

Seeing the Unreached World As It Really Is

BY **PAUL HATTAWAY**

Paul Hattaway is an author, researcher and founder of Asia Harvest (www.asiaharvest.org).

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People group research is not a fixed science. Rather, it is a constantly changing dynamo of motion as people groups move, assimilate into other cultures, regain and lose their languages, come to Christ and fall away from the faith.

As a result, a continually updated people group list is essential for decision-making in the mission world. Lists help believers gain a clearer picture of the remaining task of world evangelization that is so dear to the heart of God.

I have been engaged in mission research in Asia since the 1980s. For much of that time I have wrestled with the ethno-linguistic realities of what we found on the mission field vs. what governments and the Body of Christ have acknowledged. This disparity presents challenges for the cause of the gospel.

In the late 1990s I wrote a book profiling all the tribes, peoples and languages of Laos. The Lao government amusingly insists there are just three groups of people in the country, based on elevation(!)—those who live on the plains, in the hills and in the high mountains. Our book was revolutionary in that it profiled and mapped 117 distinct people groups in Laos. Today, the number has grown to 127 groups according to the latest Joshua Project data.

A few years later we released *Operation China*, which profiled and mapped 490 distinct ethno-linguistic groups in China. Joshua Project now lists 545 distinct people groups in China, as new research over the years has brought the existence of new groups and languages into the light.

The Chinese government to this day, however, recognizes only 56 ethnic groups within its borders, and most Christians I have met—both in China and overseas—prefer to use those broad artificial classifications because they are more manageable.

This approach is clearly flawed, however, as countless groups have been lumped together in these official categories, yet have little in common. Two groups may hardly speak a word of each other's language, refuse to intermarry and proudly possess their own unique histories, customs and identities.

For example, the official "Miao" nationality in China actually contains more than 50 distinct tribes, of which five or six are strongly Christian, and the remainder unreached. Many believers have assumed that the Christian Miao can reach the other groups, but for more than a century this assumption has largely proven false.

A believer from the A-Hmao tribe will struggle greatly if they try to reach the two million Hmu people, who live just a few hours away in the same province. I have been present when gospel audio recordings and the *Jesus* film in one Miao language were played to Miao in another group, leaving them with completely bemused looks on their faces.

The language differences between such groups are sometimes as broad as those between European languages like English, French, German and Spanish. The "Yi" nationality in China is even more complex, with 85 distinct tribes speaking their own distinct languages. At least 30 tribes have been combined together to form the official "Yao" nationality.

There are clearly hundreds more ethnic groups and languages than what some ministries acknowledge in India, Nepal, Myanmar, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The 1931 British census reported 37 distinct Kuki Chin tribes in Burma (now Myanmar) and another 13 in India.

Within those were strings of spoken languages, with some districts having as many as 20 distinct languages. These peoples and languages have not vanished, but some sources do not see any point in “slicing the pie” so thin, so they view the Kuki Chin as one cohesive group, which they are not.

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A Troubling Development

Most alarmingly, in recent years there appears to have been a push by some in the mission world to ignore reality and to imagine the task is simpler than it really is. The aim seems to be to try to reduce the size and complexity of what remains to be done. I fear the motive for this may often be a misguided bid to please some donors who have grown weary of hearing about thousands of Unreached People Groups in the world; our data contradict the mantra that we will soon complete the Great Commission.

Manipulating statistics, altering definitions and reducing the number of Unreached People Groups by pushing a “delete” button will never help reach lost people for Christ, and millions of people may go without the Word of God in their language because mission agencies don't have the courage to acknowledge the true situation.

I encourage every believer and ministry leader to put aside mission politics and funding pressures, and to realize that the Lord Jesus is *the* Truth. If we can't accept the reality of the situation facing us, we risk falling into the trap of deception.

On the field, many church leaders have grown confused and disengaged because of the games Western ministries play with data. This has led to some ludicrous situations. Last year a good friend from Nepal—who is doing outstanding ministry in more than two dozen totally unreached tribes in the high Himalayas—attended a mission conference in the United States, where he was told that Nepal no longer has any unreached groups! In effect, he was told that the job has been completed

in Nepal, and he should relax and live in the delusion that the tribes he has given his life to reach really aren't unreached!

Decades ago, God used Dr. Ralph Winter to change the discourse of mission work, when he explained that the world is not like a flat pancake, where the syrup flows easily over the whole surface. Rather, he described the world as being like a waffle, with walls between distinct sections that must be broken down before the syrup can flow into those areas.

The number of unreached ethnic groups and languages in the world will be reduced as Christians share the gospel with them and as communities of redeemed believers emerge, and not by covering our eyes and ears and imagining that hundreds of groups and languages don't exist as we squeeze them together for administrative convenience.

The Gospel is Advancing



Mosuo of China. Photo: Asia Harvest

Regardless of what men may do, God is still on the move among the unreached!

Over the years, we have been cheered by seeing amazing progress among many groups. The 57,000 Mosuo of southwest China were a completely unknown people group until they were mentioned

in a *National Geographic* article about 30 years ago. Believers visited and found them to be completely unevangelized and without a single known Christian in their midst. Today there are approximately 3,000 Mosuo believers, and at least one house church in every Mosuo village. Hallelujah!

One example of how people group research has helped reach the lost occurred in Laos. Beginning in the 1990s, thousands of Khmu people in northern Laos experienced a powerful turning to the Lord. Touched by the Spirit of



God, many Khmu believers desired to take the gospel to other tribes that had never heard of Jesus, but they were only aware of the ethnicities in their immediate areas, and they knew little about the ethnic composition of the rest of their country.

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Today, partly thanks to the influence of people group lists, dozens of Khmu missionaries are serving in southern Laos and even in surrounding countries. As a result, a number of previously unevangelized groups have gradually made progress from unreached to the list of those who have embraced the gospel and now have a growing church.

Part of our call at Asia Harvest is to help local believers get the gospel moving among unreached groups. Today, it's humbling to look back and see how the Holy Spirit has enabled a small ministry to come alongside the Asian Church. Currently, we are privileged to support more than 1,500 Asian missionaries, who serve among 1,150 different ethnic groups. Hundreds more groups

still need attention so that people will be transformed from the kingdom of darkness into God's light.

A Reminder of Who Owns the Harvest

In recent decades, the world has been rapidly changing via technological advances and the increase of information. As we continue to progress toward the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the end of the Great Commission, let us remember that the salvation of people from every fragment of humanity is not our idea. Rather, it is the plan of the living God from before the foundations of the earth.

"Then I saw another angel flying in mid-air, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people." —Revelation 14:6

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