

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach among the Yi (Lolo) People in China

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Overview

Ranking as the sixth most populous ethnic minority group in China with over 8.7 million people according to 2010 census data, [1] the Yi or Lolo constitute a loose collection of culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse peoples who traditionally reside in Yunnan Province. Small numbers of Yi peoples who total less than 50,000 reside in bordering areas of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The LDS Church has never engaged in missionary activity among Yi peoples and currently appears to have only a handful of Yi members, if any at all.

This case study provides a brief introduction to Yi peoples. Opportunities and challenges for establishing an LDS presence and proselytizing the Yi are examined. The growth of the Church among other ethnic minority groups in mainland China is reviewed and the size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups who have a presence among the Yi is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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Yi Background

Yi peoples share ancestry with several other prominent ethnic minority groups in Yunnan Province and surrounding areas, including the Bai, Naxi, and Qiang. Due to the geographical location of their homeland between China, Burma, and Southeast Asia, the Yi had contact with many of these peoples, particularly the Han, resulting in the adoption of many of their agricultural practices. Many Han Chinese and other ethnicities have resettled in the traditional Yi homelands due to government policies and economic development.[2] Yi peoples traditionally subside on pastoralism and agriculture. Most Yi peoples primary adhere to indigenous religions, Buddhism, Daoism, or a syncretism of these religions. Yi peoples speak approximately 100 languages that pertain to the Loloish (or Ngwi) language family. A map displaying the location of Yi ethnolinguistic groups and the number of speakers for each people can be found here.

Opportunities

Although it is unclear how Yi peoples will respond to LDS outreach, Protestant denominations report that several Yi peoples have exhibited strong receptivity to Christian proselytism. Missionary efforts within the past century have achieved good results as Christians comprise a slight majority or sizable minority among several people groups. These successes implicate that future LDS outreach among Yi peoples may yield startling good results if government policies and legislation restricting religious freedom become loosened and if concentrated outreach occurs among these peoples.

Kunming presents the greatest opportunity for the Church at present to make any headway with reaching the Yi due to its large population, central location within the Yi homeland, accessibility to the rest of mainland China, and fledgling LDS presence. Inhabited by 3.825 million people as of mid-2014,[3] Kunming is the most populous metropolitan area in Yunnan Province and ranks within the 30 most populous cities in mainland China. The LDS Church has maintained a presence among Chinese nationals in Kunming for many years and essentially all members appear to be Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese. Although it is unclear whether there are any Yi Latter-day Saints, there may be opportunities for member-missionary work to occur among Yi populations if any members have family connections with the Yi people or if Yi have joined the Church outside of mainland China and have subsequently returned. The other potential method is the teaching and baptizing of Yi converts in China through familial connections as permitted by the law. The Church has grown rapidly within China in recent years without the assistance of any foreign missionary personnel through member referral among family members. The lack of interconnectedness between

Han Chinese and Yi peoples presents the greatest obstacle in following this approach as very few, if any, Han Chinese Latter-day Saints have any relationships with Yi peoples which would currently qualify under the law for sharing the gospel.

Translations of all LDS scriptures and many gospel study materials into simplified Chinese characters provides resources for future missionary efforts among the Yi as many Yi speak and read Mandarin Chinese as a second language. Although many Yi peoples would benefit from scriptures and materials translated into their native language, simplified Chinese translations could be widely utilized, especially during initial missionary efforts when the Church has not had the needed resources to translate materials into these languages. Additionally, current government policies and legislation severely limit missionary activity and prevent the assignment of full-time missionaries. Consequently local Chinese members would be required to meet any missionary needs within the confides of the law. As Mandarin Chinese-speaking members utilize simplified character translations for gospel study, these members would likely be well equipped to bridge linguistic and cultural barriers through the use of these materials.

The conversion of Yi individuals abroad and their return to their homeland is a feasible method to make inroads with these populations within the confines of the law. Few Yi appear to have immigrated, and consequently this approach would likely yield few results due to few Yi who have emigrated.

Challenges

Current legislation and policies governing religious freedom in China prevent any formal missionary efforts among the Yi at present. Concentrated efforts by the LDS Church to target these populations may appear more suspicious compared to proselytism efforts among the dominant ethnic groups. Regulations on religious assembly and ecclesiastical contact between foreign and native members prohibit full-time missionaries and foreign church leaders to meet with Yi populations. The Church has maintained a positive, respectful relationship with the Chinese government for many years by strictly following the law. Deviation from this approach could result in deleterious effects on the Church's relationship with the government and potential harm to local members as those accused of prohibited religious activities have at times been imprisoned or sentenced to labor camps.

The Church maintains a tiny presence in mainland China and is poorly prepared at present to establish a presence among Yi peoples if religious freedom restrictions are relaxed to permit open proselytism and the assignment of full-time missionaries. If any improvements in religious freedom conditions occur, the Church will most likely concentrate its resources to saturate the most populous cities throughout mainland China. The sheer geographic size and enormous population of China would totally overwhelm the Church at present. Even if the Church were to hypothetically allocate all of its approximately 88,000 missionaries and 406 missions to service only mainland China, the average mission would include 3.34 million people within its boundaries. To contrast, the average mission in the United States services 2.66 million people.

The Church has never extended missionary outreach among the Yi. Only a few Yi have joined the Church, if any at all. Opportunities for outreach outside of China are practically nonexistent as less than 50,000 Yi reside outside of China in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand and nearly all of these populations live in remote, rural areas near the Chinese border. Like the current situation in China, government restrictions on religious freedom in Vietnam and Laos also prevent any overt missionary activity. There does not appear to be any visible Yi community in the United States or other countries where open proselytism is permitted.

Most Yi peoples have received very limited or no overt Christian missionary activity. Evangelicals identify most Yi peoples as being totally unreached by evangelism.[4] Most of these peoples reside in rural areas, many of which are difficult to access and located in rugged terrain. Future LDS outreach efforts will require teaching and proselytism methods to be adapted to the cultural conditions and the religious background of individual Yi subgroups.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church appears to maintain no noticeable presence among indigenous ethnic minority groups within mainland China. The Hmong people are the only indigenous ethnic minority people who have received specialized LDS outreach. However, essentially all of these Hmong populations were resettled to the United States from Laos and Thailand instead of mainland China.

Evangelicals are the only nontraditional Christian group who have made any noticeable inroads among Yi peoples according to data currently available. Although most Yi peoples have no evangelical presence whatsoever, evangelicals report that they have gained a small foothold among several Yi peoples, including the Awu,[5] Lahu Shi,[6] Laopang,[7] Miqie,[8] and Zauzou.[9] Some Yi peoples have a widespread evangelical presence due to rapid growth primarily within the past century including the Lahu (43% evangelical in Burma, 33% evangelical in China),[10] Eastern Lipo (50% evangelical),[11] Nalou (25% evangelical, [12] Eastern Nasu (29% evangelical),[13] and Wusa Nusa (24% evangelical).[14] Most of these peoples with a pervasive evangelical presence were first evangelized during the early twentieth century. Evangelicals have appeared to experience the greatest growth among the Eastern Lipo as the strength and size of the Lipo evangelical community has been strong enough to not only maintain a self-sufficient church, but to supply needed leadership manpower to conduct evangelism efforts among unreached peoples in southern China.[15] Jehovah's Witnesses do not report any information on their activities, membership, or congregations in mainland China. Witnesses have translated proselytism materials into Lahu[16] and operate one

Lahu-speaking congregation in Chiang Mai, Thailand.[17] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has over 400,000 members and thousands of congregations in mainland China. However, there appear to be few, if any, Yi Adventists.

Limitations

The Church does not publish any statistical data on language usage among church membership for languages not within the top 10 languages spoken by church membership. It is unclear how many Yi have joined the Church worldwide, if any at all. No reports were available from Yi or mainland Chinese Latter-day Saints. The Church does not publish membership or congregational statistics for mainland China due to the Church's sensitive presence among Chinese nationals.

Future Prospects

The budding LDS presence in Kunming presents the only realistic opportunity for the Church to make any inroads with the Yi people within the foreseeable future as government restrictions on religious freedom prohibit open proselytism, the assignment of full-time missionaries, and member-missionary work outside of familial connections. The loosening of religious freedom restrictions appears the most likely scenario in which the Church could ultimately establish a presence among the Yi, but any relaxation of current government policies and legislation to permit proselytism would most likely result in proselytism efforts occurring solely among Han Chinese within the largest cities. Member-missionary work will be key to extend outreach among the Yi regardless of the status of religious freedom in the coming years and decades.

[1] "List of ethnic groups in China," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 11 August 2014. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_groups_in_China

[2] "Yi - History and Cultural Relations," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 11 August 2014. http://www.everyculture.com/Russia-Eurasia-China/Yi-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html

[3] "MAJOR AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 11 August 2014. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[4] "People Cluster: Tibeto-Burman, other," Joshua Project, retrieved 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/317

[5] "Awu, Southeastern in China," Joshua Project, retrieved 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/18404/CH

[6] "Lahu Shi, Yellow Lahu," Joshua Project, 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/16018

[7] "Laopang," Joshua Project, 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12991

[8] "Michi in China," Joshua Project, retrieved 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/18594/CH

[9] "Zaozou," Joshua Project, 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/16092/CH

[10] "Lahu," Joshua Project, retrieved 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12949

[11] "Lipo, Eastern in China," Joshua Project, 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12991

[12] "Naluo in China," Joshua Project, 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/18620/CH

[13] "Nasu, Eastern in China," Joshua Project, 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/18625/CH

[14] "Nasu, Wasu," Joshua Project, 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/18629/CH

[15] "Lipo, Eastern in China," Joshua Project, 11 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12991

[16] jw.org, retrieved 11 August 2014. http://www.jw.org/lhu/

[17] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 11 August 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT