

Tebbu



Population:

20,000 (2000)
24,600 (2010)
30,300 (2020)

Countries: China

Buddhism: Tibetan

Christians: none known

Overview of the Tebbu

Other Names: Tebbus, Tewu, Tewo, Tewo Tibetans

Population Sources:

20,000 in China (2000, P Hattaway)

Language: Sino-Tibetan.

Tibeto-Burman, Unclassified (possibly Qiangic)

Dialects: 2 (Upper Tebbu, Lower Tebbu)

Professing Buddhists: 95%

Practising Buddhists: 40%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

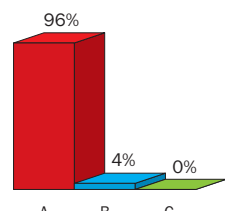
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: none

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

More than 20,000 Tebbu people live in one of the most dramatically remote regions of China. They inhabit villages in the midst of the imposing Min Shan Mountains along the Bailong River and its tributaries in southern Gansu Province, cut off from the rest of the world by their surroundings. The Tebbu are dispersed throughout rugged Tewo County and possibly into the eastern part of Zhugu County.

When Joseph Rock visited the Tebbu



Nancy Sturrock

in the 1920s he said, 'The Min Shan, extending from east to west, is composed of fantastic limestone crags cut into huge turrets and pinnacles. . . . Its northern slopes are cut into numerous deep valleys, densely forested with spruces, firs and rhododendrons, which debouch into the Tao River. The ridges and spurs separating these valleys . . . resemble huge sleeping dragons who guard the Tebbu Land.'¹ Rock also noted, 'There are ten thousand of these warlike people belonging to the Tebbu tribe. . . . These wild Tebbus that inhabit the most romantic spot of all China will perhaps remain an ethnological riddle; they call themselves Tewu, and are divided into two or perhaps three clans known as the Upper or Shan Tebbu, the Lower or Ha Tebbu, and the most refractory of all, the Tara Tebbu. . . . Today the Tebbu Land is practically closed to foreigners and Chinese alike, and he risks his life indeed who enters that forbidding natural fortress which the Tebbus claim for their own.'²

Little has changed in the years since Rock's visit. The Tebbu homeland is still dangerous

for visitors, and the people still wild and unpredictable. The Tebbu in China have largely become invisible to the outside world, due to the fact that the government has lumped them together under the general Tibetan nationality, even though the Tebbu are very different—historically, culturally and linguistically. Although almost all Tebbu people profess Tibetan Buddhism as their religion, shamanist and animist rituals undergird all of their religious practices.

Christian and Missionary Alliance workers Edwin and Carol Carlson worked in this part of Gansu from 1922 to 1948. Their son, Bob Carlson, recalls the history of the outreach among the Tebbu people: 'It can be said that we were not received

there with open arms, for my father was able to rent a house only because the landlord was having a dispute with the rest of the village, and figured the most spiteful thing he could do was to rent to foreigners. When we came on furlough in 1934, the men of a nearby village got together and burned the house to the ground.'³

The famous missionary Robert Ekvall lived for a number of years in Lhamo, better known on today's maps as Langmusi. Carlson notes, 'He had many friends among the Tebbus. In 1940, as the direct result of the death of his wife Betty, a majority of the people in one Tebbu village became Christians. Bob left Lhamo in 1941 and, because of the war, was not able to return. Subsequently my dad had some contact with the believers up until 1948. What became of those believers is something I would dearly love to know!⁴ It is now more than half a century since anything was heard about the Tebbu Christians. There is no evidence to suggest that their faith was passed on to the next generation.