

# Samtao

Although more than 12,500 Samtao people are spread over four countries in Southeast Asia, they live primarily within the Mekong River Basin. The region is hot and humid most of the year, with monsoon rains between April and October.

Various sources report widely differing figures for Samtao populations, but most agree that the majority of Samtao live in the eastern part of Shan State in Myanmar, especially in mountain villages north-east of Kengtung City. Several thousand Samtao live in the Xishuangbanna Prefecture in Yunnan Province, China. Estimates of Samtao people in China range from 100<sup>1</sup> to 24,000!<sup>2</sup>

The only countries where the number of Samtao people is more certain

are Laos (2,213 Samtao according to the 1995 census, living in six villages within Luang Namtha and Bokeo provinces) and Thailand, where just 100 Samtao people inhabit the village of Ban Hin Taek Noc in the Mae Salong District of Chiang Rai Province. They have been in Thailand for at least three generations and have lost contact with Samtao communities in other countries.

The confusion surrounding the classification of the Samtao is due to their many ethnic names and language that has borrowed many words from other varieties. In Myanmar the Samtao were formerly part of an alliance of three tribes: Samtao, Samtuan and Sen Chun.

Regardless of their present status, the Samtao are known to have enjoyed a long and rich history. More than two thousand

years ago, Han expansion reached Samtao country. By the Tang Dynasty of the seventh and eighth centuries, Samtaos had begun to distinguish themselves ethnically from surrounding peoples, acquiring a sense of group identity based on language and religion.<sup>3</sup>

Wherever the Samtao have lived, they have absorbed aspects of neighbouring groups. In Laos, practically every aspect of Samtao culture mirrors that of the Lu and Lao. In China the Samtao have assimilated to the predominant Lu and are bilingual in that language.<sup>4</sup>

The Lu converted the Samtao to Theravada Buddhism many centuries ago. When missionary William Clifton Dodd visited them in the early 1900s he remarked, 'These Sam Tao are the branch of the aboriginal stock found all over Indo-China. . . . The Sam Tao have been Buddhists for 900 years, and are the best Buddhists we have met.'<sup>5</sup>

Today there are a few Samtao Christians. One source states, 'The primary religion of the Samtao people . . . is nominally Buddhism. Less than one per cent have become Christians. . . . They also believe in spirits inhabiting the surroundings, such as the spirits of the house, the village, the trees, the sky, the forest and others. They also worship their ancestors. Once a year after harvest the Samtao hold an agricultural ceremony. They sacrifice chickens—and when they can afford also pigs—to the mother of rice.'<sup>6</sup>



Dwayne Graybill



**Population:**  
12,600 (2000)  
14,400 (2010)  
16,500 (2020)  
**Countries:** Myanmar, China, Laos, Thailand  
**Buddhism:** Theravada  
**Christians:** 120

## Overview of the Samtao

**Other Names:** Samtau, Samtuan, Saamtaav, Col, Sam Tao, Sen Chun, Xamtao, Lua

**Population Sources:** 6,000 in Myanmar (2000, P Hattaway)<sup>7</sup>  
4,000 in China (2000, P Hattaway)  
2,213 in Laos (1995 census)  
100 in Thailand (2000, J Schliesinger [1995 figure])

**Language:** Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer, Palaungic-Khmuic, Palaungic, Western Palaungic, Angkuic

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 90%

**Practising Buddhists:** 50%

**Christians:** 0.9%

**Scripture:** none

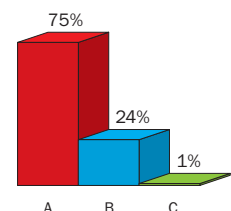
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** STU (Samtao) and XKO (Kiorr)

## 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