

# Amdo, Rongmahbrogpa

A 1987 linguistic survey of China listed 112,800 speakers of the Rongmahbrogpa Amdo language.<sup>1</sup> The main centre is the picturesque town of Xiahe in south-west Gansu Province. The language is also spoken in Tongren County in neighbouring eastern Qinghai Province.

Although ethnically and culturally the Rongmahbrogpa Amdo belong to the Tibetan nationality, they speak a language that is distinct from other Tibetan languages.<sup>2</sup> The name Rongmahbrogpa is a combination of the Tibetan words *rongba* ('villager', or 'farmer') and *brogpa* ('nomad', or 'herder').

The Labrang Monastery in Xiahe was built by E'ang-zongzhe in 1709. Presently it houses about 1,700 monks, drawn from Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Inner Mongolia. These days the monastery is 'the largest learning institution of the Gelug (Yellow Hat) sect of Tibetan Buddhism. It is comprised of Wensi (literally, "listening and meditating") College, Lower and Upper Colleges for continued studies, Shilun College, Xijingang College and a Tibetan medicine school.'<sup>3</sup>

In recent years Labrang has developed into a major tourist attraction, especially for budget travellers, thousands of whom come to soak in the town's unique atmosphere and beautiful scenery. Thousands of Tibetan pilgrims journey to Xiahe each year. They spin prayer wheels as they encircle the Labrang monastery. The Tibetan prayer wheel, or *manichorkor*, can be turned by hot air, hand, wind or water. As it spins, the scroll contained in the cylinder is believed to release prayers to the heavens.

The Amdo and Hui Muslims have had

numerous violent clashes in the past. In 1919 the Hui sacked the Labrang Monastery, burned to death hundreds of monks, and dumped their corpses on the temple grounds. In 1929, Joseph Rock witnessed the carnage of one battle in Xiahe: '154 Tibetan heads were strung about the walls of the Moslem garrison like a garland of flowers. Heads of young girls and children decorated posts in front of barracks. The Moslem riders galloped about the town, each with 10 or 15 human heads tied to his saddle.'<sup>4</sup>

Almost all Amdo are Tibetan Buddhists, but the ancient Bon religion has experienced a resurgence of growth in recent years. Bon religious rites are led by shamans, whose job in the past, as it is now, was to 'present the sacrifices, appease the spirits with magic, heal the sick and even control

the weather. The shaman specialized in a kind of ecstatic trance that let him travel to the spirit world and serve as a medium for the ghosts of the dead. In addition to the shamans there were also magicians and healers who had the power to control gods, demons, and locality spirits.'<sup>5</sup>

The Christian and Missionary Alliance opened a mission base in the town of

Xiahe in the early 1920s. They made little progress against the Buddhist stronghold. One missionary wrote that one of the main difficulties was 'The food question. The food of the Tibetans is such that for a foreigner it is very hard to partake of, and still harder to digest . . . yet the itinerating missionary in this district has to eat it, for if he does not, he greatly offends his host and gets no opportunity to preach the Gospel.'<sup>6</sup>



**Population:**  
146,800 (2000)  
180,800 (2010)  
222,700 (2020)  
**Countries:** China  
**Buddhism:** Tibetan  
**Christians:** 20

## Overview of the Rongmahbrogpa Amdo

**Other Names:** Made, Labrang Amdo, Rongmahbrogpa

**Population Sources:** 112,800 (1987, *Language Atlas of China*)

**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Bodic, Bodish, Tibetan, Northern Tibetan

**Dialects:** 2

**Professing Buddhists:** 99%

**Practising Buddhists:** 95%

**Christians:** 0.1%

**Scripture:** Tibetan Bible 1948; New Testament 1885; Portions 1862

**Jesus film:** available

**Gospel Recordings:** none

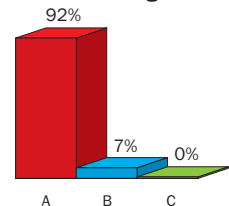
**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** ADX03



Julian Hawken

## 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