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Mountain Gods and Trance Mediums: A Qinghai Tibetan Summer Festival

Abstract

For several days every summer Zhangjia Village in the Huangnan (Malhu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province, China, celebrates the Laru Festival. During Laru those with close kinship ties to the village return to be reunited with their relatives. Everyone dons Tibetan-style clothing and takes pride in being Tibetan. A trance medium exorcises the village of evil by visiting every village home, the village gods are worshipped, and the male villagers dance and beseech the deities to bestow a bumper harvest.

Key words: Laru Festival — *lhawa* — mountain gods — Living Buddhas

ZHANGJIA is a small village about eight kilometers from Rongwu (Tongren) in Huangnan (Malhu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture¹ of Qinghai Province.² Situated between two mountains near the Gecha River, the community comprises 133 families and 756 people, almost all of whom are Tibetan.³ Here and in a few neighboring towns a distinctive celebration is held for a few days every summer: the Laru Festival, presided over by the village *lhawa* (“god-man,” a trance medium)⁴ and featuring dances by village males and rituals in honor of the local mountain gods. The authors witnessed and participated in the 1990 Laru Festival, held 5–10 August, and also interviewed a number of local informants. The informants differed at times in their explanations of the significance of the various aspects of the festival, and we have attempted to present this diversity of opinion.

The Laru Festival is celebrated in certain Rongwu Tibetan villages, but we know of nowhere else that it occurs. In Zhangjia it begins on the seventeenth day of the sixth month, according to the Hortsu calendar. It derives its name from the fact that the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth of the sixth month are called the Laru period. This is a propitious time, the barley and fruit having come into ripeness. The villagers offer these foods to the gods, and entreat them to bestow bountiful harvests in the future and spare the village and its livestock from disease. The water gods in particular are beseeched to send rain and sunshine at times that will ensure good crops. The festival usually lasts three days, but the gods may speak through the village *lhawa* to ask for additional days.

When studying Laru as an expression of Tibetan culture, it must be kept in mind that it takes place in a context of enormous cultural diversity. Qinghai Province is home to several minority nationalities, including Hui, Monguor (Tu), Salar, and Mongolians, who, together with the Tibetans, represent about forty percent of Qinghai’s four million people (one of the highest minority percentages in any province or autonomous region in China).⁵ The Tibetans comprise the largest of these minorities,

but it is a group that is far from uniform. Kam speakers are centered in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, while Amdo speakers inhabit not only areas designated as Tibetan autonomous regions but other areas as well.⁶ To further complicate the issue, there are groups in Qinghai who speak Tibetan but are classified as other nationalities. Tibetan-speaking “Mongolians,” for example, live in Henan Mongolian Autonomous County of Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, while Tibetan-speaking “Hui” can be found in Hualong Hui Autonomous County.⁷ On the other hand, there are “Tibetans” in many areas of Qinghai who speak only a Han dialect, and others in Minhe Hui and Monguor Autonomous County who speak Monguor and observe Monguor customs.

Given the enormous variety among the Qinghai Tibetans, it is difficult to speak of anything as “typical” of the regional Tibetan culture, and this is as true of the Laru Festival as of anything else. To better understand the significance of the celebration it is thus necessary to examine the particular circumstances of the village. Zhangjia is an agricultural community, with barley, wheat, and oil-bearing plants being the major crops.⁸ Each individual has the equivalent of two *mu*⁹ of land as a result of land reassignment in 1981. Most families keep several yaks and/or cow-yak crosses for milk production and plow-power; families used to raise swine as well, but most of the pigs disappeared with the improvement in economic conditions that followed the implementation of the Responsibility System. Instead, sheep are procured for meat consumption from Tibetan herdsmen living in Zekou and Henan counties, five to six hours away by bus; the sheep are often obtained in exchange for boots, which are produced by many Zhangjia residents. At times herdsmen from nGolox in south Qinghai bring sheep by truck and sell them to the villagers. The community has a Tibetan-language primary school where the village children are educated; upon graduation most go to the Rongwu Minority Middle School, where classes are primarily in Tibetan.

Most Zhangjia families are devotees of Sambawa Buddhism. Many males testify to this belief by wearing a queue wrapped about the head with a red cloth. Families commonly set aside one room of the house as a shrine, and evergreen branches and highland barley flour are burnt daily as offerings to the gods. The village also has a shrine, known as a *ndekheng*, with two rooms, in one of which are enshrined the three local mountain gods, Moggul, Trazil, and Nyenchin. The second room is dedicated to the deity Shamba.¹⁰

MOUNTAIN GODS

Mountain gods are widely venerated among the Qinghai Tibetans, Monguor, Mongolians, and native Han, who believe that these beings were originally good, courageous men who were deified after death. Those who claim to have seen them say they possess the shape and form of men; thus the village's three gods are represented with man-like images. The deities are also said to be visible to Living Buddhas, that is, high-ranking monks reputed to be reincarnations of earlier monks.

The role of the mountain gods is generally seen as being this-worldly: they are believed capable of protecting the general welfare of the village, of families, and of individuals, but are thought to be of little consequence for one's future incarnations. Thus they hold little interest for those who discount the present life, viewing it only as an opportunity to make merit so that the soul may go at death to Diwachen (Place of No Worry).¹¹

The mountain gods' mortality and their lack of power in the face of Buddhism are illustrated in the following account.

A number of years ago Zhangjia was at odds with a neighboring village. During the course of the dispute a young man in the neighboring town was killed by Zhangjia villagers. The man's father had acquired much power from frequent chanting of the scriptures. Using this power, he caught one of the Zhangjia mountain gods, bound his arms behind his back, and tied his feet together at the ankles (this was obvious to the Zhangjia villagers because, at the next village Laru Festival, the village trance medium danced as though his hands were tied and his feet bound at the ankles).

The situation worsened when the father chanted powerful curses that led to the deaths of several Zhangjia young people. He then attempted to obtain a picture of Moggul, which he wanted to stab and thereby bring death to more Zhangjia villagers. People refused to give him the picture, however, saying that enough people had already died.¹²

The three mountain gods venerated in the village are, as mentioned above, Moggul, Trazil, and Nyenchin. The Zhangjia villagers are unable to explain the origins of these gods, but they did provide us with the following information.

Moggul is generally considered the most powerful of the mountain gods, and is thus seen by some villagers as the oldest (though the village elders generally argued that this honor belongs to Trazil). One account

relates how the god came to Zhangjia. At one time, the account goes, Zhangjia had very few people. A family left and moved to Ndowa, about fifty kilometers southeast of Zhangjia, and lived near Khamse (Red Mountain). Later, when the family returned to Zhangjia, it was accompanied by Moggul. Moggul's tie with Khamse is indicated by his red face and red horse.

Another story involves a Living Buddha who, while returning from Lhasa with several other men, found himself unable to cross the Yellow River. The Living Buddha asked the men to call on their mountain gods for assistance. One man called upon Moggul, after which the party was able to cross the river. Later the Living Buddha came to Zhangjia, praised the power of Moggul, and awarded an inscribed stone to the man who had invoked the god.

The following story describes the power of Trazil.

Long ago Zhangjia was fighting another village. During one battle a strong Zhangjia warrior saw Trazil holding a spear, upon the end of which was impaled a corpse. Zhangjia was later nearly defeated in a battle with Muslims, but in the end they won the conflict. The Muslims' description of the warrior they held responsible for their defeat exactly matched that of Trazil. The Muslim stronghold had been a tall temple overlooking Zhangjia; because of its height, the village warriors had been unable to breach it. But the man resembling Trazil had attacked the temple from above. Because no villager would have been able to do this, people were convinced that the man was really Trazil.

Nyenchin, the third mountain god, is venerated by many Regong Tibetans and is thought to live on Nyenchin Mountain in Regong. Though Nyenchin is important and powerful, no festival is held in his honor since he does not dwell in the village.

THE *LHAWA*

The mountain gods participate in the Laru Festival through their medium, the *lhawa*. According to some informants, the *lhawa* may be possessed by either Moggul or Trazil. Other informants, however, claim that Trazil is never directly involved, and that the god acts instead through the spirits of certain dead virtuous men who, when alive, were sincere believers in Trazil; these spirits, they say, now live in Trazil's presence and possess the *lhawa*. It is said that while the *lhawa* is dancing during his possession, his god may speak through him or punish people

for various offenses.¹³

There are certain differences between the Zhangjia *lhawa* and *lhawa* found elsewhere. The Zhangjia *lhawa* does not pierce himself with knives or spikes,¹⁴ for example, and in living memory the role has never been held by a female (though female *lhawa* are by no means unusual in Qinghai).

At the time of our visit the local *lhawa* was forty-five years old, and had just assumed his role the previous year (1989). The former village *lhawa*, who died in June 1990, had not practiced since the ban on such activity in 1958. This had created problems for the village during festival time, since the *lhawa*'s presence is important — though not essential — to the performance of the various ceremonies. Thus the village Laru Festival experienced a strong revival after 1989 with the emergence of the new *lhawa*, a revival that may well have been spurred by the upsurge in Tibetan pride that accompanied the reappearance of this traditional representation of Tibetan culture. Such pride is characteristic of the Malhu Tibetans, particularly since the 1980s.

According to various accounts, the *lhawa* assumed his office in the following way:

In 1989 the man became repeatedly ill. Concerned, his family took him to a Living Buddha, who said that doctors would be of no help since the cause was temporary possession. The Living Buddha further established that the possession was by mountain gods, that these gods were benevolent, and that they desired to help the village. He proceeded to read a scripture that “opened the door,” allowing the mountain gods to take complete possession and keeping evil gods away.¹⁵ A god then entered the man and said, “I am Trazil. Nine years ago I left and went to Shambala, where I read scriptures to help Buddhism flourish and aid all mankind. When I returned, I found that half of the villagers no longer believed in me, so I have come into this man’s body.”

Somewhat unconvinced, since the Living Buddha they had consulted was of relatively low status, the family visited a much more revered Living Buddha dwelling some distance away. The latter confirmed all that the first Living Buddha had said, then read a scripture that prevented the man from being possessed while he was at work¹⁶ and at any time other than occasions important to the village.

As can be seen, the Living Buddha plays an important role in invest-

ing the *lhawa*. Not only does he “open the door,” but he makes a cloth necklace for the *lhawa* that prevents spirits other than the mountain gods from possessing him. The Living Buddha also composes and writes out a scripture that he gives to the villagers for the purpose of calling the mountain god. A different scripture is prepared for the *lhawa* to ease the process of possession. If at some point the *lhawa* becomes dissatisfied with his role he may consult the Living Buddha, who, in turn, chants scriptures and asks the mountain god why the medium is unwell. The *lhawa*, together with the village headman, visits the Living Buddha during the New Year’s Festival, at which time the Living Buddha summons the mountain gods to ask how the village might be helped. Some distance is maintained, however — though the Living Buddha may be invited to Laru, he is invited only as an honored guest, to observe but not to participate.

Two explanations were offered as to why the present *lhawa* was chosen by the mountain gods. One was that he has one less air channel in his thigh than normal people and is thus particularly susceptible to possession.¹⁷ The second suggestion was that he had relatives who had previously been *lhawa*.¹⁸

THE LARU FESTIVAL

The Laru celebrations begin on the fifteenth of the sixth month, when 108 volumes of the Kanjur scriptures¹⁹ and 218 volumes of the Tanjur scriptures²⁰ are carried, one per individual (men, women, boys, and girls), around the village.²¹ This ceremony, known as Chikur, is thought to protect crops from insects and floods, to ensure a bounteous harvest, and to prevent disease from afflicting people and livestock. The *lhawa* participates in this ceremony, accompanying the procession through the village. Chikur may also be performed if a number of village children fall ill.

Around ten A.M. the next day the villagers assemble at the *ndekheng*. Women crowd into the grounds, but stay on the right side near the door or on the roofs of the buildings — they are spectators only, and do not participate. Men not participating in the ritual stay on the left side of the grounds, though some may approach the mountain gods to offer sacrifices. Participating males carry rectangular hand drums of goatskin stretched over a light metal frame. Many wear traditional handmade Tibetan boots, and if they do not have a queue, most wear a false one wrapped around a towel covering the head. As many as one hundred men and boys form a circle in the *ndekheng* courtyard. In the *ndekheng sangkong* (a large conical oven) barley flour and conifer branches are

burned, creating a fragrant smoke that invests the entire vicinity of the courtyard. This is thought to provide food for the gods and to purify the area.²²

The *lhawa* stands inside the room where the images of the three mountain gods reside. When most of the village males have gathered and formed a circle, the *lhawa* is expected to enter a trance. By this time the courtyard is crowded, with women constantly pushing in behind the men. Older men and women chant and count *mani* beads during the proceedings. Males, particularly younger ones, beat drums and talk animatedly. As the time draws near for the *lhawa* to go into trance a sawhorse is placed in front of the door to the mountain gods' room. A container of smoldering conifer needles is placed in front of the *lhawa* to purify him. The ceremony leaders begin pounding their drums at a regular rhythm, which is immediately taken up by everyone else with drums. Participating males begin a long low shout of "Trazil" or "Moggul," which rises sharply just before ending. The *lhawa* now sits upon the sawhorse, the ends of the which are held steady by two men. He clasps his hands in front of his chest and begins chanting. As the shouts and drumbeats continue, he begins to vibrate. First his legs move up and down, bouncing on the balls of the feet, and then his shoulders shake. Finally, unable to remain seated, he jumps up and dances. Meanwhile a man — selected for his piety and ardor in reciting sutras — waves a bottle of liquor, then slowly pours the contents on the ground as an offering to the mountain gods. Once the *lhawa* is completely in trance the gods may speak through him; when we observed the ritual, however, they did not speak at this time.

The shouts have now subsided but the drumbeats continue. The *lhawa* is handed a drum. Dancing, he enters the circle of men and boys, where he may stay for as long as twenty minutes. He is followed by several young men, whose responsibility it is to periodically wipe the sweat and saliva from his face and restrain him in case he attempts to beat someone. They also catch and hold him when he leaves his trance, at which time his entire body shudders and he slowly wilts. Men near him assist him to a place where he rests.

After dancing for a short time the festival leaders give a signal, and the males file out of the courtyard in order of age. They are preceded by a pole topped with a picture of Moggul and festooned with bright silk strips. The procession leads the *lhawa* on visits to the village homes, starting with that of the former hereditary headman. Before the visit the families prepare a smoldering offering of flour and conifer needles and a small table set with a cup of milk tea, a bowl of liquor, and a saucer of

FIGURE 1. Adobe houses of the village with arrow poles in single-family compounds. The poles are taken to the *lets'i* on the following day.



FIGURE 2. The *lhawa*, holding a drum, dances within a family compound during the Laru Festival.



FIGURE 3. *Lhawa* dancing at the village *ndekheng* (temple) in a state of possession.





FIGURE 4. Men drumming at the village *ndekheng* while the *lhawa* is possessed. Note their headdress fixed with a queue.



FIGURE 5. During the *Laru* some village men hold spikes in their mouths or stick them in their backs. Later, as they dance, the spikes fall out.

FIGURE 6. Village men dancing at the *ndekheng*. Note spikes on their backs and in their mouths.



FIGURE 7. Arrow poles at the village *levtsi*. The smoke is from a large sacrificial fire offered to the mountain god.



FIGURE 8. Village monks chanting during the *levtzi* ritual.

FIGURE 9. During the *levtzi* ritual the old poles are removed and taken down the mountain.



FIGURE 10. Village women carrying large wooden buckets with mutton soup for the clans camped near the village.

barley seeds. The males stand in a circle around the courtyard while the family waits, checking to see that the offering fire is smoldering properly. The *lhawa* enters the courtyard, dances, shakes his head, and sputters. He is then handed the bowl of tea, the contents of which he throws about on the ground. Next he is given the bowl of liquor, with which he does the same. Finally he is proffered the saucer of grain; he takes some in his right hand and blows on it, symbolizing that the god possessing him has purified the home and driven away all evil. Then he tosses some about and places what remains back in the saucer. Meanwhile a member of the family ties a *khadag* (a strip of cloth) to the *lhawa* as a sign of respect. The ceremony is now complete and the *lhawa's* entourage leaves, the *lhawa* departing last. This process is repeated at each home in the village, and continues until late at night.²³ Periodically the gods depart the *lhawa's* body; he rests until possessed once more.

The next day's activities focus on the *levtsi* (mountain altar) of Moggul, which is located on a mountain just west of the village (Trazil's *levtsi* is on a mountain east of the village, and is the site of a festival beginning on the eleventh of the second month). Moggul's *levtsi* is a square of rocks approximately one meter high, two meters wide, and two meters deep. In the center is a wooden frame holding tall poles shaped and painted to resemble arrows and spears; some are twenty meters long. Around this frame are thrust tree branches, to which are tied numerous tufts of sheep hair.²⁴

Approximately twenty meters from this large *levtsi* stands a smaller one, built and maintained by the hereditary village leader. A rope of animal hair encircling the spears and arrows of the village *levtsi* is strung to the smaller *levtsi*, symbolizing the hope for a harmonious relationship between the village "king" and the people.

Several explanations of the *levtsi's* origins were offered. Some people, saying that the word *levtsi* means "god's palace," suggested that the structures were intended from the outset to be homes for the deities. Others claimed that the word means "road sign," and that the *levtsi* were built by groups of passing Tibetan soldiers. Vanguard troops would place their weapons in wooden frames similar to those of the *levtsi*; when the soldiers decamped they removed the weapons but left the frames so that later troops might know where they had been. Yet others said that the *levtsi* were representations of the mountain gods holding fistfuls of weapons. There was general agreement that the *levtsi* is the dwelling place of the mountain god, and that if well situated it brings the god's protection and blessing so that the village flourishes and the villagers become more comely.

The Moggul *levtsi* was moved to its present location from a site very near the village after the resumption of traditional cultural practices that followed the end of the Cultural Revolution (1967–76). The move was carried out at the suggestion of a Living Buddha. First a deep hole was dug, into which was placed a small but exact replica of an ordinary village house. Also placed into the hole were many painted wooden animals and various kinds of grains, medicines, and valuables; only then was it thought possible for Moggul to live there.

Early on the morning of the festival's third day males from each of the village households take arrows, spears, and poplar branches tied with tufts of wool to the *levtsi* site. This requires approximately one hour. On this day much of the old *levtsi* is dismantled, a task that requires another hour. Meanwhile a large offering is prepared of evergreen branches, *zamba*, wheat, and liquor. When the offering is set ablaze and the smoke wafts heavenward, small paper *longta*²⁵ are tossed into the smoke and carried heavenward. It is believed that by making such offerings the fortunes of the village will rise with the speed of the running horses depicted on the *longta*. Others say tossing *longta* heavenward is a mark of virtue and is beneficial not only to the tosser but to all mankind.

When the proper time comes, those assembled pick up the new spears and arrows and stand in a circle around the *levtsi*. As drums sound and the *ngxpa*²⁶ chant, people shout "*lhajelo*" ("victory to the gods," "may the gods defeat all evils") while the *lhawa*, who has now joined the assembly, enters a trance. He is handed a bottle of liquor, which he pours about on the ground. Next he receives a saucer of wheat seeds; these he sprinkles about, retaining some in his hand to put back in the saucer. Approximately ten minutes later he is given a drum.

Next the spears and arrows are passed up to the men on the *levtsi* frame, who insert them into the *levtsi* proper; this requires more than half an hour. Throughout the process the *ngxpa* chant, praising the *levtsi*, the spears, the arrows, and the rope that connects the two *levtsi* and Moggul. While this is going on the *lhawa* slips out of trance; during our visit he spent the time smoking cigarettes and chatting with those not busy on the *levtsi*.

After all spears and arrows are inserted the crowd makes a circuit around the two *levtsi*. As they pass by the *ngxpa* they rush forward to take in their hands some liquor poured from two bottles. This liquor has been blessed by the *ngxpa* and is now believed to be of the mountain god and thus sacred. The crowd sits for a bit, drinks the liquor, and soon departs.

In the afternoon village males assemble in the *ndekheng* and once

again dance. Altogether there are thirteen dances, taught to the villagers from memory by a man who was thirteen years old in 1958, the last year dancing took place in the village prior to its resumption in 1979. This man stressed, though, that it is normally the *lhawa* that teaches the villagers to dance: the gods enter him and, as he dances, the villagers follow suit. When we witnessed the *lhawa* in trance, however, he danced in no particular way and continued for only a few minutes.

During the dances the participants circle around the dance ground; the dances are slow-paced and always performed by males. Among the dances are those in which the village leaders circle with *khadag* held in their outstretched hands, or in which the participants engage in a number of possible movements. They may, for example, hop first on the right leg then on the left; hold their real queue or artificial queue in their right hands, wave it in a circle above their heads, then at waist level; wave a length of sash in a fashion similar to that of the queue; strip to the waist, hold two sharpened spikes in their mouths,²⁷ and insert two or three spikes into the flesh of the back; or dance while beating the forehead with a knife²⁸ until it bleeds. Dances in which human flesh is pierced are considered an offering of flesh and blood to the gods.

In the past the villagers of certain nearby communities would cut the heart out of a living goat and offer it to the mountain gods.²⁹ The goat would then be burned as a sacrifice. However, such offerings ended in the late 1980s at the insistence of the Living Buddhas. Zhangjia villagers have no memory of ever performing such sacrifices.

At the time of our visit the villagers performed three plays — one play per night — on the local school grounds. These plays may vary from year to year. Three popular ones are “Maiden Ntrawa Zangmo,” “Prince Jelwu Tremai Kandan,” and “Maiden Nangsa Wolmbom.”³⁰

CONCLUSION

Although many other Tibetan areas have *lhawa*, we know no other place that this figure plays as prominent a role as he does in Rongwu. In Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, for example, there are both *lhawa* and shamans,³¹ but neither perform publicly as do the Rongwu *lhawa*; in Yushu the *lhawa* is more than anything else an exorciser of disease-causing evil.

Nearby Monguor communities hold festivals in the same time frame as the Rongwu Laru, festivals that have much in common with those of the adjacent Tibetan villages. The Monguor village of Nianduhu, for example, holds a celebration called Heixiang,³² during which the village's five trance mediums occupy a central role; here the young men, unlike

those in Zhangjia, have their cheeks pierced with spikes as a rite of passage before they dance. More research is needed on both Laru and these Monguor festivals;³³ it might be found in both cases that there is much that dates to a time when Buddhism held less sway than it does today. Offerings of flesh and blood to the gods, for example, are more compatible with Bon than with Buddhism.

Of equal interest, however, is what the Laru Festival itself reveals about social life in Zhangjia, and about the importance of such religious figures as the *lhawa*. Before the present *lhawa* assumed his role the villagers did indeed congregate for important festivals, but the main activity was drinking liquor. This was often a prelude to quarreling and fighting, and when the festival dancing was to begin few people were willing to participate. Since the advent of the present *lhawa* this has changed — there is widespread and willing participation in the festival dancing, and the former fighting and quarreling has virtually ceased. People comment that now an atmosphere of friendliness prevails in the village and that people have a better sense of membership in and responsibility to the community than before. Most villagers attribute this directly to the presence of the *lhawa*.

Villagers also feel that the *lhawa* has led to a renewed dedication to religion in general. Because the *lhawa's* legitimacy is by and large accepted, the fact that he defers to the Living Buddhas lends support to a belief in the latter's power, and has thus resulted in a renewed interest in Buddhism. The future promises a continued role in Zhangjia for the *lhawa* and the Laru Festival, both of which, it could be argued, are central to villagers' pride in themselves as Tibetans.

NOTES

Tibetan words and names are phonetically rendered as spoken in Zhangjia, as there is no standard oral Tibetan. We are indebted to Lois Woodward and Lynn Moore for help in this task.

1. Total population for Huangnan Prefecture is 147,400, of which 65% are Tibetans. Only 10% are Han. SCHRAM (1954) has reviewed the history of early twentieth century Qinghai Tibetans.

2. Qinghai is known in Mongolian as Koko Nor (Blue Lake).

3. Two Hui families (ten people) were present in 1990, and were influenced by Tibetans to the point that they kept Buddhas in their homes and used the Tibetan language. The village population is divided into five groups:

Group Name	Number of Families	Group Population
Nyangtsang	35	210
Hadalajel	28	147
Chekha	28	143
Yegtsil	8	45
Ngkatsang	34	211

4. The Monguor and Han of Qinghai have a similar practitioner known as a *fala*. Given the similarity in pronunciation between *lhawa* and *fala*, the absence of the *lh* sound in Monguor and Chinese, and the length of time that Tibetans have dwelt in the region, the latter word may well have derived from the former.

5. In the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, for example, approximately 85% of the total population is Han Chinese. See FENG and STUART 1992, 1–2, for population statistics on the various nationalities living in Qinghai.

6. Amdo speakers reside in nGolox Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Haibei Prefecture, and Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. They also inhabit areas that are not officially designated as Tibetan autonomous regions, including Haidong Region, Ledu County, Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, Huzhu Monguor Autonomous County, Huangzhong County, Huangyuan County, Pingan County, Minhe Hui and Monguor Autonomous County, and Datong Hui and Monguor Autonomous County.

7. These are Tibetans who converted to Islam during the years the Ma family ruled the present Qinghai area. See HU and STUART 1991 for a review of materials dealing with the Ma family's rule of what is now Qinghai.

8. No one we interviewed was able to tell us how long agriculture has been practiced, or indeed when the ancestors of the present villagers came to the area. However, most informants agreed that in the past the area had been forested, a claim supported by the presence of conifer forests on nearby mountain peaks.

Barley is most often roasted and then the whole kernel is ground. The resulting flour is made into *zamba*: a mixture of barley flour, butter, hot tea, and (depending on availability and individual preference) sugar. The notion, widespread in the West, that people prefer rancid butter is false — fresh butter is used whenever available.

9. 1 *mu* = 0.067 hectares; 6.072 *mu* = 1 acre.

10. Shamba is a deity venerated throughout Regong. The *ndekheng* is a regular meeting place for the villagers. The importance of the mountain gods at the *ndekheng* is much greater than at a Buddhist temple.

11. Merit is generally acquired through such acts as kowtowing to Buddha images, reading scriptures, turning the village prayer wheel, circumambulating the village stūpa while chanting sutras, and avoiding the slaughter of animals. The last item is accomplished in many village families by asking Hui men to kill sheep; the Hui maintain that Islamic scripture requires one to kill animals if asked to by another.

12. Other forms of "black magic" include stabbing the written name of the intended victim and chanting spells while drawing a picture of the victim's heart. There are also chants for making a woman fall in love with a man.

13. During the festival, the *lhawa* beat several people who were not wearing Tibetan robes (seldom worn by young men in the late twentieth century).

14. In the late 1980s there was a Monguor *fala* in the Guanting/Sanchuan region who pierced himself with twelve knives. There are also accounts of Tibetan and Han *lhawa/fala* who pierce themselves in the belly with knives. Piercing is believed to accomplish two

things: 1) drive evil out of the man's body, allowing the god to take possession, and 2) prove the legitimacy of the practitioner.

15. The man could have been possessed by evil gods, in which case the Living Buddha would probably have read a scripture "closing the door," preventing the man from being possessed again.

16. The man is a government employee. This is a surprise to many people, who assume that such roles are filled only by illiterate peasants or herdsmen. The fact that the man is a cadre raised some concern, since villagers felt the man might be punished. This concern was alleviated when Trazil, speaking through the entranced *lhawa*, said, "This man is nothing. I choose to use him. There will be no trouble."

17. Traditional Tibetan medical theory posits the existence of air channels throughout the body. We are not able to explain why the lack of a channel in the thigh would create a susceptibility to possession.

18. *Fala* come from particular families among certain groups of the Monguor and Han, suggesting that it is an inherited position.

19. Kanjur scriptures: canonical scriptures.

20. Tanjur scriptures: the collection of semicanonical works in Tibetan Buddhism, comprising 225 volumes.

21. Monguor living in the Guanting/Sanchuan Region of Minhe Hui and Monguor Autonomous County do virtually the same thing.

22. For a detailed explanation of burning cypress, see SCHRAM 1957, 95.

23. On the night we observed the ceremony (6 August 1990) there was a partial lunar eclipse. Boys and men immediately began beating drums and shouting to chase away the *za* (an animal-like monster) that was thought to be eating the moon.

24. We were given two explanations for the tufts of hair. One was that it was mere decoration, the other was that it corresponded to offering *khadag*. Stuart noted Haixi Mongols in Qinghai taking hair from every domestic animal owned and tying it to branches that were then placed in the *oboo*, the Mongol equivalent of the *levtsi*. This was done in the hope that livestock would increase and be protected against illness and disasters (STUART et al. 1989).

25. *Longta* are pieces of paper inscribed with flying horses.

26. *Ngxpa* are religious practitioners who are literate, regularly read the scriptures, live in the village, marry, and have children.

27. In Zhangjia there is no memory of actually pushing spikes through the cheeks, but this is commonly done by young males in nearby Tibetan and Monguor villages.

28. This knife is never used to kill animals.

29. Nyenchin is thought to be particularly fond of such offerings.

30. An English translation of these three plays may be found in WANG 1986.

31. By "shamans" we refer particularly to female religious practitioners (*delo*) in some parts of Yushu, who sleep for seven days. During their sleep, they visit the souls of the dead and convey messages between the living and the dead. Such practitioners were active in Yushu even in 1992.

32. The meaning of "Heixiang" is unknown, either to the Niaduhu Monguor or to us.

33. See STUART and HU 1993 for a detailed description of a Monguor summer festival in nearby Minhe Hui and Tu Autonomous County.

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