

Tai Loi

The Tai Loi is one of the smallest Buddhist people groups in the world, even though they inhabit areas in two—and possibly three—different countries.

The majority of Tai Loi (approximately 1,400) live in Namkham, in the extreme eastern part of Myanmar's Shan State. A further 500 live on the eastern bank of the Mekong River in the Long District of Luang Namtha Province in north-west Laos.

More research needs to be done to determine whether the Tai Loi are also found to the north in Xishuangbanna Prefecture of Yunnan Province, China. The Tai Loi in Myanmar say that they have relatives in China.

There is some confusion about the identity of the Tai Loi and the identity of another small group, the Tai Doi. Both inhabit the same general areas in Myanmar and Laos. Some linguistic sources, including the *Ethnologue*, list Tai Doi as a dialect of Tai Loi.¹ More recent research, however, states that

'although it is clear the two groups are related, today they have different names and ethnic identities. They also speak different dialects. . . . The Tai Loi language is part of the Palaungic branch of Mon-Khmer, although many people presume they are a Tai-speaking group because of their appearance and the fact they live with the Lu. In fact, the Tai Loi reportedly now use the Lu script for reading and writing, even though their spoken language is from a completely different language family.'² Another source clarifies that the Tai Loi language is 'closest to Palaung Pale, it has

a lot of sound changes, separating it from Palaung in China also'.³

The famous Mekong River has divided the two Tai Loi communities in Myanmar and Laos. For centuries it has been the lifeblood and food source for the Tai Loi. Dr Vrooman, who accompanied Presbyterian missionary Daniel McGilvary on a trip down the Mekong in the early 1900s, wrote, 'The current . . .

is very swift, in places so much so that it was dangerous to navigate. The river is nearly a mile wide in places; and where the channel is narrow it rushes along with frightful rapidity. No scenery is finer throughout the entire distance we travelled on it. Mountains rise from either bank to the height of three or four thousand feet. The river fills the bottom of a long winding

valley; as we glided swiftly down it, there seemed to move in a panorama two half-erect hanging landscapes of woodland verdure and blossom.'⁴

The Mekong Delta is also one of the strongest Theravada Buddhist areas in Asia. Gold-coloured temple roofs can be seen through the palm branches on each side of the river, testimony to a centuries-old belief in Buddhism by the peoples of the region.

There are no known Christian believers among the Tai Loi in either Myanmar or Laos. A gospel recording does exist in the Tai Loi language, but it is rarely utilized because of the remoteness of this group.



Julian Hawken



Population:
1,930 (2000)
2,250 (2010)
2,630 (2020)
Countries: Myanmar, Laos, possibly China
Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: none known

Overview of the Tai Loi

Other Names: Loi, Doi, Wakut, Monglwe, Tailoi

Population Sources: 1,368 in Myanmar (2002, Myanmar Faces and Places)

500 in Laos (1995, Asian Minorities Outreach)
possibly also in China

1,500 in all countries (1981, S Wurm and S Hattori)

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

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 55%

Practising Buddhists: 25%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

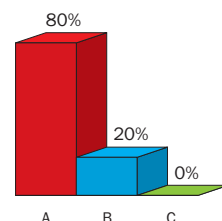
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: Tai Loi

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: TLQ

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