



**Population:**

1,570 (2000)  
1,710 (2010)  
1,870 (2020)

**Countries:** Thailand

**Buddhism:** Theravada

**Christians:** none known

**Overview of the Mpi**

**Other Names:** Mpi-mi, Ma'pri, Kaw

**Population Sources:** 1,500 in Thailand (2000, J Schliesinger [1995 figure])

**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Lolo-Burmese, Loloish, Southern, Phunoi

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 65%

**Practising Buddhists:** 30%

**Christians:** 0%

**Scripture:** none

**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** MPZ

More than 1,500 people belonging to the Mpi ethnic group inhabit two villages in northern Thailand: Ban Dong Village in Muang District of Phrae Province and Ban Sagerm in Tha Wang Pha District of Nan Province. The Mpi's Northern Thai neighbours call them Kaw, but the Mpi consider this name derogatory.

The Mpi are not found in any other countries, although their language reveals a close link between the Mpi and other Tibeto-Burman speaking tribes such as the 40,000 *Phunoi* of Laos, Thailand and Vietnam; the 8,000 *Bisu* of China and Thailand; and the 1,000 *Pyen* of Myanmar.

Linguists report that there is some mutual intelligibility between Mpi and these three languages, which are related to the numerous Yi languages of southern China. The 'Yi' are a minority group invented by the Chinese authorities to define more than a hundred distinct tribes and

Tibeto-Burman languages across several provinces of southern China. Each of these groups calls itself by a different ethnic name. The combined population of the 'Yi' nationality is more than eight million. The Mpi are unique in that the majority are Buddhists, whereas all Yi groups in China believe in polytheism, except for a few who are Christians.

The Mpi in Thailand were only 'discovered' by an American Peace Corps volunteer in 1967, who took an interest in them and later published the first Mpi dictionary. Despite the small population of those who speak it, the Mpi language has been

extensively studied and documented.<sup>1</sup>

The two Mpi villages are some distance apart. The Mpi of Ban Sagerm in Nan Province claim that they were brought to Thailand as war captives in the late 1700s from Xishuangbanna in south-west China. Today their village is in a rural area and they depend heavily on their farming skills to make a living.

The Mpi of Ban Dong in Phrae Province, on the other hand, say that their ancestors were taken from southern China to become elephant handlers, or *mahouts*, in the armies of northern Thailand. After arriving in Thailand they settled in Chiang Rai



Xayographix

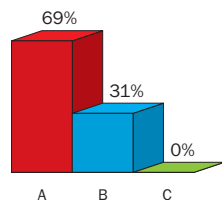
Province, where they intermarried with local Chinese. Later they migrated into Phrae Province where they live to this day. The Mpi of Ban Dong live near Phrae City, with its many factories and industries, so many of them are employed as wage earners for Thai companies. The village also generates considerable income by making and selling brooms.

Despite their widespread geographic, economic and social differences, the Mpi from each area retain regular

contact and intermarry with each other.

The Mpi are outwardly Buddhists who retain many traditional animistic beliefs. 'They strongly believe in the guardian spirit *chao fa*, which is the protector of the village and the house. The Mpi have altars in their houses for honouring this spirit. Every morning, offerings of food and drinks are placed at the altar. . . . The Mpi also believe in the spirit of the land and in malevolent spirits. The latter cause unnatural deaths. Ancestor worship is practiced within Buddhist concepts.<sup>2</sup> There are no known Christian believers among the Mpi.

**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