

History

by Bradley Mayhew, with Timeline by Tsering Shakya

YARLUNG VALLEY DYNASTY

As early myths of the origin of the Tibetan people suggest, the Yarlung Valley was the cradle of the civilisation of central Tibet. The early Yarlung kings, although glorified in legend, were probably no more than chieftains whose domains extended not much further than the Yarlung Valley (p175) itself. A reconstruction of Tibet's first fortress, Yumbulagang, can still be seen in the Yarlung Valley, and it is here that the 28th king of Tibet is said to have received Tibet's first Buddhist scriptures in the 5th century AD. According to legend, they fell on the roof of Yumbulagang.

Credible historical records regarding the Yarlung Valley dynasty date only from the time when the fledgling kingdom entered the international arena in the 6th century. By this time the Yarlung kings, through conquest and alliances, had made significant headway in unifying much of central Tibet. Namri Songtsen (c 570–619), the 32nd Tibetan king, continued this trend and extended Tibetan influence into inner Asia, defeating the Qiang tribes on China's borders. But the true flowering of Tibet as an important regional power came about with the accession to rule of Namri Songtsen's son, Songtsen Gampo (r 630–49).

Under Songtsen Gampo, central Tibet entered a new era. Tibetan expansion continued unabated. The armies of Tibet ranged as far afield as northern India and emerged as a threat to the Tang dynasty in China. Both Nepal and China reacted to the Tibetan incursions by reluctantly agreeing to alliances through marriage. Princess Wencheng, Songtsen Gampo's Chinese bride, and Princess Bhrikuti, his Nepali bride, became important historical figures for the Tibetans, as it was through their influence that Buddhism first gained royal patronage and a foothold on the Tibetan plateau.

Contact with the Chinese led to the introduction of the sciences of astronomy and medicine, and a Tibetan script was developed from Indian sources. It was used in the first translations of Buddhist scriptures, in drafting a code of law and in writing the first histories of Tibet.

For two centuries after the reign of Songtsen Gampo, Tibet continued to grow in power and influence. By the time of King Trisong Detsen's reign (r 755–97), Tibetan influence extended over Turkestan, northern Pakistan, Nepal and India. In China, Tibetan armies conquered Gansu and Sichuan, and controlled the great Buddhist cave complex of Dunhuang.

A Sino-Tibetan treaty was signed in 822 during the reign of King Tritsug Detsen Ralpachen (r 817–36). It was immortalised in stone on three steles: one in Lhasa, outside the Jokhang; one in the Chinese capital of Chang'an; and one on the border of Tibet and China. Only the Lhasa stele still stands (see p102).

Neolithic artefacts discovered in Karo village are displayed in the Tibet Museum in Lhasa (p116).

TIMELINE

28, 000 BC

The Tibetan plateau is covered in ice. It's cold. Very cold. But there are people are living there. Tools, stone blades and hunting instruments are in use in Chupsang, 85km from Lhasa.

300 BC

Throughout the plateau people are building stone dwellings and fine potteries; petroglyphs indicate that Buddhism may have started to spread by this time.

c 600

Nyatri Tsenpo, the first king of Tibet, founds the Yarlung dynasty and unifies the people and the land; according to legend he is responsible for the first building in Tibet.

ORIGINS OF THE TIBETAN PEOPLE *Tsering Shakya*

The origins of the Tibetan people are not clearly known. Today Chinese historians claim that there was a westward migration and the Tibetan people originally migrated from the present-day areas of Qinghai-Gansu plains and were descended from people known as Qiang. Although there is evidence of westward migration, it is not possible to trace a single origin of the Tibetan people. Modern genetic studies may be able to show different traces and complex ties with people from the neighbouring areas. The settlement of Tibetan people in Western Tibet and areas of Ladakh shows other connections with Central Asia. Matthew Kapstein, one of the leading Western Tibetologists writes, 'the people of Tibetan plateau became Tibetan primarily owing to cultural developments during the past two millennia, rather than to common genetic origins'.

The Tibetan people have mythic stories of their origin and, according to legend, the earth was covered in a vast sea and eventually the water receded and land appeared in the present-day Tsetang area in central Tibet. A monkey and an ogress first inhabited the land and were later identified as the emanations of Avalokiteshvara (the Buddha of Compassion) and the goddess Tara. The first people were descendants of the union between the monkey and ogress (see p173). The children of the monkey and ogress gave rise to the Tibetan people and as the number of children increased, the people evolved into six families known as Se, Mu, Dong, Tong, Wra and Dru. They became the six clans of the Tibetan people.

Signatories to the treaty swore that '... the whole region to the east... being the country of Great China and the whole region to the west being assuredly that of the country of Great Tibet, from either side of that frontier there shall be no warfare, no hostile invasions, and no seizure of territory...'

Songtsen Gampo went as far as passing a law making it illegal *not* to be a Buddhist.

The Sino-Tibetan treaty heralds an era in which 'Tibetans shall be happy in Tibet and Chinese shall be happy in China'.

INTRODUCTION OF BUDDHISM

By the time Buddhism first arrived in Tibet during the reign of Songtsen Gampo, it had already flourished for around 1100 years and had become the principal faith of all Tibet's neighbouring countries. But it was slow to take hold in Tibet.

Early missionaries, such as Shantarakshita from the Indian Buddhist centre of Nalanda (in modern-day Bihar), faced great hostility from the Bön-dominated court. The influence of Songtsen Gampo's Chinese and Nepali wives was almost certainly limited to the royal court, and priests of the time were probably Indian and Chinese, not Tibetan.

It was not until King Trisong Detsen's reign that Buddhism began to take root. Trisong Detsen was responsible for founding Samye Monastery (p168), the first institution to carry out the systematic translation of Buddhist scriptures and the training of Tibetan monks.

Contention over the path that Buddhism was to take in Tibet culminated in the Great Debate of Samye, in which King Trisong Detsen is said to have

adjudicated in favour of Indian teachers who advocated a gradual approach to enlightenment, founded in scholastic study and moral precepts. There was, however, much opposition to this institutionalised, clerical Buddhism, largely from supporters of the Bön faith. The next Tibetan king, Trisug Detsen Ralpachen, fell victim to this opposition and was assassinated by his brother, Langdharma, who launched an attack on Buddhism. In 842, Langdharma was himself assassinated – by a Buddhist monk disguised as a Black Hat dancer, during a festival – and the Tibetan state soon collapsed into a number of warring principalities. In the confusion that followed, support for Buddhism dwindled and clerical monastic Buddhism experienced a 150-year hiatus.

Langdharma is described as possessing two horns on the side of his head; he tied his hair in a knotted fashion to hide his evil origin.

SECOND DIFFUSION OF BUDDHISM

The collapse of the Tibetan state in 842 put a stop to Tibetan expansion in Asia; Tibet was never again to rise to arms. Overwhelmed initially by local power struggles, Buddhism gradually began to exert its influence again, giving the Tibetan mind a spiritual bent and turning it inward on itself. As the tide of Buddhist faith receded in India, Nepal and China, Tibet slowly emerged as the most devoutly Buddhist nation in the world.

The so-called second diffusion of Buddhism corresponded with two developments. First, Tibetan teachers who had taken refuge in Kham, to the east, returned to central Tibet in the late 10th century and established new monasteries. Second, the kingdom of Guge in western Tibet invited the Bengali scholar Atisha (Jowo-je; 982–1054) to Tibet in the mid-11th century. Disciples of Atisha (Jowo-je), chiefly Dromtönpa, were instrumental in establishing the Kadampa order and monasteries such as Reting (see p151).

GURU RINPOCHE

Padmasambhava is one of the most important Buddhist saints in Tibet and his statues can be found in most temples and households. He is more widely known by Tibetans as Guru Rinpoche. Guru Rinpoche was a Tantric master from Uddiyana, in modern-day Swat valley in Pakistan. His journey to Tibet was obstructed by evil forces, but through his magical powers he subdued evil spirits and converted them as protectors of Buddhism. Guru Rinpoche arrived in Samye and dispelled the obstructed forces, transforming it into a tranquil and holy site. While in Samye, Padmasambhava took Yeshe Tsogyal, one of the ladies of Trisong Detsen's court, as his consort. She is deified as a form of goddess today and regarded as one of the spiritual mothers of Tibet.

Guru Rinpoche is said to have stayed in Tibet for 55 years and have travelled to every corner of the empire quelling demonic forces and hiding secret objects and texts that are to be revealed at an appropriate time. These objects and texts are known as Terma (Hidden Treasures). The discoverers of these texts are called Terton.

608

The first mission is sent to the court of Chinese Emperor Yang-ti. This brings Tibet in direct contact with China and sees increasing Tibetan interest in the frontier of China

629

Namri Songtsen is assassinated and his son, Songtsen Gampo, aged 13, inherits the throne. He comes to be regarded as the founder of the Tibetan empire and remains an important cultural hero for the Tibetan people.

640s

Songtsen Gampo marries Chinese Princess Wencheng and Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti. They both contribute to Tibetan cultural formation; they are credited with bringing Buddhism, silk weaving and new methods of agriculture to Tibet.

730

King Tri Ditsuktsen requests translations of Chinese classics; one Tang court minister opposes, arguing that the secrets of the classic could not be revealed as they contained information on governance and military strategy.

765-80

Samye, the first monastery in Tibet, is built on the north bank of the Tsangpo River. Its construction is hampered by demonic forces, which are eventually overcome by Tantric master Padmasambhava, who possesses magical powers.

815-35

King Tri Ralpachen champions Buddhism, providing strong state support for the clergy, the construction of temples and translation of Buddhist texts. Ralpachen is murdered by his brother, Langdharma, in 835.

TANGTONG GYELPO

Tangtong Gyelpo (1385–1464) was Tibet's Renaissance man *par excellence*. Nyingmapa yogi, treasure finder, engineer, medic and inventor of Tibetan opera, Tangtong formed a song-and-dance troupe of seven sisters to raise money for his other passion, bridge building. He eventually built 108 bridges in Tibet, the most famous of which was over the Yarlung Tsangpo near modern-day Chushul. Tangtong is often depicted in monastery murals with long white hair and a beard, and is usually holding a section of chain links from one of his bridges.

SAKYAPA ORDER ASCENDANCY & MONGOL OVERLORDSHIP

With the collapse of a central Tibetan state, Tibet's contacts with China dwindled. By the time the Tang dynasty reached the end of its days in 907, China had already recovered almost all the territory it had previously lost to the Tibetans. Throughout the Song dynasty (960–1276) the two nations had virtually no contact with each other, and Tibet's sole foreign contacts were with its southern Buddhist neighbours.

This was all to change when Genghis Khan launched a series of conquests in 1206 that led to a vast Mongol empire that straddled Central Asia and China. Preoccupied with other matters, the Mongols did not give Tibet serious attention until 1239, when they sent a number of raiding parties into the country. Numerous monasteries were razed and the Mongols almost reached Lhasa before turning back.

Tibetan accounts have it that returning Mongol troops related the spiritual eminence of the Tibetan lamas to Godan Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan and ruler of the Kokonor region (modern-day Qinghai). In response Godan summoned Sakya Pandita, the head of Sakya Monastery, to his court. The outcome of this meeting was the beginning of a priest-patron relationship between the deeply religious Tibetans and the militarily adventurous Mongols. Tibetan Buddhism became the state religion of the Mongol empire in east Asia, and the head Sakya lama became its spiritual leader, a position that also entailed temporal authority over Tibet. Many monasteries converted (or were converted) to the Sakya school. For more on the Sakyapa reign, see p203.

The Sakyapa ascendancy lasted less than 100 years. It was strife-torn from the start. The Sakyapa relationship with the Mongol court and its rule of Tibet aroused the jealousy of other religious orders. Political intrigue, power struggles and violence were the order of the day. By 1350, Changchub Gyaltsen, a monk who had first trained in Sakya and then returned to his home district in the Yarlung Valley as a local official, contrived, through alliances and outright confrontation, to overturn the Sakya hegemony. Just 18 years later, the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China lost its grip on power and the Chinese Ming dynasty was established.

TIBETAN INDEPENDENCE

Certain Chinese claims on Tibet have looked to the Mongol Yuan dynasty overlordship of the high plateau, and the priest-patron relationship existing at the time, as setting a precedent for Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. Pro-independence supporters state that this is like India claiming sovereignty over Myanmar (Burma) because both were ruled by the British.

In fact, Tibetan submission was offered to the Mongols before they conquered China and it ended when the Mongols fell from power in that country. When the Mongol empire disintegrated, both China and Tibet regained their independence. Sino-Tibetan relations took on the form of exchanges of diplomatic courtesies by two independent governments.

After defeating the Sakyapas, Changchub Gyaltsen undertook to remove all traces of the Mongol administration. In doing this, he drew on the tradition of the former Yarlung kings: officials were required to dress in the manner of the former royal court, a revised version of King Songtsen Gampo's code of law was enacted, a new taxation system was enforced, and scrolls depicting the glories of the Yarlung dynasty were commissioned (although Changchub Gyaltsen claimed they were 'discovered'). The movement was a declaration of Tibet's independence from foreign interference and a search for national identity.

Changchub Gyaltsen and his successors ruled Tibet from Nedong, near the Yarlung Valley, until 1435. Their rule was succeeded by the princes of Rinphug, an area southwest of Lhasa. In 1565, the kings of Tsang became secular rulers of Tibet from Shigatse. Spiritual authority at this time was vested in the Karmapa, head of a Kagyupa suborder at Tsurphu Monastery (p144).

RISE OF THE GELUGPA & THE DALAI LAMAS

In 1374, a young man named Tsongkhapa set out from his home near Kokonor in eastern Tibet to central Tibet, where he undertook training with all the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. By the time he was 25, he had already gained a reputation as a teacher and a writer, although he continued to study under eminent lamas of the day.

Tsongkhapa established a monastery at Ganden, near Lhasa, and it was here that he had a vision of Atisha (Jowo-je), the 11th-century Bengali scholar who had been instrumental in the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet. At Ganden, Tsongkhapa maintained a course of expounding his thinking, steering clear of political intrigue, and espousing doctrinal purity and monastic discipline. Although it seems unlikely that Tsongkhapa intended to found another school of Buddhism, his teachings attracted many disciples, who found his return to the original teachings of Atisha (Jowo-je) an exciting alternative to the politically tainted Sakyapa and Kagyupa orders.

Tibet and its History (1962) by Hugh Richardson offers an excellent, nonpoliticised view of Tibetan history, concentrating on the years from the Gelugpa ascendancy to the Chinese takeover. Richardson headed Britain's trade missions in Gyantse and Lhasa in the 1930s and 1940s.

822

The Sino-Tibetan treaty is signed, confirming Tibet's right to rule all the conquered territories. The bilingual inscription of the treaty is erected outside the Jokhang.

842

A monk paints his face black, conceals a bow and arrow beneath a long-sleeved robe, and assassinates Langdharma. The event is still commemorated by the Black Hat Dance performed during monastic festivals.

c 900-1600

The Tibetan Empire fragments into smaller kingdoms, the most notable being Guge in Western Tibet. The kings of Guge send students to Kashmir and bring skilled craftsmen from Nepal and Kashmir to build temples and shrines

996

The important monastery of Thöling (p233) is founded and becomes the main centre of Buddhist activities in Tibet. It is there that a massive number of translations of Buddhist texts began.

1042

Atisha, the abbot of the Buddhist Monastic University of Vikramasila, arrives in Tibet. With his disciple Drömtönpa (1004–64) he is credited with founding Kadampa, the first distinctive Tibetan Buddhist School.

1073

The Khon family, which traces its lineage from the nobility of the Yarlung dynasty, founds the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism. The family remains the hereditary head of Sakya tradition to this day

REINCARNATION LINEAGES

It is not unusual for an important Tibetan lama to be a *trulku* (also spelt *tulku*), or 'incarnate lama'. There are thought to be several thousand of these lamas in contemporary Tibet. The abbots of many monasteries are *trulku*, and thus abbotship can be traced back through a lineage of rebirths to the original founder of a monastery, or at least to an important figure associated with the founding of the monastery.

Strictly speaking, however, this investiture of power through rebirth is known as *yangsid*, and a *trulku* is a manifestation of a Bodhisattva that repeatedly expresses itself through a series of rebirths. The honorific title *rinpoche*, meaning 'very precious', is a mark of respect and does not necessarily imply that the holder is a *trulku*.

The most famous manifestation of a deity is, of course, the Dalai Lama lineage. The Dalai Lamas are manifestations of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara), the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The Panchen Lama is a manifestation of Jampelyang (Manjushri), the Bodhisattva of Insight. There is no exclusivity in such a manifestation: Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelugpa order, was also a manifestation of Jampelyang (Manjushri), as traditionally were the abbots of the Sakya Monastery.

Lamas approaching death often leave behind clues pointing to the location of their reincarnation. The Panchen Lamas have their reincarnation confirmed by lots drawn from a golden urn. Potential candidates are tested by being required to pick out the former lama's possessions from a collection of objects. Disputes over *trulku* status are not uncommon (see The Karmapa

Disciples of Tsongkhapa, determined to propagate their master's teachings, established monasteries at Drepung, Sera and Tashilhunpo, and the movement came to be known as the Gelugpa (Virtuous) order.

By the time of the third reincarnated head of the Gelugpa, Sonam Gyatso (1543–88), the Mongols began to take an interest in Tibet's new and increasingly powerful order. In a move that mirrored the 13th-century Sakya entrance into the political arena, Sonam Gyatso accepted an invitation to meet with Altyn Khan near Kokonor in 1578. At the meeting, Sonam Gyatso received the title of *dalai*, meaning 'ocean', and implying 'ocean of wisdom'. The title was retrospectively bestowed on his previous two reincarnations, and Sonam Gyatso became the third Dalai Lama.

The Gelugpa-Mongol relationship marked the Gelugpa's entry into the turbulent waters of worldly affairs. Ties with the Mongols deepened when, at the third Dalai Lama's death in 1588, his next reincarnation was found in a great-grandson of the Mongolian Altyn Khan. The boy was brought to Lhasa with great ceremony under the escort of armed Mongol troops.

It is no surprise that the Tsang kings and the Karmapa of Tsurphu Monastery saw this Gelugpa-Mongol alliance as a direct threat to their power. Bickering ensued, and in 1611 the Tsang king attacked Drepung and Sera Monasteries. The fourth Dalai Lama fled central Tibet and died at the age of 25 in 1616.

1201

Sakya Pandita (1182–1251) travels to India for his education, studying under great Indian gurus. He becomes a religious figure but also a great cultural figure, creating a Tibetan literary tradition drawing on inspiration from Sanskrit poetry.

1206

Genghis Khan launches a series of conquests that lead to a vast Mongol empire that straddles Central Asia and China. Tibetan chiefs submit to the Mongols to avoid invasion.

1240

The grandson of Genghis Khan, Godan, invades central Tibet with 30,000 troops. They ransack the monastery of Reting and put a number of monks to death.

1249

Sakya Pandita becomes the preceptor to Godon and converts the Mongols to Buddhism. Godon invests Sakya Pandita as the secular ruler of Tibet, giving him the right to govern 13 myriarchies of central Tibet, Amdo and Kham.

1260

Kublai Khan (1215–94) appoints Phagpa as an imperial preceptor. This ushers in what the Tibetans call the Priest and Preceptor relationship between Mongol Khans, later Chinese Emperors and Tibetan lamas.

1268

The first census of central Tibet is carried out measuring household, land holding and livestock. The census counts some 40,000 households. Basic taxation and a new administrative system is established in Tibet.

Connection, p146). A family's fortunes are likely to improve if an incarnate lama is discovered among the children; this creates an incentive for fraud.

Most Dalai Lamas comes from poor or well-to-do peasant families; only one Dalai Lama was born in an aristocratic family. The reason is that if a child from wealthy or aristocratic family was chosen there would be dispute and questions of corruption. Therefore, a boy chosen from a poor family is less likely to lead to dispute. The family becomes noble or aristocratic after the son has been chosen as the Dalai Lama. The family of the present Dalai Lama, for example, was by no means aristocratic but his elder brother had already been identified as a *trulku* and his younger brother was also later recognised as a *trulku*.

It is possible to see in the *trulku* system a substitute for the system of hereditary power (as in Western royal lineages) in a society where, historically, many of the major players were celibate and unable to produce their own heirs. Not that celibacy was overwhelmingly the case. The abbots of Sakya took wives to produce their own *trulku* reincarnations, and it is not uncommon for rural *trulkus* to do the same.

The major flaw with the system is the time needed for the reincarnation to reach adulthood. Regents have traditionally been appointed to run the country but this tradition takes on an added dimension under modern political circumstances. The Dalai Lama has made it clear that he will not be reincarnated in Chinese-occupied Tibet and may even be the last Dalai Lama.

THE GREAT FIFTH DALAI LAMA

A successor to the fourth Dalai Lama was soon discovered, and the boy was brought to Lhasa, again under Mongol escort. In the meantime, Mongol intervention in Tibetan affairs continued in the guise of support for the embattled Gelugpa order.

In 1640, Mongol forces intervened on behalf of the Gelugpas, defeating the Tsang forces. The Tsang king was taken captive and later executed, probably at the instigation of Tashilhunpo monks.

Unlike the Sakya-Mongol domination of Tibet, under which the head Sakya lama was required to reside in the Mongol court, the fifth Dalai Lama was able to rule from within Tibet. With Mongol backing, all of Tibet was pacified by 1656, and the Dalai Lama's control ranged from Mt Kailash in the west to Kham in the east. The fifth Dalai Lama had become both the spiritual and temporal sovereign of a unified Tibet.

The fifth Dalai Lama is remembered as having ushered in a great new age for Tibet. He made a tour of Tibet's monasteries, and although he stripped most Kadampa monasteries – his chief rivals for power – of their riches, he allowed them to re-establish. A new flurry of monastic construction began, the major achievement being Labrang Monastery (in what is now Gansu province). In Lhasa, work began on a fitting residence for the head of the Tibetan state: the Potala. The Dalai Lama, with Mongol

financial support, saw to the renovation and expansion of many temples and monasteries.

MANCHUS, MONGOLS & MURDER

Reincarnation lineages were probably first adopted as a means of maintaining the illusion of a continuous spiritual authority within the various monastic orders of Tibet. With the death of the fifth Dalai Lama in 1682, however, the weakness of such a system became apparent. The Tibetan government was confronted with the prospect of finding his reincarnation and then waiting 18 years until the boy came of age. The great personal prestige and authority of the fifth Dalai Lama had played no small part in holding together a newly unified Tibet. The Dalai Lama's regent decided to shroud the Dalai Lama's death in secrecy, announcing that the fifth lama had entered a long period of meditation (over 10 years!).

In 1695 the secret was leaked and the regent was forced to hastily enthrone the sixth Dalai Lama, a boy of his own choosing. The choice was an unfortunate one (see boxed text, below) and could not have come at a worse time.

In China, the Ming dynasty had fallen in 1644 and the Manchus from the north had swiftly moved in to fill the power vacuum, establishing the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1912). The events that followed were complicated. Basically, Tibet's ineffectual head of state, the Qing perception of the threat of Tibetan relations with the Mongols, disunity within the ranks of Tibet's Mongol allies and Qing ambitions to extend its power into Tibet led to a Qing intervention that was to have lasting consequences for Tibet.

Tibet's dealings with the new Qing government went awry from the start. Kangxi, the second Qing emperor, took offence when the death of the fifth Dalai Lama was concealed from him. At the same time, an ambitious Mongol prince named Lhabzang Khan came to the conclusion that earlier Mongol leaders had taken too much of a back-seat position in their relations with the Tibetans and appealed to Emperor Kangxi for support. It was granted and, in 1705, Mongol forces descended on Lhasa, killing the Tibetan regent and deposing the sixth Dalai Lama. Depending on your source, he was either captured, with the intention of delivering him to Kangxi in Beijing, dying en

The fifth Dalai Lama wrote a detailed history of Tibet and his autobiography is regarded as a literary treasure of Tibet.

THE SIXTH DALAI LAMA

Tsangyang Gyatso was, shall we say, an unconventional Dalai Lama. A sensual youth with long hair and a penchant for erotic verse, he soon proved himself to be far more interested in wine and women than meditation and study. He refused to take his final vows as a monk and he would often sneak out of the Potala at night to raise hell in the bawdy brothels of Shöl. A resident Jesuit monk described him as a 'dissolute youth' and 'quite depraved', noting that 'no good-looking person of either sex was safe from his unbridled licentiousness'.

route at Litang (where he was probably murdered), or he lived to a ripe old age in Amdo. Whatever the sixth Dalai Lama's fate, Lhabzang Khan installed a new Dalai Lama in Lhasa.

Lhabzang Khan's machinations backfired. The Mongol removal, possible murder and replacement of the sixth Dalai Lama, aroused intense hostility in Tibet. Worse still, it created enemies among other Mongol tribes, who saw the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader.

In 1717 the Dzungar Mongols from Central Asia attacked Lhasa, killing Lhabzang Khan and deposing the new Dalai Lama. The resulting confusion in Tibet was the opportunity for which Emperor Kangxi had been waiting. He responded by sending a military expedition to Lhasa in 1720. The Chinese troops drove out the Dzungar Mongols and were received by the Tibetans as liberators. They were unlikely to have been received any other way: with them, they brought the seventh Dalai Lama, who had been languishing in Kumbum Monastery under Chinese 'protection'.

Emperor Kangxi wasted no time in declaring Tibet a protectorate of China. Two Chinese representatives, known as Ambans, were installed at Lhasa, along with a garrison of Chinese troops. It was just a beginning, leading to two centuries of Manchu overlordship and serving as a convenient historical precedent for the communist takeover nearly 250 years later.

MANCHU OVERLORDSHIP

The seventh Dalai Lama ruled until his death in 1757. However, at this point it became clear that another ruler would have to be appointed until the next Dalai Lama reached adulthood. The post of regent was created, and it was decided that it should be held by a lama.

It is perhaps a poor reflection on the spiritual attainment of the lamas appointed as regents that few were willing to relinquish the reins once they were in the saddle. In the 120 years between the death of the seventh Dalai Lama and the adulthood of the 13th, actual power was wielded by the Dalai Lamas for only seven years. Three of them died very young and under suspicious circumstances. Only the eighth Dalai Lama survived into his adulthood, living a quiet, contemplative life until the age of 45.

BARBARIANS AT THE DOORSTEP

Early contact between Britain and Tibet commenced with a mission to Shigatse headed by a Scotsman, George Bogle, in 1774. Bogle soon ingratiated himself with the Panchen Lama – to the extent of marrying one of his sisters. With the death of the third Panchen Lama in 1780 and the ban on foreign contact that came after the Gurkha invasion of Tibet in 1788, Britain lost all official contact with Tibet.

Meanwhile, Britain watched nervously as the Russian empire swallowed up Central Asia, pushing its borders 1000km further towards India. The reported

The Dalai Lamas are depicted in wall paintings holding the Wheel of Law (Wheel of Dharma) as a symbol of the political power gained under the Great Fifth Dalai Lama.

In the 120 years between the death of the seventh Dalai Lama and the majority of the 13th, actual power was wielded by the Dalai Lamas for only seven years.

1290

Kublai Khan's army supports the Sakya and destroys the main centres of Kagyu. With the death of Kublai Khan in 1294, the power of Sakya also begins to wane in Tibet.

1350-54

Phagmodrupa Jangchuk Gyaltzen overthrows the rule of Sakya, and the Phagmodru Myriarchy establishes its power over central Tibet.

1357-1419

During his lifetime Tsongkhapa establishes himself as a reformer, and is responsible for introducing strict monastic discipline. It was also during Tsongkhapa's time that his disciples founded the strict monastic order.

c 1300-1500

Peace allows for a renewed flourishing of Buddhism in Tibet, and some of the major monasteries in Tibet are established.

1368

The Mongol Yuan dynasty in China ends, and the Ming dynasty begins. This coincides with the final demise of Sakya rule in Tibet

1391

Gedundrup is born in Tibet; he is later recognized as the first Dalai Lama.

arrival of Russian 'adviser' Agvan Dorjjeff in Lhasa exacerbated fears that Russia had military designs on Britain's 'jewel in the crown'.

Dorjjeff was a Buryat Buddhist monk from near Lake Baikal who had studied at Drepung Monastery for 15 years before finally becoming a debating partner of the 13th Dalai Lama. Dorjjeff seems to have convinced both himself and the Dalai Lama that the Russian empire was the home of Shambhala, the mythical kingdom from the north whose king (or tsar) would come to save Tibet from its enemies.

When Dorjjeff led an envoy from the Dalai Lama to Tsar Nicholas II in 1898, 1900 and 1901, and when British intelligence confirmed that Lhasa had received Russian missions (while similar British advances had been refused), the Raj broke into a cold sweat. There was even wild conjecture that the tsar was poised to convert to Buddhism.

It was against this background that Lord Curzon, viceroy of India, decided to nip Russian designs in the bud. In late 1903, a British military expedition led by Colonel Francis Younghusband entered Tibet via Sikkim. After several months waiting for a Tibetan delegation, the British moved on to Lhasa, where it was discovered that the Dalai Lama had fled to Mongolia with Dorjjeff. However, an Anglo-Tibetan convention was signed following negotiations with Tri Rinpoche, the abbot of Ganden whom the Dalai Lama had appointed as regent in his absence. British forces withdrew after spending just two months in Lhasa. For more on the story of the British invasion, see p186.

The missing link in the Anglo-Tibetan accord was a Manchu signature. In effect, the accord implied that Tibet was a sovereign power and therefore had the right to make treaties of its own. The Manchus objected and, in 1906, the British signed a second accord with the Manchus, one that recognised China's suzerainty over Tibet. In 1910, with the Manchu Qing dynasty teetering on collapse, the Manchus made good on the accord and invaded Tibet, forcing the Dalai Lama once again into flight – this time into the arms of the British in India.

TIBETAN INDEPENDENCE REVISITED

In 1911 a revolution finally toppled the decadent Qing dynasty in China, and by the end of 1912 the last of the occupying Manchu forces were escorted out of Tibet. In January 1913 the 13th Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa from Sikkim.

The government of the new Chinese republic, anxious to maintain control of former Qing territories, sent a telegram to the Dalai Lama expressing regret at the actions of the Manchu oppressors and announcing that the Dalai Lama was being formally restored to his former rank. The Dalai Lama replied that he was uninterested in ranks bestowed by the Chinese and that he was assuming temporal and spiritual leadership of his country.

The concept of reincarnation was first introduced by the Karmapa and later adopted by the Dalai Lamas.

Tibetans have since read this reply as a formal declaration of independence. As for the Chinese, they chose to ignore it, reporting that the Dalai Lama had responded with a letter expressing his great love for the motherland. Whatever the case, Tibet was to enjoy 30 years free of interference from China. What is more, Tibet was suddenly presented with an opportunity to create a state that was ready to rise to the challenge of the modern world and, if need be, protect itself from the territorial ambitions of China. The opportunity foundered on Tibet's entrenched theocratic institutions, and Tibetan independence was a short-lived affair.

ATTEMPTS TO MODERNISE

During the period of his flight to India, the 13th Dalai Lama had become intimate friends with Sir Charles Bell, a Tibetan scholar and political officer in Sikkim. The relationship was to initiate a warming in Anglo-Tibetan affairs and to see the British playing an increasingly important role as mediators in problems between Tibet and China.

In 1920 Bell was dispatched on a mission to Lhasa, where he renewed his friendship with the Dalai Lama. It was agreed that the British would supply the Tibetans with modern arms, providing they agreed to use them only for self-defence. Tibetan military officers were trained in Gyantse and India, and a telegraph line was set up linking Lhasa and Shigatse. Other developments included the construction of a small hydroelectric station near Lhasa and the establishment of an English school at Gyantse. Four Tibetan boys were even sent to public school at Rugby in England. At the invitation of the Dalai Lama, British experts conducted geological surveys of parts of Tibet with a view to gauging mining potential.

It is highly likely that the 13th Dalai Lama's trips away from his country had made him realise that it was imperative that Tibet begin to modernise. At the same time he must also have been aware that the road to modernisation was fraught with difficulties. The biggest problem was the Tibetan social system.

Since the rise of the Gelugpa order, Tibet had been ruled as a theocracy. Monks, particularly those in the huge monastic complexes of Drepung and Sera in Lhasa, were accustomed to a high degree of influence in the Tibetan government. And for the monks of Tibet, the principal focus of government was the maintenance of the religious state. Attempts to modernise were seen as inimical to this aim, and they began to meet intense opposition.

Before too long, the 13th Dalai Lama's innovations fell victim to a conservative backlash. Newly trained Tibetan officers were reassigned to nonmilitary jobs, causing a rapid deterioration of military discipline; a newly established police force was left to its own devices and soon became ineffective; the English school at Gyantse was closed down; and a mail service set up by the British was stopped.

The Snow Lion and the Dragon by Melvyn Goldstein is worth wading through if you want an unsentimental analysis of the historically complex issue of China's claims to Tibet, and the Dalai Lama's options in dealing with the current Chinese leadership.

1409

1481

1578

1601

1642

1652

Tsongkhapa introduces the Mönlam festival, marking Buddha's attainment of enlightenment. The festival is celebrated continuously until the 1960s, revived in 1985 and later banned because it became the focus of Tibetan protest.

The power of the Phagmodurpa is challenged by rulers of Tsang who emerge as a powerful force in Tibet. Powerful local rulers establish alliances with religious orders.

Altan Khan converts to Buddhism and invested Sonam Gyatso as spiritual master. Khan bestows the title 'Dalai Lama', signifying the depth of Sonam Gyatso's knowledge and wisdom.

A Mongol child, the grandson of Atan Khan, is recognised by the Panchen Lama as the fourth Dalai Lama. This establishes the tradition of the Dalai Lamas being recognized by the Panchen.

Gushri Khan of the Khoshot Mongols subdues the King of Gtsang, and then hands over religious and secular power to the fifth Dalai Lama. Gaden Potrang is established at this time.

The fifth Dalai Lama is invited to China by the Manchu Emperor Shunzhi; to mark the occasion the Yellow Temple (Huangsi) is built on the outskirts of Beijing.

The definitive (but weighty) account of Tibetan history since 1947 is *The Dragon in the Land of Snows* by Tsering Shakyas.

However, Tibet's brief period of independence was troubled by more than just an inability to modernise. Conflict sprang up between the Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama over the autonomy of Tashilhunpo Monastery and its estates. The Panchen Lama, after appealing to the British to mediate, fled to China, where he stayed for 14 years until his death.

In 1933 the 13th Dalai Lama died, leaving the running of the country to the regent of Reting. The present (14th) Dalai Lama was discovered at the village of Pari Takster, near Xining in Amdo, but was brought to Lhasa only after the local Chinese commander had been paid off with a huge 'fee' of 300,000 Chinese dollars. The boy was renamed Tenzin Gyatso and he was installed as the Dalai Lama on 22 February 1940, aged 4½.

In 1947 an attempted coup d'état, known as the Reting Conspiracy, rocked Lhasa. (Reting Rinpoche was thrown into jail for his part in the rebellion, though it remains unclear whether he was set up or not.) And in 1949 the Chinese Nationalist government, against all odds, fell to Mao Zedong and his communist 'bandits'.

LIBERATION

Unknown to the Tibetans, the communist takeover of China was to open what is probably the saddest chapter in Tibetan history. The Chinese 'liberation' of Tibet was eventually to lead to 1.2 million Tibetan deaths, a full-on assault on the Tibetan traditional way of life, the flight of the Dalai Lama to India and the large-scale destruction of almost every historical structure on the plateau. The chief culprits were Chinese ethnic chauvinism and an epidemic of social madness known as the Cultural Revolution.

On 7 October 1950, just a year after the communist takeover of China, 40,000 battle-hardened Chinese troops attacked central Tibet from six different directions. The Tibetan army, a poorly equipped force of around 4000 men, stood little chance of resisting, and any attempt at defence soon collapsed before the onslaught. In Lhasa, the Tibetan government reacted by enthroning the 15-year-old 14th Dalai Lama, an action that brought jubilation and dancing on the streets but did little to protect Tibet from advancing Chinese troops.

An appeal to the UN was equally ineffective. To the shame of all involved, only El Salvador sponsored a motion to condemn Chinese aggression, and Britain and India, traditional friends of Tibet, actually managed to convince the UN not to debate the issue for fear of Chinese disapproval.

Presented with this seemingly hopeless situation, the Dalai Lama dispatched a mission to Beijing with orders that it refer all decisions to Lhasa. As it turned out, there were no decisions to be made. The Chinese had already drafted an agreement. The Tibetans had two choices: sign on the dotted line or face further Chinese aggression.

The Younghusband invasion of Tibet included 10,091 porters, 7096 mules, 2668 ponies, 4466 yaks and six camels!

The 17-point *Agreement on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet* promised a one-country-two-systems structure much like that offered later to Hong Kong and Macau, but provided little in the way of guarantees that such a promise would be honoured. The Tibetan delegates protested that they were unauthorised to sign such an agreement and anyway lacked the seal of the Dalai Lama. Thoughtfully, the Chinese had already prepared a forged Dalai Lama seal, and the agreement was ratified.

Initially, the Chinese occupation of central Tibet was carried out in an orderly way, but tensions inevitably mounted. The presence of large numbers of Chinese troops in the Lhasa region soon depleted food stores and gave rise to massive inflation. Rumours of massacres and forced political indoctrination in Kham (eastern Tibet) began to filter through to Lhasa.

In 1956 uprisings broke out in eastern Tibet (see p243), and in 1957 and 1958 protests and armed revolt spread to central Tibet (with covert CIA assistance). With a heavy heart, the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa in March 1957 from a trip to India to celebrate the 2500th anniversary of the birth of the Buddha. It seemed inevitable that Tibet would explode in revolt and equally inevitable that it would be ruthlessly suppressed by the Chinese.

1959 UPRISING

The Tibetan New Year of 1959, like all the New Year celebrations before it, attracted huge crowds to Lhasa, doubling the city's usual population. In addition to the standard festival activities, the Chinese had added a highlight of their own – a performance by a Chinese dance group at the Lhasa military base. The invitation to the Dalai Lama came in the form of a thinly veiled command. The Dalai Lama, wishing to avoid offence, accepted.

As preparations for the performance drew near, however, the Dalai Lama's security chief was surprised to hear that the Dalai Lama was expected to attend in secrecy and without his customary contingent of 25 bodyguards. Despite the Dalai Lama's agreement to these conditions, news of them soon leaked, and in no time simmering frustration at Chinese rule came to the boil among the crowds on the streets. It seemed obvious to the Tibetans that the Chinese were about to kidnap the Dalai Lama. Large numbers of people gathered around the Norbulingka (the Dalai Lama's summer palace) and swore to protect him with their lives.

The Dalai Lama had no choice but to cancel his appointment at the military base. In the meantime, the crowds on the streets were swollen by Tibetan soldiers, who changed out of their People's Liberation Army (PLA) uniforms and started to hand out weapons. A group of government ministers announced that the 17-point agreement was null and void, and that Tibet renounced the authority of China.

The Dalai Lama was powerless to intervene, managing only to pen some conciliatory letters to the Chinese as his people prepared for battle on Lhasa's

An excellent scholarly account of modern Tibet is Melvyn Goldstein's *A History of Modern Tibet 1913–1959: The Demise of the Lamaist State*, which pulls no punches in showing the intrigues, superstitions and governmental ineptitude that led to the demise of the Lhasa government.

John Avedon's *In Exile from the Land of Snows* is largely an account of the Tibetan community in Dharamsala, but is an excellent and informative read.

1706

Lhabzang Khan's army marched into Lhasa and deposes (then executes) the sixth Dalai Lama and installs Yeshi Gyatso, who is not accepted by Tibetans as a Dalai Lama.

1720

The Manchu have conquered the Mongols, and the Tibetans, under the leadership of Pholhana and Khangchennas, organise resistance to Lhabzang Khan. The Manchu army, supported by the Tibetans, overthrow Lhabzang Khan.

1757

The seventh Dalai Lama dies, and a regent rules Tibet; from now until the 1950s regents are appointed from monastic ranks. Regency is seen as a chance for ambitious politicians to make their mark.

1879

The 13th Dalai Lama is enthroned. In 1895 he takes his final ordination and becomes the secular and spiritual ruler of Tibet, uniting the country with the same authority exercised by the fifth Dalai Lama.

1904

The British mobilise over 8000 soldiers and launch an invasion of Tibet from the Sikkim frontier. The ill-equipped Tibetan army is no match. The 13th Dalai Lama escapes to Mongolia.

1909

The 13th Dalai Lama returns to Lhasa; at the ceremony handing over power the Dalai Lama is presented with a new gold seal that described his authority over Tibet as 'indestructible as a diamond'.

TIBET IN EXILE

Modern political boundaries and history have led to the fracture of the Tibetan nation. Large areas of historical and ethnic Tibet are now incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Qinghai and Gansu (traditionally known as Amdo), and Sichuan and Yunnan (traditionally known as Kham). More Tibetans now live outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region than inside it.

Then figure on the 120,000 Tibetans in exile. Refugees continue to brave high passes and rapacious border guards to get to Kathmandu, paying as much as Y800 for a guide to help them across. The trek can take up to 25 days, with no supplies other than all the dried yak meat and *tsampa* (roasted-barley flour) they can carry, and no equipment except canvas shoes to help them get over the 6000m passes. Dharamsala and McLeod Ganj (see www.tibet.net) in India's Himachal Pradesh have become de facto Tibetan towns, although the Dalai Lama, after personally meeting each refugee, actively encourages many of them to return to Tibet.

The great monasteries of Tibet have also relocated, many to the sweltering heat of South India, where you can find replicas of Sera, Ganden and Drepung Monasteries. There are also large communities of Tibetans in mountainous Switzerland and the USA.

With exile has come an unexpected flowering of Tibetan Buddhism abroad; you can now find prayer flags gracing the Scottish glens of Samye Ling Monastery in Dumfrireshire and huge chörtens decorating the countryside of California.

streets. In a last-ditch effort to prevent bloodshed, the Dalai Lama even offered himself to the Chinese. The reply came in the sound of two mortar shells exploding in the gardens of the Norbulingka. The attack made it obvious that the only option remaining to the Dalai Lama was flight. On 17 March, he left the Norbulingka disguised as a soldier. Fourteen days later he was in India.

BLOODSHED IN LHASA

With both the Chinese and the Tibetans unaware of the Dalai Lama's departure, tensions continued to mount in Lhasa. On 20 March, Chinese troops began to shell the Norbulingka and the crowds surrounding it, killing hundreds of people. Later, as the corpses were searched, it became obvious that the Dalai Lama had escaped – 'abducted by a reactionary clique' went the Chinese reports.

Still the bloodshed continued. Artillery bombed the Potala, Sera Monastery and the medical college on Chagpo Ri. Tibetans armed with petrol bombs were picked off by Chinese snipers, and when a crowd of 10,000 Tibetans retreated into the sacred precincts of the Jokhang, that too was bombed. It is thought that after three days of violence, hundreds of Tibetans lay dead in Lhasa's streets. Some estimates put the numbers of those killed far higher.

SOCIALIST PARADISE ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

The Chinese quickly consolidated their quelling of the Lhasa uprising by taking control of all the high passes between Tibet and India. Freedom

fighters were disarmed by superior Chinese troops, and able-bodied young men were rounded up, shot, incarcerated or forced to join Chinese work teams. As the Chinese themselves put it, they were liberating Tibet from reactionary forces and ushering in a new socialist society, whether the Tibetans liked it or not.

The Chinese abolished the Tibetan government and set about reordering Tibetan society in accordance with their Marxist principles. The monks and the aristocratic were put to work on menial jobs and subjected to struggle sessions, known as *thamzing*, which sometimes resulted in death. A ferment of class struggle was whipped up and former feudal exploiters – some of whom Tibet's poor may have harboured genuine resentment towards – were subjected to punishments of awful cruelty.

The Chinese also turned their attention to Tibet's 6000-plus 'feudal' monasteries. Tibetans were refused permission to donate food to the monasteries, and monks were compelled to join struggle sessions, discard their robes and marry. Monasteries were stripped of their riches, Buddhist scriptures were burnt and used as toilet paper, and the wholesale destruction of Tibet's monastic heritage began in earnest.

Notable in this litany of disasters was the Chinese decision to alter Tibetan farming practices. Instead of barley, the Tibetan staple, farmers were instructed to grow wheat and rice. Tibetans protested that these crops were unsuited to Tibet's high altitude. They were right, and mass starvation resulted. It is estimated that by late 1961, 70,000 Tibetans had died or were dying of starvation.

By September 1961, even the Chinese-groomed Panchen Lama began to have a change of heart. He presented Mao Zedong with a 70,000-character report on the hardships his people were suffering and also requested, among other things, religious freedom and an end to the sacking of Tibetan monasteries. Four years later he was to disappear into a high-security prison for a 10-year stay. More would soon join him.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Among the writings of Mao Zedong is a piece entitled 'On Going Too Far'. It is a subject on which he was particularly well qualified to write. What started as a power struggle between Mao and Liu Shaoqi in 1965 had become by August 1966 the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a movement that was to shake China to its core, trample its traditions underfoot, cause countless deaths and give the running of the country over to mobs of Red Guards. All of China suffered in Mao's bold experiment in creating a new socialist paradise, but it was Tibet that suffered most.

The first Red Guards arrived in Lhasa in July 1966. Two months later, the first rally was organised and Chinese-educated Tibetan youths raided the Jokhang, desecrating whatever religious objects they could get their

1910

Imperial Resident for Tibet Zhao Erfeng attempts to re-establish Qing authority and storms Lhasa. The Dalai Lama once again escapes. On his return to Tibet from India, he declares Tibet independent.

1913

The Simla Convention between Britain, China and Tibet is held in India. The main agenda for the conference is to delimit and define the boundary between Tibet and China.

1923

A clash with Lhasa sends the Panchen Lama into exile in China. This is to have disastrous consequences for Tibet: he comes under Chinese influence and never returns.

1933

The 13th Dalai Lama dies, and secular authority is passed to Reting Rinpoche. He is an eminent Gelugpa Lama, but young and totally inexperienced in state affairs. (He is also rather fond of women.)

1935

Birth of the present 14th Dalai Lama; his younger and older brothers are also *trulkus*.

1950

China attacks central Tibet; the Tibetan army is greatly outnumbered and defeat is inevitable. The Tibetan government in Lhasa reacts by enthroning the 15-year-old 14th Dalai Lama. There is jubilation and dancing in the streets.

It's estimated that by late 1961, 70,000 Tibetans had died or were dying from starvation.

hands on. It was the beginning of the large-scale destruction of virtually every religious monument in Tibet, and was carried out in the spirit of destroying the 'Four Olds': old thinking, old culture, old habits and old customs. The Buddhist '*om mani padme hum*' ('hail to the jewel in the lotus') was replaced by the communist mantra, 'long live Chairman Mao'. The Buddha himself was accused of being a 'reactionary'.

For more than three years the Cultural Revolution went about its destructive business of turning the Tibetan world on its head. Tibetan farmers were forced to collectivise into communes and were told what to grow and when to grow it. Anyone who objected was arrested and subjected to *thamzing*. The Dalai Lama became public enemy number one and Tibetans were forced to denounce him as a parasite and traitor. The list goes on, a harrowing catalogue of crimes against a people whose only fault was to hold aspirations that differed from those of their Chinese masters.

By late 1969 the PLA had the Red Guards under control but Tibet continued to be the site of outbreaks of violence. Tibetan uprisings were brief and subdued brutally. In 1972 restrictions on Tibetans' freedom of worship were lifted with much fanfare but little in the way of results. In 1975 a group of foreign journalists sympathetic to the Chinese cause were invited to Tibet. The reports they filed gave a sad picture of a land whose people had been battered by Chinese-imposed policies and atrocities that amounted to nothing less than cultural genocide. In the same year the last CIA-funded Tibetan guerrilla bases, in Mustang, northern Nepal, were closed down.

THE POST-MAO YEARS

By the time of Mao's death in 1976 even the Chinese must have begun to realise that their rule in Tibet had taken a wrong turn. Mao's chosen successor, Hua Guofeng, decided to soften the government's line on Tibet and called for a revival of Tibetan customs. In mid-1977 China announced that it would welcome the return of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan refugees, and shortly afterwards the Panchen Lama was released from more than 10 years of imprisonment.

The Tibetan government-in-exile received cautiously the invitation to return to Tibet, and the Dalai Lama suggested that he be allowed to send a fact-finding mission to Tibet first. To the surprise of all involved, the Chinese agreed. As the Dalai Lama remarked in his autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*, it seemed that the Chinese were of the opinion that the mission members would find such happiness in their homeland that 'they would see no point in remaining in exile'. In fact, the results of the mission were so damning that the Dalai Lama decided not to publish them.

Nevertheless, two more missions followed. Their conclusions were despairing. The missions catalogued up to 1.2 million deaths, the destruction

of 6254 monasteries and nunneries, the absorption of two-thirds of Tibet into China, 100,000 Tibetans in labour camps and extensive deforestation. In a mere 30 years, the Chinese had turned Tibet into a land of nearly unrecognisable desolation.

In China, Hua Guofeng's short-lived political ascendancy had been eclipsed by Deng Xiaoping's rise to power. In 1980 Deng sent Hu Yaobang on a Chinese fact-finding mission that coincided with the visits of those sent by the Tibetan government-in-exile.

Hu's conclusions, while not as damning as those of the Tibetans, painted a grim picture of life on the roof of the world. A six-point plan to improve the living conditions and freedoms of the Tibetans was drawn up, taxes were dropped for two years and limited private enterprise was allowed. The Jokhang was reopened for two days a month in 1978; the Potala opened in 1980. As in the rest of China, the government embarked on a programme of extended personal freedoms in concert with authoritarian one-party rule.

THE DENG YEARS

The early 1980s saw the return of limited religious freedoms. Monasteries that had not been reduced to piles of rubble began to reopen and some religious artefacts were returned to Tibet from China.

Importantly, there was also a relaxation of the Chinese proscription on pilgrimage. Pictures of the Dalai Lama began to reappear on the streets of Lhasa. Not that any of this pointed to a significant reversal in Chinese thinking on the question of religion, which remained an 'opiate of the masses'. Those who exercised their religious freedoms did so at considerable risk.

Talks aimed at bringing the Dalai Lama back into the ambit of Chinese influence continued, but with little result. A three-person team sent to Beijing from Dharamsala in 1982 heard lectures on how Tibet was part of China, and was told in no uncertain terms that the Dalai Lama would be given a desk job in Beijing if he were to return. By 1983 talks had broken down and the Chinese had decided that they did not want the Dalai Lama to return after all. Tibet, according to the Chinese government, became the 'front line of the struggle against splittism'.

Perhaps most dismaying for Tibetans, however, was the emergence of a Chinese policy of Han immigration to the high plateau. Sincisation had already been successfully carried out in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Qinghai, and now Tibet was targeted for mass immigration. Attractive salaries and interest-free loans were made available to Chinese willing to emigrate to Tibet, and, in 1984 alone, more than 100,000 Han Chinese took advantage of the incentives to 'modernise' the backward province of Tibet.

In 1986 a new influx of foreigners arrived in Tibet, with the Chinese beginning to loosen restrictions on tourism. The trickle of tour groups and individual travellers soon became a flood. For the first time since the Chinese

The journalist Harrison Salisbury referred to Tibet in the mid-1980s as a 'dark and sorrowful land'.

Education was once under the exclusive control of the monasteries, and the introduction of a secular education system has been a major goal of the communist government.

Sorrow Mountain: The Journey of a Tibetan Warrior Nun by Ani Pachen and Adelaide Donnelly is the story of a nun who became a resistance leader and was imprisoned by the Chinese for 21 years before escaping to India.

1951

The 17 Point Agreement is signed. It is the first document that formally acknowledges Tibet as a part of the People's Republic of China (PRC). At the signing ceremony Chairman Mao's first remark is 'Welcome Back to the Motherland'.

1954

In 1954 the Dalai Lama is invited to Beijing, where, amid cordial discussions with Mao Zedong, he is told that religion is 'poison'.

late 1950s

The Khampas found the resistance group known as Four Rivers, Six Ranges. The Tibetan exile groups in India make contact with the Americans, securing the CIA's aid and Tibetans were sent for training to the Pacific island of Saipan.

1959

Chinese shells explode in the Norbulingka. Amid mounting violence the 14th Dalai Lama flees to exile in India dressed as a soldier.

1964

The Panchen Rinpoche writes the 70,000 Characters Petition, accusing China of committing genocide. It states the policy was creating 'death to a nationality'. Arrested, he is charged with instigating rebellion and planning to flee to India.

1965

On 1 September 1965 the Tibetan Autonomous Region was formally brought into being with much fanfare and Chinese talk of happy Tibetans fighting back tears of gratitude at becoming one with the great motherland.

takeover, visitors from the West were given the opportunity to see the results of Chinese rule in Tibet.

For the Chinese, the foreigners were a mixed blessing. The tourist dollars were appreciated, but foreigners had an annoying habit of sympathising with the Tibetans. They also got to see things that the Chinese would rather they did not see.

When in September 1987 a group of 30 monks from Sera Monastery began circumambulating the Jokhang and crying out 'Independence for Tibet' and 'Long live his Holiness the Dalai Lama', their ranks were swollen by bystanders and arrests followed. Four days later, another group of monks repeated their actions, this time brandishing Tibetan flags.

The monks were beaten and arrested. With Western tourists looking on, a crowd of 2000 to 3000 angry Tibetans gathered. Police vehicles were overturned and Chinese police began firing on the crowd.

The Chinese response was swift. Communications with the outside world were broken and foreigners were evicted from Lhasa. It was still too late, however, to prevent eyewitness accounts from reaching newspapers around the world. A crackdown followed in Lhasa, but it failed to prevent further protests in the following months.

The Mönlam festival of March 1988 saw shooting in the streets of Lhasa, and that December a Dutch traveller was shot in the shoulder; 18 Tibetans died and 150 were wounded in the disturbances.

THE DALAI LAMA & THE SEARCH FOR SETTLEMENT

By the mid-1970s, the Dalai Lama had become a prominent international figure, working tirelessly from his government-in-exile in Dharamsala to make the world more aware of his people's plight. His visits to the USA led to official condemnation of the Chinese occupation of Tibet. In 1987 he addressed the US Congress and outlined a five-point peace plan.

The plan called for Tibet to be established as a 'zone of peace'; for the policy of Han immigration to Tibet to be abandoned; for a return to basic human rights and democratic freedoms; for the protection of Tibet's natural heritage and an end to the dumping of nuclear waste on the high plateau; and for joint discussions between the Chinese and the Tibetans on the future of Tibet. The Chinese denounced the plan as an example of 'splittism'. They gave the same response when, a year later, the Dalai Lama elaborated on the speech before the European parliament at Strasbourg in France, conceding any demands for full independence and offering the Chinese the right to govern Tibet's foreign and military affairs.

Protests and crackdowns continued in Tibet through 1989, and despairing elements in the exiled Tibetan community began to talk of the need to take up arms. It was an option that the Dalai Lama had consist-

ently opposed. His efforts to achieve peace and freedom for his people were recognised on 4 October 1989, when he was awarded the Nobel peace prize.

On 5 March 1989 Lhasa erupted in the largest anti-Chinese demonstration since 1959. Beijing reacted strongly, declaring martial law in Tibet, which lasted for more than a year. Hu Jintao was appointed Party Secretary in Tibet. Under his leadership some cultural and religious freedoms were tolerated, but control was strict. The issue of religious practices remained one of the main sources of friction between the government and the Tibetan people.

In January 1989 while visiting Tashilhunpo, the traditional seat of all the Panchen Lamas, the 10th Panchen Lama died, triggering a succession crisis that remains unresolved (see p196). The Dalai Lama identified the 11th Panchen Lama in 1995, whereupon the Chinese authorities detained the boy and his family (who have not been seen since) and orchestrated the choice of their own preferred candidate.

The Chinese began to toughen their policy towards the Dalai Lama and launched the anti-Dalai Lama campaign inside Tibet, compelling all government officials to denounce the Dalai Lama. Even in the monasteries the monks had to sign statements opposing the Dalai Lama. On 5 September 2007, the Chinese government passed a new law requiring all incarnate lamas to be approved by the government.

The Chinese authorities believe that one of the reasons for continuing separatist sentiments and opposition is Tibet's lack of integration with China. Since the 1990s the chief aim of the government has been to fully integrate Tibet with China. This has meant the opening of Tibet, allowing (and actively encouraging) Chinese migration into the region. In June 2006 President Hu Jintao formally inaugurated the controversial train that directly links Beijing and Lhasa for the first time (see p340).

Neither Mao Zedong nor Deng Xiaoping ever visited Tibet.

An illuminating glimpse of the Tibetan experience is provided by *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama*. With great humility the Dalai Lama outlines his personal philosophy, his hope to be reunited with his homeland and the story of his life. *Kundun* by Mary Craig is a biography of the Dalai Lama's family.

1967-76

The Cultural Revolution sweeps China and Tibet. The Bhuddist 'om mani padme hum' ('hail to the jewel in the lotus') is replaced by the Communist mantra 'long live Chairman Mao'.

1979-85

Tibet, under the rule of China, enters a period of liberalisation and reform; limited religious freedoms are restored.

1987-89

Pro-independence demonstrations take place in Lhasa; the response is violent, and martial law is declared.

1989

The 14th Dalai Lama's efforts to achieve peace and freedom for his people are recognised when he is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

1995

The Dalai Lama recognises Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the 11th Panchen Lama. The Chinese government appoints Choekyi Gyaltsen as the 11th Panchen Lama; Choekyi Nyima and family are not seen or heard in public since.

2007

The railway linking Beijing to Lhasa opens, bringing with it a huge number of Chinese travellers – more than two million in the first year.

The Culture

TIBETAN IDENTITY

Tibetans are such a deeply religious people that a basic knowledge of Buddhism is essential in understanding their world. Buddhism permeates most facets of Tibetan daily life and shapes aspirations in ways that are often quite alien to the Western frame of mind. The ideas of accumulating merit, of sending sons to be monks, of undertaking pilgrimages, and of devotion to the sanctity and power of natural places are all elements of the unique fusion between Buddhism and the older shamanistic Bön faith.

For travellers, the easy smile of most Tibetans is infectious and it is rare for major cultural differences to get in the way of communication. Tibetans are among the loveliest people in Asia and very easy to get along with: open, joyful, sincere, tolerant and good-humoured. This combination is all the more remarkable in view of the anger and long-harboured resentment that must lie under the surface in Tibet.

TRADITIONAL LIFESTYLE

Traditionally there have been at least three distinct segments of Tibetan society: the *drokpa* (nomads; p148); the *rongpa* (farmers of the Tibetan valleys); and the *sangha* (community of monks and nuns). Each lead very different lives but share a deep faith in Buddhism.

These communities have also shared a remarkable resistance to change. Until the early 20th century Tibet was a land in which virtually the only use for the wheel was as a device for activating mantras. Tibet has changed more in the past 50 years than in the previous 500, although many traditional social structures have endured Chinese attempts at iconoclasm.

Farming communities usually comprise a cluster of homes surrounded by agricultural lands that were once owned by the nearest large monastery and protected by a *dzong* (fort). The farming itself is carried out with the assistance of a *dzo*, a breed of cattle where bulls have been crossbred with yaks. Some wealthier farmers own a small 'walking tractor' (a very simple tractor engine that can pull a plough or a trailer). Harvested grain is carried by donkeys to a threshing ground where it is trampled by cattle or threshed with poles. The grain is then cast into the air from a basket and the task of winnowing carried out by the breeze. Animal husbandry is still extremely important in Tibet, and there are around 21 million head of livestock in the country.

Until recently such communities were effectively self-sufficient in their needs and, although theirs was a hard life, it could not be described as abject poverty. Village families pulled together in times of need. Plots of land were usually graded in terms of quality and then distributed so that the land of any one family included both better- and poorer-quality land. This is changing rapidly as many regions become more economically developed.

Imports such as tea, porcelain, copper and iron from China were traditionally compensated by exports of wool and skins. Trading was usually carried out in combination with pilgrimage or by nomads. Most villages now have at least one entrepreneur who has set up a shop and begun to ship in Chinese goods from the nearest urban centre.

Individual households normally have a shrine in the home or in a small building in the family compound. There might also be several religious texts, held in a place of honour, which are reserved for occasions when a monk or holy man visits the village. Ceremonies for blessing yaks and other livestock to ensure a productive year are still held. One of the highlights of the year

for rural Tibetans is visiting nearby monasteries at festival times or making a pilgrimage to a holy site. As traditional life reasserts itself after 50 years of communist dogma and the disastrous Cultural Revolution, many of these traditions are slowly making a comeback. A burgeoning economy is starting to fuel a growth in traditional crafts, at least in Lhasa, though this is partially for the tourism market.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is practised throughout the world, although as a devotional exercise it has been raised to a level of particular importance in Tibet. This may be because of the nomadic element in Tibetan society; it may also be that in a mountainous country with no roads and no wheeled vehicles, walking long distances became a fact of life, and by visiting sacred places en route pilgrims could combine walking with accumulating merit. To most Tibetans their natural landscape is imbued with a series of sacred visions and holy 'power places': mountains can be perceived as mandala images, rocks assume spiritual dimensions, and the earth is imbued with healing powers.

RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

Tourism has already affected many areas in Tibet. Most children will automatically stick their hand out for a sweet, a pen or anything. In some regions, eg around Mt Everest, Tibetans have become frustrated at seeing a stream of rich tourist groups but few tangible economic results. Please try to bear the following in mind as you travel through Tibet:

- Try to patronise as many small local Tibetan businesses, restaurants and guesthouses as possible. Revenues created by organised group tourism go largely into the pockets of the Chinese authorities.
- Doling out medicines can encourage people not to seek proper medical advice, while handing out sweets or pens to children encourages begging. If you wish to contribute something constructive, it's better to give pens directly to schools and medicines to rural clinics, or make a donation to an established charity. See p327.
- Monastery admission fees go largely to local authorities, so if you want to donate to the monastery, leave your offering on the altar.
- Don't buy skins or hats made from endangered animals such as snow leopards.
- Don't pay to take a photograph of someone, and don't photograph someone if they don't want you to. If you agree to send a photograph of someone, please follow through on this.
- If you have any pro-Tibetan sympathies, be very careful with whom you discuss them. Don't put Tibetans in a politically difficult or even potentially dangerous situation. This includes handing out photos of the Dalai Lama (these are illegal in Tibet) and politically sensitive materials.
- Act respectfully when visiting temples and monasteries. Always circle a monastery building, statue or *chörten* (stupa) in a clockwise direction (unless it is a Bön monastery)
- If you have a guide, try to ensure that he or she is a Tibetan, as Chinese guides invariably know little about Tibetan Buddhism or monastery history.
- Dress responsibly. Short skirts and shorts are not a suitable option, especially at religious sites. Wearing shorts in Tibet (even when trekking) is akin to walking around with 'TOURIST!' tattooed on your forehead.
- For more on the ethical issues involved in visiting Tibet, see www.savetibet.org.

For more on the etiquette of visiting monasteries, see p102. For information on responsible trekking, see p286.

TOURISTS & SKY BURIAL

Sky burials are funeral services and, naturally, Tibetans are often very unhappy about camera-toting foreigners heading up to sky-burial sites. The Chinese authorities do not like it either and may fine foreigners who attend a burial. You should never pay to see a sky burial and you should never take photos. Even if Tibetans offer to take you up to a sky-burial site, it is unlikely that other Tibetans present will be very happy about it. If nobody invited you, don't go.

The motivations for pilgrimage are many, but for the ordinary Tibetan it amounts to a means of accumulating *sonam* (merit) or *tashi* (good fortune). The lay practitioner might go on pilgrimage in the hope of winning a better rebirth, to cure an illness, end a spate of bad luck or as thanks for an answered prayer.

Death

Although the early kings of Tibet were buried with complex funerary rites, ordinary Tibetans have not traditionally been buried. The bodies of the very poor were usually dumped in a river when they died and the bodies of the very holy were cremated and their ashes enshrined in a *chörten* (or their bodies dried in salt). But in a land where soil is at a premium and wood for cremation is scarcer still, most bodies were, and still are, disposed of by sky burial.

After death, the body is kept for 24 hours in a sitting position while a lama recites prayers from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to help the soul on its journey through the 49 levels of Bardo, the state between death and rebirth. Three days after death, the body is blessed and early-morning prayers and offerings are made to the monastery. The body is folded up (the spine is broken and the body itself is folded into a surprisingly small package) and carried on the back of a close friend to the *dürtro* (burial site). Here, special body-breakers known as *rogyapas* cut off the deceased's hair, chop up the body and pound the bones together with *tsampa* (roasted-barley flour) for vultures to eat.

There is little overt sadness at a sky burial; the soul is considered to have already departed and the burial itself is considered to be mere disposal, or rather a final act of compassion to the birds. Sky burial is, however, very much a time to reflect on the impermanence of life. Death is seen as a powerful agent of transformation and spiritual progress. Tibetans are encouraged to witness the disposal of the body and to confront death openly and without fear. This is one reason that Tantric ritual objects such as trumpets and bowls are often made from human bone.

Dress

Many Tibetans in Lhasa now wear modern clothes imported from China but traditional dress is still the norm in the countryside. The Tibetan national dress is a *chuba* (long-sleeved sheepskin cloak), tied around the waist with a sash and worn off the shoulder with great bravado by nomads and Khampas (people from Kham). *Chubas* from eastern Tibet in particular have super-long sleeves, which are tied around the waist. An inner pouch is often used to store money belts, amulets, lunch and even small livestock. Most women wear a long dress, topped with a colourful striped apron known as a *pangden*. Traditional Tibetan boots have turned-up toes, so as to kill fewer bugs when walking (or so it is said).

Women generally set great store in jewellery, and their personal wealth and dowry are often invested in it. Coral is particularly valued (as Tibet is so far from the sea), as are amber, turquoise and silver. The Tibetan *zee*, a unique elongated agate stone with black and white markings, is highly

Older country folk may stick out their tongue when they meet you, a very traditional form of respect that greeted the very first travellers to Tibet centuries ago. Some sources say that this is done to prove that the person is not a devil, since devils have green tongues, even when they take human form.

prized for its protective qualities and can fetch tens of thousands of US dollars. Earrings are common in both men and women and they are normally tied on with a piece of cord. You can see all these goodies for sale around the Barkhor in Lhasa.

Tibetan women, especially those from Amdo (northeastern Tibet and Qinghai), wear their hair in 108 braids, an auspicious number in Buddhism. Khampa men plait their hair with red or black tassels and wind the lot around their head. Cowboy hats are popular in summer and fur hats are common in winter. Most pilgrims carry a *gau* (amulet), with perhaps a picture of the owner's personal deity or the Dalai Lama inside.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE UNDER THREAT

The greatest threat to Tibetan cultural life comes from development and Chinese migration, as government subsidies and huge infrastructure projects change the face and ethnic make-up of cities across the breadth of Tibet.

Investment from Beijing has brought with it a surge in Han immigrants hungry for jobs or just filled with idealism about life on the roof of the world. Although no figures are available, it is obvious that many Chinese people, attracted by preferential loans and tax rates, a less strictly enforced one-child policy, stipends for a hardship posting and easy business opportunities, are setting up shop in urban centres all over Tibet. An education system that exclusively uses the (Mandarin) Chinese language at higher levels reinforces the fact that only Sinicised Tibetans are able to actively participate in Tibet's economic advances.

Religious freedoms have increased in recent years, though any form of political dissent is quickly crushed. Monks and nuns, who are often the focus of protests and Tibetan aspirations for independence, are regarded with suspicion by the authorities. Nuns, in particular, considering their small numbers, have been very politically active and accounted for 55 of the 126 independence protests in the mid-1990s. Regulations make it impossible for nuns, once arrested and imprisoned, to return to their nunneries.

And yet for all the new roads, karaoke joints, brothels, Chinese TV, internet bars and mobile phones that have swept across Tibet, traditional and religious life remain at the core of most Tibetans' identities. Pepsi and Budweiser may now rival Buddhist deities as the most popular icons in Tibet, but the quintessence of Tibet remains remarkably intact.

ECONOMY

China's epic drive to develop its western hinterland has had a considerable impact on Tibet, and its economy is booming. Growth over the last six years has averaged an impressive 12%, trade is growing at 50% and GDP hit

Tibetans are often named after the day of week they were born on; thus you'll meet Nyima (Sunday), Dawa (Monday), Mingmar (Tuesday), Lhagpa (Wednesday), Phurba (Thursday), Pasang (Friday) and Pemba (Saturday). Popular names such as Sonam (merit) and Tashi (good fortune) carry religious connotations.

GUCCI GUCHI

Being a devout Buddhist region, Tibet has a long tradition of begging for alms. Generally, beggars will approach you with thumbs up and mumble '*guchi, guchi*' – 'please, please' (not a request for Italian designer clothes).

Tibetans tend to be generous with beggars and usually hand out a couple of mao to anyone deserving. Banks and monasteries will swap a Y10 note for a wad of one-mao notes, which go a long way.

If you do give (and the choice is entirely yours), give the same amount Tibetans do; don't encourage the beggars to make foreigners a special target by handing out large denominations. It's worth keeping all your small change in one pocket – there's nothing worse than pulling out a Y100!

PILGRIMAGE

In Tibet there are countless sacred destinations that act as pilgrim magnets, ranging from lakes and mountains to monasteries and caves that once served as meditation retreats for important yogis. Specific pilgrimages are often prescribed for specific ills; certain mountains, for example, expiate certain sins. A circumambulation of Mt Kailash offers the possibility of liberation within three lifetimes, while a circuit of Lake Manasarovar can result in spontaneous buddhahood. A circuit of Tsari in southeastern Tibet can improve a pilgrim's chances of being reborn with special powers, such as the ability to fly.

Pilgrimage is also more powerful in certain auspicious months; at certain times, circumambulations of Bönri are reckoned to be 700 million times more auspicious than those of other mountains.

The three foremost pilgrimage destinations of Tibet are all mountains: Mt Kailash, in western Tibet; Tapka Shelri and the Tsari Valley in southeastern Tibet; and Mt Labchi, east of Nyalam, in Tsang. Only the first is open to foreigners. Lakes such as Manasarovar, Yamdrok-tso, Nam-tso and Lhamo La-tso attract pilgrims, partly because their sacred water is thought to hold great healing qualities. The cave hermitages of Drak Yerpa, Chim-puk and Sheldrak are particularly venerated by pilgrims for their associations with Guru Rinpoche.

Pilgrims often organise themselves into large groups, hire a truck and travel around the country visiting all the major sacred places in one go. Pilgrim guidebooks have existed for centuries to help travellers interpret the 24 'power places' of Tibet. Such guides even specify locations where you can urinate or fart without offending local spirits (and probably your fellow pilgrims).

Making a pilgrimage is not just a matter of walking to a sacred place and then going home. There are a number of activities that help focus the concentration of the pilgrim. The act of kora (circumambulating the object of devotion) is chief among these. Circuits of three, 13 or 108 koras are especially auspicious, with sunrise and sunset the most auspicious hours. The particularly devout prostrate their way along entire pilgrimages, stepping forward the length of their body after each prostration (often marking the spot with a small conch shell) and starting all over again. The hardcore even do their koras sideways, advancing one side step at a time!

Most pilgrims make offerings during the course of a pilgrimage. *Kathaks* (white ceremonial scarves) are offered to lamas or holy statues as a token of respect (and then often returned by the lama as a blessing). Offerings of yak butter or oil, fruit, tsampa (dough made with roasted-barley flour), seeds and money are all left at altars, and bowls of water and *chang* (barley beer) are replenished. Monks often act as moneychangers, converting Y10 notes into wads of one-mao notes, which helps stretch limited funds.

Outside chapels, at holy mountain peaks, passes and bridges, you will see pilgrims throwing offerings of tsampa or printed prayers into the air (often with the cry 'sou, sou, sou!'). Pilgrims also collect sacred rocks, herbs, earth and water from a holy site to take back home to those who couldn't make the pilgrimage, and leave behind personal items as a break from the past, often leaving them hanging in a tree. Other activities in this spiritual assault course include adding stones to cairns, rubbing special healing rocks, and squeezing through narrow gaps in rocks as a method of sin detection. Many of these actions are accompanied by the visualisation of various deities and practices.

Koras usually include stops of particular spiritual significance, such as rock-carved syllables or painted buddha images. Many of these carvings are said to be 'self-arising', ie not having been carved by a human hand. The Mt Kailash kora is a treasure trove of these, encompassing sky-burial sites, stones that have 'flown' from India, monasteries, bodhisattva footprints and even a lingam (phallic image).

Other pilgrimages are carried out to visit a renowned holy man or teacher. Blessings from lamas, *trulkus* (reincarnated lamas) or *rinpoches* (highly esteemed lamas) are particularly valued, as are the possessions of famous holy men. According to Keith Dowman in his book *The Sacred Life of Tibet*, the underpants of one revered lama were cut up and then distributed among his eager followers!

\$3.7 billion in 2006. New businesses and hotels are popping up everywhere, spurred on by investment from China's eastern provinces.

Not all Chinese are here to earn money, though. Wealthy urban Chinese tourists are flocking to Tibet in droves to spend it, and tourism is an increasingly important source of revenue. Tibet currently receives three million tourists in a year, a rate growing by an amazing 40% annually. This influx brings in US\$300 million each year. More than 93% of tourists to Tibet are Chinese. Over 30,000 tourists arrived at Lhasa airport during the May 1 national holiday.

The 2006 opening of the train line between Tibet and Qinghai Province (see p339) has had a huge effect on both tourism and economic growth, cutting transport costs by US\$23 million in the first year alone. The train also transported over 1.5 million additional people to Tibet during the same period.

The Tibetan plateau has rich deposits of gold, zinc, chromium, silver, boron, uranium and other metals. The plateau is home to most of China's huge copper reserves. A single mine in northern Tibet is said to hold over half the world's total deposits of lithium. Chinese scientists announced the discovery of five billion tonnes of oil and gas in the Changtang region in 2001. Reports indicate mining now accounts for one-third of Tibet's industrial output. Mining has long been traditionally inimical to Tibetans, who believe it disturbs the sacred essence of the soil. Many fear that the train will speed up mining. The Chinese name for Tibet, Xizang – the Western Treasure House – now has a ring of prophetic irony.

There is an increasing economic and social divide in Tibet. Per capita disposable income currently stands at over US\$1000 in the towns and only \$260 in the countryside.

Many Tibetans maintain that Chinese immigrants are the real winners in the race to get rich in Tibet, while China protests that it is simply developing and integrating one of its most backward provinces, at a large financial loss.

POPULATION

Modern political boundaries and history have led to the fracture of the Tibetan nation. Large areas of historical and ethnic Tibet are now incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Qinghai and Gansu (traditionally known as

Tibetans still use the lunar calendar for traditional events. Years are calculated on a 60-year cycle and divided into five elements and 12 zodiac animals. Thus 2007/8 is the Tibetan year of the Fire Pig.

A Cultural History of Tibet by David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson is a good introduction to the history and culture of Tibet, but is marred by the use of a scholarly and at times indecipherable transliteration system of Tibetan, eg Samye Monastery is rendered 'bSam-yas'.

ON THE ROAD

'The hardest thing?' Phurba asked, clacking his crude wooden hand covers in front of his forehead and chest and dropping to the ground in full prostration.

'The hardest thing is definitely crossing the passes, especially when it's snowing. It'll take us three months to get from Pasho to Lhasa; we do about 7km a day. Yes, we have support – we take turns pushing that cart with our supplies.' He pointed to a decrepit-looking wheelbarrow loaded with duvets, a blackened kettle and a huge bag of tsampa.

All over eastern and northern Tibet, in the run-up to the Saga Dawa festival, you'll see similar bands of pilgrims hiking, prostrating and inching their way like caterpillars along the highways. Each prostration takes them a body length closer to their goal; the holy city of Lhasa. Dressed in aprons and hair nets, equipped with basic rucksacks of cloth and sticks, the pilgrims burn with a devotion that's hard to fathom.

'Why don't you take the bus?' I asked foolishly.

'The bus isn't interesting – you can't see anything travelling that fast.'

Looking guiltily back at my waiting Land Cruiser, I nodded in agreement. To me, at least, their pilgrimage seemed part-devotion, part-workout, part-camping expedition. It was a kind of spiritual road trip, a chance to see the country and earn a higher rebirth. And maybe lose a few pounds.

Tibetan babies are considered to be one year old at the time of birth, since reincarnation took place nine months previously upon conception.

Tibetans show respect to an honoured guest or a lama by placing a *kathak* (prayer scarf) around their neck. When reciprocating, hold the scarf out in both hands with palms turned upwards.

Amdo), and Sichuan and Yunnan (traditionally known as Kham). More Tibetans now live outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) than inside it. Over 120,000 Tibetans live in exile abroad, mostly in India, and over 3000 make the dangerous illegal crossing over the high mountain passes via Nepal every year.

Population Control

Population control is a cornerstone of Chinese government policy, but the regulations are generally less strictly enforced in Tibet. 'Minority nationalities' such as the Tibetans are allowed two children before they lose certain stipends and housing allowances. Ironically, the most effective form of birth control in modern Tibet still seems to be to join a monastery.

Ethnic Groups

Although local mythology has the Tibetan people descended from the union of a monkey and ogress, the Tibetan people probably descended from nomadic tribes who migrated from the north and settled to sedentary cultivation of Tibet's river valleys. About a quarter of Tibetans are still nomadic. There are considerable variations between regional groups of Tibetans. The most recognisable are the Khampas of eastern Tibet, who are generally larger and a bit more rough-and-ready than other Tibetans and who wear red or black tassels in their long hair. Women from Amdo are especially conspicuous because of their elaborate braided hairstyles and jewellery.

There are pockets of other minority groups, such as the Lhopa (Lhoba) and Monpa in the southeast of Tibet, but these make up less than 1% of the total population and only very remote pockets remain. A more visible ethnic group

ETHNIC TIBETAN REGIONS OF CHINA (GREATER TIBET)



TAP Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

TIBET & THIS GUIDEBOOK

This book covers the areas of the Tibetan cultural region that fit best with travel patterns of the majority of travellers to Tibet – the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and Western Sichuan province (as well as Kathmandu, a prominent travel gateway to Tibet). Other parts of the Tibetan region (in Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai provinces) are covered in Lonely Planet's *China* and *China's Southwest* guides.

are the Hui Muslims. Tibet's original Muslim inhabitants were largely traders or butchers (a profession that most Buddhists abhor), although the majority of recent migrants are traders and restaurant owners from southern Gansu province. Tibetans are also closely related to the Qiang people of northern Sichuan, the Sherpas of Nepal and the Ladakhis of India.

MULTICULTURALISM

Official statistics claim 93% of the TAR's population is Tibetan, a figure that is hotly contested by almost everyone except the government. Chinese figures for the population of Lhasa, for example, suggest it is just over 87% Tibetan and just under 12% Han Chinese, a ratio that stretches the credulity of anyone who has visited the city in recent years. It is more likely that somewhere in the vicinity of 50% of Lhasa's population is Han Chinese.

The current flood of Chinese immigrants into Tibet has been termed China's 'second invasion'. The Chinese government is very coy about releasing figures that would make it clear just how many Chinese there are in Tibet, but for visitors who have made repeated trips to Tibet the increased numbers of Han Chinese are undeniable.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there's an endemic mistrust between the Tibetans and Chinese and ethnic tensions bubble just under the surface. Many Tibetans see the Han Chinese as land-hungry outsiders, while the Chinese often complain that the Tibetans are ungrateful and slow to adjust to economic opportunities. The Han Chinese word for Tibetan, *zàng* (藏), is a homonym for 'dirty' (*zāng*; 脏), which easily lends itself to racist slurs. Actual violence between the two communities is rare, but it's quickly apparent to visitors that most towns have quite separate Chinese and Tibetan (and in some cases also Hui Muslim) quarters.

WOMEN IN TIBET

Women have traditionally occupied a strong position in Tibetan society, often holding the family purse strings. Several of Tibet's most famous Buddhist practitioners, such as Yeshe Tsogyel and Machik Labdronma, were women, and Tibet's nuns remain at the vanguard of political dissent. Most of the road workers you see across the plateau are women!

Up until the Chinese invasion many Tibetan farming villages practised polyandry. When a woman married the eldest son of a family she also married his younger brothers (providing they did not become monks). The children of such marriages referred to all the brothers as their father. The practice was aimed at easing the inheritance of family property (mainly the farming land) and avoiding the break-up of small plots.

ARTS

Almost all Tibetan art, with perhaps the exception of some folk crafts, is inspired by Buddhism. Wall hangings, paintings, architecture, literature, even dance: all in some way or another attest to the influence of the Indian religion that found its most secure resting place in Tibet.

Tibetans often gesture with their lips to indicate a particular direction, so if a member of the opposite sex pouts at you, they are just showing you where to go. Also if a road worker looks like he's blowing you kisses, he probably just wants a cigarette. Then again, maybe he's just blowing you kisses...

Torma are small offerings made of yak butter and tsampa (roasted-barley flour) adorned with coloured medallions of butter. They probably developed as a substitute for animal sacrifice. Most are made during the Shō-tun festival and remain on display throughout the year.

TIBET CHIC

Hollywood's flirtation with Tibet started way back in 1937 with the film version of James Hilton's classic *Lost Horizon*. The pseudo-Tibet theme underwent a bit of a revival with such films as *The Golden Child* (1986), apparently inspired by the young Karmapa of Tsurphu Monastery, and Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* (1993), merging the life story of the Buddha (Keanu Reeves, dude!) with the tale of a young Seattle boy who is discovered to be a reincarnated lama. But it was the release in 1997 of *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*, two films detailing the Chinese invasion of Tibet, that really made Tibet chic.

Richard Gere remains the most outspoken advocate of Tibetan independence in Tinseltown, using the Academy Awards ceremony in 1992 as a platform to publicise the cause. But the Hollywood connection doesn't end there. Robert Thurman, the father of actress Uma Thurman, is the Tsongkhapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Studies at Columbia University. Other celebrities with an active interest in Tibetan Buddhism include Harrison Ford, Goldie Hawn and Oliver Stone. There is even talk that *Star Wars* creator George Lucas got the name for the character Luke Skywalker from the Tibetan *Khandroma* (or Dakini), which is generally translated as a 'sky walker'. Perhaps most surprising of all was the announcement that Steven Seagal, the ponytailed, kick-boxing movie star, was discovered to be a reincarnated *trulku* (incarnate lama) of the Nyingma order of Tibetan Buddhism!

Whether all this media fuss actually helped the Tibetan cause is up for debate. Some argue that the hype has merely helped to perpetuate a media myth of Tibet that doesn't serve the interests of the Tibetan people. Back in Hollywood they grin knowingly: 'There's no such thing as bad press.'

At the same time, the arts of Tibet represent the synthesis of many influences. The Buddhist art and architecture of the Pala and Newari kingdoms of India and Nepal were an important early influence in central Tibet, and the Buddhist cultures of Khotan and Kashmir were dominant in western Tibet. Newari influence is clearly visible in the early woodcarvings of the Jokhang, and Kashmiri influence is particularly strong in the murals of Tsaparang in western Tibet. As China came to play an increasingly major role in Tibetan affairs, Chinese influences, too, were assimilated, as is clear at Shalu Monastery near Shigatse and in the Karma Gadri style prevalent in eastern Kham. A later, clearly Tibetan style known as Menri was perfected in the monasteries of Drepung, Ganden and Sera.

Tibetan art is deeply conservative and conventional. Personal expression and innovation are not valued. Individual interpretation is actually seen as an obstacle to Tibetan art's main purpose, which is to represent the path to enlightenment. The creation of religious art in particular is an act of merit and is generally anonymous. The use of colour is decided purely by convention and rigid symbolism.

Much of Tibet's artistic heritage fell victim to the Cultural Revolution. What was not destroyed was, in many cases, ferreted away to China or onto the Hong Kong art market. In recent years over 13,500 images have been returned to Tibet, still just a fraction of the number stolen. Many of Tibet's traditional artisans were persecuted or fled Tibet. It is only in recent years that remaining artists have again been able to return to their work and start to train young Tibetans in skills that faced the threat of extinction.

Dance & Drama

Anyone who is lucky enough to attend a Tibetan festival should have the opportunity to see performances of *cham*, a ritual dance performed over several days by monks and lamas. Although every movement and gesture of *cham* has significance, it is no doubt the spectacle of the colourful masked dancers that awes the average pilgrim.

Cham is about the suppression of malevolent spirits and is a throwback to the pre-Buddhist Bön faith. It is a solemn masked dance accompanied by long trumpets, drums and cymbals. The chief officiant is an unmasked Black Hat lama who is surrounded by a mandalic grouping of masked monks representing manifestations of various protective deities. The act of exorcism – it might be considered as such – is focused on a human effigy made of dough or perhaps wax or paper in which the evil spirits are thought to reside.

The proceedings of *cham* can be interpreted on a number of levels. The Black Hat lama is sometimes identified with the monk who slew Langdharma, the anti-Buddhist king of the Yarlung era, and the dance is seen as echoing the suppression of malevolent forces inimical to the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet. Some anthropologists, on the other hand, have seen in *cham* a metaphor for the gradual conquering of the ego, which is the ultimate aim of Buddhism. The ultimate destruction of the effigy that ends the dance might represent the destruction of the ego itself. Whatever the case, *cham* is a splendid, dramatic performance and is well worth going out of your way to see. For details of the major festivals in Tibet, see p318.

Performances of *cham* are usually accompanied by other, less significant performances that seem to have evolved as entertainment in festivals. *Lhamo*, not to be confused with *cham*, is Tibetan opera. A largely secular art form, it portrays the heroics of kings and the villainy of demons, and recounts events in the lives of historical figures. *Lhamo* was developed in the 14th century by Tangtong Gyelpo, known as Tibet's Leonardo da Vinci because he was also an engineer, a major bridge builder and a physician. Authentic performances still include a statue of Tangtong on the otherwise bare stage. After the stage has been purified, the narrator gives a plot summary in verse and the performers enter, each with his or her distinct step and dressed in the bright and colourful silks of the aristocracy.

Other festival dances might depict the slaying of Langdharma or the arrival of the Indian teachers in Tibet at the time of the second diffusion of Buddhism. Light relief is provided by masked clowns or children.

Music

Music is one aspect of Tibetan cultural life in which there is a strong secular heritage. In the urban centres, songs were an important vent for social criticism, news and political lampooning. In Tibetan social life, both work and play are seen as occasions for singing. Even today it is not uncommon to see the monastery reconstruction squads pounding on the roofs of buildings and singing in unison. Where there are groups of men and women, the singing alternates between the two groups in the form of rhythmic refrains. Festivals and picnics are also opportunities for singing.

Tibet also has a secular tradition of wandering minstrels. It's still possible to see minstrels performing in Lhasa and Shigatse, where they play on the streets and occasionally (when they are not chased out by the owners) in restaurants.

Generally, groups of two or three singers perform heroic epics and short songs to the accompaniment of a four-stringed guitar and a nifty little shuffle. In times past, groups of such performers travelled around Tibet, providing entertainment for villagers who had few distractions from the constant round of daily chores. These performers were sometimes accompanied by dancers and acrobats.

While the secular music of Tibet has an instant appeal for foreign listeners, the liturgical chants of Buddhist monks and the music that accompanies *cham* dances is a lot less accessible. Buddhist chanting creates an eerie haunting effect, but soon becomes very monotonous. The music of *cham* is a discordant

To see some contemporary Tibetan art visit the Gedun Cheophul Gallery in Lhasa (p103) or go online to www.mechakgallery.com.

www.asianart.com is an online journal with articles and galleries of Tibetan art.

When going over a pass, Tibetans say 'La la so, lha gyelo!' – 'May the gods be victorious!'

If you are interested in actually creating, not just understanding, Tibetan art, look for the master work on the subject, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods & Materials* by David P Jackson and Janice A Jackson.

THE TWO FACES OF TIBET

'Why did I come to Tibet? For the money, of course!' taxi driver Li grinned, his cigarette dropping ash over the dashboard. 'It's much easier to earn money here than in Mianyang, where my family lives.'

It's not that easy, though. After paying the taxi company Y260 a day rental and shelling out the ever-increasing petrol costs, Li reckons that he has to make between 30 and 50 fares a day just to turn a profit. Still, he likes it in Tibet: 'The people are friendly, the weather's good and there's hardly any traffic! Anyway, why shouldn't I come here? This is a province of China!'

Other Chinese immigrants are not so enamoured. 'I've been here three months and I'm leaving already', said Mr Wang, the owner of a Xinjiang-style restaurant in the southeast of town.

'We have health problems because of the high altitude, plus the cold winters are hard to face and the Tibetans aren't friendly to us.'

'I came on the train,' Wang continued, 'and I'll go back on the train. Without the train I wouldn't have come here.'

The flood of Chinese immigrants into Tibet is a major bone of contention between the Chinese and Tibetans in Lhasa, as is government interference in religious affairs.

After showing us a banned photograph of the Dalai Lama, one monk at a monastery in Lhasa told us in characteristically compassionate tones, 'A Tibetan plain-clothed policeman keeps tabs on the monks here, but I don't really blame him. He's got two kids, a wife and parents to support... What is he supposed to do?'

He pauses as someone moves outside the closed door of the chapel, then starts again in a low voice. 'The Tibetans and Chinese are different people. Different clothes, different ways of thinking. We are tsampa eaters,' he grinned, 'They are rice eaters.'

His eyes grew heavy, 'But there are so many, what can we do?'

He raised the photo to his forehead in a gesture of respect, placed it back in the cabinet, locked the door and smiled... 'But our hearts are in India.'

cacophony of trumpet blasts and boom-crash drums – atmospheric as an accompaniment to the dancing but not exactly the kind of thing you would want to slip into the iPod.

Tibetan religious rituals use *rolmo* and *silnyen* (cymbals), *nga* (suspended drums), *damaru* (hand drums), *drilbu* (bells), *dungchen* (long trumpets), *kangling* (conical oboes; formerly made from human thighbones) and *dungkar* (conch shells). Secular instruments include the *dramnyen* (a six-stringed lute), *piwang* (two-stringed fiddle), *lingbu* (flute) and *gyumang* (Chinese-style zither).

Most recordings of traditional Tibetan music have been made in Dharamsala or Dalhousie in India. The country's biggest musical export (or rather exile) is Yungchen Lhamo, who fled Tibet in 1989 and has since released several excellent world-music recordings. She also appeared on Natalie Merchant's *Ophelia* album. Other Tibetan singers based abroad include Dadon Dawa Dolma and Kelsang Chukie Tethong (whose recent release *Voice from Tara* is worth checking out).

Even the monks of Sherab Ling Monastery in northern India were surprised when they won the 2003 Grammy for Best Traditional World Music Recording for their *Sacred Tibetan Chant*. The album is an unadorned recording of traditional monk chanting: deep and guttural, and similar to what you'll hear in prayer halls across Tibet.

Literature

The development of a Tibetan written script is credited to a monk by the name of Tonmi Sambhota and corresponded with the early introduction of Buddhism during the reign of King Songtsen Gampo. Accordingly, pre-

Buddhist traditions were passed down as oral histories that told of the exploits of early kings and the origins of the Tibetan people. Some of these oral traditions were later recorded using the Tibetan script.

But for the most part, literature in Tibet was dominated by Buddhism, first as a means of translating Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Tibetan and second, as time went by, in association with the development of Tibetan Buddhist thought. There is nothing in the nature of a secular literary tradition – least of all novels – such as can be found in China or Japan.

One of the great achievements of Tibetan culture was the development of a literary language that could, with remarkable faithfulness, reproduce the concepts of Sanskrit Buddhist texts. The compilation of Tibetan-Sanskrit dictionaries in the early 9th century ensured consistency in all subsequent translations.

Alongside Buddhist scriptures exists an ancient tradition of storytelling, usually concerning the taming of Tibet's malevolent spirits to allow the introduction of Buddhism. Many of these stories were passed from generation to generation orally, but some were recorded. Examples include the epic *Gesar of Ling* and the story of Guru Rinpoche, who is said to have been born in a lotus in the ancient kingdom of Swat before coming to Tibet and performing countless miracles to prepare the land for the diffusion of Buddhism. The oral poetry of the *Gesar* epic is particularly popular in eastern Tibet, where a tiny number of ageing bards just keep alive a tradition that dates back to the 10th century.

Through the 12th and 13th centuries, Tibetan literary endeavour was almost entirely consumed by the monumental task of translating the complete Buddhist canon into Tibetan. The result was the 108 volumes of canonical texts (*Kangyur*), which record the words of the Historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, and 208 volumes of commentary (*Tengyur*) on the *Kangyur* by Indian masters that make up the basic Buddhist scriptures shared by all Tibetan religious orders. What time remained was used in the compilation of biographies and the collection of songs of revered lamas. Perhaps most famous among these is the *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. Milarepa was an ascetic to whom many songs and poems concerning the quest for buddhahood are attributed.

Wood-block printing has been in use for centuries and is still the most common form of printing in monasteries. Blocks are carved in mirror image; printers then work in pairs putting strips of paper over the inky block and shutting an ink roll over it. The pages of the text are kept loose, wrapped in cloth and stored along the walls of monasteries. Tibet's most famous printing presses were in Derge in modern-day Sichuan, at Nartang Monastery and at the Potala.

Very little of the Tibetan literary tradition has been translated into English. Translations that may be of interest include *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a mysterious but fascinating account of the stages and visions that occur between death and rebirth; *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, which describes the path to enlightenment as seen by the chief disciple of Milarepa and founder of the Kagyupa order; and *The Life of Milarepa*, the autobiography of the country's most famous ascetic.

Architecture

Most early religious architecture – the Jokhang in Lhasa for example – owed much to Pala (Indian) and especially Newari (Nepali) influences. Still, a distinctively Tibetan style of architectural design emerged, and found its greatest expression in the Kumbum of Gyantse, the monasteries of Samye and Tashilhunpo, and the Potala. The great American architect Frank Lloyd Wright is said to have had a picture of the Potala on the wall of his office.

Tales of Tibet – Sky Burials, Prayer Wheels & Wind Horses, edited by Herbert J Batt, gathers contemporary fiction by Tibetan and Chinese writers. The scholarly introduction explains how the nationality of the authors influences this sometimes elegiac, sometimes confronting collection.

The Tibetan epic *Gesar of Ling* is the world's longest epic poem, 25 times as long as *The Iliad*, and takes years to recite in full!

Chö by Choying Drolma and Steve Tibbets (Hannibal Music Label) is a deeply beautiful and highly recommended recording of chants and songs by Tibetan nuns. The follow-up, *Selwa* (Six Degrees Records), is also recommended.

For world music with modern production try *Coming Home* (Real World, 1998) by Yungchen Lhamo, or her recent *Ama* (2006), which features a duet with Annie Lennox.

CHÖRTENS

Probably the most prominent Tibetan architectural motif is the chörtens (stupa). Chörtens were originally built to house the cremated relics of the Historical Buddha and as such have become a powerful symbol of the Buddha and his teachings. Later, chörtens also served as reliquaries for lamas and holy men. Monumental versions would often encase whole mummified bodies, as is the case with the tombs of the Dalai Lamas in the Potala. And the tradition is very much alive: a stunning gold reliquary chörtens was constructed in 1989 at Tashilhunpo Monastery to hold the body of the 10th Panchen Lama.

In the early stages of Buddhism, images of the Buddha did not exist and chörtens became the major symbol of the new faith. Over the next two millennia, chörtens took many different forms across the Buddhist world, from the sensuous stupas of Burma to the pagodas of China and Japan. Most elaborate of all are the *kumbums* (100,000 Buddha images), of which the best remaining example in Tibet is at Gyantse. Many chörtens were built to hold ancient relics and sacred texts and have been plundered over the years by treasure seekers and vandals.

Chörtens are highly symbolic. The five levels represent the four elements, plus eternal space: the square base symbolises earth, the dome is water, the spire is fire, and the top moon and sun are air and space. The 13 discs of the

For an in-depth look at Lhasa's traditional Tibetan architecture and interactive maps of Lhasa, check out www.tibetheritagefund.org

MONASTERY LAYOUT

Tibetan monasteries are based on a conservative design and share a remarkable continuity of layout. Many are built in spectacular high locations above villages. Most were originally surrounded by an outer wall, built to defend the treasures of the monastery from bands of brigands, Mongolian hordes or even attacks from rival monasteries. Most monasteries have a *kora* (pilgrimage path) around the complex, replete with holy rocks and meditation retreats high on the hillside behind. A few monasteries have a sky-burial site and most are still surrounded by ruins dating from the Cultural Revolution.

Inside the gates there is usually a central courtyard used for special ceremonies and festivals and a *darchen* (flag pole). Surrounding buildings usually include a *dukhang* (main assembly or prayer hall) with *gönkhang* (protector chapels) and *lhakhang* (subsidiary chapels), as well as monks' quarters, a *kangyur lhakhang* (library) and, in the case of larger monasteries, *tratsang* (colleges), *kangsang* (halls of residence), kitchens and a *barkhang* (printing press).

The main prayer hall consists of rows of low seats and tables, often strewn with cloaks, hats, ritual instruments, drums and huge telescopic horns. There is a small altar with seven bowls of water, butter lamps and offerings of mandalas made from seeds. The main altar houses the most significant statues, often Sakyamuni, Jampa (Maitreya) or a trinity of the Past, Present and Future Buddhas and perhaps the founder of the monastery or past lamas. Larger monasteries contain funeral chörtens of important lamas. There may be an *tsangkhang* (inner sanctum) behind the main hall, the entrance of which is flanked by protector gods, often one blue, Chana Dorje (Vajrapani) and the other red, Tamdrin (Hayagriva). There may well be an inner *kora* of prayer wheels. At the entrance to most buildings are murals of the Four Guardian Kings and perhaps a Wheel of Life or a mandala mural. Side stairs lead up from here to higher floors.

Gönkhang are dark and spooky halls that hold wrathful manifestations of deities, frequently covered with a cloth because of their terrible appearance. Murals are often traced against a black background and walls are decorated with Tantric deities, grinning skeletons or even dismembered bodies. The altars often have grain dice or mirrors, used for divination, and the pillars are decorated with festival masks, weapons and sometimes stuffed snakes and wolves. Women are often not allowed into protector chapels.

The monastery roof usually has excellent views as well as vases of immortality, victory banners, dragons and copper symbols of the Wheel of Law flanked by two deer, recalling the Buddha's first sermon at the deer park of Sarnath.

ceremonial umbrella can represent the branches of the tree of life or the 10 powers and three mindfulnesses of the Buddha. The top seed-shaped pinnacle symbolises enlightenment. The chörtens as a whole can be seen as a representation of the path to enlightenment. The construction can also physically represent the Buddha, with the base as his seat and the dome as his body.

SECULAR ARCHITECTURE

Typical features of Tibetan secular architecture, which are also used to a certain extent in religious architecture, are buildings with inward-sloping walls made of large, tightly fitting stones or sun-baked bricks. Below the roof is a layer of twigs, squashed tight by the roof and painted to give Tibetan houses their characteristic brown band. Roofs are flat, as there is little rain or snow, made from pounded earth and edged with walls. You may well see singing bands of men and women pounding a new roof with sticks weighted with large stones. In the larger structures, the roof is supported inside by wooden pillars. The exteriors are generally whitewashed brick, although in some areas, such as Sakya in Tsang, other colours may be used. In rural Tibet, homes are often surrounded by walled compounds, and in some areas entrances are protected by painted scorpions and swastikas.

Nomads, who take their homes with them, live in *bar* (yak-hair tents), which are normally roomy and can accommodate a whole family. An opening at the top of the tent lets out smoke from the fire.

Painting

As with other types of Tibetan art, painting is very symbolic and can be interpreted on many different levels. It is almost exclusively devotional in nature.

STYLES

The strongest influence came from India. Paintings usually followed stereotyped forms with a central Buddhist deity surrounded by smaller, lesser deities. Poised above the central figure was often a supreme buddha figure of which the one below it was an emanation. Later came depictions of revered Tibetan lamas or Indian spiritual teachers, often surrounded by lineage lines or incidents from the lama's life.

Chinese influence began to manifest itself more frequently in Tibetan painting from around the 15th century. The freer approach of Chinese landscape painting allowed some Tibetan artists to break free from some of the more formalised aspects of Tibetan religious art and employ landscape as a decorative motif in the context of a painting that celebrated a particular religious figure. This is not to say that Chinese art initiated a new movement in Tibetan art. The new, Chinese-influenced forms coexisted with older forms, largely because painting in Tibet was passed on from artisan to apprentice in much the same way that monastic communities maintained lineages of teaching.

THANGKAS

Religious paintings mounted on brocade and rolled up between two sticks are called thangkass. Their eminent portability was essential in a land of nomads, and they were often used by mendicant preachers and doctors as a visual learning aid. Not so portable are the huge thangkass known as *gheku* or *koku*, the size of large buildings, that are unfurled every year during festivals. Traditionally, thangkass were never bought or sold.

The production of a thangka is an act of devotion and the process is carefully formalised. Linen (or now more commonly cotton) is stretched

www.tibetart.org has online examples of Tibetan art from dozens of collections.

MANDALAS

The mandala (*kyilkhor*, literally 'circle') is more than a beautiful artistic creation, it's also a three-dimensional meditational map. What on the surface appears to be a plain two-dimensional design emerges, with the right visual approach, as a three-dimensional picture. Mandalas can take the form of paintings, patterns of sand, three-dimensional models or even whole monastic structures, as at Samye. In the case of the two-dimensional mandala, the correct visual approach can be achieved only through meditation. The painstakingly created sand mandalas also perform the duty of illustrating the impermanence of life (they are generally swept away after a few days).

A typical mandala features a central deity surrounded by four or eight other deities who are aspects of the central figure. These surrounding deities are often accompanied by a consort. There may be several circles of these deities, totalling several hundred deities. These deities and all other elements of the mandala have to be visualised as the three-dimensional world of the central deity and even as a representation of the universe.

The mandala is associated with Tantric Buddhism and is chiefly used in a ritual known as *sadhana* (means for attainment). According to this ritual, the adept meditates on, invokes and identifies with a specific deity, before dissolving into emptiness and re-emerging as the deity itself. The process, in so far as it uses the mandala as an aid, involves a remarkable feat of imaginative concentration. One ritual calls for the adept to visualise 722 deities with enough clarity to be able to see the whites of their eyes and hold this visualisation for four hours.

on a wooden frame, stiffened with glue and coated with a mix of chalk and lime called *gesso*. Iconography is bound by strict mathematical measurements. A grid is drawn onto the *thangka* before outlines are sketched in charcoal, starting with the main central deity and moving outwards.

Colours are added one at a time, starting with the background and ending with shading. Pigments were traditionally natural: blue from lapis, red from cinnabar and yellow from sulphur. Most *thangkas* are burnished with at least a little gold. The last part of the *thangka* to be painted is the eyes, which are filled in during a special 'opening the eyes' celebration. Finally a brocade backing of three colours and a protective 'curtain' are added, the latter to protect the *thangka*.

Statuary & Sculpture

Tibetan statuary, like Tibetan painting, is almost exclusively religious in nature. Ranging in height from several centimetres to several metres, statues usually depict deities and revered lamas. Most of the smaller statues are hollow and are stuffed with paper prayers and relics when consecrated.

Metal statues are traditionally sculpted in wax and then covered in clay. When the clay is dry it is heated. The wax melts and is removed, leaving a mould that can be filled with molten metal. Statues are generally then gilded and painted.

Sculptures are most commonly made from bronze or stucco mixed with straw, but can even be made out of butter and *tsampa*. Butter sculptures are normally made on wooden frames and symbolise the impermanence of all things.

Handicrafts

Tibet has a 1000-year history of carpet making; the carpets are mostly used as seat covers, bed covers and saddle blankets. Knots are double tied (the best carpets have 100 knots per square inch), which results in a particularly thick pile. Tibet's secret carpet ingredient is its particularly high-quality sheep wool, which is hand spun and coloured with natural dyes such as indigo, walnut, madder and rhubarb. Gyantse and Shigatse were the tradi-

tional centres of carpet production, although the modern industry is based almost exclusively in Tibetan exile communities in Nepal.

Inlaid handicrafts are common, particularly in the form of prayer wheels, daggers, butter lamps and bowls, although most of what you see these days in Lhasa is made by Tibetan communities in Nepal. Nomads in particular wear stunning silver jewellery; you may also see silver flints, amulets known as *gau*, and ornate chopstick and knife sets.

Tibetan singing bowls, made from a secret mix of seven different metals, are a meditation device that originated from pre-Buddhist Bön practices. The bowls produce a 'disassociated' mystic hum when a playing stick is rotated around the outer edge of the bowl.

Woodcarving is another valued handicraft, used in the production of brightly coloured Tibetan furniture and window panels, not to mention wood-print blocks.

The Art of Tibet by Robert Fisher is a portable colour guide to all the arts of Tibet, from the iconography of *thangkas* (Tibetan religious paintings usually framed by silk brocade) to statuary.

You can see traditional craftsmen at work at the Ancient Art Restoration Centre (AARC) in Lhasa, next to Drogenling – see p125. The AARC managed the restoration of the Potala and Sera and Drepung monasteries, and craftsmen here include *thangka* painters, metal workers, wood-carvers and dyemakers.

Tibetan Buddhism

A basic understanding of Buddhism is essential to getting beneath the skin of things in Tibet. Buddhism's values and goals permeate almost everything Tibetan. Exploring the monasteries and temples of Tibet and mixing with its people, yet knowing nothing of Buddhism, is like visiting the Vatican and knowing nothing of Roman Catholicism. To be sure, it might still seem an awe-inspiring experience, but much will remain hidden and indecipherable.

For those who already do know something of Buddhism, who have read something of Zen, for example, Tibet can be baffling on another level. The grandeur of the temples, the worship of images and the fierce protective deities that stand in doorways all seem to belie the basic tenets of an ascetic faith that is basically about renouncing the self and following a path of moderation.

On a purely superficial level, Buddhism has historically encompassed the moral precepts and devotional practices of lay followers, the scholastic tradition of the Indian Buddhist universities and a body of mystic Tantric teachings that had a particular appeal to followers of the shamanistic Bön faith.

Tibetan Buddhism's reaction with existing Bön spirit worship and the Hindu pantheon created a huge range of deities, both wrathful and benign (although these are technically all merely aspects of the human ego). Apart from a whole range of different buddha aspects there are also general protector gods called *dharmapalas* and personal meditational deities called *yidams*, which Tantric students adopt early in their spiritual training. Yet for all its confusing iconography the basic tenets of Buddhism are very much rooted in daily experience. Even high lamas and monks come across as surprisingly down-to-earth.

Buddhism is perhaps the most tolerant of the world's religions. Wherever it has gone it has adapted to local conditions, like a dividing cell, creating countless new schools of thought. Its basic tenets have remained very much the same and all schools are bound together in their faith in the value of the original teachings of Sakyamuni (Sakya Thukpa), the Historical Buddha. The Chinese invasion has ironically caused a flowering of Tibetan Buddhism abroad and you can now find Tibetan monasteries around the world.

Closely linked to both Bön and Buddhism is the folk religion of Tibet, known as *mi chös* (the dharma of man), which is primarily concerned with spirits. These spirits include *nyen*, which reside in rocks and trees; *lu* or *naga*, snake-bodied spirits, which live at the bottom of lakes, rivers and wells; *sadok*, lords of the earth, which are connected with agriculture; *tsen*, air or mountain spirits, which shoot arrows of illness and death at humans; and *dud*, demons linked to the Buddhist demon Mara. Spirits of the hearth, roof and kitchen inhabit every Tibetan house. The religious beliefs of the average Tibetan are a fascinating melange of Buddhism, Bön and folk religion.

HISTORY

Buddhism originated in the northeast of India around the 5th century BC, at a time when the local religion was Brahmanism. Some brahman, in preparation for presiding over offerings to their gods, partook of an asceticism that transported them to remote places where they fasted, meditated and practised yogic techniques.

Many of the fundamental concepts of Buddhism find their origin in the brahman society of this time. The Buddha (c 480–400 BC), born Siddhartha

Gautama, was one of many wandering ascetics whose teachings led to the establishment of rival religious schools. Jainism was one of these schools, Buddhism was another.

Little is known about the life of Siddhartha. It was probably not until some 200 years after his death that biographies were compiled, and by that time many of the circumstances of his life had merged with legend. It is known that he was born in Lumbini (modern-day Nepal) of a noble family and that he married and had a son before renouncing a life of privilege and embarking on a quest to make sense of the suffering in the world.

After studying with many of the masters of his day he embarked on a course of intense asceticism, before concluding that such a path was too extreme. Finally, in the place that is now known as Bodhgaya in India, Siddhartha meditated beneath a *bo* (pipal) tree. At the break of dawn at the end of his third night of meditation he became a buddha (awakened one).

BUDDHIST CONCEPTS

Buddhism's early teachings are based on the insights of the Buddha, known in Mahayana tradition as Sakyamuni (Sakya Thukpa in Tibetan), and form the basis of all further Buddhist thought. Buddhism is not based on a revealed prophecy or divine revelation but rather is rooted in human experience. The later Mahayana school (to which Tibetan Buddhism belongs) diverged from these early teachings in some respects, but not in its fundamentals.

The Buddha commenced his teachings by explaining that there was a Middle Way that steered a course between sensual indulgence and ascetic self-torment – a way of moderation rather than renunciation. This Middle Way could be pursued by following the Noble Eightfold Path. The philosophical underpinnings of this path were the Four Noble Truths, which addressed the problems of karma and rebirth. These basic concepts are the kernel of early Buddhist thought.

In a modern sense, Buddhist thought stresses nonviolence, compassion, equanimity (evenness of mind) and mindfulness (awareness of the present moment).

Rebirth

Life is a cycle of rebirths. The common assumption is that there are many rebirths, but in Buddhist thought they are innumerable. The Sanskrit word 'samsara' (Tibetan: *khorwa*), literally 'wandering on', is used to describe this cycle, and life is seen as wandering on limitlessly through time, and through the birth, extinction and rebirth of galaxies and worlds. There are six levels of rebirth or realms of existence. It is important to accumulate enough merit to avoid the three lower realms, although in the long cycle of rebirth, all beings pass through them at some point. These six levels are depicted on the Wheel of Life (p64). All beings are fated to tread this wheel continuously until they make a commitment to enlightenment.

Karma

All beings pass through the same cycle of rebirths. Their enemy may once have been their mother, and like all beings they have lived as an insect and as a god, and suffered in one of the hell realms. Movement within this cycle, though, is not haphazard. It is governed by karma.

Karma (*las* in Tibetan) is a slippery concept. It is sometimes translated simply as 'action', but it also implies the consequences of action. Karma might be thought of as an overarching condition of life. Every action in life leaves a psychic trace that carries over into the next rebirth. It should not be thought of as a reward or punishment, but simply as a result. In Buddhist thought

www.buddhanet.net is a good online resource for anyone interested in Buddhism.

Nagas (*lu* in Tibetan) are serpent spirits that occur in wells, springs, rivers and lakes, and control the weather and disease.

Chaktsal (prostration) is a powerful way for pilgrims to show their devotion: practitioners place their hands in a *namaste* (prayer-like) position, touch their forehead, throat and heart, get down into a half-prostration (as for Muslim prayer) and then lie full on the ground with their hands stretched out, before repeating the exercise, often for hours.

Tibetan rosary beads are made of 108 dried seeds. Prayers are marked off by each bead; a second string marks off higher multiples. Spies working for the British adapted rosaries to record distances as they secretly mapped large areas of Tibet during the 19th century.

The lotus (*padma* in Sanskrit, *metok* in Tibetan) is an important Buddhist symbol and the thrones of many deities are made from a lotus leaf. The leaf symbolises purity and transcendence, in the world but not of it, rising as it does from muddy waters to become a flower of great beauty.

Keith Dowman's *Sacred Life of Tibet* builds on his earlier *Power Places of Central Tibet* to provide an excellent insight into how Tibetans see the spiritual landscape of their land. It also offers a pilgrim's perspective on travelling in Tibet.

WHEEL OF LIFE

The Wheel of Life (Sipa Khorlo in Tibetan), depicted in the entryway to most monasteries, is an aid to realising the delusion of the mind; a complex pictorial representation of how desire chains us to samsara, the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

The wheel is held in the mouth of Yama, the Lord of Death. The inner circle of interdependent desire shows a cockerel (representing desire or attachment) biting a pig (ignorance or delusion) biting a snake (hatred or anger). A second ring is divided into figures ascending through the realms on the left and descending on the right.

The six inner sectors of the wheel symbolise the six realms of rebirth: gods, battling demigods and humans (the upper realms); and hungry ghosts, hell and animals (the lower realms). All beings are reborn through this cycle dependent upon their karma. The Buddha is depicted outside the wheel, symbolising his release into a state of nirvana.

At the bottom of the wheel are hot and cold hells, where Yama holds a mirror that reflects one's lifetime. A demon to the side holds a scale with black and white pebbles, weighing up the good and bad deeds of one's lifetime.

The *pretas*, or hungry spirits, are recognisable by their huge stomachs, thin needle-like necks and tiny mouths, which cause them insatiable hunger and thirst. In each realm the Buddha attempts to convey his teachings (the dharma), offering hope to each realm.

The 12 outer segments depict the so-called '12 links of dependent origination', and the 12 interlinked, codependent and causal experiences of life that perpetuate the cycle of samsara. The 12 images (whose order may vary) are of a blind woman (representing ignorance), a potter (unconscious will), a monkey (consciousness), men in a boat (self-consciousness), a house (the five senses), lovers (contact), a man with an arrow in his eye (feeling), a drinking scene (desire), a figure grasping fruit from a tree (attachment), pregnancy, birth and death (a man carrying a corpse to a sky burial).

karma is frequently likened to a seed that ripens into a fruit: thus a human reborn as an insect is harvesting the fruits of a previous immoral existence.

Merit

Given that karma is a kind of accumulated psychic baggage that we must lug through countless rebirths, it is the aim of all practising Buddhists to try to accumulate as much 'good karma' – merit – as possible. Merit is best achieved through the act of rejoicing in giving, although merit can even be achieved through giving that is purely motivated by a desire for merit. The giving of alms to the needy and to monks, the relinquishing of a son to monkhood, and acts of compassion and understanding are all meritorious and have a positive karmic outcome.

The Four Noble Truths

If belief in rebirth, karma and merit are the basis of lay-followers' faith in Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths (Tibetan: *phakpay denpa shi*) might be thought of as the deep structure of the faith, or its philosophical underpinning. The Buddha systematised the truths in the manner of the medical practice of his time: (1) diagnose the illness, (2) identify its cause, (3) establish a cure and (4) map a course for the cure. Their equivalents in Buddhism's diagnosis of the human condition are: (1) *dukkha* (suffering), caused by (2) *tanha* (desire), which may be cured by (3) *nibbana*, nirvana (cessation of desire), which can be achieved by means of (4) the Noble Eightfold Path, or the Middle Way.

The first of the Four Noble Truths, then, is that life is suffering. This suffering extends through all the countless rebirths of beings, and finds its origin in the imperfection of life. Every rebirth brings with it the pain of birth, the pain of ageing, the pain of death, the pain of association with

Mani (prayer) stones are carved with sutras as an act of merit and placed in long walls, often hundreds of metres long, at holy sites.

The dharma wheel symbolises the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath. The eight spokes recall the Eightfold Path. The wheel was the earliest symbol of Buddhism, used long before images of the Buddha became popular.

unpleasant things, the loss of things we are attached to and the failure to achieve the things we desire.

The reason for this suffering is the second Noble Truth, and lies in our dissatisfaction with imperfection, in our desire for things to be other than they are. What is more, this dissatisfaction leads to actions and karmic consequences that prolong the cycle of rebirths and may lead to even more suffering, much like a mouse running endlessly in a wheel.

The third Noble Truth was indicated by the Buddha as *nibbana* (*namtrol*), which is known in English as nirvana. It is the cessation of all desire, an end to attachment. With the cessation of desire comes an end to suffering, the achievement of complete nonattachment and an end to the cycle of rebirth. Nirvana is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. Nit-pickers might point out that the will to achieve nirvana is a desire in itself. Buddhists answer that this desire is tolerated as a useful means to an end, but it is only when this desire, too, is extinguished that nirvana is truly achieved.

The Noble Eightfold Path is the fourth of the Noble Truths. It prescribes a course that for the lay practitioner will lead to the accumulation of merit, and for the serious devotee may lead to nirvana. The components of this path are (1) right understanding, (2) right thought, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness and (8) right concentration. Needless to say, each of these has a 'wrong' corollary.

The 10 Meritorious Deeds

The 10 meritorious deeds are to refrain from killing, stealing, inappropriate sexual activity, lying, gossiping, cursing, sowing discord, envy, malice and opinionatedness.

SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM

Not long after the death of Sakyamuni, disagreements began to arise among his followers – as they tend to do in all religious movements – over whose interpretations best captured the true spirit of his teachings. The result was the development of numerous schools of thought and, eventually, a schism that saw the emergence of two principal schools: Hinayana and Mahayana.

Hinayana, also known as Theravada, might be seen as the more conservative of the two, a school that encouraged scholasticism and close attention to what were considered the original teachings of Sakyamuni. Mahayana, on the other hand, with its elevation of compassion (*nyingje*) as an all-important idea, took Buddhism in a new direction. It was the Mahayana school that made its way up to the high plateau and took root there, at the same time travelling to China, Korea and Japan. Hinayana retreated into southern India and took root in Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Mahayana

The claims that Mahayanists made for their faith were many, but the central issue was a change in orientation from individual pursuit of enlightenment to bodhisattvahood. The bodhisattva, rather than striving for complete nonattachment, aims, through compassion and self-sacrifice, to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all beings.

In another development, Sakyamuni began to take on another form altogether. Mahayanists maintained that Sakyamuni had already attained buddhahood many aeons ago and that he was a manifestation of a long-enlightened transcendent being who sent such manifestations to many worlds to assist all beings on the road to enlightenment. There were many such transcendent beings, the Mahayanists argued, living in heavens or

Prayer flags are strung up to purify the air and pacify the gods. All feature the *longta*, or windhorse, which carries the prayers up into the heavens. The colours are highly symbolic – red, green, yellow, blue and white represent fire, wood, earth, water and iron.

Prayer wheels are filled with up to a mile of prayers; the prayers are 'recited' with each revolution of the wheel. Pilgrims spin the wheels to gain merit and to concentrate the mind on the mantras and prayers they are reciting.

Full moon days see an intensification of prayers and activity in most monasteries. On the 10th day of the lunar month there are prayers dedicated to Guru Rinpoche, on the 15th day to Öpagme (Amitayus), on the eighth day to the medicine Buddha, and at the new moon prayers are dedicated to Sakyamuni (Sakya Thukpa).

The Buddhist parable of the Four Harmonious Brothers is painted on walls at the entrance to many monasteries. The image is of a bird picking a tree-top fruit, while standing atop a hare, who is atop a monkey, who is atop an elephant. On its most basic level the image symbolises cooperation and harmony with the environment.

The Eight Auspicious Symbols (*tashi taryel*) are associated with gifts made to Sakyamuni upon his enlightenment and appear as protective motifs across Tibet. They are the knot of eternity, wheel of law, lotus flower, pair of golden fishes, victory banner, precious umbrella, white conch shell and vase of treasure.

The *dorje* (thunderbolt) and *driibu* (bell) are ritual objects symbolising male and female aspects used in Tantric rites. They are held in the right and left hands respectively. The indestructible thunderbolt cuts through ignorance.

‘pure lands’, and all were able to project themselves into the innumerable worlds of the cosmos for the sake of sentient life there.

The philosophical reasoning behind the Mahayana transformation of Buddhism is extremely complex, but it had the effect of producing a pantheon of bodhisattvas, a feature that made Mahayana more palatable to cultures that already had gods of their own. In Tibet, China, Korea and Japan, the Mahayana pantheon came to be identified with local gods as their Mahayana equivalents replaced them.

Tantrism (Vajrayana)

A further Mahayana development that is particularly relevant is Tantrism. The teachings of Sakyamuni were recorded in sutras and studied by students of both Hinayana and Mahayana but, according to the followers of Tantrism, a school that emerged from around AD 600, Sakyamuni left a corpus of esoteric instructions to a select few of his disciples. These were known as Tantra (Gyü).

Tantric adepts claimed that through the use of unconventional techniques they could jolt themselves towards enlightenment, and shorten the long road to bodhisattvahood. The process involved identification with a tutelary deity invoked through deep meditation and recitation of the deity’s mantra. The most famous of these mantras is the ‘*om mani padme hum*’ (‘hail to the jewel in the lotus’) mantra of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara). Tantric practice employs Indian yogic techniques to channel energy towards the transformation to enlightenment. Such yogic techniques might even include sexual practices. Tantric techniques are rarely written down, but rather are passed down verbally from tutor to student.

Most of the ritual objects and images of deities in Tibetan monasteries and temples are Tantric in nature. Together they show the many facets of enlightenment – at times kindly, at times wrathful.

BUDDHISM IN TIBET

The story of the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet is attended by legends of the taming of local gods and spirits and their conversion to Buddhism as protective deities. This magnificent array of buddhas, bodhisattvas and sages occupies a mythical world in the Tibetan imagination. Chenresig is perhaps chief among them, manifesting himself in early Tibetan kings and later the Dalai Lamas. Guru Rinpoche, the Indian sage who bound the native spirits and gods of Tibet into the service of Buddhism, is another. And there are countless others worshipped in images throughout the land: Drölma (Tara), Jampelyang (Manjushri), Milarepa, Marpa and Tsongkhapa, among others. While the clerical side of Buddhism concerns itself largely with textual study and analysis, the Tantric shamanistic-based side seeks revelation through identification with these deified beings and through their *terma* (‘revealed’ words or writings).

It is useful to consider the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism as revealing something of a struggle between these two orientations: shamanism and clericalism. Each school finds its own resolution to the problem. In the case of the last major school to arise, the Gelugpa order, there was a search for a return to the doctrinal purity of clerical Buddhism. But even here, the Tantric forms were not completely discarded; it was merely felt that many years of scholarly work and preparation should precede the more esoteric Tantric practices.

The clerical and shamanistic orientations can also be explained as the difference between state-sponsored and popular Buddhism respectively. There was always a tendency for the state to emphasise monastic Buddhism, with its

communities of rule-abiding monks. Popular Buddhism, on the other hand, with its long-haired, wild-eyed ascetic recluses capable of performing great feats of magic, had a great appeal to the ordinary people of Tibet, for whom ghosts and demons and sorcerers were a daily reality.

Nyingmapa Order

The Nyingmapa order is the Old School, and traces its origins back to the teachings and practices of Guru Rinpoche, who came to Tibet from India and lived in the country in the 8th and 9th centuries. As Buddhism fell into decline until the second diffusion of the faith in the 11th century (see p29), the Nyingmapa failed to develop as a powerful, centralised school, and for the most part prospered in villages throughout rural Tibet, where it was administered by local shamanlike figures.

With the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet and the emergence of rival schools, the Nyingmapa order experienced something of a revival through the ‘discovery’ of hidden texts in the ‘power places’ of Tibet visited by Guru Rinpoche. In many cases these *terma* (revealed texts) were discovered through yogic-inspired visions by spiritually advanced Nyingmapa practitioners, rather than found under a pile of rocks or in a cave. Whatever their origins, these *terma* gave the Nyingmapa a new lease of life.

The *terma* gave rise to the Dzogchen (Great Perfection) teachings. Much maligned by other Tibetan schools, Dzogchen postulates a primordial state of purity that pre-existed the duality of enlightenment and samsara, and offered a Tantric short cut to nirvana. Dzogchen teaches that enlightenment can come in one lifetime. Such ideas were to influence other orders of Buddhism in the 19th century. For more on the Dzogchen school see www.dzogchen.org.

The Nyingmapa never enjoyed the political power of other major Tibetan schools of Buddhism. Its fortunes improved somewhat with the accession of the fifth Dalai Lama, who was born into a Nyingmapa family. He personally saw to the expansion of Mindroling and Dorje Drak Monasteries, which became the head Nyingmapa monasteries of Ü and all Tibet. In particular,

The Dalai Lama is a one-man publishing empire! Many books attributed to the Dalai Lama are actually transcripts of public lectures. The most popular titles are *The Art of Happiness*, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, *The Meaning of Life* and *The Power of Compassion*.

There are many modern guides to practising Tibetan Buddhism – Western authors such as Lama Surya Das and Pema Chodron have written a selection of books dealing with Tibetan Buddhist concepts in a modern context.

THE WORLD OF A MONK

The Western term ‘monk’ is slightly misleading when used in the context of Tibetan Buddhism. The Tibetan equivalent would probably be *trapa*, which means literally ‘scholar’ or ‘student’, and is an inclusive term that covers the three main categories of monastic inmates. Monks in these categories should also be distinguished from lamas who, as spiritual luminaries, have a privileged position in the monastic hierarchy, may have considerable wealth and, outside the Gelugpa order, are not necessarily celibate.

The first step for a monk, usually after completing some prior study, is to take one of two lesser vows, the *genyen* or *getsul* ordination – a renunciation of secular life that includes a vow of celibacy. This marks the beginning of a long course of study that is expected to lead to the full *gelong* vows of ordination. While most major monasteries have a number of *gelong* monks, not all monks achieve *gelong* status.

These three categories do not encompass all the monks in a monastery. There are usually specific monastic posts associated with administrative duties, with ritual and with teaching. *Gelong* vows are also supplemented by higher courses of study, which are rewarded in the Gelugpa order by the title *geshe*. In premodern Tibet the larger monasteries also had divisions of so-called ‘fighting monks’, or monastic militias. To a large extent they served as a kind of police force within a particular monastery, but there were also times when their services were used to hammer home a doctrinal dispute with a rival monastery. In 1950, on the eve of the Chinese invasion, it was estimated that 30% of Tibet’s male population were monks.

Butter lamps, or *chömay*, are kept lit continuously in all monasteries and many private homes, and are topped up continuously by visiting pilgrims equipped with a tub of butter and a spoon.

Found on all altars and replenished twice a day, the seven bowls of water refer to the 'Seven Examined Men' – the first seven monks in Tibet, or the seven first steps of Buddha.

he is supposed to have overcome and taught mountain goddesses with the use of Tantric sexual techniques.

Kagyupa Order

This resurgence of Buddhist influence in the 11th century led to many Tibetans travelling to India to study. The new ideas they brought back with them had a revitalising effect on Tibetan thought and produced other new schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Among them was the Kagyupa order, established by Milarepa (1040–1123), who was the disciple of Marpa the translator (1012–93).

The influence of one of Milarepa's disciples, Gampopa (1079–1153), led to the establishment of numerous monasteries that became major teaching centres, eventually overshadowing the ascetic-yogi origins of the Kagyupa. The yogi tradition did not die out completely, however, and Kagyupa monasteries also became important centres for synthesising the clerical and shamanistic orientations of Tibetan Buddhism.

Several suborders of the Kagyupa sprung up with time, the most prominent of which was the Karma Kagyupa, also known as the Karmapa. The practice of renowned lamas reincarnating after death probably originated with this suborder, when the abbot of Tsurphu Monastery, Dusum Khyenpa (1110–93),

THE HISTORY OF BÖN

As a result of the historical predominance of Buddhism in Tibet, the Bön religion has been suppressed for centuries and has only recently started to attract the attention of scholars. Many Tibetans remain quite ignorant of Bön beliefs and your guide might refuse to even set foot in a Bön monastery. Yet Bön and Buddhism have influenced and interacted with each other for centuries, exchanging texts, traditions and rituals. In the words of Tibet scholar David Snellgrove, 'every Tibetan is a Bönpo at heart'.

The word 'Bön' has three main connotations. The first relates to the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, suppressed and supplanted by Buddhism in the 8th and 9th centuries. The second is the form of 'organised' Bön (Gyur Bön) systematised along Buddhist lines, which arose in the 11th century. Third, and linked to this, is a body of popular beliefs that involves the worship of local deities and spirit protectors.

Bön has its deepest roots in the earliest religious beliefs of the Tibetan people. Centred on an animist faith shared by all central Asian peoples, religious expression took the form of spells, talismans, oaths, incantations, ritual drumming and sacrifices. Rituals often revolved around an individual who mediated between humans and the spirit world.

The earliest form of Bön, sometimes referred to as Black Bön, also Dud Bön (the Bön of Devils) or Tsan Bön (the Bön of Spirits), was concerned with counteracting the effects of evil spirits through magical practices. Bönpo priests were entrusted with the wellbeing and fertility of the living, with curing sicknesses and affecting the weather. A core component was control of the spirits, to ensure the safe passage of the soul into the next world. For centuries Bönpo priests controlled the complex burial rites of the Yarlung kings. Bön was the state religion of Tibet until the reign of Songtsen Gampo (630–649).

Bön is thought to have its geographical roots in the kingdom of Shang-Shung, which is located in western Tibet, and its capital at Kyunglung (Valley of the Garuda). Bön's founding father was Shenrab Miwoche, also known as Tonpa Shenrab, the Teacher of Knowledge, who was born in the second millennium BC in the mystical land of Olma Lungring in Tajik (thought to be possibly the Mt Kailash area or even Persia). Buddhists often claim that Shenrab is merely a carbon copy of Sakyamuni (Sakya Thukpa), and certainly there are similarities to be found. Biographies state that he was born a royal prince and ruled for 30 years before becoming an ascetic. His 10 wives bore him 10 children who formed the core of his religious disciples.

announced that he would be reincarnated as his own successor. The 16th Karmapa died in 1981, and his disputed successor fled to India in 1999 (see *The Karmapa Connection*, p144). Other Kagyupa schools, the Drigungpa and Taglungpa, are based at Drigung Til and Talung Monasteries in Ü.

Sakyapa Order

With the second diffusion of Buddhism in the 11th and 12th centuries, many Tibetan monasteries became centres for the textual study and translation of Indian Buddhist texts. One of the earliest major figures in this movement was Kunga Gyaltsen (1182–1251), known as Sakya Pandita (literally 'scholar from Sakya').

Sakya Pandita's renown as a scholar led to him, and subsequent abbots of Sakya, being recognised as a manifestation of Jampelyang (Manjushri), the Bodhisattva of Insight. Sakya Pandita travelled to the Mongolian court in China, with the result that his heir became the spiritual tutor of Kublai Khan. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the Sakyapa order became embroiled in politics and implicated in the Mongol overlordship of Tibet (see the *Priests & Patrons: the Reign of the Sakyapas* box, p203). Nevertheless, at the same time, Sakya emerged as a major centre for the scholastic study of Buddhism, and attracted students such as Tsongkhapa, who initiated the Gelugpa order.

For a modern overview of Tibetan Buddhism, try *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* by John Powers or *Essential Tibetan Buddhism* by Robert Thurman.

The *sengye*, or snow lion, is one of Tibet's four animals and acts as a mount for many Tibetan protector deities. The other three animals are the garuda (*khyung*), dragon (*druk*) and tiger (*dak*).

Many of the tales of Shenrab Miwoche deal with his protracted struggles with the demon king Khyabpa Lagring.

Bön was first suppressed by the eighth Yarlung king, Drigung Tsenpo, and subsequently by King Trisong Detsen. The Bön master Gyerpung Drenpa Namkha (a *gyerpung* is the Bön equivalent of a lama or guru) struggled with Trisong Detsen to protect the Bön faith until the king finally broke Shang-Shung's political power. Following the founding of the Samye Monastery, many Bön priests went into exile or converted to Buddhism, and many of the Bön texts were hidden.

The modern Bön religion is known as Yungdrung (Eternal Bön). A *yungdrung* is a swastika, Bön's most important symbol. (Yungdrungling means 'swastika park' and is a common name for Bön monasteries.) *The Nine Ways of Bön* is the religion's major text. Bönpos still refer to Mt Kailash as Yungdrung Gutseg (Nine-Stacked-Swastika Mountain).

To the casual observer it's often hard to differentiate between Bönpo and Buddhist practice. It can be said that in many ways Bön shares the same goals as Buddhism but takes a different path. The word 'Bön' has come to carry the same connotation as the Buddhist term 'dharma' (*chö*). Shared concepts include those of samsara, karma and rebirth in the six states of existence. Even Bön monasteries, rituals and meditation practice are almost identical to Buddhist versions. Still, there are obvious differences. Bön has its own Kangyur, a canon made up of texts translated from the Shang-Shung language, and Bönpos turn prayer wheels and circumambulate monasteries anticlockwise. The main difference comes down to the source of religious authority: Bönpos see the arrival of Buddhism as a catastrophe, the supplanting of the truth by a false religion.

Bönpo iconography is unique. Tonpa Shenrab is the most common central image, and is depicted as either a monk or a deity. He shares Sakyamuni's *mudra* (hand gesture) of 'enlightenment' but holds the Bön sceptre, which consists of two swastikas joined together by a column. Other gods of Bönpo include Satrid Ergang, who holds a swastika and mirror; Shenrab Wokar and his main emanation, Kuntu Zangpo, with a hooklike wand; and Sangpo Bumprtri.

Complementing these gods is a large number of local deities – these are potentially harmful male spirits known as *gekho* (the protectors of Bön) and their female counterparts, *drapla*. Welchen Gekho is the king of the harmful *gekho*, and his consort Logbar Tsame is the queen of the *drapla*.

A spirit trap is a series of interlocking threads around a wooden frame, often placed on a tree, which is supposed to ensnare evil spirits and which is burnt after its job is done.

The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying by Sogyal Rinpoche is an excellent background to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the Dzogchen tradition. Sogyal has had contact with Western students, and several travellers recommend the book for beginners and advanced practitioners.

The swastika is an ancient symbol of Buddhism and is often found painted on houses to bring good luck. Swastikas that point clockwise are Buddhist; those that point anticlockwise are Bön.

Many Sakyapa monasteries contain images of the Sakyapa protector deity Gampo Gur and photographs of the school's four head lamas: the Sakya Trizin (in exile in the US), Ngawang Kunga (head of the Sakyapa order), Chogye Trichen Rinpoche (head of the Tsarpa subschool) and Ludhing Khenpo Rinpoche (head of the Ngorpa subschool).

Gelugpa Order

It may not have been his intention, but Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), a monk who left his home in Kokonor at the age of 17 to study in central Tibet, is regarded as the founder of the Gelugpa (Virtuous School) order, which came to dominate political and religious affairs in Tibet.

Tsongkhapa studied with all the major schools of his day, but was particularly influenced by the Sakyapa and the Kadampa orders. The Kadampa order had its head monastery at Netang, near Lhasa, and it was here that the 11th-century Bengali sage Atisha (Jowo-je) spent his last days. The Kadampa had sustained the teachings of Atisha, which are a sophisticated synthesis of conventional Mahayana doctrine with the more arcane practices of Tantric Buddhism, and emerged as a major school, emphasising scholastic study. It may never have matched the eminence of the Kagyupa and Sakyapa orders, but in the hands of Tsongkhapa the teachings of the Kadampa order established a renewal in Tibetan Buddhism.

After experiencing a vision of Atisha (Jowo-je), Tsongkhapa elaborated on the Bengali sage's clerical-Tantric synthesis in a doctrine that is known as *lamrim* (the graduated path). Tsongkhapa basically advocated a return to doctrinal purity and monastic discipline as prerequisites to advanced Tantric studies. He did not, as is sometimes maintained, advocate a purely clerical approach to Buddhism, but he did reassert the monastic body as the basis of the Buddhist community, and he maintained that Tantric practices should be reserved only for advanced students.

Tsongkhapa established a monastery at Ganden, which was to become the head of the Gelugpa order. Other monasteries were also established at Drepung, Sera and Shigatse. Although the abbot of Drepung was the titular head of the order (and is to this day), it was the Dalai Lamas who came to be increasingly identified with the order's growing political and spiritual prestige.

Bön

In Tibet the establishment of Buddhism was marked by its interaction with the native religion Bön. This shamanistic faith, which encompassed gods and spirits, exorcism, talismans and the cult of dead kings among other things, had a major influence on the direction Buddhism took in Tibet.

Many popular Buddhist symbols and practices, such as prayer flags, sky burial, the rubbing of holy rocks, the tying of bits of cloth to trees and the construction of spirit traps, all have their roots deep in Bön tradition. The traditional blessing of dipping a finger in water or milk and flicking it to the sky derives from Bön and can still be seen today in the shamanistic folk practices of Mongolia.

But it was Bön that was transformed and tamed to the ends of Buddhism and not vice versa. The Bön order, as it survives today, is to all intents and purposes the fifth school of Tibetan Buddhism. Major Bön monasteries include Menri and Yungdrungling (see p190) in central Tibet, and Tsedru (p262) and Tengchen (p263) in eastern Tibet. Other pockets of Bön exist in the Changtang region of northern Tibet and the Aba region of northern Sichuan (Kham). The main centre of Bön in exile is at Dolanji, near Solan, in India's Himachal Pradesh.

IMPORTANT FIGURES OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

This is a brief iconographical guide to some of the gods and goddesses of the vast Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, as well as to important historical figures. It is neither exhaustive nor scholarly, but it may help you to recognise a few of the statues you encounter during your trip. Tibetan names are given first, with Sanskrit names provided in parentheses. (The exception is Sakya Thukpa, who is generally known by his Sanskrit name, Sakyamuni.)

Buddhas

SAKYAMUNI (SAKYA THUKPA)

Sakyamuni is the Historical Buddha (the Buddha of the Present Age), whose teachings set in motion the Buddhist faith. In Tibetan-style representations he is always pictured sitting cross-legged on a lotus-flower throne. His tight curled hair is dark blue and there is a halo of enlightenment around his head. The Buddha is recognised by 32 marks on his body, including a dot between his eyes, a bump on the top of his head, three folds of skin on his neck and the Wheel of Law on the soles of his feet. In his left hand he holds a begging bowl; and his right hand touches the earth in the 'witness' *mudra* (hand gesture). He is often flanked by his two principal disciples Sariputra and Maudgalyana.



Sakyamuni (Sakya Thukpa)

MARMEDZE (DIPAMKARA)

The Past Buddha, Marmedze, came immediately before Sakyamuni and spent 100,000 years on earth. His hands are shown in the 'protection' *mudra* and he is often depicted in a trinity with the Present and Future Buddhas.

ÖPAGME (AMITABHA)

The Buddha of Infinite Light resides in the 'pure land of the west'. The Panchen Lama is considered a reincarnation of this buddha. He is red, his hands are held together in his lap in a 'meditation' *mudra* and he holds a begging bowl.



Tsepame (Amitayus)

TSEPAME (AMITAYUS)

The Buddha of Longevity, like Öpagme, is red and holds his hands in a meditation gesture, but he holds a vase containing the nectar of immortality. He is often seen in groups of nine.

MEDICINE BUDDHAS (MENLHA)

A medicine buddha holds a medicine bowl in his left hand and herbs in his right and rays of healing light emanate from his body. He is often depicted in a group of eight.

DHYANI BUDDHAS (GYALWA RI NGA)

Each of the five Dhyani buddhas is a different colour, and each of them has different *mudras*, symbols and attributes. They are Öpagme, Nampar Namse (Vairocana), Mikyöba (or Mitrukpa; Akshobya), Rinchen Jungne (Ratnasambhava) and Donyo Drupa (Amoghasiddhi).

JAMPA (MAITREYA)

Jampa, the Future Buddha (Milo Fo in Chinese), is passing the life of a bodhisattva until it is time to return to earth in human form 4000 years after the disappearance of Sakyamuni. He is normally seated in European fashion, with a scarf around his waist, often with a white stupa in his hair and his hands by his chest in the *mudra* of turning the Wheel of Law. Jampa is much larger than the average human and so statues of Jampa are often several storeys high.



Jampa (Maitreya)

Bodhisattvas

These are beings who have reached the state of enlightenment but vow to save everyone else in the world before they themselves enter nirvana. Unlike buddhas, they are often shown decorated with crowns and princely jewels.

CHENRESIG (AVALOKITESHVARA)

The glorious gentle one, Chenresig (Guanyin to the Chinese) is the Bodhisattva of Compassion. His name means 'he who gazes upon the world with suffering in his eyes'. The Dalai Lamas are considered to be reincarnations of Chenresig (as is King Songtsen Gampo), and pictures of the Dalai Lama and Chenresig are interchangeable, depending on the political climate. The current Dalai Lama is the 14th manifestation of Chenresig.

In the four-armed version (known more specifically in Tibetan as Tonje Chenpo), his body is white and he sits on a lotus blossom. He holds crystal rosary beads and a lotus and clutches to his heart a jewel that fulfils all wishes. A deer skin is draped over his left shoulder.

There is also a powerful 11-headed, 1000-armed version, known as Chaktong Chentong. The head of this version is said to have exploded when confronted with myriad problems to solve. One of his heads is that of wrathful Chana Dorje (Vajrapani), and another (the top one) is that of Öpagme (Am-tabha), who is said to have reassembled Chenresig's body after it exploded. Each of the 1000 arms has an eye in the palm. His eight main arms hold a bow and arrow, lotus, rosary, vase, wheel, staff and a wish-fulfilling jewel.

JAMPELYANG (MANJUSHRI)

The Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Jampelyang is regarded as the first divine teacher of Buddhist doctrine. He is connected to science and agriculture and school children; architects and astrologers often offer prayers to him. His right hand holds the flaming sword of awareness, which cuts through delusion. His left arm cradles a scripture on a half-opened lotus blossom and his left hand is in the 'teaching' *mudra*. He is often yellow and may have blue hair or an elaborate crown. He is sometimes called Manjughosa.

DRÖLMA (TARA)

A female bodhisattva with 21 different manifestations or aspects, Drölma is also known as the saviouress. She was born from a tear of compassion that fell from the eyes of Chenresig and is thus considered the female version of Chenresig and a protector of the Tibetan people. She also symbolises purity and fertility and is believed to be able to fulfil wishes. Images usually represent Green Tara, who is associated with night, or Drölkar (White Tara), who is associated with day (and also Songtsen Gampo's Chinese wife). The green version sits in a half-lotus position with her right leg down, resting on a lotus flower. The white version sits in the full lotus position and has seven eyes, including ones in her forehead, both palms and both soles of her feet. She is often seen as part of a longevity triad, along with red Tsepame (Amitayus) and three-faced, eight-armed female Namgyelma (Vijaya).

Protector Deities

Protectors are easily recognised by their fierce expressions, bulging eyes, warrior stance (with one leg outstretched in a fencer's pose), halo of flames and Tantric implements. They either stand trampling on the human ego or sit astride an animal mount, dressed in flayed animal or human skins. They represent on various levels the transformed original demons of Tibet, the wrathful aspects of other deities and, on one level at least, humankind's inner psychological demons.



Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara)



Jampelyang (Manjushri)



Drölma (Tara)

CHÖKYONG (LOKAPALAS)

The Chökyong (or the Four Guardian Kings) are normally seen at the entrance hallway of monasteries and are possibly of Mongol origin. They are the protectors of the four cardinal directions: the eastern chief is white with a lute; the southern is green with a red beard and holds a sword; and the western is red and holds a green *naga*. The Chinese connect them to the four seasons.

Namtöse (Vaishravana), the protector of the north, doubles as the god of wealth (Jambhala) and can be seen with an orange body (the colour of 100,000 suns) and clumpy beard, riding a snow lion, and holding a banner of victory, a jewel-spitting mongoose and a lemon.

DORJE JIGJE (YAMANTAKA)

Dorje Jigje is a favourite protector of the Gelugpa order. A wrathful form of Jampelyang, he is also known as the destroyer of Yama (the Lord of Death). He is blue with eight heads, the main one of which is the head of a bull. He wears a garland of skulls around his neck and a belt of skulls around his waist, and holds a skull cup, butchers' chopper and a flaying knife in his 34 arms. He tramples on eight Hindu gods, eight mammals and eight birds with his 16 feet.

NAGPO CHENPO (MAHAKALA)

A wrathful Tantric deity and manifestation of Chenresig, Nagpo Chenpo (Great Black One) has connections to the Hindu god Shiva. He can be seen in many varieties with anything from two to six arms. He is black ('as a water-laden cloud') with fanged teeth, wears a cloak of elephant skin and a tiara of skulls, carries a trident and skull cup and has flaming hair. In a form known as Gompo (or Yeshe Gompo), he is believed by nomads to be the guardian of the tent.

TAMDRIN (HAYAGRIVA)

Another wrathful manifestation of Chenresig, Tamdrin (the 'horse necked') has a red body. His right face is white, his left face is green and he has a horse's head in his hair. He wears a tiara of skulls, a garland of 52 severed heads and a tiger skin around his waist. His six hands hold a skull cup, a lotus, a sword, a snare, an axe and a club, and his four legs stand on a sun disc, trampling corpses. On his back are the outspread wings of Garuda and the skins of a human and an elephant. He is sometimes shown embracing a blue consort. He has close connections to the Hindu god Vishnu and is popular among herders and nomads.

CHANA DORJE (VAJRAPANI)

The name of the wrathful Bodhisattva of Energy means 'thunderbolt in hand'. In his right hand Chana Dorje holds a thunderbolt (*dorje* or *vajra*), which represents power and is a fundamental symbol of Tantric faith. He is blue with a tiger skin around his waist and a snake around his neck. He also has a peaceful, standing aspect. Together with Chenresig and Jampelyang, he forms part of the trinity known as the Rigsum Gonpo.

PALDEN LHAMO (SHRI DEVI)

The special protector of Lhasa, the Dalai Lama and the Gelugpa order, Palden Lhamo is a female counterpart of Nagpo Chenpo. Her origins probably lie in the Hindu goddess Kali. She is blue, wears clothes of tiger skin, rides on a saddle of human skin, and has earrings made of a snake and a lion. She carries a club in her right hand and a skull cup full of blood in



Nagpo Chenpo (Mahakala)



Tamdrin (Hayagriva)



Chana Dorje (Vajrapani)



Palden Lhamo (Shri Devi)

the left. She uses the black and white dice around her waist (tied to a bag of diseases) to determine people's fates. She holds the moon in her hair, the sun in her belly and a corpse in her mouth, and rides a mule with an eye in its rump.

DEMCHOK (CHAKRASAMVARA)

This meditational deity has a blue body with 12 arms, four faces and a crescent moon in his top knot. His main hands hold a thunderbolt and bell, and others hold an elephant skin, an axe, a hooked knife, a trident, a skull, a hand drum, a skull cup, a lasso and the head of Brahma. He also wears a garland of 52 heads, an apron of bone and clothes made from tiger skin.

Historical Figures

GURU RINPOCHE

The 'lotus-born' 8th-century master from modern-day Swat in Pakistan, Guru Rinpoche subdued Tibet's evil spirits and helped to establish Buddhism in Tibet. Known in Sanskrit as Padmasambhava, he is regarded by followers of Nyingmapa Buddhism as the second Buddha and wears a red five-pointed Nyingmapa-style hat. His domain is the copper-coloured mountain called Zangdok Pelri. He has a curly moustache and holds a thunderbolt in his right hand, a skull cup in his left hand, and a *katvanga* (staff) topped with three heads – one shrunken, one severed and one skull – in the crook of his left arm. He has a *phurbu* (ritual dagger) in his belt. Guru Rinpoche has eight manifestations, known collectively as the Guru Tsengye, which correspond to different stages of his life. He is often flanked by his consorts Mandarava and Yeshe Tsogyel.

TSONGKHAPA

Founder of the Gelugpa order and a manifestation of Jampelyang, Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) wears the yellow hat of the Geluggas. Also known as Je Rinpoche, he is normally portrayed in the *yab-se sum* trinity with his two main disciples, Kedrub Je and Gyatsab Je. His hands are in the 'teaching' *mudra* and he holds two lotuses. He was the founder and first abbot of Ganden Monastery and many images of him are found there.

FIFTH DALAI LAMA

The greatest of all the Dalai Lamas, the fifth (Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso; 1617–82) unified Tibet and built the bulk of the Potala. He was born at Chongye (in the Yarlung Valley) and was the first Dalai Lama to exercise temporal power. He wears the Gelugpa yellow hat and holds a thunderbolt in his right hand and a bell (*drilbu*) in his left. He may also be depicted holding the Wheel of Law (symbolising the beginning of political control of the Dalai Lamas) and a lotus flower or other sacred objects.

KING SONGTSEN GAMPO

Tibet was unified under Songtsen Gampo, who introduced Buddhism to the country early in the 7th century. He has a moustache and wears a white turban with a tiny red Öpagme poking out of the top. He is flanked by Princess Wencheng Konjo, his Chinese wife, on the left, and Princess Bhrikuti, his Nepali wife, on his right.

KING TRISONG DETSEN

The founder of Samye Monastery reigned from 755 to 797. He is normally seen in a trio of kings with Songtsen Gampo and King Ralpachen (r 817–36).



Guru Rinpoche



Tsongkhapa



Fifth Dalai Lama



King Songtsen Gampo

He is regarded as a manifestation of Jampelyang and so holds a scripture on a lotus in the crook of his left arm and a sword of wisdom in his right. Images show him with features similar to Songtsen Gampo's but without the buddha in his turban.

MILAREPA

A great 11th-century Tibetan magician and poet, Milarepa (c 1040–1123) is believed to have attained enlightenment in the course of one lifetime. He became an alchemist in order to poison an uncle who had stolen his family's lands and then spent six years meditating in a cave in repentance. During this time he wore nothing but a cotton robe and so became known as Milarepa (Cotton-Clad Mila). Most images of Milarepa depict him smiling, sitting on an antelope skin, wearing a red meditation belt and holding his hand to his ear as he sings. He may also be depicted as green because he lived for many years on a diet of nettles. Milarepa's guru was the translator Marpa.



Milarepa

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Food & Drink

Tibet is unlikely to become a hot destination for foodies. Though you won't starve, Tibetan food will probably not be a highlight of your trip. In Lhasa there are a few restaurants that have elevated a subsistence diet into the beginnings of a cuisine but outside the urban centres, Tibetan food is more about survival than pleasure. On the plus side, fresh vegetables and packaged goods are now widely available and you are never far away from a good Chinese *fanguan* (饭馆) or *canting* (餐厅) (restaurant, or ཟུང་ཁང་; *sakhâng* in Tibetan).

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES Tibetan

Tellingly, the basic Tibetan meal is *tsampa*, a kind of dough made with roasted-barley flour and yak butter (if available) mixed with water, tea or beer – something wet. Tibetans skilfully knead and mix the paste by hand into dough-like balls – not as easy as it looks! *Tsampa* with milk powder and sugar makes a pretty good porridge and is a fine trekking staple, but only a Tibetan can eat it every day and still look forward to the next meal.

Outside of Lhasa, Tibetan food is limited to greasy *momos* and *thugpa*. *Momos* are small dumplings filled with meat or vegetables or both. They are normally steamed but can be fried and are pretty good.

More common is *thugpa*, a noodle soup with meat or vegetables or both. Variations on the theme include *hipthuk* (squares of noodles and yak meat in a soup) and *thenthuk* (more noodles). Glass noodles known as *phing* are also sometimes used. The other main option is *shendre* (sometimes called curried beef), a stew of potatoes and yak meat on a bed of rice. In smarter restaurants in Lhasa or Shigatse you can try dishes like *damje* or *shomday* (varieties of fried rice with yak meat, raisins and yoghurt), *droma drase* (rice with sweet potato, sugar and butter) and *shya vale* (fried pancake-style pasties with a yak-meat filling).

In rural areas and markets you might see strings of little white lumps drying in the sun that even the flies leave alone – this is dried yak cheese and it's eaten like a boiled sweet. For the first half-hour it is like having a small rock in your mouth, but eventually it starts to soften up and taste like old, dried yak cheese.

Also popular among nomads is *yak sha* (dried yak jerky). It is normally cut into strips and left to dry on tent lines and is pretty chewy stuff.

Chinese

Han immigration into Tibet may be a threat to the very essence of Tibetan culture but it's done wonders for the restaurant scene. Even most Tibetans admit that Chinese food is better than *tsampa*, *momos* and *thugpa*. Chinese restaurants can be found in almost every settlement in Tibet these days, but dishes are around 50% more expensive than Chinese restaurants elsewhere in China.

Tasty Travel

Tibetan food isn't all that popular among travellers. Top-end Tibetan restaurants in particular are very big on yak offal, with large sections of menus sumptuously detailing the various ways of serving up yak tongues, stomachs and lungs. The situation isn't helped by dishes such as *luokwa*, a 'combination of sheep's lungs, wheat flour, garlic, pepper and salt'. Probably lots of salt...

Want to cook some dharma food for a visiting *rinpoche*? Try *Tibetan Cooking: Recipes for Daily Living, Celebration, and Ceremony* by Elizabeth Kelly or *The Lhasa Moon Tibetan Cookbook* by Tsering Wangmo. Both books offer recipes for everything from *momos* to Milarepa-style nettle soup.

In most restaurants you can simply wander out into the kitchen and point to the vegetables and meats you want fried up. The main snag with this method is that you'll miss out on many of the most interesting sauces and styles and be stuck with the same dishes over and over.

Chinese food in Tibet is almost exclusively Sichuanese, the hottest of China's regional cuisines. Sichuanese dishes are usually stir-fried quickly over a high flame and so tend to be very hygienic.

Chinese snacks are excellent and make for a fine light meal. The most common are *shuijiao* (ravioli-style dumplings) ordered by the bowl or weight (half a *jin*, or 250g, is enough for one person), and *baozi* (thicker steamed dumplings), which are similar to *momos* and are normally ordered by the steamer. Both are dipped in soy sauce, vinegar or chilli (or a mix of all). You can normally get a bowl of noodles anywhere for around Y5; *shaguo mixian* is a particularly tasty form of rice noodles cooked in a clay pot. *Chaomian* (fried noodles) and *dan chao fan* (egg fried rice) are not as popular as in the West but you can get them in many Chinese and backpacker restaurants.

Muslim

The Muslim restaurants found in almost all urban centres in Tibet are an interesting alternative to Chinese or Tibetan food. These are normally recognisable by a green flag hanging outside or Arabic script on the restaurant sign. Most chefs come from the Linxia area of Gansu. The food is based on noodles, and, of course, there's no pork.

Dishes worth trying include *ganbanmian*, a kind of stir-fried spaghetti bolognese made with beef (or yak) and sometimes green peppers, and *chaomianpian*, fried noodle squares with meat and vegetables. *Xinjiang banmian* (xinjiang noodles) are similar but the sauce comes in a separate bowl, to be poured over the noodles. You can often go into the kitchen and see your noodles being handmade on the spot.

Muslim restaurants also offer good breads and excellent *babao cha* or *babao wanzi* (eight treasure tea), which is made with dried raisins, plums and rock sugar, and only releases its true flavour after several cups.

Breakfasts

You can get decent breakfasts of yoghurt, muesli and toast at backpacker hotels in Lhasa, Gyantse and Shigatse, but elsewhere you are more likely to be confronted by Chinese-style dumplings, fried bread sticks (油条; *youtiao*) and tasteless rice porridge (稀饭; *xifan*). One good breakfast-type food that is widely available is scrambled eggs and tomato (*fanqie chaojidan*).

Self-Catering

There will be a time when you'll need to be self-sufficient, whether you're staying overnight at a monastery or are caught between towns on an overland trip. Unless you have a stove, your main saviour will be instant noodles. After a long trip to Mt Kailash and back you will know the relative tastes of every kind of packet of instant noodles sold in Tibet. Your body will also likely be deeply addicted to MSG. Even the faintest smell of noodles will leave you gagging. It's a good idea to stock up on instant coffee, hot chocolate and soups, as flasks of boiling water are offered in every hotel and restaurant.

Vegetables such as onions, carrots and bok choy (even seaweed and pickled vegetables) can save even the cheapest pack of noodles from culinary oblivion, as can a packet of mixed spices brought from home.

DRINKS Nonalcoholic Drinks

The local beverage that every traveller ends up trying at least once is yak-butter tea (see p78). Modern Tibetans use an electric blender to mix their yak butter tea.

If you find yourself kicking your heels up in Chengdu, several local hostels will teach you to stir-fry a multicourse Sichuan feast for around Y75 to Y100 (which includes the food). Places include Holly's Hostel (see p93) and Sim's Cozy Guesthouse (p91).

One popular Sichuanese sauce is *yuxiang*, a spicy, piquant sauce of garlic, vinegar and chilli that is supposed to resemble the taste of fish (probably the closest thing you'll get to fish in Tibet).

To re-create a little taste of Tibet when you get home, Lhasa's Oh Dan Guest House (see p121) offers *momo*-making courses for Y20.

double-cooked fatty pork
dry-fried runner beans
egg and tomato
'fish-resembling' eggplant
'fish-resembling' pork
fried green beans
fried vegetables
greens
home-style tofu
pork and green peppers
pork and sizzling rice crust
pork in soy sauce
red-cooked eggplant
spicy chicken with peanuts
spicy tofu
spinach
sweet and sour pork fillets
'wooden ear' mushrooms and pork

Drinks

beer
boiled water
mineral water
Muslim tea
tea
hot
ice cold

回锅肉
干煸四季豆
番茄炒蛋
鱼香茄子
鱼香肉丝
素炒扁豆
素炒蔬菜
油菜/空心菜
家常豆腐
青椒肉片
锅巴肉片
京酱肉丝
红烧茄子
宫爆鸡丁
麻辣豆腐
菠菜
糖醋里脊
木耳肉

啤酒
开水
矿泉水
八宝豌豆
茶
热的
冰的

huíguō ròu
gānbīān sījìdòu
fānqié chǎodàn
yúxiāng qiézi
yúxiāng ròusī
sùchǎo biǎndòu
sùchǎo sùcài
yóucài/kōngxīncài
jiācháng dòufu
qīngjiāo ròupiàn
guōbā ròupiàn
jīngjiàng ròusī
hóngshāo qiézi
gōngbào jīdīng
mǎlà dòufu
bōcài
tángcù lǐjǐ
mù'ěr ròu

píjiǔ
kāi shuǐ
kuàng quán shuǐ
bābǎo wǎnzi
chá
rède
bīngde

Environment

The Tibetan plateau has global ecological significance, not only as the earth's highest ecosystem and one of its last remaining great wildernesses but also as the source of Asia's greatest rivers. Furthermore, it is thought that the high plateau affects global jet streams and even influences the Indian monsoon. The Dalai Lama would like to see Tibet turned into a 'zone of peace' and perhaps even the world's largest national park.

The Tibetan Buddhist view of the environment has long stressed the intricate and interconnected relationship between the natural world and human beings, a viewpoint closely linked to the concept of death and rebirth. Buddhist practice in general stands for moderation and against overconsumption, and forbids hunting, fishing and the taking of animal life. Tibet's nomads, in particular, live in a fine balance with their harsh environment.

THE LAND

The Tibetan plateau is one of the most isolated regions in the world, bound to the south by the 2500km-long Himalaya, to the west by the Karakoram and to the north by the Kunlun and Altyn Tagh ranges, some of the least explored ranges on earth. Four of the world's 10 highest mountains straddle Tibet's southern border with Nepal. The northwest in particular is bound by the most remote and least explored wilderness left on earth, outside the polar regions. With an average altitude of 4000m and large swathes of the country well above 5000m, the Tibetan plateau (nearly the size of Western Europe) deserves the title 'the roof of the world'.

The high plateau of Tibet is the result of prodigious geological upheaval. The time scale is subject to much debate, but at some point in the last 100 million years the entire region lay beneath the Tethys Sea. And that is where it would have stayed had the mass of land now known as India not broken free from the protocontinent Gondwana and drifted off in a collision course with another protocontinent known as Laurasia. The impact of the two land masses sent the Indian plate burrowing under the Laurasian landmass, and two vast parallel ridges, over 3000km in length and in places almost 9km high, piled up. These ridges, the Himalaya and associated ranges, are still rising at around 10cm a year. You may well find locals near Shegar selling fossils of marine animals – at an altitude of more than 4000m above sea level!

The Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), with an area of 1.23 million sq km, covers only part of this geographical plateau (the rest is mostly parcelled off into the Qinghai and Sichuan provinces). It encompasses the traditional Tibetan provinces of Ü (capital, Lhasa), Tsang (capital, Shigatse) and Ngari, or western Tibet, as well as parts of Kham (eastern Tibet). The TAR shares a 3482km international border with India, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar (Burma), and is bordered to the north and east by the Chinese provinces of Xinjiang, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan.

Much of Tibet is a harsh and uncompromising landscape, best described as a high-altitude desert. Little of the Indian monsoon makes it over the Himalayan watershed. Shifting sand dunes are a common sight along the Samye Valley and the road to Mt Kailash.

Ütsang (the combined provinces of Ü and Tsang, which constitute central Tibet) is the political, historical and agricultural heartland of Tibet. Its relatively fertile valleys enjoy a mild climate and are irrigated by wide rivers such as the Yarlung Tsangpo and the Kyi-chu.

Geographically speaking, the Qinghai-Tibet plateau makes up almost 25% of China's total landmass, spread over five provinces.

The TAR is made up of the municipality of Lhasa and six prefectures (Ali, Shigatse, Nagchu, Shannan, Nyingtri and Chamdo) and is divided into 70 counties.

The dry, high altitudes of the Tibetan plateau make for climatic extremes – temperatures on the Changtang have been known to drop 27°C in a single day!

Towards the north of Ütsang are the harsh, high-altitude plains of the Changtang (northern plateau), the highest and largest plateau in the world, occupying an area of more than one million sq km. This area has no river systems and supports very little in the way of life. The dead lakes of the Changtang are the brackish remnants of the Tethys Sea that found no runoff when the plateau started its skyward ascent.

Tibet has several thousand lakes (*tso* in Tibetan), of which the largest are Nam-tso, Yamdrok-tso, Manasarovar (Mapham yum-tso), Siling-tso and Pangong-tso, the last crossing the Indian border into Ladakh. Nam-tso is the second-largest saltwater lake in China and one of the most beautiful natural sights in Tibet; the largest is Koko Nor (Qinghai Lake in Chinese; Tso-Ngon) in Qinghai province.

Ngari, or western Tibet, is similarly barren, although here river valleys provide grassy tracts that support nomads and their grazing animals. Indeed, the Kailash range in the far west of Tibet is the source of the subcontinent's four greatest rivers: the Ganges, Indus, Sutlej and Brahmaputra. The Ganges, Indus and Sutlej Rivers all cascade out of Tibet in its far west, not far from Mt Kailash itself. The Brahmaputra (known in Tibet as Yarlung Tsangpo) meanders along the northern spine of the Himalaya for 2000km, searching for a way south, before coiling back on itself in a dramatic U-turn and draining into India not far from the Myanmar border.

Kham, which encompasses the eastern TAR, western Sichuan and north-west Yunnan, marks a tempestuous drop in elevation down to the Sichuan plain. The concertina landscape produces some of the most spectacular roller-coaster roads in Asia, as Himalayan extensions such as the Hengduan Mountains are sliced by the deep gorges of the Yangzi (Dri-chu in Tibetan; Jinsha Jiang in Chinese), Salween (Gyalmo Ngul-chu in Tibetan; Nu Jiang in Chinese) and Mekong (Dza-chu in Tibetan; Lancang Jiang in Chinese) headwaters.

The Yarlung Tsangpo crashes through a 5km-deep gorge here (the world's deepest) as it swings around 7756m Namche Barwa. Many parts of this alpine region are lushly forested and support abundant wildlife, largely thanks to the lower altitudes and effects of the Indian monsoon.

WILDLIFE

The vast differences in altitude in Tibet give rise to a spread of ecosystems from alpine to subtropical.

Animals

If you are not trekking in Tibet and your travels are restricted to sights off the Friendship Hwy, you are unlikely to see much in the way of wildlife. On the road out to Mt Kailash, however, it is not unusual to see herds of fleet-footed Tibetan gazelles (*gowa*), antelope (*tso*) and wild asses (*kyang*), particularly along the northern route. During the breeding season antelope converge in groups numbering several hundred.

Trekkers might conceivably see the Himalayan black bear or perhaps the giant Tibetan brown bear searching for food in the alpine meadows. Herds of blue sheep (*nawa na*) are frequently spied on rocky slopes and outcrops, but the argali, the largest species of wild sheep in the world, now only survives in the most remote mountain fastnesses of western Tibet.

Wolves in a variety of colours can be seen all over the Tibetan plateau. Much rarer than the all-black wolf is the white wolf, one of the great sacred animals of Tibet. Smaller carnivores include the lynx, marten and fox.

Marmots (*chiwa* or *piya*) are very common and can often be seen perched up on their hind legs sniffing the air curiously outside their burrows – they

make a strange birdlike sound when distressed. The pika (*chipi*), or Himalayan mouse-hare, a relative of the rabbit, is also common. Pikas have been observed at 5250m on Mt Everest, thus earning the distinction of having the highest habitat of any mammal.

A surprising number of migratory birds make their way up to the lakes of the Tibetan plateau through spring and summer. Tibet has over 30 endemic birds; 480 species have been recorded on the plateau. Birds include the black-necked crane (whose numbers in Tibet have doubled over the last decade), bar-headed goose and lammergeier, as well as grebes, pheasants, snow cocks and partridges. Watching a pair of black-necked cranes, loyal mates for life, is one of the joys of traipsing near the wetlands of northern and western Tibet. Flocks of huge vultures can often be seen circling monasteries looking for a sky burial.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

About 80 species of animal that are threatened with extinction have been listed as protected by the Chinese government. These include the almost-mythical snow leopard (*gang-zig*), ibex (*king*), white-lipped deer (*shawa chukar*), musk deer (*lawaw*), Tibetan antelope (*chiru*), Tibetan wild ass (*kyang*), bharal, or blue sheep (*nawa na*), black-necked crane, argali and wild yak (*drong*). Omitted from the list is the very rare Tibetan brown bear (*dom gyamuk*), which stands up to 2m tall and can only be found in the forests of southern Tibet and the remote Changtang plateau.

The Tibetan red deer was recently 'discovered' only 75km from Lhasa after a 50-year hiatus, as was a hitherto unknown breed of ancient wild horse in the Riwoche region of eastern Tibet. The horses bear a striking resemblance to those shown in Stone Age paintings.

Wild yaks are mostly encountered in the Changtang, north of the 34th parallel. The biggest bull yaks are reputed to be as large as a Land Cruiser. Even rarer is the divine giant white yak, thought by Tibetans to inhabit the higher reaches of sacred mountains.

The *chiru*, a rare breed of antelope, was recently placed on the Red List (www.redlist.org), a list of threatened species maintained by the World Conservation Union. Numbers in Tibet have dropped from over a million *chiru* 50 years ago to as few as 70,000 today. Poachers kill the animal for its *shatoosh* wool (wool from the animal's undercoat).

The illegal trade in antelope cashmere, musk, bear paws and gall bladders, deer antlers, and other body parts and bones remains a problem. You can often see Tibetan traders huddled on street corners in major Chinese cities selling these and other medicinal cures. When the Dalai Lama expressed disapproval of Tibetans wearing animal pelts on their *chubas* (Tibetan cloaks) a few years ago, a movement inside Tibet resulted in the mass burnings of thousands of tiger, leopard and other hides as a sign of devotion.

Plants

Juniper trees and willows are common in the valleys of central Tibet and it is possible to come across wildflowers such as the pansy and the oleander, as well as unique indigenous flowers such as the *tsi-tog* (a light-pink, high-altitude bloom).

The east of Tibet, which sees higher rainfall than the rest of the region, has an amazing range of flora, from oak, elm and birch forests to bamboo, subtropical plants and flowers, including rhododendrons, azaleas and magnolias. It was from here that intrepid 19th-century plant hunters FM Bailey, Frank Kingdon Ward and Frank Ludlow took the seeds and cuttings of species that would eventually become staples in English gardening.

For an account of George Schaller's trips to the Changtang and some wonderful photographs, check out his coffee-table book, *Tibet's Hidden Wilderness: Wildlife and Nomads of the Chang Tang Reserve*. For a more academic background to the region's natural history try his *Wildlife of the Tibetan Steppe*.

In the arid climate of much of Tibet, water takes on a special significance. The *lu* (water spirits) guard the wellbeing of the community and are thought to be very dangerous if angered.

The Tibetan antelope was adopted as the mascot of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

Two of the best places to go bird-watching are the lakes Yamdrok-tso and Nam-tso; a section of the latter has been designated a bird preserve, at least on paper. April and November are the best times.

NATURE PRESERVES

Nature preserves officially protect over 20% of the TAR, although many exist on paper only. The preserve with the highest profile is the Qomolangma Nature Preserve (opposite), a 34,000-sq-km protected area straddling the 'third pole' of the Everest region. The park promotes the involvement of the local population, which is essential as around 67,000 people live within the park.

Tibet's newest preserve is the Changtang Nature Preserve, set up in 1993 with the assistance of famous animal behaviourist George Schaller. At 247,120 sq km (larger than Arizona), this is the largest nature reserve in the world after Greenland National Park. Endangered species in the park include bharal, argali sheep, wolves, lynxes, gazelles, snow leopards, wild yaks, antelopes, brown bears and wild asses.

Other reserves include the Great Canyon of the Yarlung Tsangpo Nature Reserve (formerly the Medog reserve) to the south of Namche Barwa, the Dzayul (Zayu) Reserve along the far southeast border with Assam, and

Yak-tail hair was the main material used to produce Father Christmas (Santa Claus) beards in 1950s America!

YAKETY-YAK

Fifty years ago an estimated one million wild yaks roamed the Tibetan plateau. Now it is a rare treat to catch a glimpse of these impressive black bovines, which weigh up to a tonne, whose shoulder heights reach over 1.8m and whose sharp, slender horns span 1m. Wild yaks have diminished in number to 15,000 as a result of the increased demand for yak meat and a rise in hunting. Although eating yak meat is not sacrilegious in Tibetan culture, hunting wild yaks is illegal.

Few, if any, of the yaks that travellers see are *drong* (wild yaks). In fact, most are not even yaks at all but rather dzo, a cross between a yak and a cow. A domestic yak rarely exceeds 1.5m in height. Unlike its wild relative, it varies in shade from black to grey and, primarily around Kokonor in Qinghai, white. Seeing only one yak of a certain colour in a herd is considered a bad omen, while seeing two or more yaks of the same colour is considered a sign of luck.

Despite their massive size, yaks are surprisingly sure-footed and graceful on steep, narrow trails, even while burdened by loads of up to 70kg. Yaks panic easily, though, and will struggle to stay close together. This gregarious instinct allows herders to drive packs of animals through snow-blocked passes, and thus to create a natural snowplough.

With three times more red blood cells than the average cow, the yak thrives in the oxygen-depleted high altitudes. Its curious lung formation, surrounded by 14 or 15 pairs of ribs rather than the 13 typical of cattle, allows a large capacity for inhaling and expelling air; thus the Latin name *Bos grunniens*, which translates literally as 'grunting ox'. In fact, a descending below 3000m may impair the reproductive cycle and expose the yak to parasites and disease. Cloaked in layers of shaggy, coarse hair and blanketed by a soft undercoat, the yak uses its square tongue and broad muzzle to forage close to the soil in temperatures that frequently drop to minus 40°C.

Tibetans rely on yak milk for cheese, as well as for butter for the ubiquitous butter tea and offerings to butter lamps in monasteries. The outer hair of the yak is woven into tent fabric and rope, and the soft inner wool is spun into *chara* (a type of felt) and used to make bags, blankets and tents. Tails are used in both Buddhist and Hindu religious practices. Yak hide is used for the soles of boots and the yak's heart is used in Tibetan medicine. In the nomadic tradition, no part of the animal is wasted and even yak dung is required as a fundamental fuel, left to dry in little cakes on the walls of most Tibetan houses. So important are yaks to the Tibetans that the animals are individually named, like children.

Herders take great care to ensure the health and safety of their animals. Relocation three to eight times a year provides adequate grazing. Every spring the yaks' thick coats are carefully trimmed. Nomads rely on unique veterinarian skills, which they use to lance abscesses, set broken bones and sear cuts.

The yak, with its extraordinary composition and might, has been perhaps the sole enabler of the harsh life of Tibet's *drokpas*, or nomads, and the two coexist in admirable harmony.

the Kyirong and Nyalam Reserves near the Nepali border. Unfortunately, these reserves enjoy little protection or policing.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Modern communist experiments, such as collectivisation and the changing of century-old farming patterns (for example, from barley to wheat and rice), upset the fragile balance in Tibet and resulted in a series of great disasters and famines in the 1960s (as, indeed, they did in the rest of China). By the mid-1970s, the failure of collectivisation was widely recognised and Tibetans have since been allowed to return to traditional methods of working the land.

Other natural resources are less easily renewed. When the Tibetan government-in-exile sent three investigative delegations to Tibet in the early 1980s, among the shocking news they returned with was that Tibet had been denuded of its wildlife. Stories of People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops machine-gunning herds of wild gazelles circulated with convincing frequency. Commercial trophy-hunting, often by foreigners paying tens of thousands of US dollars, has had an effect on the numbers of antelope and argali sheep in particular.

Rapid modernisation threatens to bring industrial pollution, a hitherto almost unknown problem, onto the high plateau. Several cement factories at Lhasa's edge created clouds of noxious smoke, which blanketed parts of western Lhasa until the factories were shut down in the 1990s. Mass domestic tourism (92% of tourists to Tibet are Chinese) is also beginning to take its toll, with litter and unsustainable waste management a major problem in areas like Nam-tso and the Everest region.

Tibet has enormous potential for hydroelectricity, although current projects at Yamdrok-tso and elsewhere have been criticised by both Tibetans and foreign environmental groups. For more information, see p181. Reports of a planned 'super-dam' (which could generate twice as much electricity as the Three Gorges Dam) on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) in the remote southeast of Tibet has the Indian government downstream deeply concerned. China's latest mega-engineering project is a plan

QOMOLANGMA NATURE PRESERVE

The Qomolangma Nature Preserve (QNP) was established in 1989 by the government of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) to conserve the natural and cultural heritage of the Mt Everest region.

Bordering Nepal's Sagarmatha, Langtang and Makalu-Barun National Parks and their buffer zones, the 34,000-sq-km preserve is part of the only protected area to straddle both sides of the Himalaya. QNP's park managers hold regular exchanges with their counterparts in Nepal to share experiences and promote conservation cooperation across political boundaries.

More than 7000 foreign tourists visit the QNP each year, and their numbers are growing. The goal of the QNP is to encourage tourism and generate local benefits and employment while protecting the environment. Entry fees to core preserve areas are invested in maintaining access roads and controlling litter at major mountaineering and trekking camps.

Funding for various environmental and economic-development activities comes from national and regional governments. QNP also collaborates with a number of international organisations. The **Mountain Institute** (www.mountain.org; 1828 L St NW, Ste 725, Washington, DC 20036) is one such organisation; it supports QNP in conserving local environment and culture and improving village livelihoods through its multiyear Qomolangma Conservation Project (QCP). In Tibet, you can get information on the project from **Christopher La Due** (☎ 891-636 4037; ccp@mountain.org; Ste 1306, Lhasa Tashi Norbu Hotel, 24 South Tuanjie Xingcun Lane, Lhasa, TAR 850000), director of the institute's Peak Enterprise Program.

The film *Mountain Patrol: Kekexili* tells the story of four Tibetans from Yushu who band together to protect the local Tibetan antelopes. The film was shot on location at Kekexili (Hoh Xil in Mongolian) nature reserve in the Tibetan grasslands of southern Qinghai (Amdo). For more info see www.nationalgeographic.com/mountainpatrol.

If you are interested in identifying Tibetan medicinal plants, check out *Tibetan Medical Thangkas of the Four Medical Tantras*, a lavish coffee-table book available in most Lhasa bookshops. Also see *Flowers of the Himalaya* by Oleg Polunin and Adam Stainton for some examples of Tibetan flora.

As early as 1642, the fifth Dalai Lama issued an edict protecting animals and the environment.

to construct a 300km pipeline to divert water from the Yalong, Dada and Jinsha Rivers in western Sichuan (Kham) to the Yellow River. The US\$37 billion project is set to begin in 2010.

The region also has abundant supplies of geothermal energy thanks to its turbulent geological history. The Yangpachen Geothermal Plant already supplies Lhasa with much of its electricity. Portable solar panelling has also enjoyed some success; the plateau enjoys some of the longest and strongest sunlight outside the Saharan region. Experimental wind-power stations have been set up in northern Tibet.

Deforestation has long been a pressing problem in eastern Tibet: around US\$54 billion worth of timber has been felled in the Tibetan region since 1959. The effect on sediment and runoff levels for rivers downstream, especially in flood-prone China, has finally sunk in and logging activity has eased considerably in recent years.

Environmentalists remain concerned about the new train line to Tibet. The line touches six protected areas and effectively blocks the seasonal migration routes of the endangered Tibetan antelope. Engineers claim that the 33 passageways built under the raised track allow wildlife to cross the line safely, though whether the antelope will learn to use the underpasses is another question. There are also fears that the possibility of seismic disruption (a magnitude 8.1 earthquake struck in 2001 near the Kunlun Shan pass) and the effects of global warming will affect the track in the coming years. Maintenance of the track may prove to be an even bigger job than construction.

Environmentalists also fear that the line will speed up mining exploitation in the region. Mining has traditionally been inimical to Tibetans, who believe it disturbs the earth spirits. In May 2007 several Tibetans were arrested in Bamei (Garthar) in Kham (Western Sichuan) after violent demonstrations against Chinese mining operations on the sacred peak of Yala Shan.

In the long term, climate change is expected to affect Tibet as much as it will the earth's low-lying regions. Chinese scientists recently announced that Tibet's glaciers are retreating at a rate of 9% in the Everest region and up to 17% at Mt Amnye Machen near the source of the Yellow River in Qinghai. China recently lowered the official height of Everest by 1.3m, citing a shrinkage in the ice cap around the peak. The UN has warned that Tibet's glaciers could disappear within a century, with 80% predicted to disappear by 2035.

The results of the glacial melting will be initial flooding and erosion, followed by a long-term drought. With almost half the world's population (85% of Asia) getting its water from the rivers flowing off the Tibetan plateau (the Ganges, Yarlung Tsangpo/Brahmaputra, Indus, Karnali, Sutlej, Yangzi, Huanghe/Yellow River, Mekong, Salween and Irrawady Rivers), changes to Tibet's environment will have global resonance.

For more on environmental issues in Tibet, visit Tibet Environmental Watch at www.tew.org.