

TIBETAN FOLK CUSTOMS

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Tibetan Folk Customs: Splendid painting scroll rich with the snowy plateau's unique features

With an average elevation above sea level of 4,000 metres and the world's highest mountain, the Tibetan Plateau has been aptly named the Third Pole of the Earth. Over the course of thousands of years, the Tibetan people have created a splendid culture in this magical land.

Folk customs form an important part of Tibetan culture, embedding and reflecting the unique features of the snowy plateau.

The formation and development of Tibetan folk customs span a long time.

Between 50,000 to 10,000 years ago, ancient humans left their traces on the Tibetan Plateau. What can be considered Tibetan folk customs began to take shape in the Neolithic Age, about 5,000 to 4,000 years ago. The discovery of the ruins of two primitive villages in Karub, Chamdo, and Qoigong, Lhasa, provided an outline of how ancient people lived in Tibet. We can catch glimpses of their material and spiritual lives through relics of food, housing, apparel and methods of transport.

During the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907), Tibet was known as the Tubo regime. It was a period of cultural blossoming and folk customs developed in leaps and bounds. The basic norms of the region's folk customs matured in the Tubo Era, and have continued to grow and influence generations until today.

For more than 1,000 years after the Tubo Era, Tibetan folk customs flourished along with social growth and cultural exchanges among ethnic

groups to become a significant element of Tibetan culture.

Tibetan folk customs have a long history and striking features, with their own unique lineage.

Geographical Features

Geographical features are some of the most striking elements that set Tibetan folk customs apart from those of other areas.

Tibet lies on the roof of the world. To its north are the Kunlun and Tanggula mountain ranges; at its centre lie the Gandise-Nyanchen Thanglha Mountains; the Himalayas border its south and the Hengduan Mountains lie on its eastern rim. These giants form the backbone of the plateau.

The landscape of Tibet is naturally formed into several distinct parts. The northern plateau (which includes the Ali Plateau) lies between the Kunlun, Tanggula and the Gandise-Nyanchen Thanglha mountains. In the Tibetan language, this vast area is called Changtang (meaning plateau in the north). Between the Gandise-Nyanchen Thanglha Mountains and the Himalayas is the valley of southern Tibet. The mighty Yarlung



Gorgeous mountains form the backbone of the Tibetan Plateau.

Zangbo River and its tributaries — the Lagazangbo, Nyangchu, Lhasa and Nyang Qu rivers — run through the valley. Further south is the Himalayan mountain area, which includes the southern and southeastern slopes of the Himalayas. Finally there's the eastern valley area where the Nu, Lancang and Jinsha (upper reaches of the Yangtze) rivers cut deep ravines through the Hengduan Mountains.

These unique geographical conditions helped shape Tibet's distinctive folk customs. The vast northern plateau has an average elevation above sea level of more than 4,000 metres, which creates a frigid climate. The many lakes and crisscrossing rivers there form a paradise of wildlife and ideal pastures. For generations local people followed the best water and grass, creating a nomadic culture with clear regional features.

The southern valley area sits at 2,700 to 3,700 metres above sea level. The deep, fertile soil is excellent for agriculture. Since the mythical era of "monkey turning into man", humans have been cultivating fields there and creating a strong farming civilisation. The flat valleys in the middle ranges of the Yarlung Zangbo River were important sources of ancient Tibetan civilisation. It is said that the first inhabitants of Tibet settled



The Yarlung Zangbo River makes a u-turn at Guoguo tang in Metok County, Nyingchi Prefecture.

there. The first farming field, the first house, and the first Tsampo ruler were all established in the Yarlung Valley.

In eastern Tibet, the Nu, Lancang and Jinsha rivers cut through gorgeous mountains, where the climate differs according to the altitude. Clans of locals dwelt in houses built along the mountains, living from farming and herding.

The southern and southeastern slopes of the Himalayas enjoy a temperate climate with ample rain. The dense, humid forests provide a home for diversified animal and plant species. This meant that local people lived by hunting and gathering as well as traditional primitive farming. Such differences in geography predetermined the varied ways people lived and produced food and built shelter.

Tibetan folk customs differ from those outside the Tibetan Plateau because of these unique geographical features. Within Tibet, there are many smaller geographical subdivisions. As a Tibetan idiom goes, "Every lama has a sect, every area has a dialect". The cultures of different areas have their own specific geographical features. Together they form the colourful kaleidoscope of Tibetan folk customs.

Ethnic features

Tibetan folk customs have been created by all the ethnic groups in Tibet. While Tibetans mainly live on the snowy plateau, the Monbas, Lhobas, Dengs and Sherpas are scattered in the southern and southeastern slopes of the Himalayas. Sharing the Tibetan Plateau, these ethnic groups have each made contributions to Tibetan folk culture. From languages to weddings and funerals, religious festivals, as well as cuisine, apparel, housing and methods of transport, all aspects of Tibetan folk culture are rich with ethnic features. To a certain extent, such ethnic cultural features are also consistent with the geographical features.

Although ethnic groups in Tibet live in relatively independent geographical units, they all belong to the Tibetan Plateau and communication between them can be traced deep back in history, forging close ties in politics, economy and culture. The folk customs created by all ethnic groups in Tibet together form a unified but also diverse culture of folk customs. Folk customs are the emblems of an ethnic group. Tibetan folk



Statues of Songtsen Gampo, Princess Wencheng and Princess Tritsun at the temple on top of the Tomb of Songtsen Gampo

customs reflect and display the spirits of the region's ethnic groups.

Fusion features

The fusion of Tibetan folk customs included the embrace of outside cultures, exchanges among ethnic groups, and amalgamation of religious and secular aspects.

Situated at the heart of Asia, Tibet has been a pivot of East, South and Central Asia. In terms of cultural distribution, Tibet is the point where cultures from East, South, Central and West Asia clashed and converged. Since ancient times, Tibet has been communicating with surrounding regions. As far back as the Neolithic Age, Tibet already had cultural exchanges with Central and South Asia. Tibetan civilisation was closely linked with the civilisation along the Yellow River. During and after the Tubo Era, the exchanges in politics, economy and culture between Tibet and surrounding regions, especially the Central Plains to its east, continued to expand. Buddhism from India and Nepal, and Confucianism from the Central Plains both exerted significant influences

on the development of Tibetan culture. The assimilation of cultures from outside was also a process of fusion and adaptation. The new cultures were injected with the spirit of Tibetan culture. Through constant choices, outside cultures were adapted to the local cultural structure. For these reasons, Tibetan culture never lost its own features and eventually became a unique plateau culture.

Tibetan folk customs display strong features of the fusion of the secular and the religious, the sacred and the entertaining.

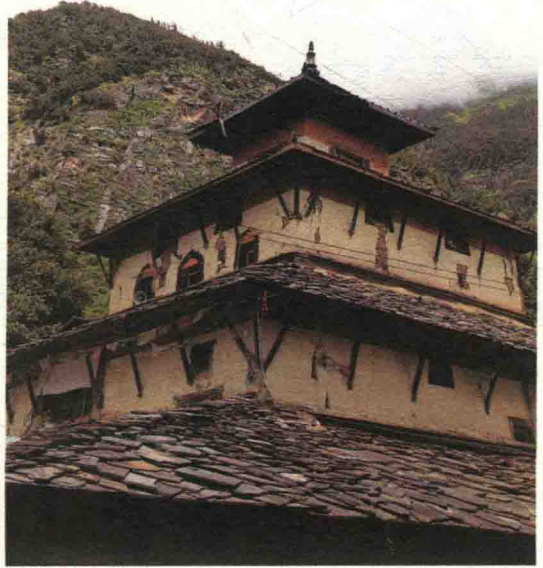
Features of the time

Folk customs are creations of history. Any phenomenon of folk customs is the crystallization of an ethnic group's cultural activities over thousands of years. While carrying on historical traditions, folk customs also grew and evolved as society changed, thereby displaying features from certain historical periods. In the history of Tibetan folk customs, Karub, Tubo and the feudal fiefdom cultures were all etched deep into the overall scene.

The ancient castle of Yumbulagang is a beautiful place from which to observe the Yarlung Valley.

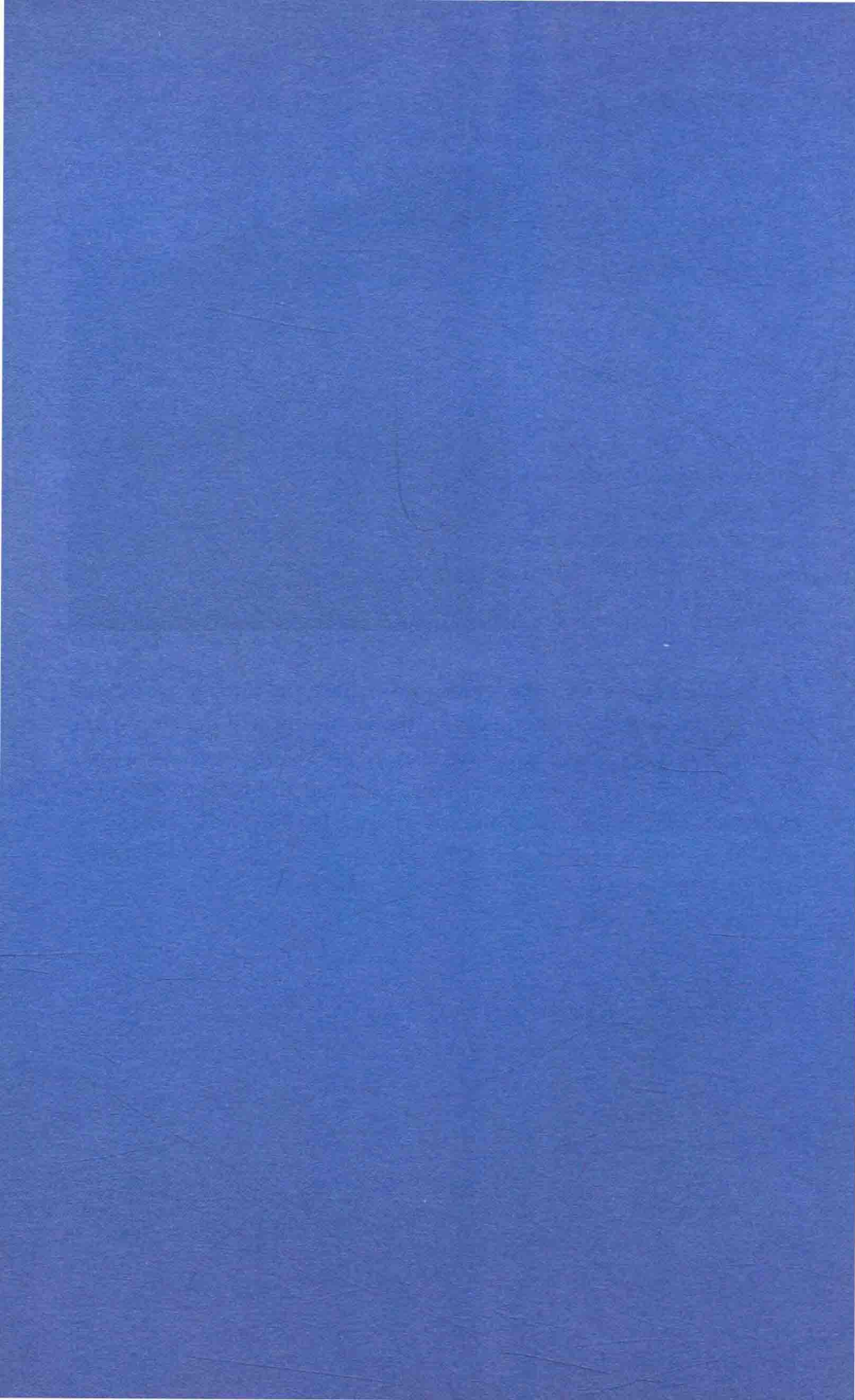


Changdren Monastery in Gyirong County, Shigatse Prefecture, is more than 1,000 years old and features a strongly South Asia style of architecture and decoration.



As Tibet opens its arms wider to welcome the outside world and modernisation gathers momentum, the economy will develop while society undergoes fundamental reforms. Many changes are taking place in the methods of production, living, thinking and how people view culture. Such changes have affected all aspects of folk customs. From daily necessities to weddings and funerals, as well as festivals and games, they all reflect changes and progress of the time.

In a society that is changing rapidly, Tibetan folk customs are displaying even more colourful features today.



Chapter One

**Mellow tea and fragrant wine
amid bright colours
— folk customs in daily life**

I. CUISINE

As a Chinese saying goes, “For the common people, food is heaven.” The formation of a nation’s culinary folk customs is mainly defined by the natural environment, climate, resources and produce of the region where they live, as well as the methods of production and style of living that arise from those conditions. The Tibetan people’s cuisine reflects the distinctive features of the snowy plateau which has been their home for thousands of years.

1. Types of food

The food in daily Tibetan life differs greatly from one agricultural or pasture region to another, and the main differences are caused by variations in production. Methods of preparing food also vary from region to region. In general, traditional Tibetan food for daily consumption includes *zamba* (also spelled as *rtsam-ba*), flour (winter wheat), meat and dairy products.



Qingke, or highland barley, is the most important crop in Tibet.

Farmers thresh highland barley at harvest time.



Farmers in Chanang County, Shannan Prefecture, take a break from their work to build a fire in a field to make buttered tea and eat *zamba*.



Zamba is a staple food for Tibetans. It is made from the flour of highland barley (*nas* in Tibetan, *qingke* in Chinese), which is special to the high-altitude regions of the Tibetan Plateau. Across Tibet, the same method for grinding barley is used. The barley is stir-fried, then ground into *zamba* flour with a water mill or a hand-powered mini-mill.

In areas where ethnic Tibetans live, water mills are commonly used to grind barley. Such mills are often built by a mountain stream or a river that has enough drop to generate hydro force to push the blades of the mill. Where the water flow is slow, people also dig channels to divert river water to create a drop where the mill is constructed. Manual mills are also common among the Tibetan people. In pasture areas, almost every family has such a small mill because they are easy to carry, which is essential for people leading a nomadic life. Besides the water mill and hand mill, electric mills have become widely used in Tibet in the past few



Making butter

decades. Electricity has liberated people from heavy manual work.

As a staple food through all four seasons, *zamba* is eaten in many ways. The most common method is *mar-spags*, or pinched *zamba*. Pour hot tea into a wooden or porcelain bowl with a chunk of butter, then add a suitable amount of *zamba*, with a bit of cheese or white sugar according to taste. Mix the ingredients well with your fingers and pinch it into your mouth. Another common way to eat *zamba* is *skyo-ma-ldags*, which is a thin porridge of buttered tea with *zamba* flour, cheese and white sugar, commonly served at breakfast or in between formal meals.

A more complicated form of cooking *zamba* is *thug-pa*, also a Tibetan favourite. This is a porridge generally served at dinner and it is made by stewing *zamba*, diced meat, pieces of dough, radish and other ingredients. When making *thug-pa*, the flour dough is often kneaded into thin pieces or small chunks. *Zamba* is also used for *bskol-ldan* (highland barley wine porridge), a special treat for honoured guests, relatives and friends as well as for festive occasions. It is made by warming highland barley wine, then adding butter, cheese, black sugar and a suitable amount of *zamba*.

Winter wheat, called *gro* or *dgun-gro* in Tibetan, is another staple food for Tibetans. Methods for cooking winter wheat aren't that elaborate. Mostly it is ground into flour and made into *bag-leb*, a kind of pancake one carries on a journey or during a day's labour away from home. Also made into Tibetan noodles, winter wheat flour is an indispensable ingredient in *thug-pa*.