

Tibetan, Central

More than one million speakers of the Central Tibetan language live scattered throughout Central Asia—and now in many nations around the world where they have been dispersed as refugees during the past 50 years. Approximately 740,000 speakers of Central Tibetan live in the city of Lhasa and surrounding counties in the Tibet Autonomous Region, now part of China.¹ Approximately 150,000 live in India,² 100,000 in Nepal and 70,000 in Bhutan.

Tourists in Lhasa often find that the city falls short of the mystique they desire, although it has certainly improved since Thomas Manning described it in the early 1800s: ‘There is nothing striking, nothing pleasing in its appearance. The habitations are begrimed with smut and dirt. The avenues are full of dogs, some growling and gnawing bits of hide which lie about in profusion, and emit a charnel-house smell; others limping and looking livid; others ulcerated; others starving and dying and pecked at by the ravens; some dead and preyed upon. In short, everything seems mean and gloomy.’³

Although the Tibetans strongly maintain that they are one people and are opposed to any attempts to classify them separately, the Tibetan nationality clearly divides into numer-

ous linguistic components.⁴ Central Tibetan—which has five dialects—is considered the most prestigious Tibetan language, as is the language of Lhasa, the hub from which the Tibetan world emanates.

Written records of Tibetan history have survived from the 7th century AD, but it



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is known that nomadic tribes roamed Tibet as early as the 2nd century BC. The cradle of Tibetan civilization is the Yarlung Valley area, about 80 kilometres (49 mi.) south-east of Lhasa. There, according to tradition, the union of a monkey and a she-devil created the Tibetan race. Around AD 600 the warrior-king of Yarlung, Namri Gampo, unified the clans of Tibet.

He acquired a princess from Nepal and another one from China to be his wives. Under the persuasion of these two women, he combined the ancient polytheistic faith—which was a mixture of magic, divination, demon worship and sacrifices—with Buddhist teachings. The Buddhist religion is the lifeblood of the Tibetan people

In the 1950s, the Chinese took full control of Tibet. Hundreds of thousands of Tibetans have been killed,⁵ and hundreds of temples and monasteries demolished. In many ways, all that this opposition seems to have done is strengthen Buddhism among the Tibetans.

Tibet has long posed one of the greatest challenges for Christianity. Timothy, the Nestorian patriarch in Baghdad (778–820), referred to Christians in Tibet and indicated that he was willing to assign a missionary to them.⁶ In 1892 Hudson Taylor said, ‘To make converts in Tibet is similar to going into a cave and trying to rob a lioness of her cubs.’⁷ Today there are just one or two small Tibetan fellowships in Lhasa⁸ and small pockets of believers among refugees in India and Nepal.⁹ Chinese Christians trying to reach Tibetans often encounter strong opposition from the monks. At least five evangelists have been stoned to death since 1988.¹⁰



Population:

1,044,500 (2000)
1,282,000 (2010)
1,574,100 (2020)

Countries: China, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Switzerland, Taiwan, USA, Norway, France, Australia, United Kingdom, New Zealand

Buddhism: Tibetan

Christians: 200

Overview of the Central Tibetans

Other Names: Zang, Wei, Weizang, Bhotia, Phoke, Dbus, Dbustsang, Lhasa, Lhasa Tibetan, U, Bhokha, Pohbetian, Tebilian, Tibate

Population Sources:

569,300 in China (1987, *Language Atlas of China*)
124,280 in India (1994, India Missions Association)
60,000 in Nepal (1973, Summer Institute of Linguistics)
50,000 in Bhutan (1987, D Bradley)
1,500 in Switzerland also in Taiwan, USA, Norway, France, Australia, United Kingdom, New Zealand

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetetic, Tibetan, Central

Dialects: 5 (Lhasa, Chushur, Phanpo, Testhang, Lunrtse)

Professing Buddhists: 98%

Practising Buddhists: 90%

Christians: 0.1%

Scripture: Bible 1948; New Testament 1885; Portions 1862

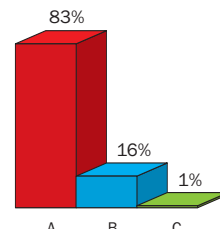
Jesus film: available

Gospel Recordings: Lhasa; Tibetan; Colloquial

Christian Broadcasting: available

ROPAL code: TIC

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians
C = Are adherents to some form of Christianity