

Tibet's spectacular natural beauty includes high plateaus and rolling valleys spreading out on either side of the world's highest mountain peak, Mt. Everest. Wild yak, blue sheep, musk deer, and antelope roam the countryside, and cries of the black-necked crane, bar-headed geese, and ibis fill the sky.

Most Tibetans are farmers. They raise yaks, sheep, and barley, from which they make the country's staple food, *tsampa* (roasted barley flour). Vegetables are difficult to grow because the temperature rarely exceeds 60 degrees, but meals usually include a cup of hot butter tea.

Religion is the dominant force in the life of Tibetans. Most are devout Buddhists, and their religious leader is the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, a title which means "great ocean of wisdom." Historically, most families have encouraged at least one child to enter a monastery or nunnery.

For hundreds of years, mysterious Tibet isolated itself from the rest of the world, hoping to protect its unique culture from the influence of foreigners. In 1950, the Chinese government began sending military troops into Tibet. Five years later it reshaped Tibet's borders, annexing the northeastern half of the country into neighboring Chinese provinces. In 1959, the Chinese army took control of the Tibetan capital city of Lhasa, forcing the Dalai Lama and thousands of his subjects into exile, mostly in India and Nepal, where many have remained.

Today, about 2.1 million Tibetans live in the small area designated the "Tibetan Autonomous Region" and about 4.6 million in the area claimed by the Chinese. The United States is home to about 1500 Tibetan refugees.

