

Location: More than 78,000 Axi live in Yunnan Province. The majority live in Mile County of Honghe Prefecture where 59,014 were reported in 1984.¹ Others live near the Stone Forest in Shilin (formerly Lunan) County. About 300 Axi live in eastern Huanning County of Yuxi Prefecture and 1,200 in Luxi County. For centuries the Axi have lived in peaceful communities, separated from other groups in the area.

Identity: The Axi people in Shilin County are closely related to the Sani. The Sani chose to live at the base of the Qui Mountains and therefore are more assimilated to Chinese culture.² Seeing this, the Axi have chosen to remain hidden in the hills and retain their own identity. The Axi possess their own traditions, language, and style of dress.

Language: The Axi language — which has 35 consonants, 15 vowels, and 4 tones — is distinct from the speech of all surrounding peoples. It is described as being “genetically closer to Lisu and Hani than... to other Yi languages.”³ An Axi orthography was created by the government in 1986, but few Axi have been educated past primary school level and are able to use it.

History: The Axi claim to have originated in a place called Azhede in northwestern Sichuan many centuries ago.⁴ They are famous for their unique dance, the *Axi Tiaoyue*. It is a dance depicting a terrible fire long ago on the mountain where the Axi live. It

burned for nine days and nine nights. The ground became so hot that the Axi had to hop up and down on one leg to avoid being burned. After the fire was extinguished, the Axi people played flutes and *sanxians* (a plucked instrument) to celebrate the victory. They hop around on one leg, imitating their fire-fighting heroics.⁵

Customs: The *Axi Tiaoyue* is now famous throughout China. A troupe of 50 Axi dancers have performed it all over the country. In 1993 the troupe traveled to Europe where they performed in Portugal, France, and Germany. The Axi also participate in the Torch Festival which takes place at the Stone Forest every year.⁶

Religion: The Axi believe demons will afflict them should someone in their village upset the spiritual harmony. Chickens and other animals are immediately sacrificed in an attempt to placate the demons and prevent them from causing further harm. A festival is held in the third lunar month in which the Axi strip down to their loincloths, paint their bodies, wear grotesque masks, and run around the hillsides. This enactment



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represents the time when the Fire god was drawn out of a pool of water.⁷

Christianity: French Catholic missionary Père Alfred Liétard spearheaded work among the Axi beginning in the 1880s.⁸ Later, Paul Vial continued the work, heading a team of priests dedicated in reaching out to the Axi, Sani, and some other Yi groups in the area. Vial wrote, “These sweet, honest, naive, and likeable faces have conquered me.”⁹ In 1948 Vial listed 1,500 Axi converts in seven churches.¹⁰ Today, mostly elderly Axi believers remain in the Shilin and Mile areas. Despite these Catholics, most Axi have yet to hear the gospel for the first time.



Population in China:
76,200 (1999)
78,100 (2000)
98,100 (2010)
Location: Yunnan
Religion: Polytheism
Christians: 2,000

Overview of the Axi

Countries: China
Pronunciation: “Ah-shee”
Other Names: Axiyu, Ashi, A-chi, A-hi, Ahi, Ascii, Axiyu, Aoxi, A-hsi, Axiyu
Population Source:
76,200 (1999 J. Pelkey);
Out of a total Yi population of 6,572,173 (1990 census)
Location: *Yunnan:* Mile (73,900), Shilin (800), Huanning (300), Luxi (1,200), and Yiliang (45) counties; Also in Kunming Municipality
Status:
Officially included under Yi

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Burmese-Lolo, Lolo, Northern Lolo, Yi, Southeastern Yi
Dialects: 0
Religion: Polytheism, Animism, Christianity
Christians: 2,000
Scripture: None
Jesus film: None
Gospel Recordings: Axi #04806
Christian Broadcasting: None
ROPAL code: YIE02

