



**Population:**  
 5,500 (2000)  
 7,100 (2010)  
 8,740 (2020)  
**Countries:** China  
**Buddhism:** Tibetan  
**Christians:** none known

## Overview of the Tongren Bonan

**Other Names:** Tongren, Buddhist Bonan, Bao'an, Qinghai Bonan

**Population Sources:**  
 4,000 in China (1987, *Language Atlas of China*)

**Language:** Altaic, Mongolian, Eastern Mongolian, Mongour

**Dialects:** 5 (Tongren, Nianduhu, Dunmari, Gajjuri, Bao'an Xiazhuang)

**Professing Buddhists:** 100%

**Practising Buddhists:** 90%

**Christians:** 0%

**Scripture:** none

**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** PEH02

Tongren County, in the eastern part of China's remote Qinghai Province, is home to more than 5,000 people of the Bonan minority group. Tongren is a crossroads for many different peoples, including the Salar, Tu, Hui, Amdo Tibetans and Wutun.

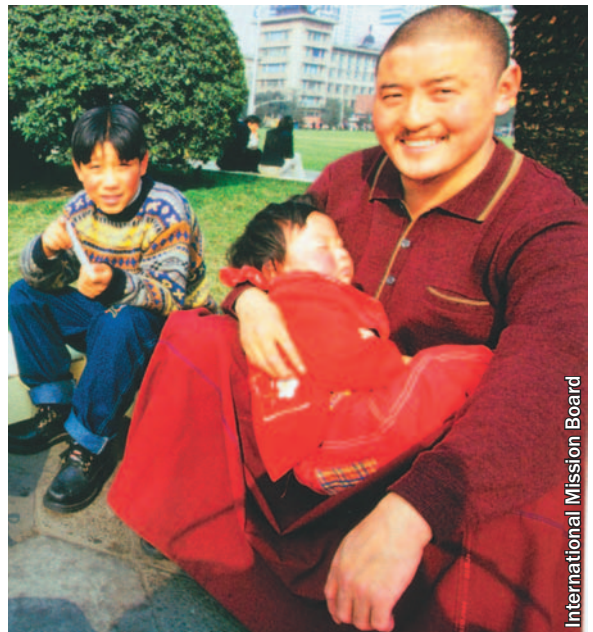
The Tongren Bonan are part of the larger Bonan minority in China, but the Buddhist Bonan living in Tongren consider themselves a separate people from the Muslim Bonan in Gansu. Their languages are now also different. Using the definition of a people group as 'a significantly large ethnic or sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another',<sup>1</sup> the Tongren Bonan definitely qualifies as a distinct people group.

The Bonan language spoken in Tongren County of Qinghai is distinct from the main body of Bonan spoken across the border in Gansu Province. The Gansu Bonan language has been influenced by Chinese, while Tongren Bonan has been heavily influenced by Tibetan and Tu. Various linguists note that sound structure and grammar also differ between the two areas.<sup>2</sup>

The Tongren Bonan are the descendants of Mongolian troops who were stationed in the region during the Mongolian empire of the 13th and 14th centuries. After the collapse of Mongol rule in 1368 most soldiers retreated to Mongolia, but a few remained behind. After centuries of intermingling with the Tibetans, the Tongren Bonan have culturally become almost indistinguishable from their neighbours. 'Those Bonans who retained their Buddhist faith became strongly acculturated to their neighbors . . . as a result, only a small number of persons remain in Tongren who from an ethno-linguistic point of view can still be considered Bonan.'<sup>3</sup>

The Tongren Bonan are Tibetan Buddhists

and mix spirit worship and shamanism into their observances.<sup>4</sup> In the early 1800s, some of the Bonan converted to Islam, 'an event that put them at odds with their Tibetan and Tu neighbours, all of whom were Buddhists. The friction between Buddhists and Muslims occasionally erupted into violence. In the late 1950s and early 1960s the confrontation became so violent that the Islamic Bonan decided to move . . . they gradually migrated down the Huang [Yellow] River into Gansu Province,

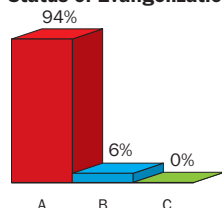


International Mission Board

where they live today.<sup>5</sup>

The first foreign missionaries among the Tongren Bonan were workers affiliated with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. They commenced work in Bao'an Township around 1910. Despite being in the Bonan neighbourhood, the missionaries' primary target was the Tibetans, not the Bonan. By 1922 the mission was closed due to a lack of workers.<sup>6</sup> The mission did open again, but after years of slow and unfruitful labour the work gravitated towards the more receptive Han Chinese.<sup>7</sup> Today, there are no known Christians among the Tongren Bonan. Because of the geographic, cultural and linguistic barriers, they could be classified as one of the most difficult Buddhist groups in the world to reach with the gospel.

## 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