People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach among the Zhuang People in China

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Overview

The Zhuang constitute a collection of related peoples in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China and extreme northern Vietnam. The Zhuang constitute approximately one-third of the population of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and are the largest ethnolinguistic minority group in China.[1] The worldwide Zhuang population is estimated at 19.4 million people, with the vast majority residing in China.[2] The LDS Church has never engaged in missionary activity among Zhuang peoples and currently appears to have only a handful of Zhuang members, if any at all.

This case study provides a brief introduction to Zhuang peoples. Opportunities and challenges for establishing an LDS presence and proselytizing the Zhuang 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 Zhuang is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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Zhuang Background

The Zhuang have been heavily influenced by Chinese culture and language albeit Zhuang languages are not classified as Chinese. Rather, these languages pertain to the Northern Tai branch[3] and Central Tai branch[4] of the Tai-Kadai language family. There are approximately 17 Zhuang ethnolinguistic groups. Zhuang languages are generally written in Han Chinese characters or in Zhuang characters – characters derived from Chinese that have been modified for Zhuang language use.[5] Chinese languages have influenced the development of Zhuang languages. Most adhere to indigenous religious beliefs. Less than one percent of Zhuang adhere to Christianity.[6] A map displaying the location of Zhuang ethnolinguistic groups and the number of speakers for each Zhuang people can be found here.

Opportunities

Nanning currently presents the greatest opportunity for the Church to make headway with reaching the Zhuang due to its large population, central location within the Zhuang homeland, and accessibility to the rest of mainland China. Inhabited by 3.125 million people as of mid-2015,[7] Nanning is the most populous metropolitan area in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. It is unclear whether the Church maintains a branch or member group for Chinese Latter-day Saints who reside in Nanning. However, based on the Church's progress establishing congregations among Chinese citizens in other major cities in mainland China, Nanning appears a likely candidate to have an LDS congregation organized if one does not currently operate.

Although it is unclear whether there are any Zhuang Latter-day Saints, there may be opportunities for member-missionary work to occur among Zhuang populations if any members have family connections with the Zhuang people or if Zhuang have joined the Church outside of mainland China and have subsequently returned. The other potential method is the teaching and baptizing of Zhuang 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 Zhuang peoples presents the greatest obstacle in following this approach as very few, if any, Han Chinese Latter-day Saints have any familial relationships with Zhuang peoples that 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 Zhuang as many Zhuang speak and read Mandarin Chinese as a second language. Although many Zhuang 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 confines 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 Zhuang 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 Zhuang appear to have immigrated to nations where there are no restrictions on religious freedom. Consequently, this approach would likely yield few results due to an extremely small target population.

Challenges

Current legislation and policies governing religious freedom in China prevent any formal missionary efforts among the Zhuang 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 Zhuang 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 Zhuang 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 use 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 418 missions to service only mainland China, the average mission would include 3.27 million people within its boundaries. To contrast, the average mission in the United States services 2.60 million people.

Zhuang peoples have received extremely limited or no overt Christian missionary activity. The population predominantly adheres to traditional religious beliefs. The Church may need to adapt teaching and missionary tactics to present the Latter-day Saint gospel witness in a manner that can be understood and relevant to Zhuang culture and religious background. Evangelicals identify most Zhuang peoples as being totally unreached by evangelism.[8] 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 Zhuang subgroups.

The Church has never extended missionary outreach among the Zhuang. Only a few Zhuang have joined the Church, if any at all. Opportunities for outreach outside of China are practically nonexistent as there are very few Zhuang who reside outside of China or Vietnam. Like the current situation in China, government restrictions on religious freedom in Vietnam prevent any overt missionary activity. There does not appear to be any visible Zhuang community in the United States or other countries where open proselytism is permitted.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church appears to maintain no noticeable presence among indigenous ethnic minority groups within mainland China. The Hmong (Miao) 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 rather than mainland China.

Evangelicals are the only nontraditional Christian group who have established a presence among Zhuang peoples. However, essentially all Zhuang ethnolinguistic groups are no more than 0.5% evangelical due to significant religious freedom restrictions and challenges evangelizing ethnic minorities who traditionally reside in rural areas. Jehovah's Witnesses do not report any information on their activities, membership, or congregations in mainland China. There do not appear to be any Witness materials translated into Zhuang languages. 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, Zhuang 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 Zhuang have joined the Church worldwide, if any at all. No reports were available from Zhuang 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 establishment of an LDS presence in the Chinese city of Nanning presents as the only realistic opportunity for the Church to make any inroads with the Zhuang 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 Zhuang in major cities in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, 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. It appears highly unlikely that the Church would consider future missionary efforts in any minority languages. There appear no feasible prospects for an LDS establishment in locations in Vietnam within the Zhuang homelands. Member-missionary work will be key to extend outreach among the Zhuang 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] “People Cluster: Zhuang,” Joshua Project, retrieved 2 July 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/322

[3] “Northern,” www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 2 July 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/northern-80

[4] “Central,” www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 2 July 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/central-71

[5] “Sawndip,” en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 3 July 2015. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sawndip

[6] “Country: China,” Joshua Project, retrieved 2 July 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/countries/CH

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

[8] “People Cluster: Zhuang,” Joshua Project, retrieved 2 July 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/322