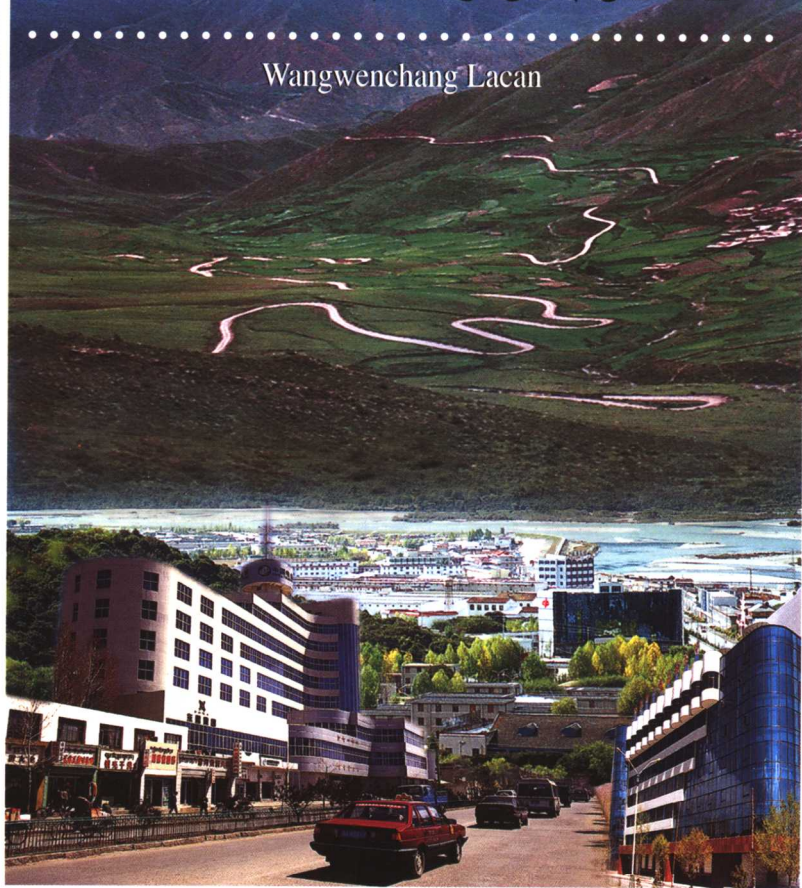


Series of Basic Information of Tibet of China

TIBETAN ECONOMY

Wangwenchang Lacan



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS



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● Tibetan Economy ●



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*One voice sighed:
"What a hard job
To make them take the holy road,
That calls for profound wisdom
And enormous courage."
--Third Dalai Lama Soinam Gyaco*

Even in the second half of the 20th century, Tibetan society was still buried under the accumulated snow of feudal serfdom.

After some 40 years, however, the snow has finally melted away to make way for burgeoning economic and social development. Indeed, the whistling arrow representing a modern economy is flying through the cool highland air, creating a heart-stirring song:

*Yes,
Chance for development,
That has not been lost.
Keep walking,
Though the journey is full of hardship.
Be bright,
With a staunch mind and unchanging heart,
And create wealth.
The light of the time
Guides your footprints.*



Qomolangmo, 8848.13 meters above sea level, is the chief peak of the Himalayas.

Preface



A glance at Lhasa.

Snapshots of Economic Life

Tibet lies at high altitude and the air is thin, with oxygen content only one-third of sea level. When I recently went to Tibet and disembarked from the plane in Lhasa, I was enchanted by the beauty of the landscape. Walking fast to leave the airport, however, I was soon gasping for breath. This made me realize why Tibetan women walk at such a leisurely pace.

Such a harsh environment exerts a special impact on the economic life of the Tibetans.

I.Economic Tradition

The Tibetan economic mode has a long history in terms of farming, animal husbandry and a handicraft industry steeped in tradition.

Age-Old Mode of Farming and Animal Husbandry

Karub Ruins, discovered in 1977 beside the Langcangjiang River in Qamdo County shows that early inhabitants of the Tibetan plateau began to settle there to carry on farming and animal husbandry some 4,000 years ago.

Farming in Tibet is divided into two parts: Highland and low-altitude farming. Qingke barley, wheat, peas, sweet potatoes, buckwheat and rape are the major crops of highland farming, being resistant to dry, cold conditions. Major crops in the areas at low-altitude include rice, maize, chicken feet cereals, and various kinds of vegetables.

Relying on oxen to plough, a traditional

cultivation method, continued until the mid-20th century, and some people in remote villages continue to farm in this way. After the 1980s, farm machinery such as walking tractors replaced traditional beasts and manpower. This, coupled with use of chemical fertilizers, fine seed varieties of seeds and efficient irrigation, along with the adoption of new cultivation methods, led to the emergence of modern farming. By 1997, the power of farm machinery used in Tibet added up to 774,500 KW; electricity consumed in the rural areas added up to 19.29 million kWh; a total of 24,400 tons of chemical fertilizers was being used each year; the acreage of farmland being irrigated reached 156,740 hectares. All these figures show that farming and animal husbandry in Tibet have witnessed an improved infrastructure. Tibet has enjoyed bumper harvests for 14 consecutive years since 1988, with grain production hitting some 790,000 tons in 1997, some 850,000 tons in 1998, and 982,500 tons in 2001. This latter figure represents a 550 percent increase on the output recorded in 1959. In 2002, the acreage of farmland ploughed, sown and harvested using farm machinery reached 116,000 hectares, 146,000 hectares and 84,000 hectares respectively. This laid a sound foundation for further development in future.

As one of the five major pasturelands in China, Tibet boasts 80 million hectares of grasslands. Animal husbandry continues to hold an important position in Tibetan economic life.

In the 1950s, the output value of animal husbandry made up two-thirds of the total farming output, and remained ahead until



Paddy fields in Zayu.



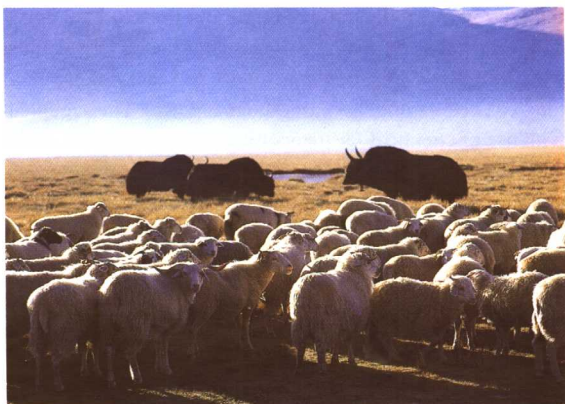
1959



2001

In 2001, Tibet won the 14th bumper harvest, with the grain production reaching a new record high of 982,500 tons, or 5.5 times that of 1959.

A shot of Northern Tibet Grasslands.



1994, when it was finally overtaken by agricultural output.

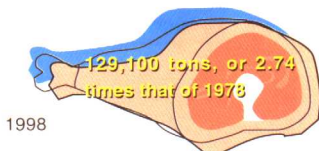
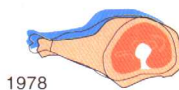
Wandering around in pursuit of water and grass constitutes the basic form of traditional animal husbandry in Tibet. With the passage of time, the composition of the herds of domestic animals has changed from being mainly comprised of yaks to sheep. In areas at lower altitude, buffaloes and *pien niu* (offspring of a bull and a female yak) are comparatively numerous. That livestock breeding in Tibet still retains many of its traditional ways has something to do with the salient features of animal husbandry in the Tibetan grasslands. Other factors include separation and closeness.

Over the past 50 years, it has moved from nomadic herding to semi-settlement and then to permanent settlement, and further to scientific herding. At present, the animals are kept in pastures devoted to summer and winter grazing. In the meantime, efforts have been made to develop quality grass production, and to improve the variety of breeding and a better composition of animals being raised. The same period



Weaving pulu woolen fabrics.

Meat Output



saw improvement in the scale of meat marketing and industrialized management. In 1998, Tibet's meat production reached 129,100 tons, a 274-fold increase from that of 1978, the year the reform and opening program was introduced in China. Also in that year, 4.925 million head of animals were slaughtered, with the number of animals in stock reaching 22.52 million, a 200 percent increase from the early 1950s. The increase in the number of livestock, however, has had some negative effects, notably to the quality of the grasslands. The last few years have witnessed continuous growth in animal husbandry. In 2001, pork, beef and mutton production reached 160,100 tons. Processed farm produce and animal byproducts-such as Gyangze butter and milk dregs, Gurong's zanba (roasted highland barley), Damxung's cheese, Amdo's dried meat have enjoyed a good market, and their added value has increased.

Outstanding Ethnic Handicrafts

Ethnic handicraft industry constitutes one of the three traditional industries in Tibet. Even during the New Stone Age, the area where Tibet is now located was known for its handicrafts. A case in point is a jar in the shape of two animals that has been unearthed. Art workers commented that it shows good workmanship.



Twin jars.



Weaving bamboo objects.

Tibetan knife
(with silver sheath)



Legend has it that, during the period of the 5th Dalai Lama Lobsang Gyamco, a handicrafts exhibition was held in Lhasa. Exhibits included kardian cushions from Gyangze, aprons from Gonggar Chiedeshiu, pulu woolen fabrics from Nangyishiu, pottery from Taba Village in Meizhogkonggar County, sewn fabrics from Lhasa, tangka paintings from Qamdo, and silver and gold wares in U-Tsang areas. Tibetan handicrafts re-

main a major source of income for farmers and herders in Tibet. In the 1970s, only some products were for exchange, however. In the 1950s, there were more than 8,000 handicraft worker households in Tibet; they were scattered in some 40 trades, producing more than 1,000 products. Handicraft industry fell into the category of individual business with small scale. This lasted until 1953, when the Lhasa Carpet Factory was set up. Today, the factory is a modern one whose products are sold to Europe, North America and Southeast Asia and are displayed in the Tibet Hall of the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. The Central Government also used one of its products as a gift to the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region on



In recent years, Tibet succeeded in increasing its export of handicrafts.

its return to the motherland in 1997.

Handicrafts produced in Tibet today have a flavor unique to Tibet itself. Since the 1980s, the handicraft industry has received energetic support from the Government, with the result that some of the traditional items enjoy good market share. At present, the region produces some 2,000 handicraft works, including tourist souvenirs.

This writer visited Garma Township in Qamdo County in the summer of 1997. It is home to many handicraft workers, and there are 32 households doing the business, including 24 involved in making tangka paintings, casting Buddha images, or processing various kinds of gold, silver, bronze or iron works. Of the 76 able-bodied people in the village, 31 were engaged in handicraft industry. The annual per-capita income in the village had reached 2,000 Yuan. In Garma Township, half of the income came from the handicraft business. Zelung Village in Lharze County and Kargar Village in Xietongmoin County, in Xigaze Prefecture, processes high-quality knives. Scale production of Tibetan knives helps increase farmers' income. In 2001, Lharze County sold 3,340 Tibetan knives, netting an income of 190,000 Yuan. The Xigaze Yamei Group is currently the largest of its kind producing handicrafts unique to Tibet. It deals in some 1,600 products, with assets valued at some 10 million Yuan.

Tibetan ethnic handicrafts have become tourist souvenirs much in demand. At the China Tourist Souvenir Design Contest sponsored by the National Tourism Administration in April 2002, the 34 tourist souvenirs provided by the Tibet Autonomous Region

Tourist souvenirs from Tibet



Ramming Agar clay
(singing while laboring)

Threshing and winnowing



won four gold medals and six silver medals, as well as six excellent work awards, an achievement well ahead of other Chinese regions.

Work with Music and Songs

Tibetans like to work with music and songs. For instance, Dapur Work Song popular in Northern Tibet says:

“Shovel golden soil in the holy land/build a magic wall on the solid base/ the horses beside the wall work quickly/ the stone tamper moves fast up and down/the wall construction is speeding up.”

In building the wall, the words of the Dapur Work Song, mixed with the descant of ethnic music, sung with the rhythm of the work, helped people forget their fatigue.

The farmers held ceremonies according to tradition on a selected lucky day before spring plowing. In the morning, men driving farm cattle decorated with red tassels and a hada scarf and women and children in full dress holding a qema



Spring ploughing

box and qingke barley got together at land to be tilled to seek a good harvest of the coming year, while the old villagers made (piles of) aromatic plant branches in the center. The plowmen show their respect for the “three treasures” (Buddhist doctrines, dharma and monks) with zanba (roasted barley flour) and qingke wine. After that, the men drove the farm animals to start the plowing and the women sung and danced surrounding the smoking (piles of) aromatic plant branches. The old ceremony is still held, although the presence of a tractor gives it a modern touch.



Making Tibetan-style food

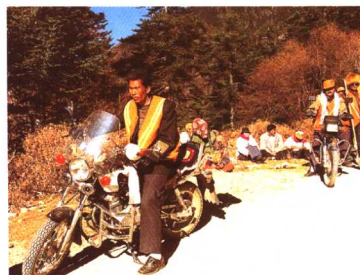
II. Family Economic Life

Daily Life

In some outlying villages, there is a mix of farming and herding in a typical family economic structure. Many families fenced around their houses a piece of vegetable garden for raising pigs, cattle, sheep and chickens, which is a standard courtyard economy.

At the scattered herding locations, some families with close relationships looked after and helped one another and herded together. Although they had a clear property relationship, they enjoyed the material resource together and shared the wine.

Although the economic and living standards of Tibetan farming and pastoral areas is lower than the developed areas in the hinterland of China, the existing quality of life has been greatly improved compared with its own development history. Prior to the 1950s, the living conditions of farmers and herders at the bottom of society were rather inferior. In the northern area of Tibet, working for the herd owner for a year, a herder could only obtain an old sheepskin coat, a cap



Road maintenance workers ride motorcycles to examine road conditions



Tibeterin and Model

and a pair of shoes besides meals. For people such as the Dorbugyi family of Bamdui Township, Darze County, the average annual food allowance was less than 100 kg, which was only just enough to feed them for half a year. Eating meat and drinking qingke wine and buttered tea was beyond their ambition. But now, the Dorbugyi family, with ten members, farms 2.67 hectares and harvests 15,000 kg of grain every year, of which one-third is sold to the State. With other earnings, their yearly cash income surpasses 10,000 yuan.

Consumption

Today, many Tibetan families have meat and buttered tea drink every day. A lot of farmers have purchased walking tractors, grain winnowing machine, threshers, color TVs, cassette players, etc.

Urban young people are no strangers to Karaoke. Mobile phone, computers, the Internet and such like have become an accepted aspect of new life consumption.

PC-card phone booths along township streets are very convenient in today's Tibet. On the streets of Gyangze and Nyingchi there is one phone every 50 to 100 meters. Most of the farmer families close to cities and towns are able to install their own telephone.

In Tibet, every farming family brews qingke wine, which, made from clean boiled qingke barley along with fermented

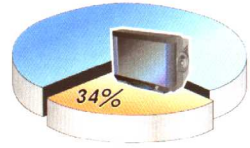


Festive celebration

alcohol and clear water, is sweet and pure. A common farming family uses an equal quantity of grain in wine brewing and for meals. In Bangjor Lhunbo Village of the Xigaze Area, each family consumes about 2kg of qingke barley in wine brewing every day. This is, in some respects, related to a consecutive year-on-year good harvest and sufficient grain stock.

The farmers and herders living in mountainous and pasture areas get to know the rich and colorful world outside and the various life styles through TV. The youngsters there start to have their own youth icons, such as pop stars. The TV coverage rate reached 34 percent of the population in 1990, while, by 1997, there were 107 TV sets for every 100 urban households. Basically, each township owns TV sets. There are 10.6 TV sets for every 100 rural households. Major durable consumer goods possessed by every 100 urban households include 96 washing machines, 68 refrigerators, eight motorcycles and 38 cameras. The kind of consumer goods such as telephone, color TV, washing machine, cell phone and motorcycle, and even automobile are not only the property of township people, but also the consumer targets of rich farmers and herders.

In Nyingchi, the local economy is developing rapidly, creating some rich villages that have been subbed as “Auto Village”, “Telephone Village”, “Cell Phone Village” and “TV Village” because of the widespread ownership of these commodities. In Bamna Village of Nyingchi County, there are many two-storied houses built among the trees along the one concrete road looping its way through the village. Each house is equipped with a TV set, washing machine, telephone and other household electrical appliances as well as water supply. However, in the past, this village was notorious as a “Beggar Village”, when the villagers had no stable income and food supply and most of them made a living through begging. Today the entire village of over 300 villagers is living a happy life. In 2001, the village’s grain production hit 240,000 kg, and the per-capita income reached 3,290 Yuan, which made it the richest village in Tibet.



TV coverage rate in Tibet reached 34% in 1990



In 1997, every 100 urban households owned 107 color TV sets



In 1997, every 100 farmer families owned 10.6 TV sets



In 1997, every 100 urban residents owned 38 cameras

In 1997, every 100 urban residents owned 8 motorcycles



In 1997, every 100 urban residents owned 68 refrigerators



In 1997, every 100 urban residents owned 96 washing machines



Milking maid