



Population in China:
 44,000 (1987)
 60,600 (2000)
 78,100 (2010)
Location: Hainan Island
Religion: Polytheism
Christians: None Known

Overview of the Bendi Li

Countries: China

Pronunciation: “Ben-dee-Lee”

Other Names: Bli, Bendi

Population Source:
 44,000 (1987 LAC);
 Out of a total Li population of
 1,110,900 (1990 census)

Location: *Hainan Island:* The eastern half of Baisha County, and in areas north to Yinggeling

Status:
 Officially included under Li

Language: Daic, Kadai, Li-Laqua

Dialects (2): Baisha (36,000), Yuanmen (8,000)

Religion:
 Polytheism, Animism, Shamanism

Christians: None known

Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Gospel Recordings: None

Christian Broadcasting: None

ROPAL code: LICO4



Paul Hattaway

Location: A 1987 linguistic survey listed 44,000 speakers of the Bendi Li language.¹ The Bendi language further divides into the Baisha dialect (36,000 speakers) and the Yuanmen dialect (8,000 speakers). The Bendi Li are one of five distinct Li tribes located on southern China’s tropical Hainan Island. The Bendi inhabit the central part of the island, including the eastern half of Baisha County and northward to Yinggeling.

Identity: Although the various Li groups on Hainan Island acknowledge a common historical kinship, “they are divided into several groups, distinguishable by their different dialects [and costumes].”² The name *Li* means “black” or “dark brown”; it can also mean “numerous.”³

Language: *Bendi* is the Chinese name for the speakers of this distinct language. Although there is a small measure of intelligibility between the various Li languages, “The Li language is really more like a collection of related languages.”⁴ Bendi Li contains five or six tones, compared to nine tones in some of the other Li languages. Bendi Li is part of the so-called *Kadai* language family. “The Kadai languages form one of two branches of Thai-Kadai.... The term Kadai was coined

by Benedict from the human prefix ‘ka’ and the general term for the Tai group. Most of the Kadai languages are spoken by small populations in widely scattered areas, and some have extensive internal diversity.”⁵

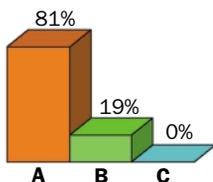
History: The ancestors of the Li are believed to have migrated to Hainan Island from the Mainland approximately 3,000 years ago. The state of Li is mentioned at the beginning of the tenth book of the Chinese *Book of History*. The state was conquered by the Chief of the West in AD 1123.⁶ Historically the Chinese have viewed Hainan as a backward, undesirable place. When Li Deyu — a Chinese prime minister during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907) — was exiled to Hainan, he described his new home as “the gate to hell.”⁷

Customs: Until recently the Bendi Li relied on hunting and fishing for their survival. One visitor to Hainan Island noted, “The natives do not use fish hooks, but dam the numerous interior rivers and pour in root poison which stupefies the fish, making them easy to spear.”⁸

Religion: The Bendi Li are mostly polytheists and animists, worshiping a multiplicity of gods and spirits. Before the antireligion purges of the Cultural Revolution, most Li villages had their own shaman who acted as a medium between the community and the spirit world.

Christianity: There is no known Christian presence among the Bendi Li. Of the more than one million Li on Hainan Island, only 1,000 believe in Jesus Christ.⁹ The majority have never heard the gospel before. Tragically there are no Scriptures, gospel recordings, or *Jesus* film available in any of the Li languages. Historically, most evangelism conducted on Hainan Island has been aimed at the Hainanese Chinese.

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