

Approximately 4,000 members of the Tai Pao ethnic group inhabit areas of central Laos in Southeast Asia. Laos—despite its relatively small population of about six million people—is home to more than 140 tribes and ethnolinguistic groups.<sup>1</sup> Many of them are small in number, like the Tai Pao.

The Tai Pao villages are located in the Viangthong, Khamkeut and Pakkading districts of Borikhamxai Province, Laos.<sup>2</sup> Their communities are found at the border

where these three districts intersect. The Tai Pao live near another small Buddhist group, the Tai He, and in fact may be related to them. Neither language has been researched by linguists to determine mutual intelligibility. The *Ethnologue* reports ‘Classification problems, probably due to migration. Survey needed.’<sup>3</sup>

The religious world-view of the Tai Pao people is ‘a mixture of animism and Theravada Buddhism. Such a religious intertwining has existed in Laos since Buddhism was introduced.’<sup>4</sup>

In Laos today, even professing Buddhists continue to seek the guidance of the spirits in matters that may benefit them. For example, thousands of people visit mediums in an effort to divine ‘lucky numbers’ which could help them win the lottery.

Contemporary author Grant Evans comments, ‘The destabilizing of Lao culture and society . . . [has] seen people flock to all varieties of religious consultants in an attempt to find some orientation and

meaning in all of these changes. . . . This is especially evident in what I call “lottery mania” and the attempt to get rich quickly. . . . Every time I sat down with a Lao the conversation would drift toward lottery numbers and how to divine them: through dream interpretation, consultations with monks or nuns who would be asked for numbers, or other spirit mediums. With the collapse of socialist ideology no other explanations are offered for the confusions thrown up by economic, social and cultural change, and religious belief in all its variety has rapidly filled the gap.’<sup>5</sup>

One of the new and growing influences in Laos in recent years is Christianity. Although there have been small numbers of Christians—both Protestant and Catholic—in Laos for more than a century, since 1990 the Christian community in Laos has more than tripled in size. This has come about despite the fact that the

Communist authorities in Laos have spared no effort to stop the spread of Christianity. Periodic crackdowns occur throughout the country, and there always seem to be a number of church leaders in prison in Laos at any given time.

Despite these encouraging developments, the small Tai Pao tribe has yet to experience God’s grace. They remain an unreached people group with no known Christians. For the Tai Pao, ‘maintaining their culture is equally as important as their religious beliefs. Accordingly, the few Tai Pao who have been exposed to the Gospel have not seriously considered it, believing that to become a Christian would be a disgrace against their culture and heritage as a Tai Pao.’<sup>6</sup>



Paul Hattaway

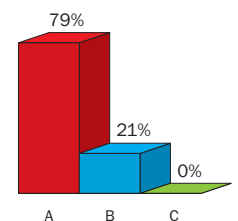


**Population:**  
3,710 (2000)  
4,680 (2010)  
5,900 (2020)  
**Countries:** Laos  
**Buddhism:** Theravada  
**Christians:** none known

## Overview of the Tai Pao

**Other Names:** Pao, Tay Pao  
**Population Sources:** 3,300 in Laos (1995, Asian Minorities Outreach)  
**Language:** Tai-Kadai, Kam-Tai, Unclassified  
**Dialects:** 0  
**Professing Buddhists:** 55%  
**Practising Buddhists:** 25%  
**Christians:** 0%  
**Scripture:** none  
**Jesus film:** none  
**Gospel Recordings:** none  
**Christian Broadcasting:** none  
**ROPAL code:** TPO

## 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