

THAI YUAN

ထိုင်း ယွန်း



Supermap

Location: Several thousand Thai Yuan (Northern Thai) people inhabit Shan State's Golden Triangle area in the extreme northeast of Myanmar, where the country meets Laos and Thailand along the Mekong River. The Thai Yuan are primarily found in Tachileik and Mongyawng districts.¹ Nearly eight million speakers of the Thai Yuan language are spread across 12 provinces of northern Thailand. A further 40,000 Thai Yuan live across the river in northwest Laos.

Identity: Chiang Mai was formally incorporated into the modern Thai nation in 1939, but the Thai Yuan have always viewed themselves as distinct from the Northeast Thais (Isan) and Central Thais (Siamese), with whom they often waged cruel wars. Until the 20th century, "the Siamese considered Northern Thais to be "Lao" due to linguistic and cultural differences or, more specifically, as Lao phung dam, or 'black-bellied Lao,' because of their tradition of tattooing their abdomens.... The use of the term Khon Muang ('city dwellers') is a

way for Northern Thais to assert their distinct identity and cultural heritage."² Identifying the Thai Yuan in Myanmar is complicated because "Yuan is also a name associated with the use of Buddhist scriptures written in the Tai Tham script. Khun, and to a lesser extent Tai Lue, are sometimes referred to as Yuan Buddhists. The Yuan label may be more cultural-religious than linguistic in Myanmar these days."³

Language: Most linguistic sources, including the Ethnologue, do not mention the Thai Yuan language being spoken in Myanmar, despite the respected Australian linguist David Bradley having documented its existence in a report to the United Nations in 2016. He noted: "The Northern Thai call themselves Khon Muang but are also called Yuan or Yun, and live mainly in northern Thailand, with a few in eastern Shan State. Their orthography is similar to Khun."⁴ The Thai Yuan have their own script, but while most rural Thai Yuan people continue to speak their mother tongue at home, their ability

to read Yuan has diminished.⁵

History: The first kingdom founded by the Thai Yuan is believed to have been the state of Yonok in AD 773.⁶ Later, as thousands of people arrived from southern China, King Mangrai united several Tai tribes and founded the great Lanna ("million rice fields") Kingdom in 1263 before moving his capital to Chiang Mai in 1296. Lanna flourished for the next 250 years until its eventual downfall to the Burmese in 1556.⁷

Customs: Thai Yuan culture is distinct from other Thai groups that have their own languages, customs, and cuisine. In the 1770s, the King of Siam "laid Lanna waste, plundered their villages, and brought away many thousands of captives to be slaves forever. The Thai Yuan king was confined to a large iron cage, exposed to the burning sun, and obliged to proclaim to everyone that the King of Siam was great and merciful."⁸

Religion: The Thai Yuan have been Buddhists for a millennium. In 1330 they sponsored their own monks to travel to India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to study "the purest form of Buddhism at its root."⁹ Like other Theravada Buddhists, the Thai Yuan today mix their beliefs with animistic rituals, and it could be said their religious view is one of utilizing "whatever works."¹⁰

Christianity: Protestant missionaries have faithfully labored in northern Thailand for about 150 years. While many of the tribes in the region have responded to the Gospel, progress among the Thai Yuan has been painstakingly slow and very few have become Christians. They remain an unreached group in all three countries where they reside. The New Testament in the Thai Yuan script was first published in 1914 and a revised edition followed in 2017. Translation of the Old Testament is underway, but most of this group now reads standard Thai, although the *Jesus* film and other Gospel resources have been created in the Northern Thai vernacular.



Population in Myanmar: 4,000 (2026)

Location: Shan State

Language Family: Kra-Dai

Main Religion: Buddhism (98.0%)

Christians: 80 (2.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population: 4,000 in Myanmar (2026 Asia Harvest)

Other Countries: 7,758,000 in Thailand
40,000 in Laos

Other Names: Bandu, Kam Mu'ang, Kam Mueang, Kammuang, Kammyang, Khon, Khon Muang, Khon Mueang, Khon Myang, La Nya, Lan Na, Lanatai, Lanna, Muang, Mueang, Mu'ang, Mung, Northern Tai, Northern Thai, Payap, Phayap, Phiyap, Siamese Shan, Tai Nya, Tai Wang, Tai Yon, Tai Yong, Tai Yuan, Tai Yun

Location: Shan State: Tachileik and Mong Hpayak townships in Tachileik District; Mongyawng Township in Mongyawng District

Language: Thai, Northern [nod]

Dialects:

Scripture: New Testament 1914
Portions 1867

Jesus film: Thai, Northern

Global Recordings: Thai, Northern #101

People ID: 12666

