



Harry Laub

Location: The 11,000 Samtao people in Myanmar inhabit villages in Shan State’s Mongla Township, between the Chinese border and the Nam Lwe River, which is a crucial tributary of the Mekong River. Although Mongla is in Myanmar, the town’s electricity, telecommunications, and trade are dependent on China, and the main currency used in the town is the Chinese Yuan.¹ The sensitive border area is closed to foreign visitors, as before 1989 Mongla was a lawless area controlled by armed militia groups. Although things are better today with one local government and army in control, the Myanmar government has no authority in the area. The Samtao language may also be spoken in six villages of northern Laos² and by a small number of people in southwest China and northern Thailand.

Identity: Much confusion surrounds the classification of the Samtao, probably because they are not a cohesive ethnolinguistic group, and their name is applied not only to members of the Samtao ethnic group, but to people from the Samtao mountains. In Myanmar, the Samtao are historically said to be an alliance of three tribes: Samtao, Samtuan, and Sen Chun.³

In China, where the Samtao are officially counted as part of the Blang minority, a major discrepancy exists between the number of people considered part of the ethnic group and those who speak the Samtao language. As a result, estimates of Samtao people in China range from 100 to 24,000!⁴

Language: The respected *Ethnologue* struggles to define the Samtao language and offers several convoluted explanations of this complex situation.⁵ While some linguists disagree about how to classify Samtao, they agree that it is part of the Waic branch of the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family.⁶ Most Samtao people in Myanmar also speak Burmese and Shan.

History: Despite their modest population, the Samtao boast a long history. One historian claims that “More than 2,000 years ago, Han expansion reached Samtao country. By the Tang Dynasty of the seventh and eighth centuries, the Samtao had begun to distinguish themselves ethnically from surrounding peoples, acquiring a sense of group identity based on language and religion.”⁷ A 2014 book notes: “During the Wa occupation of the Kengtung

Valley, some of their people moved out into the outlying districts and formed a village of their own. When the main body was defeated and driven out, these smaller groups remained and offered their allegiance to the conquerors and were permitted to remain.... After many years, isolated villages developed their own customs and dress and assumed different dialects of the spoken language. The ‘left behind Wa’ are now divided into six distinct tribal dialect groups [including the Samtao].”⁸

Customs: When a Samtao person dies, “his family kills a chicken to call back the soul of the deceased. The corpse is then bathed and dressed in new clothes, a turban is placed on the head, and the body is positioned between white sheets.”⁹ Wherever they live, “the Samtao absorb aspects of neighboring groups. In Laos, practically every aspect of Samtao culture mirrors that of the Lu and Lao. In China the Samtao have assimilated to the predominant Lu and are bilingual in that language.”¹⁰

Religion: Whereas most Samtao in China are zealous Buddhists, having absorbed the culture of their Buddhist neighbors, many in Myanmar still perform traditional animistic rituals alongside their Buddhism. Presbyterian missionary William Dodd wrote in the 1920s: “The Samtao have been Buddhists for 900 years and are the best Buddhists we have met.”¹¹ Another source says: “The primary religion of the Samtao people is nominal Buddhism. Less than 1% have become Christians.... They also believe in the spirits of the house, village, trees, sky, forest, and others. They also worship their ancestors. Once a year, following the harvest, the Samtao hold an agricultural ceremony where they sacrifice chickens and pigs to the mother of rice.”¹²

Christianity: The Samtao remain an unreached group in each country where they reside, and no Scripture or Christian resources of any description have ever been translated into their language.



Population in Myanmar: 11,000 (2025)

Location: Shan State

Language Family: Austro-Asiatic

Main Religion: Buddhism (80.0%)

Christians: 220 (2.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population: 11,000 in Myanmar (2025)
9,550 (2000 SIL)

Other Countries: 3,800 in Laos
200 in China
100 in Thailand

Other Names: Col, Con, Kem Degne, Kiorr, Kontoi, Lua, Mu Di Pa, Samatao, Samtau, Samtuan, Sen Chun, Xamtao

Location: Shan State: Mongla Township in Mongla District

Language: Samtao [stu]

Dialects:

Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings: None

People ID: 14680

