



# People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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## Prospective LDS Outreach among Tibetans in China

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Posted: August 31st, 2015

### Overview

Tibetans constitute a collection of related peoples who traditionally inhabit the Tibet Autonomous Region and Qinghai Province in China and adjacent areas in China, India, and Nepal. There are approximately 6.5 million Tibetans worldwide.<sup>[1]</sup> Most Tibetans speak three closely related Tibetan languages: Amdo Tibetan (1.8 million speakers),<sup>[2]</sup> Central Tibetan (1.17 million speakers),<sup>[3]</sup> and Kham Tibetan (1.38 million speakers).<sup>[4]</sup> Tibetans are homogeneously Buddhist. Tibetan Buddhism has adopted aspects of Mahayana Buddhism and traditional beliefs indigenous to Tibet called Bon.<sup>[5]</sup> A very small minority continue to practice traditional beliefs. The LDS Church has never appeared to engage in proselytism efforts that specifically target Tibetans.

This case study provides a brief introduction to Tibetan peoples. Opportunities and challenges for the establishment of an LDS presence and the proselytism of Tibetans are examined. The growth of the Church among other ethnic minority groups in mainland China is reviewed and the size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups who have a presence among Tibetans is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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### Tibetan Background

Songtsen Gampo unified peoples who inhabited the Tibetan Plateau in the seventh century and established the Tibetan Empire. Han Chinese have exerted significant influence on Tibetan history since this time and have maintain control of the Tibet for many centuries. Tibetans maintained significant autonomy over their homelands with little interference from China until 1949 when the communists imposed a new government and superseded Tibetan authorities.<sup>[6]</sup> Tibetans recognize the Dalai Lama as an important spiritual leader and a reincarnation of the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara. Tibetans have maintain strong ethnoreligious ties to Buddhism for centuries. There have been numerous human rights concerns in Tibet in recent years due to the Chinese government severely restricting religious freedom in the area. Examples of these concerns included imprisonments, death sentences, killings, and repression of religious and political anniversaries. The State Administration for Religious Affairs controls all aspects of religious practice in Tibet. Many have self-immolated in protest to Chinese control and religious freedom restrictions.<sup>[7]</sup> Tibetans constitute a strong majority in the Tibet Autonomous Region (91%) and comprise visible minorities in two Chinese provinces, namely Qinghai (24%) and Sichuan (2%).<sup>[8]</sup> Tibetan languages are traditionally written in the Tibetan script and pertain to the Bodish branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family.<sup>[9]</sup> A map displaying the location of the Tibetan homeland can be found [here](#).

### Opportunities

The Church appears to have previously printed at least one LDS material into Tibetan.<sup>[10]</sup> However, no Tibetan translations of LDS materials are currently listed on the Church's official website to order church materials, [store.lds.org](http://store.lds.org). Use of previously translated materials in initial missionary efforts may be effective if these materials are still available. Translations of all LDS scriptures and many gospel study materials into simplified Chinese characters provides resources for future missionary efforts among Tibetans in China who are bilingual in Mandarin Chinese. Bilingualism in Mandarin Chinese is highest in Lhasa. Current government policies and legislation severely limit missionary activity and prevent the assignment of full-time missionaries. Consequently local Chinese members would be required to meet any missionary needs within the confines of the law. As Mandarin Chinese-speaking members utilize simplified character translations for gospel study, these members would likely be well equipped to bridge linguistic and cultural barriers through the use of these materials.

Lhasa presents the greatest prospects for LDS outreach among Tibetans in their homeland due to its status as the administrative capital for the Tibet Autonomous Region and sizable population. Lhasa is the only city in Tibet with more than 100,000 inhabitants<sup>[11]</sup> and is the most easily accessed city in the Tibetan homelands from major cities in China.

Although it is unclear whether there are any Tibetan Latter-day Saints in mainland China or Tibet, there may be opportunities for member-missionary work to occur among Tibetan populations in China if there are any Tibetan converts who have family connections. The Church is permitted to teach and baptize converts in China through familial connections. The Church has grown rapidly within China in recent years without the assistance of foreign missionary personnel through member referral among family members. The lack of interconnectedness between Han Chinese and Tibetan peoples presents the greatest obstacle in following this approach as very few, if any, Han Chinese Latter-day Saints have any familial relationships with Tibetan peoples which would currently qualify under the law for sharing the gospel.

## Challenges

Tibetans are one the most challenging peoples in the world for the LDS Church to reach at present among peoples with a population of more than five million. Strong ethnoreligious ties to Buddhism, political conflict in Tibet, religious freedom restrictions imposed by the Chinese government, no Tibetan LDS community, long distance from the nearest LDS mission and cities in mainland China with an LDS presence, a comparatively tiny population spread over vast geographical areas, rugged terrain, and a lack of a Christian presence among Tibetans predict nearly insurmountable barriers to future LDS growth and missionary activity.

Strong ethnoreligious ties to Buddhism pose a significant challenge for establishing an LDS presence among Tibetans. Buddhism has become inextricably connected to Tibetan ethnicity and efforts to gain greater autonomy or independence from China. Even more secular Tibetans appear unreceptive to Christian proselytism. Tibetans in China have received extremely limited or no overt Christian missionary activity due to proselytism restrictions, remote location, and low receptivity to Christianization efforts in previous centuries. Prospective missionary efforts among Tibetans may yield very few converts even if mission leaders consistently extend specialized outreach for extended periods of time. The Church has yet to develop specialized proselytism and gospel study materials tailored to individuals with a Buddhist religious background.

There are significant religious freedom restrictions in China that severely restrict missionary activity. Current legislation and policies governing religious freedom in China prevent any formal missionary efforts among Tibetans at present. Concentrated efforts by the LDS Church to target these populations may appear more suspicious compared to proselytism efforts among the dominant ethnic groups. Regulations on religious assembly and ecclesiastical contact between foreign and native members prohibit full-time missionaries or foreign church leaders to meet with Tibetan populations. The Church has maintained a positive, respectful relationship with the Chinese government for many years by strictly following the law. Deviation from this approach could result in deleterious effects on the Church's relationship with the government and potential harm to local members as those accused of prohibited religious activities have at times been imprisoned or sentenced to labor camps.

The Church maintains a tiny presence in mainland China and is poorly prepared at present to establish a presence among Tibetans if religious freedom restrictions are relaxed to permit open proselytism and the assignment of full-time missionaries. If any improvements in religious freedom conditions occur, the Church will most likely concentrate its resources to saturate the most populous cities throughout mainland China. The sheer geographic size and enormous population of China would totally overwhelm the Church at present. Even if the Church were to hypothetically allocate all of its approximately 88,000 missionaries and 418 missions to service only mainland China, the average mission would include 3.27 million people within its boundaries. To contrast, the average mission in the United States services 2.60 million people.

There are no feasible prospects for the Church to reach Tibetan peoples in India or Nepal. The Church maintains a minimal presence in Nepal limited to a single branch in Kathmandu where no proselytizing, full-time missionaries are assigned. The Church in India operates an extremely limited presence restricted to approximately one dozen major cities primarily in southern areas of the country. Thus, the relatively tiny Tibetan population in either nation is distant from the nearest LDS congregations. The Church in South Asia remains in its infancy and has yet to establish a presence among the largest ethnolinguistic groups, let alone small ethnolinguistic minorities in these nations such as Tibetans.

The remote location of Tibet from the nearest LDS missions and "centers of strength" may delay outreach for many years or decades. The Church has often postponed outreach to locations distant from mission headquarters due to challenges for church leaders to regularly visit and supervise church activities. This challenge with LDS centralization of administration may pose serious challenge for future missionary outreach even if concerns with religious freedom and strong ethnoreligious ties to Buddhism are overcome.

## Comparative Growth

The LDS Church appears to maintain no noticeable presence among indigenous ethnic minority groups within mainland China. The Hmong (Miao) people are the only indigenous ethnic minority people who have received specialized LDS outreach. However, essentially all of these Hmong populations were resettled to the United States from Laos and Thailand rather than mainland China.

All missionary-focused Christian denominations with a worldwide presence report extremely few, if any, adherents among Tibetans. Evangelicals note essentially no presence among Tibetans.<sup>[12]</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses do not report any information on their activities, membership, or congregations in mainland China. There do not appear to be any Tibetan-speaking Witness congregations worldwide.<sup>[13]</sup> Witnesses have translated basic proselytism materials into Tibetan that can be downloaded online.<sup>[14]</sup> The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has over 400,000 members and thousands of congregations in mainland China. However, there does not appear to be an Adventist presence among Tibetans in China or elsewhere.

## Limitations

The Church does not publish any statistical data on language usage among church membership for languages not within the top 10 languages spoken by church membership. It is unclear how many Tibetans have joined the Church worldwide. No reports were available from Tibetan or mainland Chinese Latter-day Saints. The Church does not publish membership or congregational statistics for mainland China due to the Church's sensitive presence among Chinese nationals.

## Future Prospects

Tibetans number among the most challenging peoples for the LDS Church to reach due to remote location, strong ethnoreligious ties to Buddhism, religious freedom restrictions in mainland China, the lack of an LDS community among Tibetans, no LDS materials available in Tibetan languages, comparatively small populations spread over vast geographical areas, and political conflict in Tibet. The establishment of an LDS presence in Lhasa will likely be vital for any progress to occur in laying the groundwork for future LDS missionary activity within the Tibetan homelands. However, current government prohibitions on missionary activity render any prospective outreach improbable for many years or decades to come.

[1] "People Cluster: Tibetan," Joshua Project, retrieved 15 July 2015. <http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/304>

[2] "Tibetan, Amdo," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 15 July 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/adx/18>

[3] "Tibetan, Central," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 15 July 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/bod/18>

[4] "Tibetan, Khams," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 15 July 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/khg/18>

[5] "Tibetans," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 15 July 2015.  
<http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Brazil-to-Congo-Republic-of/Tibetans.html>

[6] "Tibetans," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 15 July 2015.  
<http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Brazil-to-Congo-Republic-of/Tibetans.html>

[7] "China - Tibet," International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 15 July 2015.  
[http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dynamic\\_load\\_id=222125&year=2013](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dynamic_load_id=222125&year=2013)

[8] "China - Tibet," International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 15 July 2015.  
[http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dynamic\\_load\\_id=222125&year=2013](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dynamic_load_id=222125&year=2013)

[9] "Central Bodish," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 15 July 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/central-bodish-0>

[10] <http://indybooks.blogspot.com/2007/08/language-material-listings-now.html>

[11] "China: Xizang," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de), retrieved 15 July 2015. <http://www.citypopulation.de/China-Xizang.html>

[12] "People Cluster: Tibetan," Joshua Project, retrieved 15 July 2015. <http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/304>

[13] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 15 July 2015. [https://www.jw.org/apps/E\\_FsPnZGTZNCf](https://www.jw.org/apps/E_FsPnZGTZNCf)

[14] "Featured Items," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 15 July 2015. <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/?contentLanguageFilter=bo>