



Population:

661,200 (2000)
814,900 (2010)
1,004,400 (2020)

Countries: China, Nepal, India

Buddhism: Tibetan

Christians: 50

Overview of the Gtsang Tibetans

Other Names: Xigatse Tibetans, Xigatze Tibetans, Xigatze, Gyantse, Sagya, Tsang, Xigaze Tibetans

Population Sources:

457,700 in China (1987, *Language Atlas of China*)
50,000 in Nepal (1987, D Bradley)
also in India

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

Dialects: 10 (Reng, Pungmo, Kag, Lo, Gyasumdo, Kyidgrong, Dingri, Zhiskartse, Gyalrtse, Nadkarrtse)

Professing Buddhists: 99%

Practising Buddhists: 96%

Christians: 0.1%

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

Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: TIC01

Almost 700,000 Tibetans belong to the Gtsang Tibetan language group. They are located in a wide geographical area, stretching east to west over roughly the entire length of the Tibet-Nepal border. Gtsang is spoken in the cities of Xigaze and Gyantse, the second and fourth largest cities in Tibet respectively. The main attraction of Gyantse is the immense pagoda, or *Kumbun*, built by Raptan Kunsang Phapa (1389–1442). Approximately 60,000 Gtsang Tibetans also live in Nepal, throughout northern parts of the country as well as in Kathmandu, the nation’s capital.

The Gtsang Tibetan language—which has 10 dialects¹—is a variety of Central Tibetan. It is largely intelligible with Lhasa and Ngahri Tibetan, although speakers can struggle to communicate with each other depending on their accents and how much exposure they have had to other varieties of Central Tibetan.² Despite their differences in speech, all Tibetans use the same Sanskrit-based orthography. In the 7th century, King Songtsen Gampo sent his minister, Thonmi Sambhota, to India, where he produced the script.

Xigaze, the capital of Tibet from 1618 to 1642, is the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, Tibet’s second most powerful ruler after the

Dalai Lama. In 1954 the city was nearly destroyed by floods. After putting down a revolt in 1959, the Chinese imprisoned 400 monks in the Tashilhunpo Monastery.

The *Xigaze* New Year festival is held in the first week of the 12th lunar month. Thousands of visitors have flocked to Gyantse since 1408 for the annual horse racing and archery show. Captain O’Conner, the British trade agent at Gyantse in the

early 1900s, described the Gtsang Tibetans as ‘superstitious indeed to the last degree, but devoid of any deep-rooted religious convictions or heart-searchings, oppressed by the most monstrous growth of monasticism and priest-craft which the world has ever seen.’³

The Gtsang region is home to several Buddhist sects, including the *Nyingmapa* (Ancient), *Kagyupa* (Oral Transmission) and *Sakya* (Gray Earth) schools. After the death of the Panchen Lama in 1989, the Chinese filled his position with their own choice of successor. In May 1995, the exiled Dalai Lama announced a new Panchen Lama who was immediately rejected by the Chinese. Monks at the Tashilhunpo Monastery and a number of lay Tibetans rioted in protest. Eighty monks were interrogated by the police, and the city of Xigatse was sealed off for several days.

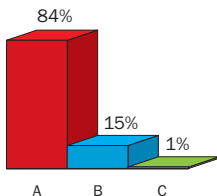
Jesuit missionary Antonio de Andrade arrived in Tibet from India in 1624 by disguising himself as a Hindu pilgrim. ‘Andrade outwitted hostile local officials, made his way north to the Himalayas, endured



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altitude sickness and snow blindness, fought his way over a 17,900-foot pass into Tibet, and finally reached Tsaparang. . . . There he impressed the king and queen with his piety, and they gave him permission to return, establish a mission, and preach the Gospel.⁴ A revolution in Tsaparang in 1635 abruptly ended the Jesuit mission. Today there are a few Gtsang Tibetan Christians.

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