

STAGE 1	ASIA	SOUTH WEST CHINA	AN UNREACHED PEOPLE: THE SANI
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More than 105,000 Sani live in the central and eastern parts of Yunnan Province. The Sani are polytheists. They believe the earth, sky, water, fire, mountains, stones, etc., have their own spirits. They also worship their ancestors. The majority live in Shilin (formerly Lunan) County, especially around the famous Stone Forest (picture on left by ChinaPictures.org). The Stone Forest, about 120 kilometers (75 mi.) southeast of Kunming, is a massive collection of limestone formations that stand up to 30 meters (98 ft.) high. Sani legend says the gods

created the Stone Forest in order to help young lovers, who can find privacy among the towering pillars. The Catholic Church took the gospel to the Sani in 1887. But today Catholic believers are found in only 22 of the 120 villages in Shilin County and there are few Evangelical believers (estimated 0.15%). No portions of the New Testament are available in the local language.

The initial church planting team was composed of an American staff person (D.) and a Chinese assistant (F.). They worked in partnership for several years with the Summer of Linguistics to translate the New Testament. Our expatriate staff person could share very little about the work going on in the villages for security reasons. In fact D. has had to leave, so as not to jeopardize the integrity of the work. She works to translate the gospel and helps in its propagation through a Chinese assistant evangelist from another tribe (F). F. does all the village work now, and is doing a great job. He is learning the minority language and is starting to use “storying” to progressively share the gospel through teaching narrative passages.

The work advanced in 4 villages where local Sani believers have gathered in homes. Two were small study groups, and two were house churches, but one got shut down by the government because someone turned them in! They are still receiving instruction but cannot all meet together as a church. At the writing of this case study, the other house church was going strong and the 5 or 6 families continue to meet regularly without the presence of any outsiders. D. adds, “There is also a work starting up in another village where we have a few new believers but nothing is formally organized as yet.”

The church planting team decided to use narrative evangelism (storytelling) as their primary means of outreach. They go through the accounts of creation, the fall, the flood, the animal sacrifices, all the way to the cross and resurrection. The earlier stories provide a context for the gospel when they finally arrive at that point. The goal is to eventually teach all Sani believers to do the “storying,” so that they can all share from the Word with unbelievers around them. The vision is to work through Sani believers to reach other tribes so that the churches are indigenous from the start and will suffer less unnecessary interruption.

The growth was relatively slow until the team started using T4T with disciples to help them make other disciples. “Training for Trainers,” or “T4T.” T4T is not a Western invention. It was developed by an Asian-American missionary named Ying Kai. God taught Ying to go beyond his limited vision of planting churches, and showed him how he could train a continually multiplying number of church planter trainers. The result was what Ying called T4T, Training for Trainers. In less than a decade, T4T had multiplied a small band of disciples into a movement of more than 80,000 new churches with more than 2 million baptisms in the Pearl River region of China (across from Hong Kong). Although this explosive growth is not always experienced, many movements have started when simple, reproducible, generational approaches (like T4T) are used in the church planting DNA.