



Nevin Bowman

**Location:** Although almost three million Shan inhabit the northern section of Myanmar, the members of only one village in China speak the same language as the Shan of Myanmar. This village is located in a remote area that juts into Myanmar, in a densely forested and mountainous region. The Shan live in the Dehong Prefecture of western Yunnan Province, an area open to foreigners. In addition, 56,000 Shan live in northwest Thailand. Small Shan communities also exist in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

**Identity:** The inhabitants of the one Shan village in China have been included under the Dai nationality. The name *Shan* is used by various ways throughout China. The predominant Tai group in the Dehong Prefecture are the Tai Mao, who sometimes call themselves *Shan*. Furthermore, the Tai Nua are often called *Yunnanese Shan*. The Shan are very

proud of their racial identity. They call themselves *Tai Yay*, meaning “greater Tai.” Although the different Tai peoples view themselves as from the same ethnic stock, for reasons of determining Christian strategy it is important to classify them according to their various ethnic and linguistic affiliations.

**Language:** Linguists note that the Shan in one location of Dehong are “sometimes called Tai Nua, but the same Shan as Burma is spoken there,”<sup>2</sup> and “the dialect seems close to — but not identical with — the Tai-Mao dialect of Northern Shan (i.e. that spoken on the Burmese side of the border). The two groups used to share the same writing system.”<sup>3</sup> The Shan of Myanmar and the Tai groups of China use several different scripts.

**History:** The Shan are one of the great peoples of Southeast Asia. They dominate the state in

northern Myanmar that bears their name. Desiring their own independent homeland, rebel Shan armies have been fighting the Burmese since the end of World War II.

**Customs:** Traditionally all Shan boys are sent to a temple at the age of seven or eight, where they receive their education from Buddhist monks. In recent decades the region has seen rampant drug trafficking between China and Myanmar.

**Religion:** The Shan have been ardent followers of Theravada Buddhism for many centuries. Gold-colored temples are scattered throughout the jungles and mountains of Shan State. All Shan community life is centered around their religion. Unlike most Buddhists who believe in karma, the Shan believe they are protected from evil by the spiritual power of Buddha idols and spirits.<sup>4</sup>

**Christianity:** Mission research ministries have designated the Shan of Myanmar the ninth largest unreached people in the world. Missionaries first started reaching out to the Shan in 1860, and the Shan New Testament was completed in 1882. Historically, few Shan have responded to the gospel, largely because of their ethnic pride and identity as Buddhists. In recent years some breakthroughs have occurred in Myanmar. There are no Christians reported among the Shan in China, even though the Bible, the *Jesus* film, and gospel radio broadcasts are all available in the Shan language.



**Population in China:**  
 400 (1990)  
 500 (2000)  
 640 (2010)  
**Location:** Yunnan  
**Religion:** Buddhism  
**Christians:** None Known

## Overview of the Shan

**Countries:** Myanmar, Thailand, China, USA  
**Pronunciation:** “Shahn”  
**Other Names:** Sha, Tai Yay, Tai Shan, Great Thai  
**Population Source:** 400 (1990 AMO); Out of a total Dai population of 1,025,128 (1990 census); 2,920,000 in Myanmar (1993 P. Johnstone); 56,000 in Thailand (1993 P. Johnstone); Also in USA  
**Location:** SW Yunnan: One village in Dehong Prefecture  
**Status:** Officially included under Dai  
**Language:** Daic, Tai, Southwestern Tai, East Central, Northwest  
**Dialects:** 0  
**Religion:** Theravada Buddhism, Animism  
**Christians:** None known  
**Scripture:** Bible 1892; New Testament 1882; Portions 1871  
**Jesus film:** Available  
**Gospel Recordings:** Shan #00083  
**Christian Broadcasting:** Available (FEBC)  
**ROPAL code:** SJN00

