

Zhaba

A 1983 source listed 15,000 people belonging to the Zhaba ethnolinguistic group in China.¹ They live in parts of Yajiang and Daofu counties within the vast Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in western Sichuan Province. The area was originally part of Kham Province in Tibet until the Chinese annexed it. One source states, 'The Zhaba live a hard life in a land of fast winding rivers and high mountains. Most of the Zhaba live along the Xianshui River that flows from Daofu to Yajiang.'²

The main centre is Zhaba township in southern Daofu County. The town, which boasts a population of 5,200, has had no electricity or telephone lines since 1997, when the government banned logging because of environmental concerns. The logging industry had been extremely profitable, so when the companies pulled out, the electricity and phone lines were unplugged too.

Although the Zhaba are culturally Tibetans, their language is part of the Qiangic branch of Tibeto-Burman, totally unintelligible to surrounding Tibetans. When Marco Polo passed through rural Tibetan areas in the 13th century he found unique local customs. Polo wrote, 'No man of that country would on any consideration take to wife a girl who was a maid; for they say a wife is worth nothing unless she has been used to consort with men. . . . When travellers come that way, the old women of the place get ready, and take their unmarried daughters . . . to whomsoever will accept them. . . . In this manner people travelling in that way

. . . shall find perhaps 20 or 30 girls at their disposal.'³ Promiscuity continues to be rife among the Zhaba. A 1950s survey of the Garze area found the rate of venereal diseases was 40 per cent among people in peasant areas and 50.7 per cent among people living in the pasture areas.⁴

Most people in the area acknowledge that the Zhaba were the original inhabitants.

'They say they came to this area after being defeated in the Mongol wars in northern China.'⁵ Throughout history their society has been matriarchal. Today, 'in some of the distant villages the women still have control over the family, with the father taking care of his sister's children, not his own. When a couple wants to get

married, it is not the fathers who discuss the potential marriage, but the brothers of the mothers of the prospective bride and groom.'⁶

The Zhaba worship a wide variety of demons and ghosts. These influences date back to the pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion of Bon. Today the Zhaba's religion continues to be a mixture of Buddhism and Bon. 'There is a Bon temple just north of Zhaba town, which has three groups using the monastery, 30 monks being there at any given time. Every Zhaba village has a temple and its own Holy Mountain where the villagers go to worship on special holidays.'⁷

There are no known Christians among the Zhaba, although there are a few Tibetan Catholics further west near Litang.



China Advocate



Population:
20,900 (2000)
25,750 (2010)
31,700 (2020)
Countries: China
Buddhism: Tibetan
Christians: none known

Overview of the Zhaba

Other Names: Zaba, Zhaboa, Buozhi

Population Sources:
15,000 in China (1983, Sun Hongkai)

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Tangut-Qiang, Qiangic

Dialects: 2 (Western Zhaba, Eastern Zhaba)

Professing Buddhists: 100%

Practising Buddhists: 85%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

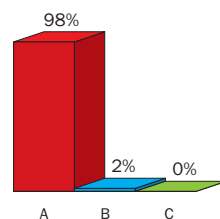
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: ZHA

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians
C = Are adherents to some form of Christianity