



Population in China:
 3,150,000 (1972)
 4,296,000 (2000)
 4,855,000 (2010)
Location: Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan Island, Hong Kong, Macau
Religion: Polytheism
Christians: 15,000

Overview of the Dan

Countries: China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand

Pronunciation: "Dan"

Other Names: Tanka, Danjia, Xumin, Soisangyan, Dan, Ngai, Boat People

Population Source:
 3,150,000 (1972 E. Anderson);
 Out of a total Han population of 1,042,482,187 (1990 census);
 1,200 in Vietnam (1991 census);
 Also in Malaysia and Thailand

Location: Guangdong; Hainan Island; Guangxi; Hong Kong; Macau

Status: Officially included under Han Chinese

Language: Chinese, Cantonese

Dialects: 0

Religion: Polytheism, Animism, Ancestor Worship, Christianity

Christians: 15,000

Scripture: Bible 1894; New Testament 1877; Portions 1862

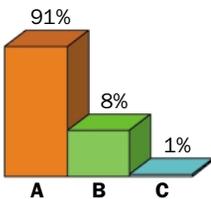
Jesus film: Available (Cantonese)

Gospel Recordings:
 Cantonese #00013

Christian Broadcasting:
 Available (FEBC, TWR)

ROPAL code: YUH01

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: A 1972 study listed a population of about three million Dan people, historically known as the "Boat People," living along the coasts of southern China including Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan Island, and Macau. An additional 150,000 lived on boats in Hong Kong at the time. By the 1980s the number in Hong Kong had diminished to about 50,000.¹ In addition, Dan people have migrated to several countries in Southeast Asia, where they are known by various names, including the official *Ngai* minority in Vietnam.

Identity: The Dan prefer to call themselves *Soisangyan*, a name which means "water-borne people" in their dialect. Although they are officially classified as part of the Han Chinese nationality, most other people in southern China "attest the Dan are not Han Chinese at all, but rather a distinct minority race."² Experts now generally agree that although the Dan are ethnolinguistically a Sinitic people, "there is no doubt that they have been discriminated against in the past, officially as well as socially.... It is clear they have developed a strong sense of group identity.... Other Chinese consider them an separate ethnic group.... Such a castelike distinction is more typical of India than of China."³

Language: Despite general belief among the Cantonese that the Dan are from a tribal background, linguists have ascertained that the Dan speak the Yuehai dialect of Cantonese.

History: Chinese references to the Dan and their lives as

boat people date back at least 800 years. The uniqueness of the Dan was enforced by tales describing how they had short legs, useful only for life at sea. Some stories alleged they had six toes and even a tail. In Hong Kong the status of the Dan has been greatly diminished in recent years since the government has outlawed the practice of living on boats.⁴

Customs: Not surprisingly, all customs of the Dan revolve around their lives on the water. Whole families live on small boats that "seldom if ever touch the shore. Children are born and raised on the boats, and dogs, chickens, and cats move freely from deck to deck. In the old days... little coffin boats carried each [Dan] person to his or her final resting place on land. For some, it was the first time on land as well as the last."⁵ The Chinese have a saying that a Dan person

"on the water is a veritable dragon, on land is only a miserable worm."⁶

Religion: The Dan developed their own religious beliefs relating to their unique lifestyles. They worship *Tin Hau*, the goddess of fishermen, whose image is carried in floating temples. They also honor the spirit of the fish and sea dragon.

Christianity: Because of their close-knit families and unique, isolated culture, few Dan in China have ever been exposed to the gospel message. Churches have existed among the Dan in Hong Kong for more than 50 years, however, due to the efforts of mission agencies who specifically targeted them and boarded their boats to share the love of Christ. Most Dan can understand standard Cantonese and could be reached using materials in that language.



Paul Hattaway