

Rough Around the Edges: Christianity along the Sino-North Korean Border

by Jared Ward

There is little debate that religion in China remains a socially and politically charged issue. Nowhere is this truer than amongst ethnic minority borderland populations in the PRC. In volatile areas such as Tibet, Xinjiang and, though less publicized, the Sino-North Korean border, Beijing's increased focus on security has placed many religious groups under the microscope.

While this essay focuses on recent efforts by the Chinese Communist Party to consolidate the frontiers by cracking down on disparate religious groups, the CCP's efforts are hardly altogether new. According to the human rights group [Dui Hua](#), as early as 2002, a Chinese official voiced a fear that Yanbian was a potential place for splittist efforts, along with Xinjiang and Tibet. He warned officials to be mindful of illegal proselytizing and potential Christian separatists.

Finally, advocates for North Korean refugees -- and the scholars and journalists who weave around them -- too often see Chinese crackdowns as a uniquely Korean issue or as reflective of China's instrumentalist need to put pressure on North Korea. Surely there are unique dynamics at play that would merit such a view. However, just as often, it appears that tightening controls in the Sino-Korean border region are the result of broader CCP policy goals in the related areas of security, management of religion, and "harmonization" of nationality (ethnic minority) groups. Yanbian is not so different from other borderland regions in this regard, and the broader national debate on religion in the borderlands needs to be taken into account.



Image via DossierTibet

Religion on the Frontier | While the CCP problems in Tibet are rarely considered as having an impact on China's outlook on the North Korean border region, in fact they do. As early as the 1950s, the CCP was bringing Tibetan officials to Yanbian to study, and today, Party officials in Yanbian attend work

conferences on the meaning of the Tibet problem.

The extensive Western media coverage of the self-immolation of dozens of (mostly young) monks in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and in the huge swathes of ethnographic Tibetan areas in the PRC has resulted in a ratcheting-up of military and police pressure on Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. Predictably, the Chinese news media has followed suit; [The Global Times](#) has used the self-immolation incidents as support in their on-going campaign decrying Tibet's leader in exile, the Dalai Lama, as a separatist intent on inciting violence in Tibet in the pursuit of restoring his own theocratic rule. While critiques of Buddhism as a religious practice per se are rare, state media discussion of the need for monks to heighten their own patriotic vigilance makes the message rather clear. The broader issue is even more sharply drawn in the northwest.

In Xinjiang, Islamic Uighurs have described a tightening of control over religion in the region, including a recent series of house searches which was prompted by the discovery and closing of a Qur'an teaching center, illegally operating as an unregistered place of religious education. Again, [The Global Times](#) weighs in from its publication bunker in Beijing, saying the raids on houses had occurred only to target illegal activities such as Qur'an teaching and religious education to minors. It adds that although religious education for minors isn't illegal in China broadly, "special circumstances" surrounding Xinjiang have the law applied differently.[\[1\]](#)

In both Tibet and Xinjiang there is a similar directive at work where religion amongst ethnic populations is viewed suspiciously and as potentially dangerous both socially and politically. Similarly, in Yanbian, Christianity amongst ethnic Koreans has magnified this already present suspicion toward the intentions of groups with cultural and linguistic ties extending past China's borders. However, unlike Tibet and Xinjiang, the Korean Christians in Yanbian face pressure from each side of the border, and thus stand as a friendless third party wedged between two avowed atheist governments. It would seem that each country sharing the border, both nominally atheist, presents a united front against religious groups in the area. However, China's growing tolerance of Christianity, missionaries and a general opening to foreigners means if there were a possible loser in an expanding religious presence in the region, it would be North Korea.



Catholic Church in Dandong | Image via the one and only Kernbeisser

Korean Christians | In Yanbian, Protestant Christians are at the lead in operating at the Sino-North Korean border, providing a channel for North Korean defectors on the run. According to [Dong-A Ilbo](#), churches making up this network are being targeted by Chinese public officials in light of shifting leadership in both China and the DPRK; assuring stability during the transition. Dong-A-Ilbo's above article says this has led to 400-500 missionaries being deported in recent months. The deportation of missionaries is not a new phenomenon in the region, but it does appear to be accelerated. Dating back to 2008, the US State Department [reported](#) the closure of churches in Yanbian with a focus on rooting out any religious organization with foreign contacts, primarily South Korean or American.

While Christians in Yanbian seem to be at the focus of most media attention to the issue, Dandong is also home to a bustling Christian community which merits attention. According to statistics provided by the Christian group [Asia Harvest](#), there are nearly 8,000 Christians who attend public worship weekly, the same

report says there are 16,000 practicing in house churches. According to one [report](#), there are approximately 600,000 Christians in Liaoning Province as a whole.

However, it is the collective efforts of groups, not individual religious practitioners that are seen as most troublesome by the CCP and DPRK. Amongst the active players on the border are groups such as Helping Hands Korea, a Christian based group founded in South Korea in 1999. Their [website](#) lists their activities as providing foster homes for North Korean children whose mothers have been repatriated, assisting refugees make their way to the so-called “underground railroad” and sending food inside North Korea. Another, [Durihana](#), a mission founded by Chun Ki-Won, a pastor arrested in 2002 on his way to Mongolia with North Korean defectors, has been active in getting refugees to neighboring countries such as Mongolia and Vietnam. Groups such as these have formed an informal network of underground churches that work to move refugees from North Korea to China and to a third country such as South Korea or Mongolia.

Policy has been implemented in the region that proactively tries to gain intelligence on the activities of these groups in order to deter defector traffic that poses problems for both countries. There have been some reports of fake churches being created by North Korean state agents to become part of the network, or North Korean agents behaving as refugees to receive aid from missionary groups and subsequently an understanding of their inner-workings (Prison Without Bars, 49). Amid the overall astonishment at the bizarreness of the DPRK’s celebratory treatment of “returned refugee” Pak Song-juk, it might be added that the state intelligence service were surely quite interested in the specific names of those who had helped her escape into China and South Korea.

The increased pressure has led to mysterious deaths and assassination attempts seemingly from a cold-war spy movie. On May 30th, 2012 [Kang Ho-Bin](#), a South Korean Protestant Pastor was killed in a head-on car crash at 2 PM in the afternoon in Dandong on his way to church. The accident, about which Chinese officials have remained mum, comes after an assassination attempt years earlier on him when he was pricked with a poison-filled needle. Kang Ho-Bin’s death is not the first case of a missionary in the area dying under suspicious circumstances. In 2011, [Barbara Demick](#) reported for the *LA Times* a South Korean missionary in Dandong died while waiting for a taxi; some speculated that poison was the cause of death.

Conclusion | Muslims in Xinjiang and the Buddhists of Tibet look toward their non-Chinese borders and see religious and cultural similarities. However, the Christians in Yanbian have no such luxury. They are juxtaposed between and within two Asian powers; the PRC and DPRK, each united in their offensive campaign at limiting the effectiveness of such groups. Arrayed within and against this force, collective Christian groups such as Helping Hands Korea in Yanbian are often overtly social and even global in their objectives, acting as agents

operating between South Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam and others. As the on-going saga between the PRC and DPRK unfolds before the eyes of the international community, the efforts of religious groups operating in border regions, and the CCP efforts to stem the tide, promises to exert influence at the margins and beyond.

Further Readings:

- [A Prison Without Bars: Refugee and Defector Testimonies of Severe Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. March, 2008.](#)
- [Hawk, David. "Thank you Father Kim Il Sung": Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion in North Korea. November 2005.](#)

[1] This leads to a question of what criteria is being used by the CCP to deem which religious practice is dangerous and which is not. The answer, it seems, is not so much a Marxist repudiation of religion, but selectivity in which “opiate of the masses” is best for public consumption. In each case, religion represents a dialogue of authority outside the state sponsored one, a competing ideology that in many ways functions as a social-political institution, often with competing interests.

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