Tibet (“the Roof of the World”)—is one of China’s five autonomous regions. A distinction is made between “political” Tibet, the area governed by the Lhasa government before 1950, and “ethnic” or “cultural” Tibet, the area inhabited by mainly Buddhist people of Tibetan origin. Tibet has been the focus of international attention because of calls for increased autonomy or independence, and at the same is being developed as an international tourist destination.

Tibet—since 1965 officially known as the Tibet (Xizang) Autonomous Region (TAR)—is made up of the central Asian landmass between the Kunlun mountain range to the north, the Himalayan Mountains to the south, and the Karakoram range to the west. It is one of China’s five autonomous regions (areas dominated by one or more of China’s fifty-five officially recognized minority ethnic groups: in this case, the Zang people).

On the east Tibet is bounded by a region of three great rivers: the Yangzi (Chang), Mekong, and Salween. With most of its territory located above 4,500 meters and its capital, Lhasa, located at 3,607 meters, Tibet has been called “the Roof of the World.” The total Tibetan population remains uncertain, and is a highly-politicized issue, particularly given the movement of Han Chinese into the TAR over the last five decades. While around 130,000 Tibetans live in exile in India and elsewhere, estimates of the Tibetan-speaking population of China range between 2 and 5 million.

Although the degree to which Tibet was a part of China in earlier eras is disputed, Tibet certainly has been a part of China since the Chinese Communist invasion in 1950 and exists today only in the much-reduced area of the TAR. A Tibetan government-in-exile, headed by the Dalai Lama (the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan people), has been established in India, and significant Tibetan exile communities exist in the United States and Switzerland. The Tibetan government in exile continues to campaign for self-determination for Tibet, and the ongoing Sino-Tibetan dispute invests facts and figures regarding Tibet with political implications. However, a distinction historically has been made between “political” Tibet, the area governed by the Lhasa government before 1950, and “ethnic” or “cultural” Tibet, the area inhabited by mainly Buddhist people of Tibetan origin.

Geographic Features

“Political” Tibet had an estimated population of 1.8–3 million, around half of whom were seminomadic yak herders. The settled urban and agricultural populations were concentrated in the river valleys, particularly in the triangle formed by the major settlements of Lhasa, Gyantse, and Shigatse (Xigaze). Today the TAR population includes a large number of Han Chinese immigrants, and with the...
completion of a railroad connecting Lhasa with other Chinese cities, the Han Chinese are now believed to form a majority of the Lhasa population.

Although Tibet is located at a latitude similar to that of Algeria, the location and altitude of the Tibetan plateau produces a cold and generally dry climate, although south-eastern Tibet includes tropical jungle. The western Tibetan area around the Gangdise (Kailas) mountain range and Lake Mapam Yumco (Manasarowar) is the source of four great rivers: the Indus, Brahmaputra, Ganges, and Sutlej. Mount Everest, located on the Tibet-Nepal border, at 8,848 meters is the world’s highest mountain.

Tibet’s climate limits its sedentary agriculture. Barley is the major crop and, in its roasted form as tsampa, comprises, along with yak meat and tea (a traditional import from Sichuan and other parts of China), the staple diet of most of the Tibetan population.

**Origins**

The origins of the Tibetan peoples appear to be linked to central Asian nomadic tribes such as the Yue Zhi (Tokharians) and Qiang. The first unified Tibetan state was a tribal confederacy formed in the seventh century under the rule of King Songtsen Gampo (or Srong-brtsan Sgam-po (c. 608–650 CE), who established his capital at Lhasa. The introduction of a Tibetan script and Buddhist teachings is among the innovations attributed to his reign. His dynasty lasted until the assassination of King Langdharma around the year 842.

During this period Tibet was a formidable military power, constantly warring with neighboring powers and strong enough to sack the Chinese capital of Xi’an in 763. At its zenith the Tibetan empire reached as far west as Samarqand in modern-day Uzbekistan. Buddhism became
Increasingly important, particularly in the court, and the first monastery in Tibet was established at Samye around 779. However, there was considerable opposition to the new religion among aristocratic factions associated with followers of the indigenous Tibetan belief system, which was later identified with the Bon faith but probably at that time was an unsystematized tradition that included elements of divine kingship and sacrifice.

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries Buddhism became firmly established when Indian Buddhist texts were translated into the Tibetan language. Of the four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism that developed on the basis of these teachings, the Gelugpa sect eventually emerged as prominent, and from the sixteenth century onward Tibet was ruled by a line of incarnate Gelugpa monks with the title of “Dalai Lama.” Religious factions in Tibet tended to seek Mongol or Chinese patronage, and in the eighteenth century China became increasingly involved in events in Tibet. Thus, from 1793 until 1911–1912 China exerted at least nominal suzerainty (dominion) over Lhasa.
The British imperial government of India in 1903–1904 dispatched a mission to Lhasa that forced Tibetans to accept British representatives and effectively opened the country to Western influences. However, despite some modernization during the next couple of decades, Tibet remained an essentially conservative religious society and strongly resisted change. The thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876–1933), a strong nationalist leader, led Tibet to independence after the Chinese revolution in 1911, and Tibet survived as a de facto independent state until the Communist Chinese invasion in 1950. However, its independence was not officially recognized by any major powers, with China continuing to claim Tibet.

**Society**

In spite of the continuing existence of the Bon faith and its many cultural manifestations, the outstanding feature of Tibetan culture generally is considered to be its unique
form of Buddhism, a synthesis of the Mahayana and Tantric forms of the faith. Buddhism influenced virtually all aspects of traditional society. An estimated 20 percent (although some estimates place the figure as high as 50 percent) of the male population were monks, and more than six thousand monasteries were located throughout the Tibetan cultural world. These were important economic and political centers as well as guardians of Tibetan artistic and cultural expression. Aside from the monasteries, pilgrimage to sacred cities and mountains was an especially significant religious expression for all classes of people.

A small aristocratic class enjoyed considerable privilege, although the Tibetan peasantry, in comparison with their contemporaries in neighboring states, were tolerably well treated. Women also enjoyed greater-than-average freedom, particularly in the economic and social spheres, although they were almost entirely excluded from religious power.

Cultural influences from both India and China were present, but Tibetan culture was strikingly distinct from the culture of its neighbors. This was particularly true in such areas as literary traditions (in particular the Gesar of Ling epic), language, and art and architecture, with buildings such as Lhasa’s Potala Palace and Jokhang Temple, as well as the regional monasteries, being of striking originality. Some of this culture has been destroyed in the TAR, but much is remembered or preserved in exile, and the Chinese government has in recent years focused on developing Tibet as a domestic and international tourist destination. The Qinghai-Tibet railway links the Tibetan capital of Lhasa with Beijing and is the world’s highest railway line, with nearly 1000 km of track at an altitude of more than 4,000 meters above sea level.

Alex McKay

Further Reading