespread, isolated section of southwest Sichuan Province in China is home to approximately 40,000 Northern Pumi people. Most are located in and around Muli County, described as 'a rich possession. The rivers, especially the Litang, carry gold and produce a considerable revenue.'<sup>1</sup> Northern Pumi is also spoken in Zuosuo and Yousuo districts of Yanyuan County and in the Sanyanlong and Dabao districts of Jiulong County.<sup>2</sup> Seven thousand Northern Pumi live in the Yongning District of Ninglang County in northern Yunnan Province.

In the past, the Northern Pumi were commonly known as *Xifan*, a derogatory Chinese name meaning 'barbarians of the west'—a name applied not only to this group but sometimes also used for all Tibetans. Older sources listed them as the Chrame people, a name also used in *Operation China*.<sup>3</sup> Linguistic

sources, however, consistently label this group as the Northern Pumi. The Chinese government does not recognize the Northern Pumi as a distinct ethnic minority, but they have simply included those living in Sichuan as part of the Tibetan nationality based on their culture and religion. Consequently, the Northern Pumi in Sichuan almost always identify themselves as Tibetans when speaking with visitors, even though they have a separate language and history from their Tibetan neighbours.<sup>4</sup> The 7,000 Northern Pumi in northern Yunnan Province have been counted as part of the Pumi nationality.

The Northern Pumi language—which has three tones and five dialects—shares 60

per cent lexical similarity with Southern Pumi, which is spoken in Yunnan Province. The Southern Pumi have not been included in this book because they are primarily animists and polytheists. Few are adherents of Buddhism.

A Northern Pumi king presided over the former Buddhist monastery town of Muli until the 1950s. The king once 'held sway over a territory of 9,000 square miles—an area slightly larger than Massachusetts'.<sup>5</sup> The rulers of Muli 'are said to be of Manchu origin.

They were given the sovereignty of the kingdom in perpetuity in recognition of valorous services rendered to Yungcheng, the famous Manchu emperor, who ascended the throne in 1723.<sup>6</sup> The king ruled with 'absolute spiritual and temporal sway'<sup>7</sup> over his subjects. 'The villagers occupy wooden shanties scattered over the hillsides below the town. They are very poor, and live in constant fear of

the lama king and his parasitic satellites'.<sup>8</sup> The king of Muli was fond of feeding visitors 'dried legs of mutton and yak cheese . . . propelled by squirming maggots the size of a man's thumb'. Rock's group gave theirs to beggars, who 'fought for it like tigers'.<sup>9</sup>

All Northern Pumi adhere to Tibetan Buddhism. Their religion is a major part of their ethnic and cultural identity. They are one of the most unreached people groups in China, with no known Northern Pumi church or Christian believer. In recent years a small number of faith-filled Christians have ventured into Muli and become advocates for the Northern Pumi people, although there are still no known believers among this precious and unique group today.



**Population:**  
39,000 (2000)  
48,100 (2010)  
59,200 (2020)  
**Countries:** China  
**Buddhism:** Tibetan  
**Christians:** none known

## Overview of the Northern Pumi

**Other Names:** Xifan, Hsifan, Northern Pumi, Chrame, Ch'rame, Tshomi, Sichuan Pumi

### Population Sources:

30,000 in China (1987, *Language Atlas of China*)

**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Tangut-Qiang, Qiangic

**Dialects:** 4 (Tuoqi, Sanyanlong, Taoba, Zuosuo)

**Professing Buddhists:** 100%

**Practising Buddhists:** 95%

**Christians:** 0%

**Scripture:** none

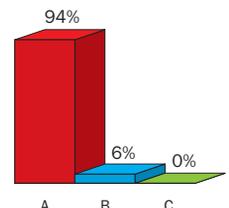
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** PMI

## 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