

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

RESPONSE

Can you provide any information on the group Young Sang Gyo?

No information was found on a sect in Korea called *Young Sang Gyo*, but information was found on a sect called the *Youngsang* or *Yongsaeng* (meaning “Everlasting Life”) Church. This group attracted publicity in October 1998 when several of its members, including the leader, apparently committed group suicide. No reports on the sect have been found since that time, but the material below does indicate that there are many similar “doomsday” groups in Korea.

An item on the group from the Metareligion website, which collects information on cults around the world, states:

Youngsang (“Everlasting Life”) Church

On October 5, 1998, six doomsday cult members and their leader were found burned to death in a mini-van in a suspected self-immolation ritual. The dead cultist were identified as members of the Youngsang (everlasting life) Church, one of the dozens of doomsday cults active in South Korea.

Police said the doomsday cult leader, Woo Jong-min, 57, left his home in Seoul in July with six followers, saying that they were embarking on an everlasting journey. Jong-min taught his followers that when they die, they will live a new, happy life in heaven. The news shocked South Koreans, most of whom had returned to their home towns to celebrate Chusok, a traditional lunar holiday. It is not known whether the date was a significant one for the cult members (‘Youngsang (“Everlasting Life”) Church’ (undated), Metareligion website, http://www.metareligion.com/New_religious_groups/Groups/New_Age/youngsang.htm – Accessed 7 July 2005 – Attachment 1).

Other reports from the time provide further information about the group.

A *Korea Times* report states that the group was reported to have “set out on a journey of martyrs”, according to family members they had contacted. The dead were presumed to be the pastor, Woo Jong-min, his wife, son and four other followers (‘Seven religious cult members commit suicide’ 1998, *Korea Times*, 6 October – Attachment 2).

A *Korea Herald* report indicates that the group suicide by burning was thought by police to be “a religious rite to obtain ever-lasting life in heaven”. Police were “also investigating the possibility that they were murdered” (‘Suspected cult members commit suicide’ 1998, *The Korea Herald*, 7 October – Attachment 3).

A *South China Morning Post* report states that the reason the police were not ruling out murder was that “the cult was dogged with fraud claims and reports many members had disappeared”. This report also contains useful background information on *Yongsang* and other cults:

The Korean National Council of Churches estimates some 300,000 follow more than 100 Korean cults.

While cults promise eternal bliss, many have decidedly blemished records. One cult leader was jailed after pocketing more than US\$1 million...donated by followers in exchange for a place among the “chosen few”.

Another sect was accused of murdering members who challenged its teaching and using members as slave labour.

The Everlasting Life sect once had thousands of followers, but its popularity waned after leader Woo suggested the faithful could achieve god-like status (Larkin, J. 1998, ‘Murder suspicion in macabre cult deaths’, *South China Morning Post*, 8 October – Attachment 4).

A 1999 article from *Agence France Presse* discusses the rise of “doomsday” sects in Korea, including *Yongsaeng*:

Cults in South Korea are notorious for their involvement in swindling scandals, sexual abuse charges, dismemberment of their victims, slave labor, and extortion of money. Despite these alarming practices, cults are making a comeback in South Korea. Faith in doomsday sects waned when the most controversial among them, the *Yongsaeng* (Everlasting Life) cult, was disbanded in 1994 on charges of swindling their followers.

This year, however, cult experts fear predictors of Armageddon are making a comeback. According to many estimations, aided by the economic crisis in their country, a rash of new cults continue to spring up while older ones revive. Approximately 100 cult leaders currently claim to be gods or messiahs. “They are flourishing again by taking advantage of the country’s economic crisis,” warned Tak Ji-Won, 31, who opened a hot-line service in 1994 after his father, a prominent anti-cult activist, was killed by cult members. “My office is busy again with calls by the victims of doomsday sects which have recruited followers with a sermon that the end of the world is imminent,” said Ji-Won according to *Agence France Presse* [January 14, 1999].

Ji-Won estimates the number of “dangerous” doomsday sect members awaiting the end of the world this year is climbing into the thousands. Estimates of cult membership in Korea alone, provided by the Korean National Council of Churches in 1997, was 200,000 in 1997. “I believe the number is now much higher as many cults are gaining power through clandestine door-to-door propagation. I’m not concerned about figures, but about possible mass suicide. Some violent sect members regard suicide as martyrdom to be free from sin. They die to find an eternal life in heaven, misguided by their leaders,” Ji-Won concluded, as reported by *Agence France Presse*.

He pointed out that tragic incidents -- such as a suicide that took place last October when seven members of a Bible-based cult burned themselves to death in a van -- actually increase cult membership. That suicide, combined with doomsday references to the decline of the local and national economy, sparked intensive recruiting efforts among hundreds of fringe religions and messianic cults, who successfully broadened their influence and increased their membership ('Cults in South Korea on the rise' 1999, *Agence France Press*, 14 January, Factnet website, http://www.factnet.org/headlines/korean_cults.htm?factnet – Accessed 7 July 2005 – Attachment 5).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Google search engine

UNHCR *REFWORLD* UNHCR Refugee Information Online

http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_coun.htm

Databases:

Public	<i>FACTIVA</i>	Reuters Business Briefing
DIMIA	<i>BACIS</i>	Country Information
	<i>REFINFO</i>	IRBDC Research Responses (Canada)
RRT	<i>ISYS</i>	RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State <i>Country Reports on Human Rights Practices</i> .
RRT Library	<i>FIRST</i>	RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. 'Youngsang ("Everlasting Life") Church' (undated), Metareligion website, http://www.meta-religion.com/new_religious_groups/groups/new_age/youngsang.htm – Accessed 7 July 2005
2. 'Seven religious cult members commit suicide' 1998, *Korea Times*, 6 October (FACTIVA).
3. 'Suspected cult members commit suicide' 1998, *The Korea Herald*, 7 October (FACTIVA).
4. Larkin, J. 1998, 'Murder suspicion in macabre cult deaths', *South China Morning Post*, 8 October (FACTIVA)
5. 'Cults in South Korea on the rise' 1999, *Agence France Press*, 14 January, Factnet website, http://www.factnet.org/headlines/korean_cults.htm?FACTNet – Accessed 7 July 2005