

Approximately 70,000 Tibetans in western China's Sichuan Province speak the Rtahu Amdo language. They live primarily on grasslands along the banks of the turbulent Xianshui River in Dawu and Luhuo counties. These two counties form part of the huge Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in north-west Sichuan, which is home primarily to the fierce Khampa Tibetans.

Rtahu is the southernmost of the four Amdo groups. Linguists have identified Rtahu as a variety of Amdo, but the Rtahu claim to belong culturally to the Khampa Tibetans. The Rtahu language seems to be transitional between Amdo and Khampa Tibetan; these two are reported to have about 70 per cent lexical similarity.<sup>1</sup> There are two dialects of Rtahu: Braghgo and Tahu.<sup>2</sup>

Tibetan history closely reflects the religious journey of the people as they have sought for spiritual enlightenment. Padmasambhava, a Tibetan sage, gave the following prophecy in the 8th century: 'When the iron bird flies and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the world and the Dharma will come to the land of the Red Man.'<sup>3</sup> In October 1950 the Chinese army invaded Tibet from Sichuan. Another garrison moved southward from Xinjiang into western Tibet. Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama – who himself is an Amdo Tibetan – fled into India. From his base in Dharamsala, northern India, the Dalai Lama has continued to lobby for

the liberation of his people.

Between 1913 and 1950 Tibet tried to assert its authority as a separate nation, with its own flag, passports and currency. Tibetan passports were only accepted as legal documents by Great Britain, India and the United States.

A Tibetan stamp was printed in India in 1910, bearing the image of the Dalai Lama. 'These were rejected by the Tibetans. . . . The Dalai Lama could not be placed on a stamp as it might get trodden underfoot, which would bring dishonor to him. Besides, who was going to strike his head with a great metal franking hammer?'<sup>4</sup>

All Rtahu Amdo Tibetans are fervent Tibetan Buddhists. No more than a handful have ever heard of the existence of Jesus Christ. Geographic, social, linguistic and cultural barriers make communicating the gospel to the Rtahu Amdo extremely difficult. Chinese house church evangelists in recent years have tried to live among the Rtahu Amdo, but their presence in the area has raised suspicion among the authorities and the Tibetans alike.

The criteria used in the 1920s for missionaries

among Tibetan peoples still applies to would-be labourers—whether foreigners or Chinese—today: 'In sending out missionaries for work among the Tibetans, candidates with a strong constitution should be chosen, as missionary work in Tibet is more strenuous than in most places. Missionaries that are afraid to expose themselves to hardship and even danger should not be sent to Tibet.'<sup>5</sup>



Nancy Sturrock



**Population:**  
78,800 (2000)  
97,100 (2010)  
119,600 (2020)

**Countries:** China  
**Buddhism:** Tibetan  
**Christians:** none known

## Overview of the Rtahu Amdo

**Other Names:** Tahu

**Population Sources:** 60,600 (1987, *Language Atlas of China*)

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

**Dialects:** 2 (Braghgo, Tahu)

**Professing Buddhists:** 100%

**Practising Buddhists:** 95%

**Christians:** 0%

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

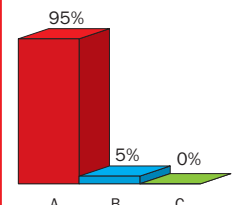
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** ADX04

## 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