



Myanmar Places & Faces

Location: Numbering more than a quarter of a million people, the Palaung Shwe live in northern Myanmar's Shan State. Their main center is in the hills surrounding the town of Namhsan, the capital of the Palaung Self-Administered Zone, established by the government in 2010 in a bid to placate the Palaung by granting them nominal autonomy. In the Palaung Shwe language, Namhsan means *trembling waters*, as the town is thought to have been founded on a marsh which floods during heavy rains.¹ An additional 8,000 Palaung Shwe people live across the border in China's Yunnan Province, where they are one of four groups that form the official De'ang minority group.

Identity: Although this group calls itself "Saam Loong," the Burmese know them as the Palaung Shwe, and outsiders have nicknamed them "Golden Palaung" because of the color of their women's traditional belts. They are not as well-known as their Palaung Pale counterparts, despite having a similar population. One reason for their relative obscurity is that the

Palaung Pale live over a widespread part of northern Myanmar, while the Palaung Shwe are confined to a smaller area.

Language: Palaung Shwe, which has either two or three tones depending on the location, is distinct from the other Palaung languages spoken in Myanmar. The main dialect of Palaung Shwe is called Ywama. Most people also speak Shan as a second language, and they use the Burmese script for writing.

History: In the early 20th century, the Namhsan area prospered because of its tea plantations and silver mines,² but today many people are impoverished due to the breakdown of Myanmar society. Violence has long plagued the Palaung Shwe. After thousands of Palaung people were slaughtered during General Ne Win's 1962 coup, armed resistance against Burmese rule was established, which has continued until today. In December 2023, Namhsan fell under the control of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army after two weeks of fighting against the

Burmese military. It remains a hotly contested town because of its strategic location and abundant natural resources.

Customs: Many Palaung people believe they were once brothers with the Karen, even though their languages are from two completely different linguistic families. A Palaung tale states: "The two tribes went out hunting with the intent of sharing their food. The Karen caught an elephant, and a huge feast was held for all to enjoy. The Palaung, however, only managed to catch a porcupine. They skinned it and cooked the small amount of meat. The Karen didn't mind, as they thought the Palaung had only been able to catch a small animal. But when they finished their meal, they saw a large pile of needles and assumed the Palaung had only given them a small portion of their meat. The two groups have been separated ever since, but even today some Palaung homes have an opening on one side, signifying that their Karen brothers are welcome to return to live with them."³

Religion: Although almost all Palaung Shwe people identify as Buddhists, spirit-worship has long dominated their communities, and every village traditionally had its own shaman. Little has changed today, except that now the leading Buddhist monk usually adopts that role.

Christianity: Although fewer than one in 100 Palaung Shwe people are Christians today, a 2003 missionary reported: "We found individuals and pockets of Palaung believers. Some of their children have died from malaria and they hardly have enough to survive, but their faces lit up when we came, and they were very glad when the Good News was shared with their friends, who live in fear of hell and the demons they believe live inside trees and rocks."⁴ After many generations of neglect, the Palaung Shwe finally had their first Bible portions translated in 2024, but distribution has been low-key due to the intense persecution that often occurs when Palaung decide to follow Jesus Christ.



Population in Myanmar:
234,000 (2025)

Location:
Shan State

Language Family:
Austro-Asiatic

Main Religion:
Buddhism (96.0%)

Christians:
1,170 (0.5%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
234,000 in Myanmar
(2025 Joshua Project)
231,000 (2017 J. Leclerc)

Other Countries:
7,900 in China

Other Names:
Golden Palaung, Liang, Red Da'ang, Saam Loong, Samlung, Shwe Palaung, Ta'ang Samlung, Ta-Ang Palaung

Location:
Shan State: Namhsan Township in the Palaung Self-Administered Zone and Kyuakme Township in Kyuakme District

Language:
Palaung, Shwe [pll]

Dialects: 2

Scripture:
Portions 2024

Jesus film:
None

Global Recordings:
Palaung, Samlung #15422

People ID: 11921

