

THE HOME OF A  
TIBETAN LANDOWNER

## AGRICULTURISTS OF TIBET

Peasants in a Land of Nomads—Their Homes, Their Industries,  
and Their Religion

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**T**IBET, by and large, is anything but agricultural, yet in the southern portion of that elevated land, four hundred miles or so directly north of the upper reaches of the Bay of Bengal and near the northern borders of Bhutan and Nepal, certain of the Tibetan natives have developed a type of agriculture that seems to be unique. On their section of the high and wind-swept plateau behind the snow-clad Himalayas, where Nature gives them a growing season that averages only four months free of frost, they are able to plant, to grow, and to harvest their crops of barley and peas, but, having done so, these hardy people do not use these products for their own consumption. Buttered tea is almost their only food, and the barley and peas that their efforts, with Nature's meager help, produce, go entirely to feed their horses and their cows.

Compared with the country to the south of the mountain wall that sets this land apart, Tibet is a sparsely populated region, for the most part given over to wind and semi-barrenness. Consequently the intensive agricultural methods of other lands are far from necessary. Rainfall, too, is limited, but to make up for this lack, the plateau is intersected by many streams and rivers fed by the melting snows of the extreme uplands. The streams, being swift, and the need for arable land being small, it is an easy task to build the simple system of short canals that supply the irregular fields and patches with the water that they need. Thus, even at altitudes of 13,000 feet or more, the fields of barley and peas (which are mixed when sown) are tilled with comparative ease.

The peasant agriculturists of Tibet do not live in tents as do their nomadic

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THE HOME OF A TIBETAN PEASANT

These structures are rude but substantial. They are built either entirely of stone or of a sort of plaster, and have very few windows

fellow Tibetans. Instead, they build rude but substantial houses of stone or plaster, with wind-proof walls that are usually almost devoid of windows. Glass is rare and can be had only by the "wealthy." Even where it is used, the windows are small and few, and the houses that cannot boast glass are usually, for all practical purposes, windowless, for what windows there are must be closed against the almost ever-present wind by shutters solidly made of wood. Thus one can imagine what the dark interior of such a house must be. Only one fire—always using yak dung as fuel—is kept going. The room in which it burns is a combination of kitchen and living room, and here, hovering about the fire, one finds the inmates, save when they are out of doors attending to their cattle and their horses.

Even in Tibet there are degrees of wealth and comfort, with the result that large landowners and petty rajahs have

more elaborate houses. Even these, however, from the western point of view, leave more than a little to be desired, though some of them have certain sturdy architectural features that are pleasing and are obviously thoroughly comfortable to those who inhabit them.

Tibet is anything but a clean land, and the inhabitants so rarely bathe that one cannot fail to wonder at their freedom from disease. Being Buddhists, too, they are not permitted to kill even the most offensive creatures, with the result that all of them are flea-ridden. Still, the rarefied air is dry and cool, and the odors of the lowlands of India have no counterpart here. Even decaying flesh and bones along the roads do not give off the breath-taking odors that occasionally offend one's nostrils farther south, and the result is that, despite the omnipresent filth, one is not overly conscious of it.

Trees do not grow naturally in Tibet, but it is customary to plant small clumps



of cottonwoods about the houses, with the result that something similar to a garden is often available for the owners during the summer. One home that we visited—that of a wealthy carpet manufacturer—had in it a private Buddhist temple, while the factory on which the owner's wealth was built, was near by. In it the workers, both male and female, lived, and for their efforts, to which they devoted all the hours of daylight, they received their board and lodging and the munificent pay of one or two cents a day.

Manufacturing is limited and simple, carpet and paper making being two of the most interesting activities. The paper that is made is of the crudest quality, gray and coarse. Women pound bark and wood pulp in water, and when the fibers are thoroughly mixed, set layers of the mass over cloth frames. By dipping these frames in water the pulpy mass can be spread evenly, whereupon it is set in

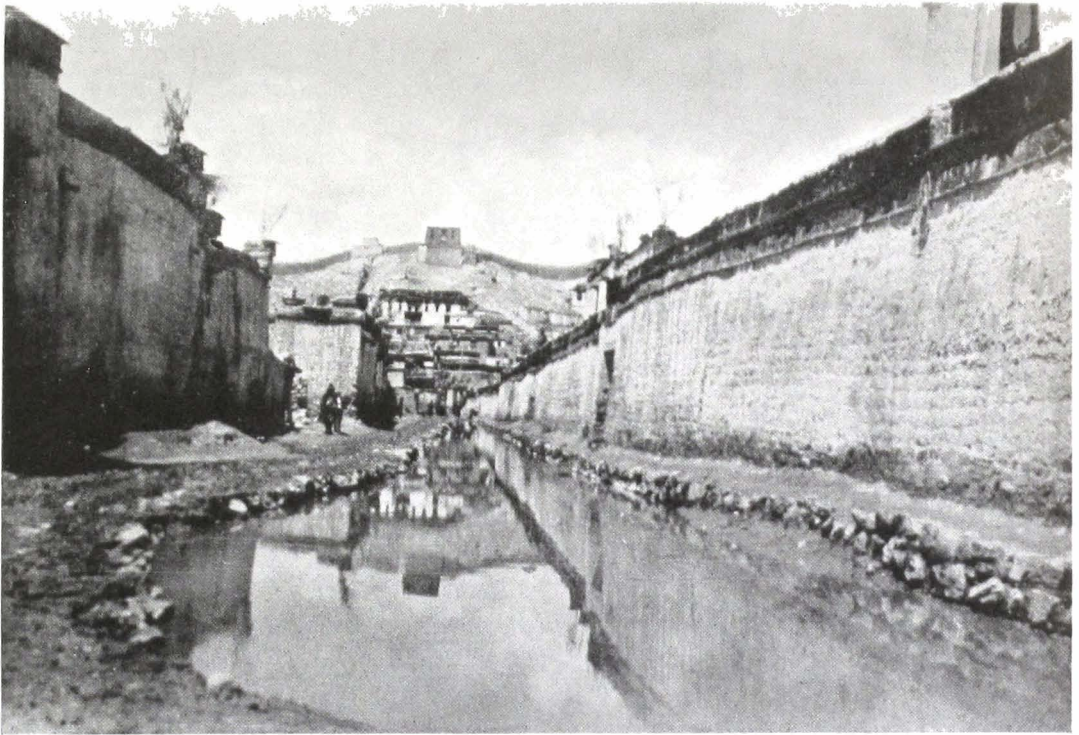
the sun to dry. The crude "factories" in which this product is made house the employees as do the factories that produce carpets.

Buddhism being the national religion of Tibet, a large percentage of the population is made up of lamas—priests who live a life of celibacy. Usually these priests are chosen from among the more influential families, and often they enter their period of training when they are as young as ten years. For a number of years they remain as acolytes, during which period they devote themselves to study. As a result they acquire a vast amount of Buddhist lore, and some of the older lamas, who have kept up their studies, become exceedingly erudite in their field. Their education, however, bears little resemblance to education in the western sense. As a matter of fact, while some learn to read and write, most, if not all of them, would be classed as intensely



PLOWING WITH YAKS

Throughout Tibet yaks are used principally as pack animals. Sometimes, however, they are ridden, and among the Tibetan agriculturists they are often yoked to the plow



#### TIBETAN CITIES ARE NOT CLEAN

Pools of water often collect and dirt is the order of the day, but mosquitoes and flies are absent or exceedingly rare, and the many germs of the region south of the Himalayas do not thrive on the Tibetan plateau

ignorant by any western standard. Vast though their stores of information may be, it would be utterly useless amid modern civilization.

Lamas do no work. Their religious studies and duties occupy their time exclusively. The result is that they have to be supported by the peasants, who supply them with all the needs of life. The drain on the population is consequently great and has been offered as one explanation of the backwardness (in western eyes) of this crude land.

Shrines are to be found in every town and village and often in the open country along trails or roads. In the city of Gyantse there is a large shrine that is more than usually interesting. It contains a large library, with innumerable books piled up on shelves and covered with dust. These books are all loose leaved, and have stiff carton covers

that are bound round with string.

Elsewhere in this temple are numerous effigies and small shrines, some of which are extraordinarily queer. Two stuffed yaks, for example, hang from the ceiling. Other effigies are life-sized figures representing ancient abbots of the lamasery. The shrines are gods—usually Buddhas—before which, day and night, burn wicks stuck into yak butter. As a result, every temple has an unmistakable odor.

Buddhism, like other religions, has sects, but in all of them the principal thought in the lama's mind is that of reincarnation. No Buddhist may take any life—not even that of the fleas that abound on him. To take the life of a man is the most serious, of course, and the person guilty of this crime is thought to face positive reincarnation as a louse which, apparently, even in Tibet is considered to be the lowest of the low



THE BETTER HOMES  
HAVE SPACIOUS  
COURTYARDS

Except for temples and shrines, Tibetan cities are purely residential. The strings stretched above this courtyard carry prayer-flags, which are common decorations in this region



A TIBETAN  
BAZAAR

These booths are the Tibetan counterparts of the busy native markets of the cities of India. Throughout Tibet, however, these marts are small, and are open usually only in the morning







THE "ORCHESTRA" AT A NATIVE DANCE

Masks and weird costumes are a part of the religious dances so common in Tibet. The music, to western ears, leaves much to be desired

Strict as all these rules are, however, they are many times departed from.

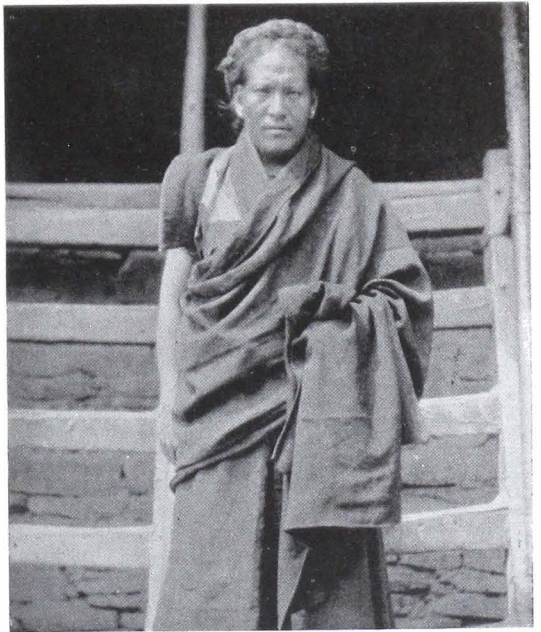
Near Gyantse is a lamasery in which the lamas have adopted a most severe custom. These lamas sometimes incarcerate themselves in tiny cells where they remain in absolute seclusion for periods ranging from a month to a lifetime. During this period of incarceration they neither see nor speak to anyone. The cells have tiny apertures covered with removable wooden boards. When meal-time comes a lama raps on the board and then removes it. At the signal the lama within puts forth his hand and receives his buttered tea, but his hand is covered by a large glove as he must never permit mortal eye to see any portion of his person. I took a photograph of the glove-covered hand of a lama said to be an old man. He had been in his cell for many years and had announced before going in that he would never come out. Some day, when there is no answer to the knock at buttered tea time, they will know that he

has ended his long period of seclusion.

This dreadfully ascetic life is thought to improve their reincarnations, and all the lamas of this lamasery go through periods of such seclusion for varying lengths of time. One lama, for instance, had spent seven years in one of the cells, but decided at the end of that time he had had enough and would never go back. So often had this particular man prayed with his forehead touching the stone floor that a permanent bump had developed.

The lamas are dressed in the usual yellow or red robes of their class, but the peasants are clad in substantial garments woven of yak hair or yak leather. These heavy garments are well fitted to resist the cold and the wind. Heavy leather boots are the usual footgear, and are both substantial and warm. Women often wear leather dresses and their hair is done in the Lhasa style, with a complicated head-dress bound permanently into the hair.

The people of the higher classes dress



A TIBETAN LAMA

This particular man had, at one time, spent seven years in a tiny cell, without being seen even by those who brought his food, and without speaking to anyone. He came out at the end of that time



more comfortably and a petty rajah who entertained us at a true Tibetan meal made quite a display when surrounded by his wife and children. The food he gave us, too, was excellent—very different from the peasant food. Mutton was the staple. After being chopped and formed into small balls it was effectively flavored with high seasoning. Macaroni—imported—was present and a native drink called *chung* was served. It is not unpalatable, but becomes so when one has to drink it for about two hours.

At Gyantse we called on the governor who, at one time, had been first man in waiting on the Dalai Lama himself. Consequently he was in high standing with the central government. When we arrived, he asked us to lunch, and when he made his return call, we offered him good India tea and powdered milk in solution. Of these he would touch nothing as he had had his servants bring along his kettle and buttered tea. Of this brew he would drink forty to fifty cups a day.



NATIVE TIBETANS DANCING

These masked figures began their dance with slow and solemn tread, only to increase the pace until it became a rapid, whirling motion

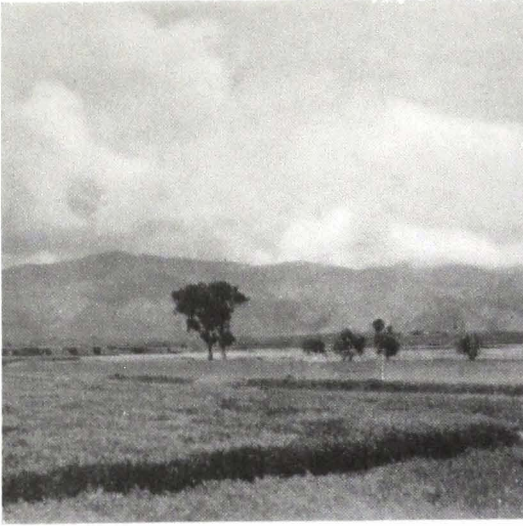
In meeting dignitaries such as this one, it is customary to make gifts. We presented him with a self-winding wrist watch, and he, in return, presented us with some Tibetan carpets.

The governor was very pleasant and had a well-developed sense of humor. The last time we saw him was one morning about breakfast time. He was just starting off on an administrative trip, but came to see us because he had to deliver more carpets that had come to us from the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. He said that, considering the fact that he came as an emissary of the Dalai Lama, he ought to spend the entire day with us, that being the custom under such circumstances. He then apologized and said that so prolonged a visit was impossible, as he could not cancel his trip. Pleasant as the governor was, a full day with him would have been rather trying. A long attempt at conversation, Tibetan on one side, Hindustani on the other, with an interpreter in between, would soon have worn out everybody.



THE OPENING TO A LAMA'S CELL

Through this tiny opening food is passed to the lama within, who covers his hand with the huge, awkward glove shown, in order to get his meal without even his hand being seen by those outside



FIELDS OF THE TIBETAN AGRICULTURISTS  
These fields are small and are watered by short canals leading from near-by streams

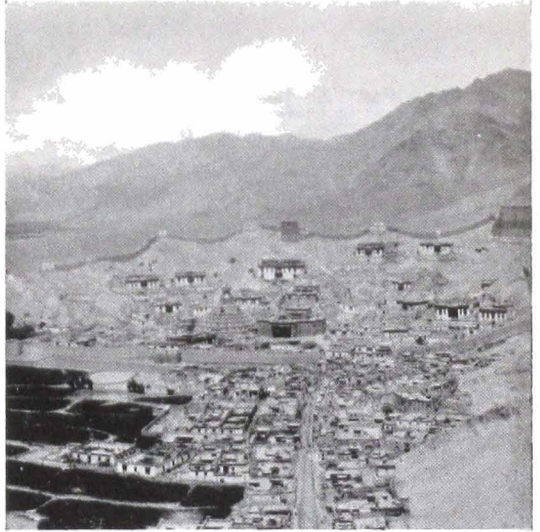
Tibet differs much from southern Asia in that it is in no way overpopulated. This is particularly obvious in the cities. They have no large, permanent bazaars such as tourists to the East always see in the larger cities. There are small marts, but the stalls are temporary structures readily taken down. Bazaars of this sort, which have singularly little to offer, may be open only during the mornings and are then closed and removed for the rest of the day.

Except for the temples and shrines, Tibetan cities are purely residential, and there is no congestion. The better class homes all have spacious courtyards, and across these strings are stretched upon which prayer-flags flutter. There is one standard prayer throughout Tibet—"Om mani padme hum"—which, interpreted, means "Oh, thou jewel in the lotus." No Tibetan priest or layman really knows what this means, but this fact alone gives the prayer a certain charm, as this lack of significance lends mysticism to it.

Every house has one or more watchdogs—large, heavily coated, fearfully vicious beasts. They are courageous and very different from the pariah dogs of

India and China. Often they are kept chained all day and are loosed only at night. Wherever one goes it is best to be on one's guard, and certainly one should never enter a house or a courtyard without being absolutely certain that the dogs are secured.

With the absence of offensive odors, are other lacks that need not be regretted. The dry air, bitter in winter and never



THE CITY OF GYANTSE  
View taken from the fort that guards the city.  
The dark patches are areas of cultivation

hot in summer, does not breed germs. During the summer there is no pest of flies. Pools of water may sometimes form, but they never breed mosquitoes. Tropical diseases from the lowlands farther south do not appear in Tibet. In fact, Tibet is remarkably fortunate in its good health, its lack of overpopulation, and its ample and regular food supply.

The usual means of human transportation throughout this portion of Tibet are horses and mules. The yak is the great pack carrier. Owing to the numerous rivers, however, boats are occasionally used. They are made of yak skins drawn tightly over light wooden frames. These boats are quite round and are operated by paddles. The streams are too swift to



make it possible to go against the current, but this does not bother the Tibetans in the least, for the boats are so light that they can readily be carried. The high freeboard and the flat bottoms, too, make them reasonably seaworthy and they are capable of carrying many persons. For downstream trips the boats are useful, and once the destination has been reached, the boats are picked up and set up along the sides of the houses. The life of one of these boats is only one season, whereupon they are all remade.

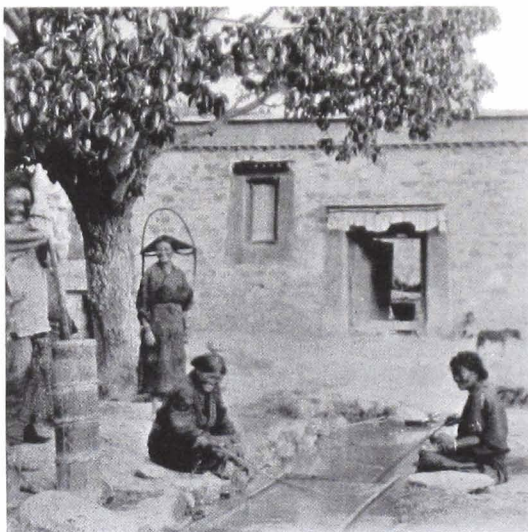
Trade between Tibet and the outside world is carried on only on a small scale. Hides and wool are the chief exports. Recently a wool merchant with headquarters at Lhasa wrote me asking if I

then wrapped in animal gut and are transported by caravans to the nearest bazaars. This butter is always rancid but is widely used in cooking.

The carpets and blankets manufactured in Tibet are made from yak skins but the quality is so inferior that few are used outside those made for home consumption.

It seems that Tibet is practically self sufficient. Dyes must be imported, but not in great quantities, for Tibetans do not seem to be very fond of bright colors. Homburg hats are getting more and more popular, coming largely from India. The rich do buy food and clothes from China, but aside from these articles little is demanded of the outside world.

The biggest ceremony of the land is the butter ceremony which is held annually. Large effigies of Buddha are set up—all made of yak butter—and are surrounded by many lighted wicks set in the same material. The ceremony, which takes place at night, is extremely grotesque. The lamas wear elaborate and highly colored clothes and enormous masks. The dancing is slow at the start, but increases in speed until it becomes a furious



MAKING PAPER

After beating wood and bark into pulp, it is soaked in water and spread on frames

could open a market for him in the United States. Through a Calcutta firm he had in the past sold his wool in Philadelphia, but now he considered "times were hard."

In eastern Tibet clarified yak butter is sold in large quantities to the Chinese along the border. The butter is first properly boiled to reduce its water content and to sterilize it. Large chunks are



MAKING PAPER

The frame with the wood pulp is then set in the sun to dry into coarse paper



A TIBETAN WOMAN WEAVING

All the clothes of the common people are made by the people themselves, the women doing all the weaving. The wealthy, however, buy some food and clothing from China, and India sends some goods

spinning motion. This lasts only a few moments and the dancers then revert to the slow time with which they started. Music of a kind is provided as an accompaniment.

Throughout southern Tibet, if one enters the country under proper auspices, one will always find the population most hospitable and kind. The people have an excellent sense of humor and their good health is always apparent even though they have no regard for cleanliness.

The people are hardy and strong. As a rule they are tall and men of the upper classes in particular are often more than

six feet. It is noticeable that the older they are the darker is their skin which, I believe, can most readily be explained by the fact that they rarely bathe and that during the long, cold winters they must sit close to the yak dung fire in order to get enough of its ineffective heat. These fires give off a peculiar smoke which seems to darken the exposed parts of the body with which it comes



WOMEN PAPER MAKERS

in contact. Consequently, Tibetans have a much darker complexion than is natural to them.

As caravan men the Tibetans are second to none. In high winds, through snow and



sleet, they will often make astonishingly lengthy marches. They are good packers, and their animals, which seem as sturdy as they, rarely have sore backs. It is pleasant to accost these distant people and to receive their ready smiles.

Here is one portion of the world that seems to have few cares or worries. Shut off by natural barriers, it seems quite capable of taking care of itself. The climate is rigorous, it is true, but that very rigor brings health and keeps out the foreigners who might otherwise migrate

there. The policy of the priests who dominate the country is "Tibet for the Tibetans," a policy quite sensible enough.

It is apparent that the population of Tibet is smaller than it once was. Here and there one comes across ruined villages long abandoned. Still, this is due to the egress of the population rather than the ravages of disease. Some few may have

desired to move to climates more mild, but Tibet will always remain as it is, and is not likely to become an uninhabited region.



A YAK CARAVAN



A TIBETAN BOAT

The boats are merely crude frames, covered with skin. They are light and easily carried, with the result that they are often taken upstream overland to be used on the downstream journey