

# Thai, Northern

Approximately six-and-a-half million Northern Thai people live in north and north-west Thailand. For the past 800 years, the Northern Thai have been centred in and around Chiang Mai—Thailand's second largest city after Bangkok. In addition to Chiang Mai, the Northern Thai can be found in the provinces of Chiang Rai, Nan, Phrae, Phayao, Lampang, Lamphun, Tak, Nan, Mae Hong Son and Uttaradit.

A small community of less than 10,000 Northern Thai lives in Laos.<sup>1</sup> Others live scattered around the world in countries like Singapore, the USA, Australia and the United Kingdom.

The first kingdom founded by the Northern Thai is believed to have been the state of Yonok in the Chiang Saen area in AD 773.<sup>2</sup> Later, as thousands of people migrated southward from southern China, King Mengrai united several Tai tribes and founded the great Lanna ('million rice fields') Kingdom at Chiang Rai in the late 13th century.<sup>3</sup> In 1296, Mengrai founded the city of *Chiang Mai* (which means 'New Town') and moved his capital there. Over the next 250 years Lanna flourished until its eventual downfall to the Burmese in 1556.

Right up until 1939, when Chiang Mai was formally incorporated into the modern Thai nation, the Northern Thais viewed themselves differently

from the Isan and Central Thai (Siamese), with whom they often waged cruel wars.<sup>4</sup> In the 1770s, Chau Prasat Tawng, the King of Siam, 'laid the country waste, plundered their villages, and brought away many



Paul Hattaway

thousand captives to be slaves forever more. The [Northern Thai] king . . . underwent cruelties of which it is a shame even to speak. . . . He was confined to a large iron cage, exposed to the burning sun, and obliged to proclaim to everyone that the King of Siam was great and merciful.<sup>5</sup>

The Northern Thai language is distinct

from other Thai varieties.<sup>6</sup> They have their own script, called Yuan, which is similar to the orthography used by the Lu. Today, while most rural Northern Thai people continue to speak their own language in the home,<sup>7</sup> the ability to read Yuan has diminished.

The Northern Thai have believed in Buddhism for 1,000 years. In 1330 they sponsored their own monks to travel to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and India to study 'the purest form of Buddhism at its root'.<sup>8</sup> Like other Theravada Buddhists, the Northern Thai today mix their beliefs with numerous animistic rituals.<sup>9</sup>

Protestant missionaries have faithfully worked in northern Thailand for about 150 years.<sup>10</sup> While many of the tribal peoples in the region have responded to the gospel in large numbers, progress among the Northern Thai has been painstakingly slow. In recent years the city of Chiang Mai has emerged as a regional missions hub and is home to about 2,000 foreign missionaries and their

children. Strangely, however, most of them are engaged in work in places like China, Vietnam and Myanmar, while many of those focusing on Thailand work with the hill tribes.<sup>11</sup> Few are reaching out to Thai Buddhists. This strange situation may mean that there are more foreign missionaries than there are ethnic Thai Christians in Chiang Mai.



## Population:

6,509,700 (2000)  
7,116,800 (2010)  
7,780,700 (2020)

**Countries:** Thailand, Laos, Singapore, USA, Australia, United Kingdom and other nations

**Buddhism:** Theravada

**Christians:** 40,000

## Overview of the Northern Thai

**Other Names:** Yuan, Lanna, Lan Na, Lanatai, Phyap, Phayap, Payap, Kammuang, Kammyang, Myang, Kam Mu'ang, Mu'ang, Khon Mung, Khon Myang, Tai Nya, La Nya, Western Laotian, Tai Yuan, Youon, Youanne, Youe, Yonok, Yonaka, Yon, Yun, Yoan, Khon Muang, Muang Lan Na, Lan Na Thai, Khon, Khon Mang, Lao Yuan, Nhuane, Lao Phung Dam

## Population Sources:

6,500,000 in Thailand (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)  
9,750 in Laos (1999, Asian Minorities Outreach)  
also in Singapore, USA, Australia, United Kingdom and many other

nations

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

**Dialects:** 3 (Nan, Bandu, Tai Wang)

**Professing Buddhists:** 95%

**Practising Buddhists:** 65%

**Christians:** 0.6%

**Scripture:** Bible 1927; New Testament 1914; Portions 1867; work in progress

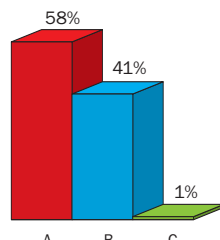
**Jesus film:** available

**Gospel Recordings:** Northern Thai

**Christian Broadcasting:** available

**ROPAL code:** NOD

## 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