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Location: More than 5,000 Tai Loi people inhabit villages among the hills of eastern Shan State near the juncture of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos—the area known as the Golden Triangle, one of the most notorious narcotic-producing areas on earth. Tai Loi communities are found in the three townships of Kengtung, Mongping, and Mongla. Approximately 600 Tai Loi people also live across the Mekong River in northwest Laos,¹ and a small number live further north in China’s Yunnan Province, where they are considered a subgroup of the Bulang minority.

Identity: Despite their modest population, identifying the Tai Loi is a complex task due to several factors. Their name, which means “Mountain Tai,” is used as a cover term for several Mon-Khmer speaking tribes. “Loi” is the Shan word for “mountain.” In the Tai Lue

language, however, it is spelled Doi, so this group is known as both Tai Loi and Tai Doi, depending on the vernacular of the local group.²

Language: In Myanmar, considerable dialect variation exists between Tai Loi villages. Most adults also speak Tai Lue, while many youths use Burmese, which they have learned at school. In Laos, the Tai Loi language has almost become extinct as they have shifted to speaking Lao.

History: The famous Mekong River has divided the two Tai Loi communities in Myanmar and Laos. For centuries the river has been the lifeblood and food source for tribes in the area. When a team of Presbyterian missionaries traveled down the Mekong in the early 1900s, they wrote: “The current is very swift, in places so much so that it was dangerous to navigate. The river is nearly a mile

wide in places; and where the channel is narrow it rushes along with frightful rapidity. No scenery is finer throughout the entire distance we traveled on it. Mountains rise from either bank to the height of 4,000 feet [1,220 meters]. The river fills the bottom of a long, winding valley; as we glided swiftly down it, there seemed to move in a panorama two half-erect hanging landscapes of woodland verdure and blossom.”³

Customs: Although the Tai Loi language is not part of the Tai linguistic family, the name resulted from centuries of living alongside Tai-speaking peoples, from whom they have absorbed many linguistic and cultural influences. Tai Loi houses are usually built with bamboo and sit on stilts about 9 feet (2.7 meters) above the ground. Pigs, poultry, and cattle are free to roam beneath the floorboards. A bride price is required to be paid to the girl’s family after engagement as a form of repaying the expense of raising her. Although the amounts change, at one time the bride price included “a pig, two chickens, two eggs, many bottles of whiskey, and an amount of cash annually for six years.”⁴

Religion: The Tai Lue are said to have converted the Tai Loi to Buddhism. They also worship their ancestors once a year. An anthropologist noted that “they also believe in the spirits of the village, house, tree, forest, sky, water, etc. They have shamans, who are called *mor phi*. An annual ceremony is held in honor of the village spirit at the spirit house outside the village in the forest.”⁵

Christianity: Although American missionaries Josiah and Ellen Cushing first shared the Gospel in Kengtung in 1869,⁶ it failed to take root among the Buddhist groups in the area, and today there are no known Christians among the Tai Loi in either Myanmar or Laos, and no Scripture exists in their language. A Gospel audio recording is available in the Tai Loi language, but it is rarely utilized.



Population
in Myanmar:
5,100 (2025)

Location:
Shan State

Language Family:
Austro-Asiatic

Main Religion:
Buddhism (70.0%)

Christians:
None known (0.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
5,100 in Myanmar
(2025 Joshua Project)

Other Countries:
600 in Laos
possibly in China

Other Names:
Aw-aak, Bulang-Su, Doi, Duia, Khabe, Kon Doi, Kon Loi, Loi, Mong Lue, Monglwe, Samtao, Sam Hteun, Tailoi, Wakut

Location:
Shan State: Kengtung and Mongping townships in Kengtung District; Mongla Township in Mongla District

Language:
Tai Loi [tɬɰ]

Dialects: 2

Scripture:
None

Jesus film:
None

Global Recordings:
Tai Loi #1649

People ID: 16146

