

# Tibetan, Shangri-La



**Population:**

74,800 (2000)  
92,100 (2010)  
113,500 (2020)

**Countries:** China, Switzerland

**Buddhism:** Tibetan

**Christians:** 2,000

## Overview of the Shangri-La Tibetans

**Other Names:** Tibetan: Zhongdian, Zhongdian Tibetans, Chung-tien Tibetans, Chongtien, Rgyalathang

**Population Sources:**

60,740 in China (1990, Asian Minorities Outreach) also in Switzerland

**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetc, Tibetan, Northern

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 95%

**Practising Buddhists:** 70%

**Christians:** 2.6%

**Scripture:** Tibetan Bible 1948; New Testament 1885; Portions 1862

**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** Zang: Xiaozhongdian; Zang: Weixi; Zang: Deqing

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** none

Approximately 75,000 linguistically-distinct Tibetans inhabit villages in Shangri-La (formerly Zhongdian), Weixi and Lijiang counties in the north-western part of Yunnan Province, China. According to the 1990 Chinese census, 50,302 live in Shangri-La County, 8,581 in Weixi and 1,849 in Lijiang. The extent of their territory seems to extend to the Hengduan Pass between the towns of Shangri-La and Deqen, located farther to the north.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the pass, the dialect changes markedly. *Hengduan* literally means 'cut off vertically'.<sup>2</sup> A few Shangri-La Tibetan families have reportedly migrated to Switzerland.<sup>3</sup>

*Operation China* profiles this group under the name *Tibetan, Zhongdian*. Recently the Chinese authorities officially changed the name of the town and county where this group lives from Zhongdian to Shangri-La, hoping to cash in on the mysterious place name first written about in the 1933 James Hilton novel *Lost Horizons*.<sup>4</sup>

The Shangri-La Tibetans wear a different traditional dress from all other Tibetans. The women prefer to wear a cone-shaped headdress which is wrapped up inside a scarf.

Researchers who have travelled into Tibetan areas of northern Yunnan Province report that the dialect variation between Shangri-La and Deqen is enough to seriously affect mutual intelligibility between Tibetans from the two areas.<sup>5</sup> Local legends say that the ancestors of the Shangri-La Tibetans were Qiang people who came to the area, fought and overcame the locals in battle, and eventually became assimilated to Tibetan ways. This would explain the linguistic, clothing and cultural differences between

them and other Tibetan groups today.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of Shangri-La Tibetans adhere to Tibetan Buddhism. The large Jietang Songlin Monastery, which houses several hundred monks, is located just to the north of Shangri-La Township.

Although many Christians today think of the Tibetans as completely untouched by Christianity, there is a significant Catholic presence among the Shangri-La Tibetans. The story actually began in 1852 when an intrepid young missionary named Pére Renou arrived in Yunnan and headed for its northwest corner, reaching Dongzhulin,

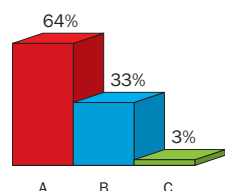
a Khampa monastery two-thirds of the way from Zhongdian to Deqen. There the young priest, disguised as a Chinese merchant, befriended the head lama. . . . Pére Renou and his little band of hardy priests managed to erect churches in several Tibetan villages.<sup>7</sup> Today, a large French-style



Julian Hawken

cathedral still stands at Tchronteu, near Weixi.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of the monks of Saint Bernard was to minister to all in need who travelled over the high mountain trails in trade and commerce. Their most valuable helpers were huge Saint Bernard dogs—half Swiss and half Tibetan. In the city of Weixi, the monks, helped by the Cluny Sisters of Saint Joseph and two Tibetan nuns, ran a mission school attended by children from Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet.<sup>9</sup> Presently, a Catholic priest is responsible for 9,500 Tibetan believers in his area. Of these, about 7,500 belong to the Southern Khampa group and 2,000 to the Shangri-La Tibetans.

## 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