

# Kandze Visit Report

*Jon Aldridge*

*In November and December of last year, two representatives of Aid to Tibet undertook a visit to our projects in Kandze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province. Aid to Tibet has been working inside Kandze Prefecture since 1993, and enjoys a very constructive and amicable relationship with the predominantly Tibetan local authorities of the Prefecture. The following is a brief report on their trip:*

**I**t was under a heavy sky that we set off from the Sichuanese Capital of Chengdu, following the road west towards Tibet. Recently completed with all the trimmings bar any traffic, a motorway now sweeps west through the densely populated Sichuan basin, racing past the palms and paddies of Sichuan, and toward the distant grasslands and mountains of Kham.

As with many first impressions this was merely transitory. The motorway ran only so far as the edge of the plains, where a winding road started the precipitous climb into the first foothills. The landscape here epitomised classical China; the botanist's dream of steep valleys enveloped by lingering mist, penetrated by distant conifers on high rocky outcrops.

This image of quintessential Cathay was transformed as we passed through the new tunnel under the *Shedo La* and into Kandze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. More than just a physical watershed, the landscape here changed abruptly to that of timeless Tibet; the clouds so ubiquitous across China parting to let the long suppressed sun stream through. In the same way that the swirling mist was an integral part of China, the frigid blue skies over the broad green valleys were quintessential Tibet. Though Kandze Prefecture is outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and sometimes even overlooked as being a Tibetan area, all the villages had a strongly Tibetan identity, with brightly painted eaves, meticulous woodwork and the masonry for which the area is famous. Every village or town had its monastery, and the golden domes, gilded statues and inevitable worshippers were testimony to the importance of the role that Buddhism still holds in those societies.

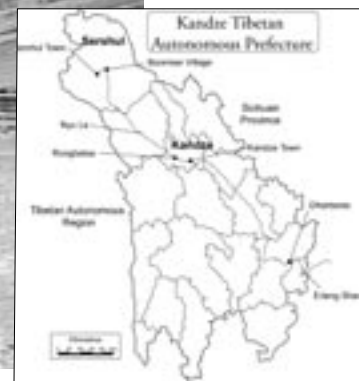
Our first stop in Kandze Prefecture was in the prefectural capital of Dhartsedo. Sandwiched between two hills, the administrative centre had little to recommend it to most tourists – the lack of space in the valley forced buildings to grow ever taller out of their concrete foundations. However the low altitude and good facilities of the capital attracts many officials from the Prefecture's eighteen counties, and because Aid to Tibet works only in partnership with local authorities, there were many meetings to be had, and many people to be seen.

**A**fter a whirlwind two days of meetings and visits we took once again to the road. Recently metalled, the road between Dhartsedo and our next destination of Kandze Town climbed over several wintry passes, falling after each into a valley less bountiful than that before. The villages along



*Monk amid the desolate snow-covered plains of Sershul.*

*Photo: Jon Aldridge.*



this stretch displayed a strongly regional Tibetan identity, each village having a different building design and style. There was a visible affluence among sections of this population – many houses were recent, and new religious buildings became increasingly common as we went further west. Large monasteries had been expensively and extravagantly rebuilt with government money, smaller monasteries were being re-invigorated with private money. Recent afforestation legislation across the whole of China will doubtless slow any future building work – already the local market price of timber has doubled.

In many ways Kandze Town was the zenith of life along the road. The town sits beneath hills, on the floodplain of the *Zar Chü* River, dramatically overlooked by Kandze Monastery. With a friendly and predominantly ethnic Tibetan population, and an old-town encompassing some remarkable old houses and temples, Kandze Town was a welcome break after the bustle of Dhartsedo.

While staying in Kandze Town, we visited Gyalten School – which Aid to Tibet has supported for the last seven years – and selected two new schools to receive support from Aid to Tibet. This was done following careful consultation with the local authorities, to ensure that while remaining within Aid to Tibet's guidelines, the money given would have the greatest possible impact on the recipients. Details of all the schools visited will be published in a later newsletter.

Leaving Kandze Town we started the long and dramatic climb to Sershul. Though the overall height difference was not too great – around 2500 feet – the changes in environment as we crossed first beyond the limits of settled agriculture, and ultimately onto the grasslands of the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau (at the *Nyu La*), were dramatic. While the farming villages of the lower valleys had buzzed industriously with autumnal activities, life on the snowbound plateau was sedate.

Far removed from the tiger economies of East Asia, Sershul County was the heartland of the Yak economy, where everything necessary and everything available for life – milk, felt, cheese,

butter and of course dung for heating – spouts forth one way or the other from the dependable *dri* and yak. The nomads and their herds lived a marginal and precipitous existence. The sheer size of the grasslands they inhabited, the absolute dearth of modern skills among the local population, the ferocity of the climate and the scarcity of government resources made provision of any health, education or infrastructure services, a monumental challenge.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the scale of the challenge, there were an amazing number of individuals who were working far beyond their call of duty, and often at great personal expenses, to help. From the treasury officer supporting Boomsar Old People's Home, to the doctors of Sershul Hospital who paid for medication from their own wages rather than turn patients away, there was a strong sense of community permeating all sections of society and of the region. It was a source of pride and delight to many people that this responsibility for collective help had extended to Tibetans overseas, particularly given that the Tibet Foundation's Tibetan staff comprised Tibetans from outside many of the areas we were working in.

Our work in Sershul County included visiting potential new projects, purchasing seventy five *Dri* and calves as part of the Yak for Life programme, and visiting prior recipients of Yaks, but was focussed predominantly on the Sershul County Health Initiative (see our separate report on page 16). Though Sershul Town initially appeared to be architecturally and culturally as barren as the surrounding plains, beneath the frozen surface this devastatingly poor community proved to be incredibly welcoming and hospitable. As we prepared to leave, after what had been without doubt the coldest weeks of our lives, a large crowd of the people we'd met and worked with had gathered at the guesthouse to see us off. Doctors, officials, children, and the old alike were gathered and stood shoulder to shoulder in a tight circle against the icy wind. The town behind was dark, as the hydropower station had frozen with the river. As our car rolled off toward the warmer lowlands, and the crowd of people dispersed toward their schools, homes and offices, we contemplated how much had already been achieved in Sershul, but how much still needed to be done.