



**Population in China:**

426,917 (1990)  
 565,000 (2000)  
 728,900 (2010)  
**Location:** Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi, Hunan, Sichuan, Jiangxi  
**Religion:** Ancestor Worship  
**Christians:** 500

## Overview of the Gelao

**Countries:** China, Vietnam

**Pronunciation:** "Ger-laow"

**Other Names:** Gelo, Kelao, Ila, Khei, Keleo, Chilao, Kehlah, Lao, Thu, Khei, Tulao

**Population Source:**  
 437,997 (1990 census);<sup>1</sup>  
 53,802 (1982 census);  
 26,852 (1964 census);  
 6,700 in Vietnam (1984 census)

**Location:** SW Guizhou; E Yunnan; NW Guangxi; SW Hunan; Sichuan; Jiangxi

**Status:**  
 An official minority of China

**Language:** Daic, Kadai, Lati-Kelao

**Literacy:** 43%

**Dialects:** Many

**Religion:** Ancestor Worship, Animism, Polytheism

**Christians:** 500

**Scripture:** None

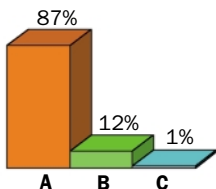
**Jesus film:** None

**Gospel Recordings:** None

**Christian Broadcasting:** None

**ROPAL code:** KKFOO

**Status of Evangelization**



**A** = Have never heard the gospel  
**B** = Were evangelized but did not become Christians  
**C** = Are adherents to any form of Christianity

**Location:** The 1982 Chinese census recorded 53,800 Gelao people in China, but by 1990 that figure had dramatically jumped more than eight-fold to 438,000. There are several reasons for this peculiarity.<sup>2</sup> The Gelao are widely scattered across 40 counties in six provinces of southern China. The majority live in western Guizhou Province. Other communities are in Yunnan, Guangxi, Hunan, Sichuan, and Jiangxi provinces.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 7,000 Gelao are also located in northern Vietnam.

**Identity:** The Gelao, despite their considerable size, are one of the least known of China's official ethnic minorities. *Gelao* means "human beings" as well as "bamboo."<sup>4</sup> Today, most Gelao are culturally indistinguishable from the Chinese. Even back in 1911 one observer wrote, "The Gelao are now nearly extinct; many of them have married into Bouyei and [Chuanlan and Chuanqing] families."<sup>5</sup>

**Language:** Although the Chinese report that a mere 6,000 individuals (1.4%) are able to speak the Gelao language, "scholars suggest that this is an underestimate, and that perhaps 25,000 (mostly older) can still use some Gelao."<sup>6</sup> One source lists 60,000 speakers of Gelao.<sup>7</sup> This Tai language contains six tones and numerous dialects, some of which differ greatly and should be considered separate languages. The Gao dialect shares only 54% lexical similarity with the Duoluo dialect.<sup>8</sup> The Gao and Duoluo are among the Gelao groups profiled separately in *Operation China*.

**History:** The Gelao are thought to be descended from the ancient Liao race who established the Yelang Kingdom in Guizhou about 2,000 years ago. A folk tale tells how the king of Yelang was born from bamboo, so the whole group came to be called *Bamboo*.<sup>9</sup> The Gelao are considered the original inhabitants of each region where they live. "Where the Miao and Gelao occupy the same district, the Miao allow that the Gelao were there before themselves."<sup>10</sup>

**Customs:** The Gelao primarily grow maize, wheat, potatoes, sorghum, millet, tobacco, and tea. "In the past, the Gelao practiced initiation rites for their young men, including tooth-breaking and hair-cutting rituals. The Gelao were once head-hunters and cannibals."<sup>11</sup> Among the Yaya (Tooth) Gelao, the custom of breaking the front tooth of a bride was observed until recently.<sup>12</sup>

**Religion:** The Gelao are primarily ancestor worshipers. "They also worship the gods of giant trees, of mountains, of sky and earth, cows, etc. They have no idols, temples or monasteries, and no systematic religious creeds or organization. But they have a number of primitive superstitions and taboos, which affect every aspect of their lives."<sup>13</sup>

**Christianity:** Because it is difficult to convey the Gelao as a cohesive people group with a common identity, it is also difficult to gauge the status of Christianity among them. The Gelao were penetrated with the gospel by French Catholic missionaries in the late 1800s, but little fruit from that effort remains today. No Scripture translations have ever been made in the Gelao language.<sup>14</sup>



Paul Hattaway