

Approximately 400,000 Phutai people live across three countries in Southeast Asia: Laos¹ (154,000), Vietnam (150,000) and Thailand² (70,000). Phutai may also live in south-west Yunnan Province, China. A number of Phutai refugees were granted asylum in the USA. A small community has lived in the Los Angeles area since the late 1970s.

In all of the countries where they live, it is difficult for researchers to identify the Phutai because they have merged with other communities. In Vietnam they have not been granted status as a distinct ethnic group, but they are one of many sub-groups lumped together under the official 'Thai' minority. In Laos, the 1995 census listed a population of 472,458 Phutai people, but this inflated figure included groups such as the Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai Kao (White Tai) and Tai Deng (Red Tai). Although ethnically they are distinct, there are only slight differences between the languages

of these groups.³ The name *Phutai* has a generic meaning, 'Tai people', which further complicates attempts to classify them. Despite this murky situation, some other ethnic groups envy the Phutai because of their rich cultural heritage. They are a proud people who still preserve their traditions. Many Phutai in Vietnam, and to a lesser degree in Laos, remain animists, with minimal Buddhist influence.⁴ Buddhism is stronger among the Phutai in Thailand, but worldwide only about 50 per cent of Phutai people identify themselves as Buddhists.

Each Phutai village in Thailand has one or more female shamans, called *moi yau*. They are responsible for mediating between the Phutai people and the spirit world. During certain times they go into trances and give messages from the spirit world or from the Phutai ancestors. The *moi yau* are both feared and highly respected by the Phutai.

Even those Phutai who say they are Buddhists mix their faith with the worship of 25 different spirits. 'Every year during the third lunar month the Phutai gather for the *Pi Tian* ("Spirit of Heaven") festival.



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People relax and unwind by riding horses, elephants and shooting arrows, etc. The focal point of the festival is a ritual at which the whole community gathers and offers sacrifices and prayers to the spirit that they believe resides in paradise above. After waiting for some time, the Phutai believe there is a moment when the spirit actually comes down from heaven. The normally-reserved Phutai dance and jump for joy, and

often . . . healing takes place. Despite this remarkable ceremony, there are few Phutai who have ever accepted Jesus Christ, who is the Holy Spirit who gives lasting joy.⁵

Today there are several hundred Phutai Christians in Laos, both Catholic and Protestant, and a similar number in Thailand. The vast majority of Phutai people, however, have never heard the gospel. Their strong sense of community often results in the Phutai being resistant to change and outside influence. Consequently, few have ever broken away to follow Christ.



Population:	388,500 (2000) 460,900 (2010) 548,400 (2020)
Countries:	Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, USA, possibly China
Buddhism:	Theravada
Christians:	900

Overview of the Phutai

Other Names: Phu Tai, Putai, Puthay, Poutai

Population Sources: 154,400 in Laos (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)

150,000 in Vietnam (1993, P Johnstone)

70,000 in Thailand (2001, J Schliesinger [1999 figure]) also in USA; possibly China

Language: Tai-Kadai, Kam-Tai, Be-Tai, Tai-Sek, Tai, Southwestern, East Central, Lao-Phutai

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 50%

Practising Buddhists: 25%

Christians: 0.2%

Scripture: none

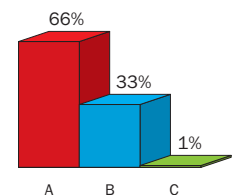
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: Phu Tai

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: PHT

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