

Location: The 1982 China language census listed 34,000 speakers of the Ya language. Ya villages are located in the Ya and Chung districts of Yuanjiang County and also in the Mosha District of the neighboring Xinping County.¹ Both counties, which have only recently been opened to foreign visitors, are located in the southern part of Yunnan Province. The Ya language is also spoken in a few villages in Chiang Rai Province in northern Thailand.

Identity: Despite being acknowledged as a separate language by the Chinese, the Ya were combined with other related groups to form the official Dai nationality. The Ya are also known locally as the *Cung* and *Tai Ya*.² Subgroups of the Ya include the Tai Sai and Tai Ka.³

Language: Ya is a member of the Tai linguistic family. It is related to other Tai languages in China, such as the Tai Dam and Tai Kao, but contains many Chinese and Hani loanwords. Linguists list Ya as being “different from all other varieties of Tai,”⁴ and “an identifiable Southwestern Tai variety originally associated with Mu’ang Ya in Yunnan... transported into Thailand and spoken in a few villages in Chiang Rai.”⁵

History: The Ya were originally part of the great Tai group. Today, after centuries of migration, as many as 20 million people scattered across southern China still belong to Tai-related groups — including members of the Zhuang, Bouyei, Shui, and Dai

nationalities. Other Tai groups have migrated as far west as northeast India, and as far east as China’s Hainan Island and Vietnam.

Customs: The practice of tattooing has long held a prominent place in Ya culture. Legend has it that a long time ago there was no sun in the sky. Instead, a big pearl on a *pipal* tree gave light to the people. One day a demon stole the pearl.

Wannapa, a Tai hero, started a long expedition to the edge of hell to recover it. On his way he recorded line maps on his body using sap, to enable him to find his way back. However, he found that after a few days the lines faded from the rain and sweat so he courageously bore the pain of pricking thorns into his skin to make the maps sustainable. Chinese records from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) nickname the Tai “those with embroidered feet” in reference to their custom of tattooing.

Religion: The Ya are polytheists and animists. “The Buddhist Tai call all these illiterate Tai, *Tai Ya*. They say that the Lord Buddha once tried to teach these Tai, but found them so ‘thick’ that he desisted,” recorded a



Dwayne Graybill

researcher in the 1920s.⁶ Each year before the Ya plant their seeds, offerings are made to the spirit of the field and the goddess of rice.

Christianity: Although Scripture portions may have been translated into Ya in 1922, few Ya today have ever heard of Christ. There are no known believers among them.⁷ Little has advanced in regard to Christianity among the Ya since one missionary who worked in southern China in the 1920s wrote, “Most of the tribes people are very ignorant and many have no written language of their own. Throughout that part of the province which is inhabited by tribal people, little Christian work has yet been done. Many areas have never even been explored.”⁸



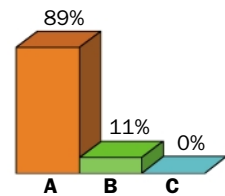
Population in China:
 34,000 (1982)
 50,700 (2000)
 64,600 (2010)
Location: Yunnan
Religion: Polytheism
Christians: None Known

Overview of the Ya

Countries: China, Thailand
Pronunciation: “Yah”
Other Names: Tai Ya, Tai Chung, Cung, Chung, Tai Cung, Dai Ya
Population Source:
 34,000 (1982 census);
 Out of a total Dai population of 1,025,128 (1990 census);
 Also in a few villages in Thailand
Location: S *Yunnan*: Ya and Chung districts of Yuanjiang County; And Mosha District of Xinping County

Status: Officially included under Dai
Language: Daic, Tai, Southwestern Tai, East Central, Northwestern
Dialects (2): Tai La, Tai Sai
Religion: Polytheism, Animism
Christians: None known
Scripture: Portions 1922
Jesus film: None
Gospel Recordings: Tai Ya #00508
Christian Broadcasting: None
ROPAL code: YYA00; CUU00

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