

Tibetan

Although the Tibetans strongly maintain they are one people and are opposed to any attempts to classify them as separate groups, the Tibetan nationality clearly divides into numerous linguistic components.

Identity

The Boyu Tibetans are a distinct ethnolinguistic people group. As one visitor remarked, "Their language and costume is now very different from Tibetans elsewhere." During festivals, Boyu women wear special dress, unique among all Tibetan peoples. "A breastplate is made of around five to six thousand coral beads, and an enormous silver medallion at waist level - known as Meilong . . . The body of the medallion is scattered with motifs executed in colored enamels, including Tibetan Buddhist symbols and talismans to ward off evil spirits." The Boyu are ethnolinguistically distinct from other Tibetans in the area.

The Gtsang ("Git-zung") Tibetans, also known as Xigatse Tibetan, Xigatze, Gyantse, Sagya, and Tsang, are part of the Tibetan nationality, but they speak a language only partly intelligible with other Tibetan varieties. Captain O'Conner, the British trade agent at Gyantse in the early 1900s, described the Gtsang Tibetans as "superstitious indeed to the last degree, but devoid of any deep-rooted religious convictions or heart-searchings, oppressed by the most monstrous growth of monasticism and priest-craft which the world has ever seen.&"

The inhabitants of the Nghari region, the Nghari are also known as the *Chang Tang* (Northern Plain) Tibetans. Although they are ethnically Tibetan, they speak a language far removed from other Tibetan varieties. Their lifestyles have changed little over the last thousand years and are still devoid of any technology or machinery.

The Zhongdian, pronounced "Jong-dee-an," are also called the Zang, Khampa, Chung-tien Tibetan, Chongtien, and Rgyalathang. The Zhongdian Tibetans wear a different traditional dress from all other Tibetans. Zhongdian women prefer to wear a cone-shaped headdress which they wrap inside a scarf.

The Tibetans of Zhugqu are counted as part of the Tibetan nationality, but along with several other groups in southern Gansu - such as the Baima and the Boyu Tibetans - they are a specific ethnolinguistic group with their own language and customs.

Few have heard of the existence of the Jone ("Joe-nee") Tibetans. . . . Their name was previously spelled *Choni*, and they still appear in many publications by that name. Although they are now officially considered part of the Tibetan nationality, the Jone Tibetans speak their own language and possess their own ethnic and historical identity. The name *Jone* may be of Tibetan origin, meaning *Jo* "pine trees" and *nyi* "two."

The language and many customs of the Deqen Tibetans are distinct from other Tibetan peoples. One Chinese scholar was "surprised to find that the life and customs of the people of the Deqen Prefecture differ from those of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Besides traditional Tibetan customs, they have developed quite a few of their own."

Christianity

Central Tibet has long been one of the greatest challenges for Christianity. . . . Today there are just one or two small Tibetan fellowships in Central Tibet. Would-be missionaries face opposition from Buddhist monks, the Chinese authorities, and pro-Tibet foreigners living in Tibet.

The Tibetans have had a New Testament since 1885, portions of Scripture since 1862, and a Tibetan Bible since 1948. The Jesus film and Christian Broadcasting is available (FEBC) to Central Tibetans.

There are no known Christians among the Boyu Tibetans today, although the Christian & Missionary Alliance worked in nearby Min Xian prior to 1949. The missionaries, who first arrived in 1889, included William Christie, W. W. Simpson, Robert Ekvall, Calvin Snyder, and William Ruhl.

Jesuit missionary Antonio de Andrade arrived in the Gtsang region of Tibet from India in 1624 by disguising himself as a Hindu pilgrim, "Andrade outwitted hostile local officials, made his way north to the Himalayas, endured altitude sickness and snow blindness, fought his way over a 17,900-foot pass into Tibet, and finally reached Tsaparang. . . . There he impressed the king and queen with his piety, and they gave him permission to return, establish a mission, and preach the Gospel." A revolution in Tsaparang in 1635 abruptly ended the Jesuit mission. Today 92% of Gtsang Tibetans have never heard the gospel, 7% have been evangelized but have not become Christians, and only 1% are adherents to any form of Christianity.

The first recorded Nghari Tibetan church was built by Jesuit missionaries in Lhasa in 1726. Twenty-seven baptized converts and 60 inquirers attended the church. "At the end of April, 1742, a new convert named Pu Tsering publicly refused to bow before the Dalai Lama. This threw the town into an uproar. . . . Twelve of the Christians were flogged with 20 lashes each. The missionaries fled to Nepal, but their church was attacked by a mob who destroyed everything except the church bell. . . . Today there are no known Christians among the Nghari Tibetans, and only 1% [have heard the gospel.]

French Catholic missionaries commenced work among the Zhongdian Tibetans in the late 1800s. Today, a large French-style cathedral still stands at Tchronteu, near Weixi. "The purpose of the monks of Saint Bernard was to minister to all in need who traveled 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." A Catholic priest is responsible for 9,500 Tibetan believers in his area. Of these, about 7,500 belong to the Deqen Tibetan group and 2,000 to the Zhongdian Tibetans. Of the Zhongdian Tibetans, 70% have never heard the gospel and 26% have been evangelized but have not become Christians.

The Zhugqu Tibetans have never been reached with the gospel. Few members of this group have any awareness of the existence of Christianity. While 1% of Zhugqu Tibetans have been evangelized, there are no Christian communities in the region, and no record exists of any missionary activity among them at any stage throughout their long history.

A 1922 mission report stated, "The prince of Choni (Jone) alone governs 48 clans, and we can easily travel among these clans, as the prince is friendly and would protect us. . . . If we had the workers to employ we would press toward the west from the line we are now occupying." Today there are about 200 Jone Tibetan believers in Lintan County, to the northwest of Jone County. A church was constructed in 1997—the first ethnic

Tibetan fellowship in Gansu Province. "One woman sold her hair, and another family sold their TV to help build the new church."

Three Deqen Tibetan villages numbering 600 people, located on the Tibetan side of the border, are Catholic. Another 700 Tibetans meet in a large Catholic church in Yanjing. The area was first converted by workers with the Paris Foreign Missionary Society in the late 1800s. The mission reached out in love to people all over the Tibetan world. In 1905 Tibetan lamas killed all of the French missionaries and the head of Father Dubernard was hung on the monastery gate. The Chinese authorities responded by demolishing . . . several Tibetan temples in the region.

Around the same time, emissaries of the Dalai Lama were dispatched to a Christian village near Yanjing to order the people to renounce Christianity. They shot several Christian families in a field that is called the "Field of Blood" to this day. Instead of intimidating the believers, this cruel act solidified their faith and helped them to renounce Buddhism. It has remained Christian ever since. By 1922 there were a reported 1,610 Tibetan Catholic converts in the area. The Pentecostal Missionary Union commenced work in Deqen in 1912 but gained few converts. In recent years Lisu evangelists have been sent to the Deqen Tibetans and have disciplined hundreds of Tibetans in the ways of Christ. According to a Tibetan priest, Lu Rend, there are 6,500 Tibetan Catholics in Southeast Tibet and at least a further 3,000 in neighboring areas of Yunnan Province.

Of the Deqen community, 66% have never heard the gospel, 26% have been evangelized but have not become Christians, and 8% are adherents to any form of Christianity.

Religion

The Buddhist religion is the life-blood of the Central Tibetan people. It was placed over the powerful Tibetan religion of Bon, which is a mixture of magic, divination, demon worship, and sacrifices. The patron saint of Tibet is Chenrezig, whose image has up to 11 heads and from 2 to 1,000 arms.

The religion of the Boyu Tibetans is Polytheism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Animism. During the Flower-Gathering Festival, the Boyu worship *Lianzhi*, the goddess of flowers. One of their legends relates that the Boyu lived in abject poverty in ancient times. Touched by their misery, "the gods eventually took pity and sent a young girl, Lianzhi, from heaven to teach them how to reclaim land and grow crops, how to spin and weave cloth. . . This went on until one year . . . she went into the mountains to gather flowers . . . and never came back. . . The people made offerings to her and named her the *Goddess of Flowers*."

The Gtsang region is home to several Buddhist sects, including the *Nyingmapa* (Ancient), *Kagyupa* (Oral Transmission), and *Sakya* (Gray Earth) schools. After the death of the Panchen Lama in 1989, the Chinese filled his position with their own choice of successor. In May 1995 the exiled Dalai Lama announced a new Panchen Lama who was immediately rejected by the Chinese. Monks at the Tashilhunpo Monastery and a number of lay Tibetans rioted in protest. Eighty monks were interrogated by the police, and the city of Xigatse was sealed off for several days. Tensions have remained high since then.

Buddhism and Shamanism are the religions of the Nghari Tibetans. Immersion in one of two holy lakes south of Mount Kailas is thought to release people from their sins for a lifetime. Pilgrims who trek to the top of the 5,640-meter-high (18,500 ft.) Dolma Pass are believed to be born again in the process. Folk Tibetans believe in a hell divided into eight hot and eight cold levels. Sinners are made to suffer until they have worked off their demerits.

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

Zhugqu Tibetans believe in polytheism, Buddhism, Animism, and Bon. Their pre-Buddhist belief of Bon includes the belief that mountains are holy. They believe powerful demons live inside the highest mountains. "They pray to the mountain god to make their hopes and wishes come true: peace, security, thriving livestock and abundant harvests." There are different legends explaining the origin of the Arrow-Planting Festival. One states that there was a "certain man of dignity and fame who, after he died, was found by the gods to be too bad for heaven but too good for hell. Accordingly, he stayed on the earth, creating a great deal of mischief and disturbing the peoples' peace. Eventually a Living Buddha took pity on him and settled him on the mountain, directing him to give up evil and devote himself to good."

Most Jone Tibetans are Buddhists. Jone formerly contained a huge monastery, "containing 172 buildings and 3,800 monks at its zenith."

Although most Deqen Tibetans are Buddhists, this group also has the largest number of professing Christians among any Tibetan group in the world.

Location

The Boyu Tibetans live in the large Boyu Village in Zhugqu County. Zhugqu is within the Gaanan Prefecture in . . . Gansu Province. They live atop a 3,000-meter-high (9,840 ft.) mountain. "Boyu is located at the heart of a complex of high peaks and deep ravines, and the paths along which they climb lead through magnificent scenery . . . dotted with all kinds of flowers: azaleas, camellias, peonies, wolf-berries.

Central Tibetans live in the Tibet Autonomous Region, China, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Taiwan, Switzerland, USA, Norway, France, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Approximately 740,000 speakers of Central Tibetan live in the city of Lhasa and surrounding counties in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Tourists to Lhasa often find the city falls short of the mystique they desire, although it has certainly improved since Thomas Manning's description in the early 1800s: "There is nothing striking, nothing pleasing in its appearance. The habitations are begrimed with smut and dirt. The avenues are full of dogs, some growling and gnawing bits of hide which lie about in profusion, and emit a charnel-house smell; others limping and looking livid; others ulcerated; others starving and dying, and pecked at by the ravens; some dead and preyed upon. In short, everything seems mean and gloomy."

Almost 600,000 Tibetans belong to the Gtsang Tibetan dialect group. They are located in a wide geographical area, stretching east to west over roughly the entire length of the Tibet-Nepal border. Gtsang is spoken in the cities of Xigaze and Gyantse, the second and fourth largest cities in Tibet. The main attraction of Gyantse is the immense pagoda, or *Kumbun*, built by Raptan Kunsang Phapa (1389-1442).

Nghari Tibetans occupy W Tibet; the Nghari Prefecture: Rutog, Gartok, Zamda, Burang, Coqen, and Gerze; and a few speakers also live in Xigaze Prefecture.

Approximately 75,000 linguistically distinct Zhongdian Tibetans inhabit villages in Zhongdian, Weixi, and Lijiang counties in the northern part of Yunnan Province. The extent of their territory seems to extend to the Hengduan Pass between the towns of Zhongdian and Deqen located farther to the north. Beyond the pass the dialect changes markedly. *Hengduan* literally means "cut off vertically." In autumn, the Zhongdian Plateau abounds with colorful flowers. "Azaleas in full bloom on the sheep pastures provide a cheering contrast while, higher up, maple saplings signal in a

blaze of reds and oranges." A few Zhongdian Tibetan families have reportedly migrated to Switzerland.

More than 38,000 Zhugqu Tibetans live in Zhugqu County, in the Gaanan Prefecture of Gansu Province. They are the most easterly of all Tibetan peoples in China. The Bai Long (White Dragon) River flows through mountainous Zhugqu County.

Approximately 100,000 speakers of the Jone Tibetan language inhabit Jone County in the southwestern part of Gansu Province. A small number of Jone Tibetans live in the adjacent parts of northern Sichuan. The To River flows through Jone County. One traveler described the location: "Nowhere else [in Gansu] are there such forests, and the scenery is unsurpassed."

Much confusion surrounds the classification and population of the Deqen Tibetans, whom some researchers refer to as Atuence. Atuence is the old name for the Tibetan town of Deqen in northern Yunnan Province. There are nine villages of Deqen Tibetans in the northernmost tip of Myanmar. [back](#)

Language

The Boyu arrived in Gaanan at a different time from other Tibetan groups presently in the prefecture, bringing with them their own distinct language. The Boyu language may be from the Qiangic branch of Tibeto-Burman.

Central Tibetan - which contains five dialects - "is more commonly known as central Bus (transliterated from *U*, the spoken version of the same word)... Educated people from other areas of Tibet traditionally retained their local variety and learned the literary variety of Central Tibetan."

Gtsang Tibetan - which has 19 dialects - is a variety of Central Tibetan. It is largely intelligible with Lhasa and Ngahri Tibetan. Despite their differences in speech, all Tibetans use the same Sanskrit-based orthography. In the seventh century, King Songtsen Gampo sent his minister, Thonmi Sambhota, with a delegation to India where he produced the script.

The Nghari Tibetan language group extends into northwestern Nepal. It has seven dialects, named after their principal towns of habitation. The Tibetan alphabet consists of 30 consonants and four vowels, plus six symbols used for Sanskrit words.

Researchers who have traveled into Tibetan areas of northern Yunnan Province report that the dialect variation between Zhongdian and Deqen is different enough to seriously affect mutual intelligibility between Tibetans from the two areas. Zhongdian Tibetan, which is related to the Khampa Tibetan group, has experienced much greater exposure to Chinese than the Deqen Tibetan language.

The Zhugqu language is a form of Khampa Tibetan, although it has great differences with other Khampa varieties farther to the south. The Zhugqu Tibetans cannot understand the speech of their neighbors, the Jone Tibetans, even though both are reported to be Khampa languages.

The Jone language is related to Khampa Tibetan. Possible dialects or related languages in the area include Dpari, Rebkong, Wayen, and Horke.

Different linguists over a 60-year period have classified the Deqen, or Atuence, language in different ways. It has been described as "an ancient nomad dialect of Tibetan," "Central Bodish," and "Central Tibetan." The authoritative Language Atlas of China lists it as the Southern Kham variety of Tibetan.

History

The cradle of Tibetan civilization is the Yarlung Valley area, about 80 kilometers (49 mi.) southeast of Lhasa. There, according to tradition, the union of a monkey and a she-devil created the Tibetan race. Around AD 600 the warrior-king of Yarlung, Namri Gampo, unified the clans of Tibet. He acquired a princess from Nepal and another one from China to be his wives. Under the persuasion of these two women, he combined the ancient Tibetan religion of Bon with Buddhist teachings.

The Boyu women's special costume "is thought to be associated in some way with the army of Tubo, the Tibetan kingdom which was founded by Songtsen Gampo in 629 and lasted for around two hundred years.... Legend has it that the forebears of the Boyu Tibetans were soldiers from the hinterland of Tibet who were sent to guard the border areas. However, they began to farm the land and eventually decided to settle there."

Written records of Central Tibetan history have survived from the seventh century AD, but it is known that nomadic tribes roamed Tibet as early as the second century BC.

Xigaze, the capital of Gtsang Tibet from 1618 to 1642, is the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, Tibet's second most powerful ruler after the Dalai Lama. In 1954 the city was nearly destroyed by floods. After putting down a revolt in 1959, the Chinese imprisoned 400 monks in the Tashilhunpo Monastery.

Western Nghari Tibet is a holy site for the followers of the four religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Bon. Every year, thousands of pilgrims flock to the sacred Mount Kailas, a 6,714-meter (22,021 ft.) peak near Tibet's border with India and Nepal. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) ten of the 13 monasteries in the region were demolished.

Local legends say the ancestors of the Zhongdian Tibetans were Qiang people who came to Zhongdian, fought and overcame the locals in battle, and eventually became assimilated into Tibetan ways. This would explain the linguistic, clothing, and cultural differences they have today with other Tibetan groups.

The Zhugqu Tibetans have a long history. A Chinese writer remarked, "Their forebears fled from the horrors of war (during the Southern Song Dynasty, 1127-1279) and eventually settled here and in surrounding areas, where they have multiplied over the generations."

Jone was the site of an independent kingdom until 1928, when Chinese General Fengyu Shang stripped the prince of his title and confiscated his land. A detailed history of the Jone appeared in a 1928 *National Geographic* article: "The prince represents the twenty-second generation, but is not of direct descent. His ancestors, a Tibetan official family, left their own country and made their way across [Sichuan] and the Min Shan Range... to the Tao River in 1404, conquering and pacifying the tribes and villages on the way. Upon informing the Imperial Court in Peking [Beijing] of their conquest of the territory for the Chinese Empire, they were made hereditary chiefs of Choni and the subjugated tribal lands. At the same time the Emperor, Yung Lo, gave them a seal and the Chinese name Yang." Today many of Jone's inhabitants are still surnamed Yang.

Formerly located in Tibet, Deqen was annexed by the Chinese in 1703 and has since been a part of Yunnan Province. Tibetans had migrated south into the region many centuries earlier.

Customs

The Flower-Gathering Festival of the Boyu is unique to this one small area. It takes place annually on the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar. "They believe if they drink the spring water on the mountain before the sun touches it... it will keep them free from disease. And if they bathe in the water, all evil will be kept from them."

For centuries the Chinese have claimed Central Tibet as an "unalienable part of China," despite Tibetans being culturally, historically, linguistically, and religiously distinct from Chinese. In the 1950s the Chinese took full control of Tibet.

The Xigaze New Year Festival of the Gtsang Tibetans is held in the first week of the 12th lunar month. Thousands of visitors have flocked to Gyantse since 1408 for the annual Horse Racing and Archery Show.

The favored kind of burial for Nghari Tibetans is wind burial. The corpse is cut into small pieces and laid out on an exposed rock for vultures and ravens to eat. In the 1980s, tourists in Lhasa secretly tried to take photographs of the ritual, an act considered a major offense by Tibetans. "An Australian tried to hide up the mountain and take telephoto pics. Whilst hopping around on the skyline, he scared the birds away - an exceptionally evil omen. The irate burial squad gave chase brandishing knives and showered him with rocks." Another group of tourists was "bombarded with rocks, chased with knives or threatened with meaty leg-bones ripped straight off the corpse."

The inhabitants of the Zhongdian area live in two-story wooden houses. Except for a few new roads and electricity lines, life has not changed much in this remote part of China.

The homes of the Zhugqu Tibetans are one story, built of mud, stone, and wood. Due to the lack of level ground, "nearly every household has a flat platform which serves many purposes. Some people, when they walk out their own door, are in fact standing on the neighbor's roof." Every year, usually in the fifth lunar month, the Zhugqu Tibetan men celebrate the Arrow-Planting Ceremony. Women are not allowed to participate. The men ride horses up to the mountaintop and plant prayer flags on the summit. "A respected elder of the tribe directs the sacrificial rites. Each in turn lays roasted flour, butter, barley and tea onto a pile of heaped-up cypress branches, which are then set alight and burned. These are offerings to the mountain god."

In the past the Jone prince was selected by rules of succession. If a prince had two sons, the elder succeeded him, and the second became the lama of the monastery. If there was only one son, he took both positions concurrently.

The extreme north of Yunnan is an isolated, mountainous region with abundant rain and snowfall. Hot springs located throughout the region help the Dequen people alleviate their winter struggles.

From *Operation China* by Paul Hattaway, Piquant, 2000. Used by permission.

Urgent Prayer Need

Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, urgently needs a [French teacher](#) to join their staff team in August. Pray that God will provide the right person to meet this need.