

More than one million Lu people live throughout the world. The majority (more than 600,000) are concentrated in the south-west part of China, especially in and around the famous Xishuangbanna Prefecture,<sup>1</sup> considered the homeland of the Lu. Xishuangbanna is the Chinese transliteration of the Tai name *Sipsongpanna*, meaning 'twelve thousand rice fields'. This well-watered area is in the Mekong River delta close to the borders of several countries. As a result, significant numbers of Lu people are found across the border in neighbouring countries Myanmar,<sup>2</sup> Laos,<sup>3</sup> Thailand<sup>4</sup> and Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> In each place they are known by different names according to the national language. In Thailand, for example, they are often called Tai Lu, and in Laos they are widely known as the Lao Lu. Several thousand Lu make their homes in the United States, and thousands more inhabit other Western nations. Specific numbers in each country are difficult to ascertain, as in the West they usually identify themselves as Thai or Lao people to avoid having to explain their ethnicity.

The Lu diaspora has occurred because of warfare waged against them by hostile peoples. There is evidence that they were once the dominant people group in the region, having settled there as early as the first century AD. By the 9th century the Lu had a well-developed agricultural system. 'They used oxen and elephants to till the land and constructed extensive irrigation systems.'<sup>6</sup>

The Lu are widely regarded as a peaceful and graceful people. Multitudes of tourists flock to witness their

colourful festivals,<sup>7</sup> of which *Songkran* is the most famous. People splash water over each other, believing it cleanses the sins of the past year.

Although the large majority of Lu people call themselves Buddhists, there are certain areas in China and in Vietnam where their Buddhist faith is little more than a veneer thrown over ancient animistic rituals designed to protect them from the threat of evil spirits. At certain times the Lu pay homage to the spirits of those who have contributed greatly to the well-being of their descendants. One researcher reported, 'Sacrifices are offered to the spirits [and] the village is shut in on itself; all roads and tracks giving access to the community are blocked with barricades of trees and branches . . . the whole village is encircled with ropes made of straw or a line of white cotton thread, to represent symbolically an encircling wall preventing entry or exit. No outsiders of any description, not even monks or members of the elite ruling class, are permitted to attend these rites.'<sup>8</sup>



The Presbyterian missionary Daniel McGilvary and his co-workers first brought the gospel to the Lu living in the Mekong Delta in 1893. They rode elephants from their base in Chiang Mai, Thailand, distributing Christian literature as they went. The first Lu church was formed

in China in the early 1920s. Strong persecution against those who believed in Christ forced the Christians to form their own village, Bannalee, which remains Christian to this day and contains the largest concentration of Lu believers anywhere. The overwhelming majority of Lu people, however, remain oblivious to the gospel.



**Population:**  
1,077,700 (2000)  
1,208,600 (2010)  
1,358,900 (2020)

**Countries:** China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, USA, Vietnam and other Western nations

**Buddhism:** Theravada  
**Christians:** 2,500

### Overview of the Lu

**Other Names:** Lǔ, Tai Lu, Lue, Leu, Dai Lu, Dai Le, Lao Lu, Nhuon, Duon, Pai-l, Shui-Pai-l, Ly, Tai L, Kon, Pai-yi, Sipsongpanna Dai, Xishuangbanna Dai, Shui Dai

**Population Sources:**  
550,000 in China (1986, T'ien Ju-K'ang)  
200,000 in Myanmar (1981, SIL)  
119,100 in Laos (1995 census)  
70,000 in Thailand (1995, Department of Public Welfare)  
4,000 in USA (2000, P Hattaway [1998 figure])  
3,684 in Vietnam (1989 census) also in other Western nations

**Language:** Tai-Kadai, Kam-Tai, Be-Tai, Tai-Sek, Tai, Southwestern, East Central, Northwest

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 88%

**Practising Buddhists:** 65%

**Christians:** 0.2%

**Scripture:** New Testament 1933 (reprinted 1996); Portions 1921

**Jesus film:** available

**Gospel Recordings:** Lu; Thai Lu

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** KHB

### Status of Evangelization

