


Population in China:

100 (1993)
120 (2000)
155 (2010)

Location: Yunnan

Religion: Buddhism

Christians: None Known

Overview of the Samtao

Countries: Myanmar, Laos, China

Pronunciation: “Sahm-taow”

Other Names: Samtau, Samtuan, Sam Tao, Sen Chun, Kiorr, Saamtaav, Con, Col

Population Source: 100 (1996 B. Grimes – 1993 figure); Out of a total Bulang population of 82,280 (1990 census); 2,213 in Laos (1995 census); Also in Myanmar

Location: SW Yunnan: Xishuangbanna Prefecture

Status: Officially included under Bulang

Language: Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer, Palaungic, Western Palaungic, Angkuic

Dialects: 0

Religion: Theravada Buddhism, Animism

Christians: None known

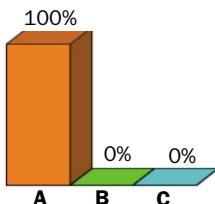
Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Gospel Recordings: None

Christian Broadcasting: None

ROPAL code: STU00

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 small Samtao tribe lives in the Bulang Mountains, in southwest China’s Xishuangbanna Prefecture. Little information is available about the Samtao. A 1993 figure placed only 100 speakers of the Samtao language remaining in China,¹ but the number of people who belong to the Samtao ethnic group may be significantly higher. The vast majority of Samtao live in the eastern part of Myanmar’s Shan State. They are primarily located in mountain villages northeast of the city of Kengtung. More than 2,000 Samtao also live in Laos.

Identity: The Samtao have been officially counted as part of the Bulang nationality in China. Although they share many cultural similarities with the Bulang, the Samtao speak their own separate language. The Samtao in Myanmar are part of what used to be a collection of three distinct tribes: Samtao, Samtuan, and Sen Chun.

Language: The Samtao language is part of the Western Palaungic language family. It is related to, yet distinct from, all other Mon-Khmer languages in the region such as De’ang, Wa, and Bulang. A visitor in the early 1920s noted, “They are mostly illiterate... but there are some members of the Wa-Palaung group who are literate, such as the Sen Chun, Sam Tao and Sam Tuan.”²

History: The Samtao, although small in number, have a long and rich history. It is believed that they were originally Wa people who converted to Theravada

Buddhism at least nine centuries ago.³ The great majority of Wa have resisted Buddhism and remain animists or polytheists to this day. After many generations of separation, the Samtao emerged as a distinct people group with their own customs and language.

Customs: The primary occupation of the Samtao is tea cultivation. The Bulang Mountains are famous for the Pu’er variety of tea. Other crops include maize, rice, cotton, and sugarcane. Many Samtao men tattoo their limbs and torsos—often with passages of Buddhist scriptures. When a Samtao dies, his family kills a chicken to call back the soul of the deceased. The corpse is then bathed and dressed in new clothes; a turban is placed on the head and the body is positioned between white cloth sheets.

Religion: The Samtao are zealous followers of Theravada Buddhism. Their whole ethnic identity is wrapped up in their adherence to Buddhism. Missionary William Clifton Dodd wrote this about the Samtao in the 1920s: “These Sam Tao are one branch of the aboriginal stock found all over Indo-China, including the Khmu of French Laos State, the Lawa of North Siam [Thailand] and the Wild Wa of northern Burma and southern China. These three branches are not Buddhists, but the Sam Tao have been Buddhists for 900 years, and are the best Buddhists we have met.”⁴

Christianity: There is not a single trace of Christianity among the Samtao today. They have never been targeted with the gospel throughout their long history and remain a completely unevangelized people group on both sides of the China-Myanmar border.



Dwayne Graybill