

## THE TIBETAN POPULATION AND THEIR GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION IN CHINA

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The Tibetans is one of the 56 ethnic groups in China. They live in the south-western part of the country and have their own history and culture. Tibet is well-known in the world because of its plateau characteristics and its famous religion. For a long time, the size of Tibetan population has been a puzzle to people who study Tibet. On the other hand, argument have also been concentrated on how many Han (the majority ethnic group in China) have migrated into traditional Tibetan-inhabited areas since the 1950s. But unfortunately, the historical records of Tibetan population are very limited. Therefore, the estimates about the Tibetan population varies at a very large extent.

In the first and second censuses in China (1953 and 1964), the population data about the Tibetan population in the Tibetan Autonomous Region were based on indirect survey. The third census held in 1982 was the first time that the Tibetan population were recorded in a direct way, but the items were only about half compared with the census items in other parts of China and about 28 thousands were still counted based on administrative records. The fourth census (1990) covered all Tibetan regions. The accuracy of the Chinese third and fourth censuses were approved by the demographic experts around the world. The data from the last two censuses provide us an opportunity to study population dynamics in Tibet. Based on the analyses of the census data, this article will examine the changes of Tibetan population and their patterns of geographic distribution.

### I. The Geographic Scope of the Tibetan-inhabited Areas

In order to study the population of an ethnic group and its changes, it is necessary to identify its geographic scope or coverage. In history, the territory of the Tibetan Tu-Po dynasty (610 - 846 A.D.) covered the present Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), Western part of Sichuan province and south-western part of Qinghai province (Huang, 1985:57). These areas gradually developed into three major parts of China inhabited by Tibetans. They are Tibet (including Anterior and Posterior Tibet and Ari in the present TAR), Kang (including the two Tibetan autonomous prefectures in the west of Sichuan, the Changdu prefecture in TAR, and Diqing Tibetan autonomous prefecture in Yunnan province), and Anduo (including Gannan Tibetan autonomous prefecture in Gansu province and most part of Qinghai province) (see Figure 1). Each area has its own distinct Tibetan dialect.

From the 13th to early 20th centuries, both the Kang and Anduo Tibetan areas were ruled by the central government under the Tusi system. In Tibet, on the other hand, the central government appointed the local master preacher of Buddhism and Wangjue (during the Ming dynasty), conferred the title of Dalai Lama and Penchan Lama and established the local Kashag government (during the Qing dynasty). The three areas were also under the administration of central government commissioners based in Tibet, Sichuan and Xining (capital of Qinghai) respectively (Huang, 1985: 229).

Rong Ma, Naigu Pan: Tibetan population

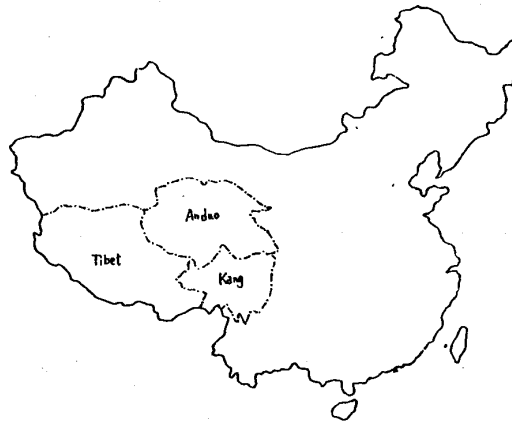
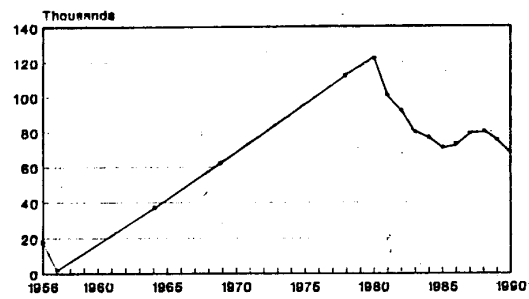


Figure 1. Tibetan-inhabited Areas in China

Figure 4. Han Population in Tibet  
(1956-1990)



Statistics from the 1982 census show that Tibetans are to be found in all the 29 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions of China, varies from 18 persons (Jilin province) to 1.76 million (TAR, see Table 1). About 99% of the country's Tibetans live in TAR, Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan (cf. Table 1). In 1990, the basic pattern is still the same, about 99.6% the Tibetan population lived in TAR and the above four provinces.

Table 1. The Geographic Distribution of Tibetans

1982 census: Tibetan population 3,874,035					
province	population	%	province	population	%
TAR	1,786,544	45.9	Hebei	127	
Sichuan	921,984	24.0	Anhui	105	
Qinghai	753,987	19.6	Shanghai	104	
Gansu	304,573	7.9	Hunan	95	
Yunnan	95,925	2.5	Fujian	87	
Above 5	3,862,923	99.7	Hubei	83	
Xinjiang	1,967		Jiangsu	82	
Shaanxi	1,120		Shanxi	75	
Beijing	820		Liaoning	67	
Henan	521		Heilongjian	55	
Nei Mongol	504		Ninxia	47	
Guangdong	388		Jiangxi	39	
Gueizhou	205		Zhejiang	35	
Shandong	173		Tianjing	30	
Guangxi	149		Jilin	18	
1990 census: Tibetan population 4,593,330					
Tibet	2,096,346	45.6	Gansu	366,718	8.0
Sichuan	1,087,510	23.7	Yunnan	111,414	2.4
Qinghai	911,860	19.9	Above 5	4,573,848	99.6

Source: *Almanac of China's Population (1985)*, p. 620.

Fourth Census Data published by respective provinces.

There are about 100,000 Tibetans live in India on exile. Besides, there is a large Tibetan blood-lineage population in neighbor countries (India, Nepal, Sihkim, Bhutan, and Kashmir Region), about 1 million by some estimates (Kolb, 1971:365-366).

During the past three decades, the major administrative change in Tibetan-inhabited areas was that Changdu Region became a part of TAR and rescinded former Xikang province in 1956. Since the 1950s, besides TAR, ten Tibetan autonomous prefectures, two Tibetan autonomous counties, and one Tibetan autonomous Xing have been established in four provinces. These areas are the region discussed in this article as the Tibetan-inhabited areas. One thing is noteworthy, there were 430,000 Han, 220,000 Hui, Mongolian, Qiang, Yi and other ethnic groups in these areas in 1953 (Ma and Pan, 1988:24).

## II. The Tibetan Population in History

The demographic data for Tibetan population in history are very limited and most of them are estimates without reliable sources. According to Richardson, there were about 300,000 Tibetan population during the Mongolian Yuan dynasty in the 13th century (Richardson, 1962:4). In 1737, the administrative records of the Qing dynasty show there were 957,150 Tibetan population under Dalai Lama and Penchan Lama (Huang, 1985:264). Another study suggests that this number excludes the residents outside the

monasteries' control and the real population should be around 1,340,000 at that time (Wang and Wu, 1982:60).

The Ministry of Interior of the Republic of China (KMT) reported 3,922,011 Tibetan population in 1928, then reported 5,234,359 in 1929 (Hong, 1936:41). Obviously, these numbers were rough estimates. Lin Donghai's study reported that the Tibetan population was between 700,000 and 800,000 in 1939 (Hong, 1936:41). Some estimates for Tibetan population are listed in Table 2 as a reference (Bell, 1928; Carrasco, 1959; Hong, 1936).

Although these estimates are quite different from each other, they seem all agreed that during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the Tibetan population experienced a decline. Zhang Yintang believed that "Tibetan population decreased about 800,000 during 1736-1900" (Hong, 1936:218). The reasons for the decline are: 1) widespread venereal disease; 2) the practice of polyandry; 3) the climate and topography, and 4) a large, mostly celibate clergy (Grunfeld, 1987:218). Before the 1950s, monks consisted of one-third of the total Tibetan population, then women became the major labor force which resulted in miscarriage and high infant mortality rates. This also has a negative impact on Tibetan population growth.

Table 2. Estimates of Tibetan Population (in million)

Resource	Date	Tibet population
Lifanyan, Qing dynasty	1737	0.96
W.W. Rockhill	1895	3.0
Sarat Chandra Das	1905	2.5-3.0
<i>Encyclopedia Britannica</i>	1910	3.0
Ministry of Interior, KMT	1928	3.7
Pedro Carrasco	1928	3.9
Ministry of Interior, KMT	1929	5.2
David MacDonald	1929	3.9
Lin Donghai	1934	0.7-0.8
Charles Bell	1936	3.0-4.0
Ministry of Interior, KMT	1947	2.8
Heinrich Harrer	1959	4.0
Hugh Richardson	1961	3.0
Stein	1962	3.5-4.0
Dalai Lama	1962	7.0-8.0
Dalai Lama	1987	6.0

Data sources: cf. A. Tom Grunfeld, 1987. p.219.

### III. The Changes of Tibetan Population Since the 1950s

According to *History of Tibetans* (Huang, 1985), the Tibetan population and its geographic distribution in early 1950s is shown in Table 3. The numbers provided in his study are very close to the result of the first census.

During the first census (1953), the Tibetan population in Tibet and Changdu region was estimated, but the Tibetan population in other areas was counted in detail by county. Generally speaking, the actual number of Tibetan population in early 1950s should be close to the result of the first census (2,773,000). In these Tibetan-inhabited areas (totally 2.2 million square kilometers), the areas with 1 million square meters were covered by the census and the result shows that about 54% of the total Tibetan population lived in these areas. The Tibetan population lived in

other 1.2 million square meter area (Tibet and Changdu region) was reported by the Dalai Lama Kashag government. The Dalai Lama had no objection to the result of the first census.

Table 3. Tibetan Population in Early 1950s (in 10,000)

	Early 1950s*	First census(1953)
Tibet		100.0
Changdu	127.5	27.4
Xikang	60.0	49.9
Qinghai	42.5	49.4
Gansu	14.5	20.5
Sichuan		23.4
Yunnan	33.1	6.7
Total	277.6	277.3

\*Source: Huang Fensheng 1985, p.384.

The second census was held in 1964. The result reported that total Tibetan population was about 2,501,174, a decline of 272,000. The population for TAR (including Changdu region) was estimated as 1,208,163, decreased about 60,000. The reasons for the decline might be: 1) Tibetan population might be affected by the nation-wide population decline due to the difficult period in the early 1960s — the population of China experienced a decrease of 13.48 million during 1959-1961 (*Almanac of China's Population (1985)*, p.807); and 2) accounting mistakes by estimates while no any formal residential registration system in these areas.

For example, the estimates by local administrative materials suggested that during 1953-1964, the Tibetan population in Tibet (including Changdu) increased from 1.15 million to 1.35 million. Based on the report of the Dalai Lama Kashag government and the estimate by the census staff in 1964, the Census Bureau reported at the Tibetan population in Tibet decreased from 1.27 million to 1.21 million.

Among the two reports, which source is more reliable will need a careful examination. But at least two points supporting the numbers provided by local administration seem more convincing: 1) the exact 1 million population in Tibet (excluding Changdu) reported by Kashag government might be overestimated. At that time, the relationship between Kashag and the central government was very subtle, to overstate the population under its control seems rational for Kashag government; 2) the residential registration system has been established in northern pastoral areas in Tibet in 1964, some herdsmen might be covered by local registration but not covered by census.

The third census (1982) covered TAR and reported that the total Tibetan population in China reached 3.87 million. The Tibetan population in TAR increased from 1.21 million to 1.79 million (increased by 47.8% or an average annual growth rate of 2.2%).

The average annual growth rate for total Tibetan population was 2.5%, which suggests that the Tibetans in other regions outside TAR had a high population growth. Those regions started democratic reform earlier than TAR, have a better transportation and closer to Han regions geographically, which resulted in a faster development of local economy, education and health care facilities, which in term reduced mortality rate.

The fourth census (1990) reported 4.59 million Tibetans in China and an annual growth rate of 2.02% during 1982-1990. In comparison, the national annual growth rate for China was 1.48% during the same period.

The third and fourth censuses provide us the population data (including the ethnic structures) for all 147 counties in Tibetan-inhabited areas, so we can examine the population density and geographic distribution of Tibetan population. From Figure 2, it is clear that most counties have a density less than 50 persons per square kilometer except Lhasa city and Lintan County in Gansu. About 23 counties (16% of the total counties) have a density less than 1 person per square kilometer. The population density in TAR was 1.6 persons per square kilometer in 1982 and 1.8 in 1990. In comparison, the average population density in China was 105 in 1982 and 118 in 1990.

Because 72 counties in TAR were not covered by the 1953 census, we will concentrate on 75 counties in other Tibetan-inhabited areas to study the changes of Tibetan population and their geographic distribution. These areas are located between Tibet and Han regions, therefore the discussion of demographic changes in these areas, especially on migration, is quite meaningful.

Among 75 counties, the decline of Tibetans in absolute number during 1953-1990 only occurred in 4 counties (Aba, Hongyuan, Derong in Sichuan province, Weixi in Yunnan province). During 1964-1990, the Tibetan population increased in all 75 counties. The changes of Tibetan population by county are shown in Table 4. Among 75 counties, 17 experienced a growth of 1-1.5 times during 1953-1990, 31 experienced a growth of 1.5-3 times, 10 experienced a growth over 3 times which has a same annual growth rate of 3% — the highest rate in the world<sup>1</sup>.

Among these 10 counties such as Jinchuan (increased by 58.2% during 1953-1990), Maowen (97.7%), Luding (152.7%), in-migration must be the major reason for the rapid increase of their Tibetan population. Among the 4 counties which experienced a decline of their Tibetan population, out-migration might be a reason. For example, Tibetan population in Aba county decreased from 47 thousands to 36 thousands during 1953-1990, while the Tibetans in a nearby county (Jiouzhi) increased from 8,000 in 1964 into 1,500 in 1990. It is possible that some Tibetans migrated from Aba to Jiouzhi. In general, Tibetan population has experienced a significant growth in the past four decades.

Figure 3 shows the age structures of Tibetans and Han in TAR in 1990. The Tibetan population has a normal population pyramid without any obvious breach which might be resulted from wars, famines or other unusual deaths. In contrast, the population pyramid of Han in TAR is very unusual with a large proportion of working age groups and more males than females. It reflects the fact that most of the Han came from other regions and were arranged by the central government to work in Tibet only for a period. Many of them left their children and elderly at the place of origin, those government employees will join their family in their home region after their service period in Tibet.

Table 4. Changes of Tibetan Population during 1953-1990

Tibetan population	number of counties	%
decreased	4	5.3
increased 1-1.5 times	17	22.7
increased 1.5-2 times	14	18.7
increased 2-3 times	17	22.7
increased over 3 times	10	13.3
unknown (no 1953 data)	13	17.3
Total	75	100.0

IV. Han Population in Tibet Autonomous Region

There were also many estimates of Han population in Tibet (cf. Table 5). These estimates vary from 50,000 to 12 million, and a large proportion of them were around 4.5 million. One of the reasons for estimating such a large Han population may be due their including Haidong prefecture in the eastern part on Qinghai province (which had 1 million Han population in 1964) and the central part of Sichuan province, both are not traditional Tibetan-inhabited areas.

In fact, Han population increased at a generally low rate in Tibetan-inhabited areas, mainly due to the plateau climate. In 1953, Kashag government reported that there was no Han in Tibet and Changdu. In 1982 and 1990, Han civilians in TAR with residential registration were only 91,720 and 81,217, including cadres, doctors, teachers, engineers, and skilled workers.

The Han population changes in Tibetan-inhabited areas were shown in Table 6. During 1953-1990, Han population in Tibetan-inhabited areas (totally 2.2 million square kilometers) increased from 426,000 to 1,508,000 while Tibetan population increased from 2,773,000 to 4,573,848. For TAR, Tibetans consisted of 96.1% of the total population, while Han 3.1% and others 0.8% in 1990.

Table 5. Estimate of Han Population in Tibetan-inhabited Areas

Source	Date	Estimate (in 10,000)
Tingfu F. Tsiang	1958	30
Noel Barber	1959	450
P. Trikram das	1959	500
Dalai Lama	1959	550
Lowell Thomas, Jr.	1959	580
Wadi Rufail	1959	600
Hugh Richardson	1961	5
Bradford Smith	1961	1,200
Lucien Pye	1976	Twice as Tibetans
Dalai Lama	1987	750

Source: A. Tom Grunfeld, 1987. p.221.

Table 6. Han Population in Tibetan-inhabited Areas (in 10,000)

Areas	1953	1964	1982	1990
TAR	0	3.7	9.2	6.7
6 prefectures (Qinghai province)	4.0	30.6	50.4	53.2
1 prefecture, 1 county (Gansu province)	15.5	23.7	37.5	40.3
3 prefectures, 1 county (Sichuan province)	20.3	36.6	52.0	45.5
1 prefecture (Yunnan province)	2.8	3.3	5.0	5.1
Total	42.6	97.9	154.1	150.8

For all Tibetan autonomous areas (cf. Table 6), Tibetans consisted of 67.1% of the Total population in 1982, while Han 26.9% and others 6%. The percentage of Tibetans in total is expected to be even higher in 1990. The percentage changes of Han in total population by county were shown in Table 7.

From Table 7, we can see a trend of decline of Han population during 1982-1990. It is also found that in a large number of counties, Han population experiences a decline in absolute number. For example, the Han population decreased for about 65,000 or by 13% during 1982-1990 in two Tibetan autonomous prefectures in Sichuan. Since the in-depth system reform and the rapid economic development in coastal areas, many Han migrated from western China to coastal provinces to search for new opportunities. The year of 1981 or 1982 can be seen as a turn point of the trend of Han migration, from western oriented changed to eastern oriented. It is safe to say that, since 1982, Han population has been moving out, not moving into Tibetan-inhabited areas.

Table 7. Percentage Changes in Han in Total Population by County in Tibetan-inhabited Areas (1982-1990)

Areas	increased	unchanged	decreased	Total
Tibet	9 counties	3 counties	60 counties	72 counties
Sichuan	2 counties	-	30 counties	32 counties
<i>Qinghai</i>	5 counties	-	27 counties	32 counties
Gansu	-	-	8 counties	8 counties
Yunnan	-	-	3 counties	3 counties
Total	16 counties	3 counties	128 counties	147 counties
%	10.9	2.0	87.1	100.0

Table 8 shows the net-migration volume in TAR during the period of 1965-1990. During this period, the net in-migration was 152,800, but most of them were not Han since the Han population during this period only increased for about 30,000 (cf. Table 6). In other words, about 122,800 Tibetans migrated from other areas into Tibet Autonomous Region.

Table 8. Inter-provincial Migration in Tibet Autonomous Region (In-migration - out-migration = Net migration) (in 10,000)

Year	net-mig	Year	net-mig	Year	net-mig
1965	1.23	1974	0.66	1983	0.40
1966	1.36	1975	0.44	1984	0.43
1967	2.00	1976	0.86	1985	
1968	1.64	1977	0.57	1986	-0.37
1969	1.43	1978	0.64	1987	0.53
1970	0.89	1979	1.57	1988	0.01
1971	1.84	1980	0.05	1989	-0.53
1972	1.43	1981	-2.26	1990	-0.81
1973	1.09	1982	0.18	Total	15.28

Sources: *Almanac of China's Population (1985)*, p.546.

*Social and Economic Statistical Yearbook of TAR (1991)* p. 127.

Mr. Hu Yiaobang, the Secretary-general of Chinese Communist Party, visited Tibet in 1981 and called for local Tibetans to manage the administrative in TAR. The Han population in TAR was shown in Figure 4. Since 1981, the basic trend of Han population is out-migration<sup>2</sup>.

Figures 5, 6 and 7 show the percentages of Han in total population by each county in totally 147 counties in Tibetan autonomous areas in 1953, 1982 and 1990. From these figures, we can see that percentage of Han increased in general counties (eastern Qinghai, western Sichuan and urban Lhasa). During 1953-1982, the Han percentage decreased in 10 counties, for example, Han percentage decreased from 11.3% to 6.3% in Batang



county, decreased from 61.0% to 18.7% in Maowen county. The increase of percentage of Han in north-western Qinghai (cf. Figures 5 and 6) mainly due to the establishment of some mines and railway construction. The population density is extremely low in this desert area (0.9 persons per square kilometers in Haixi autonomous prefecture in 1990).

During 1982-1990, Han percentage decreased in 128 counties. In the central and western parts of Qinghai, percentages of Han have been always below 5%. In 51 counties of TAR, percentage of Han even below 1% in 1990 (71% of the total counties in TAR). Therefore, Han population consists of only a small part of the population in these Tibetan-inhabited areas, and their percentage as well as absolute number has been decreasing.

The occupational structure of Han population in TAR indicates their function in local administration and economy. For example, among the total Han population (123,356 including children and elderly), about 30,000 worked for industry, post, communication, trade, health care, and educational facilities of the Regional government. Among them, there were 12,000 engineers and workers, 5,600 employee in trade, 4,500 school teachers, 2,500 employees in post and communication, and 3,000 doctors (*General Situation of Tibet Autonomoug Region*, 1984:462-530). According to the 1982 census, the occupational structure of Han in TAR at working age is: cadres (9.1%), clerk (12.9%), professionals (26.4%), workers (40%), employees in trade and services (10%), farmers and herdsmen (2.3%), and others (0.4%) (Liu, 1988:294).

The total financial subsidies from the Central government to TAR reach 14.55 billion Yuan during 1952-1990. The funds were used to improve urban and rural construction, transportation, communication, education, health care facilities, social welfare, agricultural and industrial production. These Han in TAR have helped the local people to manage the use of the funds.

Han population in western Qinghai concentrates in Gelmu City, the end of the railway to transport good from Han regions into Tibet. Most of them work for railway system (about 10,000) or for truck convoy (about 25,000). In 1990, 1.54 million ton good were transported into TAR through this railway-highway system. These are necessary productive and consumer goods for people's life and social society in Tibet.

#### IV. Summary

Based on the discussions above, several conclusions can be summarized as below:

1. Before 1951, Tibetan population experienced the trend of decline. After the democratic reform in the late 1950s, Tibetan population began to increase, the period of 1964-1990 was the period of rapid growth.
2. In the early 1950s, Tibetan population in China was about 2.75 million, it reached 3.87 million in 1982 and 4.59 million in 1990.
3. There was no obvious decline in Tibetan population since 1951. For several counties with a decline of Tibetan population, special survey is necessary to identify the reasons, very likely they were due to out-migration. Meanwhile, no obvious unusual gaps were found in the age structure of Tibetan population.
4. The Han population in Tibetan-inhabited areas increased from 0.43 million in 1953 to 1.54 million in 1982, then decreased to 1.51 million in 1990. These Han mainly live in eastern part of Qinghai and western part of Sichuan.

5. According to the census data, 1982 was the year when Han population changed its migration patterns. After 1982, Han population decreased in TAR and western Sichuan, there is a clear trend of out-migration.

6. In TAR, the total Han population was only 67,407 in 1990, including over 30,000 employees working in transportation, industry, trade, post, schools, and hospitals. They play an important role in Tibet's economy and society.

#### NOTES

1. Examples of other countries have an annual population growth rate over 3% are Kenya (3.8%), Tanzania (3.5%), Iraq (3.6%), Pakistan (3.2%) (The World Bank, 1991:228).
2. The Han population in Tibet Autonomous Region was: 1978 (112,569); 1980 (122,356); 1981 (99,873); 1982 (91,720); 1983 (79,650); 1984 (76,322); 1985 (70,932); 1986 (72,340); 1987 (78,804); 1988 (79,871); 1989 (74,989); 1990 (67,407) (*Social and Economic Statistical Yearbook of Tibet (1989)*, p. 140; (1991), p.126).

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