

Bruno Morandi



Location: The 21,000 members of the Zophei tribe inhabit 23 villages in Chin State’s Thantlang Township in the western half of Hakha District. Their mountainous territory extends across the border into the Indian state of Mizoram, which is home to an additional 3,000 Zophei people. In Myanmar, the Zophei are surrounded by the Lai Chin tribe to the north, Senthang to the east, and the Mara and Lautu to the south.

Identity: The Zophei people group first appeared in official census figures in 1931 when they were listed as “Zolamnai” and numbered 2,431 people. They are one of more than 60 Chin-related groups scattered throughout Myanmar.

Language: The Zophei language, which is also spelled “Zyphe,” is part of the Maraic branch of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. It is related to Mara, Senthang, and Zotung. While Zophei enjoys widespread use in their communities, many people can also speak Lai (Hakha) Chin, Mara, or Mizo. Two dialects have been identified among the Zotung, which linguists have labeled Lower Zyphe and Upper Zyphe. For many generations Zophei remained an unwritten language until a script was developed in 1997.

History: For the past 200 years, dozens of tribes dwelling in Chin State have been lumped together under the broad label of “Chin”

despite their cultural, historic, and linguistic differences. Haugo, a lecturer at Mandalay University, expressed the feeling of many of his people when he said of the artificial label: “The appellation ‘Chin’ is altogether foreign to us. It has been externally applied to us. We respond to it out of necessity but we never appropriate it and never accept or use it to refer to ourselves. It is not only foreign but also derogatory, for it has become synonymous with being uncivilized, uncultured, backward, and even foolish and silly.... We cannot but interpret it as a direct and flagrant insult, and the fact that we have some rotten friends is no consolation.”¹

Customs: The Zophei and other tribes in Hakha District tend to be among the most literate and educated people in all of Myanmar. This trend began during the missionary era, when many schools were established and even girls were taught to read and write—something that had never been thought possible. One 12-year-old girl, Ma Wine, begged her parents to let her attend classes, but they vehemently opposed the idea, afraid she would convert to the dreaded “foreign religion.” Finally they relented, and “Early in the second year of her stay she was brightly and beautifully converted, and oh, how she prayed for her parents! She could not write and tell them of her new-found joy because there was no one in her

village who could read.... Finally her father could stand it no longer and said, ‘Ma Wine, you had better come home.’ This filled her heart with joy. Her father was so proud of her accomplishments that whenever a chief came from another village he called her out and had her read and sing for him. Ma Wine brought both her father and mother to the mission to be baptized. Through his efforts, a school and church were built in his village where formerly there had never lived a Christian.”²

Religion: At the time of the 1931 census, all 2,431 Zophei people identified as animists, without a single Christian among them. The religious landscape soon experienced a seismic shift, however, and by the 1990s approximately two-thirds of Zophei people were committed followers of Jesus Christ, leaving a minority of rural people still clinging to the animistic rituals of their forefathers.

Christianity: A key moment in the history of Christianity among the Zophei came with the publication of the New Testament in 2010, which helped strengthen the understanding of thousands of believers, many of whom had a nominal faith. Before that time the Zophei Christians used Hakha Chin Bibles, and even though the two languages are related, having the Scriptures in their “heart language” gave a significant boost to the Zophei Body of Christ.



Population
in Myanmar:
21,000 (2025)

Location:
Chin State

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Christianity (80.0%)

Christians:
16,800 (80.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
21,000 in Myanmar
(2025 Joshua Project)
17,000 (1994 SIL)
2,431 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
3,000 in India

Other Names:
Chin Zophei, Chin Zyphe,
Zolamnai, Zo-pe, Zoptei

Location:
Chin State: Thantlang Township
in Hakha District

Language:
Chin, Zyphe [zyp]

Dialects: 2

Scripture:
New Testament 2010

Jesus film:
None

Global Recordings:
Chin, Zyphe #5179

People ID: 19593

