

**Population:**

500 (2000)

610 (2010)

750 (2020)

**Countries:** China**Buddhism:** Tibetan**Christians:** none known**Overview of the Za****Other Names:** Deng Za, Zayu**Population Sources:**

500 in China (2000, P Hattaway)

**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Unclassified**Dialects:** 0**Professing Buddhists:** 100%**Practising Buddhists:** 55%**Christians:** 0%**Scripture:** none**Jesus film:** none**Gospel Recordings:** none**Christian Broadcasting:** none**ROPAL code:** none

Approximately 500 people belonging to an ethnic group called the Za live in a remote area of south-eastern Tibet. The Za, who were originally a collection of tribal peoples including relatives of today's Geman Deng people, live between Xiachayu and the Wanong Valley in Zayu County. Very few foreigners have ever ventured into this extremely remote part of China.

The Za ethnic group is one of the most fascinating examples of ethnic fusion in China today. The ancestors of the Za are believed to have been the same as today's Geman Deng people, but Tibetan political and religious

leaders entered the area about 200 years ago and exerted their influence over the people there. The result is a new ethnic group that the Tibetans call Za, who speak a distinct language from the Deng and who practise different customs. The Za were not counted under any official nationality in the 1990 China census but instead were included in a list of 'Undetermined Minorities'.

Chinese linguist Sun Hongkai, who visited the Za in 1976, wrote, 'Today the Za people only use their own language at home; outside the home they use Tibetan. The language that they use at home is about 60 per cent Tibetan loanwords, and the grammar is also basically Tibetan. Recent Geman Deng immigrants into this area can only understand about 30 per cent of the speech of the Za people. . . . Two hundred years of language contact, because of political, economic, cultural and religious dominance, caused one language to be heavily influenced by another and gradually lose its unique characteristics. In the recognition and comparison of this type of language we see how social factors play a crucial role in the process of language change in contact situations. Za is an

unclassified part of the Tibeto-Burman language family.<sup>1</sup>

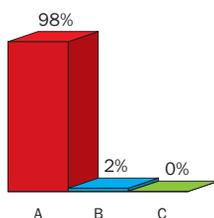
Two hundred years ago, the Tibetans entered this area and set up a combined rule of government and religion, and subsequently the original inhabitants of the area slowly became Tibetanized. The Tibetans ruled the Za with an iron fist. The Za were not even allowed to travel outside the area without prior permission of the monk or administrator. Today, the Za have changed from the Geman Deng so much that they deserve to be viewed as a distinct ethnolinguistic group.<sup>2</sup>



China Advocate

The Za have lost the use of all of their original customs and festivals; these are still practised by Geman Deng people who lived outside the influence of Tibetan rule. Culturally, the Za have become identical to the Tibetans. The forefathers of the Za people were polytheists, worshiping nature and a host of spirits. When the Tibetans took over the area long ago, however, they converted the Za to the Tibetan Buddhist religion.

Christianity has yet to make its presence felt in the isolated part of Tibet inhabited by the Za. Few roads led into the area until recently. Contact between the Za and the outside world is now possible. Today, the Za remain unaware of the existence of Christianity and are a completely unreached people group.

**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