

[handicrafts home](#) | [economic development programs home](#) | [kham aid home](#)



## Handicrafts and Economic development in Kham

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Contents:

- \* Why Tibetans don't raise chickens
- \* Rugs in Kham?
- \* Metal craft
- \* Discovered: a handicraft mecca in Maisu
- \* Artisan crafts from the wider perspective of traditional Tibetan wisdom
- \* Woodcarving and pottery production
- \* A Tibetan "Heritage Arts Village"

Since 2003 when Kham Aid Foundation started its [Greenhouse Program](#), with gratifying success, I've become interested in creating more economic development strategies for Tibetans in Kham. It's a great thing to buy washing machines and basketballs for schools, but wouldn't it be better if the schools could afford to buy their own? As the old adage goes, rather than give fish to a starving man, it's better to teach him to catch fish by himself.

Unlike basketballs and fish, you can't find economic development on store shelves in Chengdu. To create a program that generates income for the poor requires intimate knowledge of Tibetan society, government policies and infrastructure, and available natural and manpower resources.

In search of new income-generating ideas, I interviewed one Litang family to learn whether they would like to have a small loan to buy some chickens. They could then raise chickens in the yard of their house, and sell eggs in the Litang market. Currently, in Litang, eggs are trucked in from a far distance, and are sold for .5 yuan a piece - pricey. It seems like a nice opening for local entrepreneurs.

I was inspired to ask about chickens because Litang monastery has a flock of its own. They

were purchased in the market by believers who wanted to save the birds from the slaughter, and who released them to the monastery. The chickens at Litang Gonpa seemed to be doing well, despite the elevation - more than 4000 meters above sea level. They were even laying eggs. (The eggs are usually stolen by children, I was told).



**Monastery chickens at 4100 meters, Litang.**

A chicken in Litang might lay 20 eggs in a month. However, the family I was interviewing thought that the profit from sale of eggs would be entirely cancelled out by the cost of feed. Well, I thought, maybe there are cheaper ways to feed chickens. Might they eat tsampa, for instance? I was discouraged, but unready to give up chickens as a business concept.

One thing I did not even consider suggesting was that my Litang family raise chickens for slaughter. As devout Buddhists dedicated to preserving life, most Tibetans would refuse to have anything to do with such an enterprise. But I didn't then know that the more conservative Tibetans consider eggs to be alive, too, and do not like to eat them. What's more, they consider chickens to be disreputable creatures because they subsist by eating many small insects, each of which is a precious life sacrificed. Even if my Litang family were disposed to act contrary these religious beliefs, if they went into the egg business they would be criticized by their neighbors, and especially monks in the monastery, which was only a stone's throw away from their home.

I gave up the idea of promoting chicken-raising in Kham. Pigs, too, are [problematic](#).

Handicrafts, fortunately, do not entail killing, and they are moreover the mainstay of many economic development efforts around the world. The trouble is, I didn't know which handicrafts made by Khampas might be sellable to outsiders with a minimum of alteration and investment. One possibility is furniture. Not only is beautifully-decorated wooden furniture ubiquitous in Tibetan homes, but carpentry and painting are widely practiced crafts, found in nearly all communities in Kham, and especially within monasteries. Furniture is a big subject, and I will write about it in another report.

Rugs are another Tibetan product, but rug-weaving is not practiced in Kham, where there is not a single rug factory that I'm aware of. In contrast, rug factories in Lhasa, Shigatse, Nepal and elsewhere have been in business for many years, and have received significant investment, both foreign and domestic. The factories produce highly refined products that are exported in quantity to other parts of Tibet and to fanciers abroad. These existing factories have a huge head start over any conceivable new enterprise that Kham Aid might try to start. Rugs, then, do not seem to be a very likely source of new income in Kham.

Back in 1999 I visited a [handicraft workshop in Kangding](#). It had been a State-subsidized work unit but was trying to transition to the market economy. They had an impressive catalog of exquisitely intricate religious things, crafted from metal, that they had produced in the past. However, over the years, their most knowledgeable craftsmen had retired or died, and by 1999 the workshop received few commissions for high-margin items. Instead, they were cranking out lots of everyday objects like earrings, wooden butter churns and tea bowls. Because of management, quality, or demand problems (I'm not sure which), a few years later the workshop closed its doors. Out on the streets of Kangding, Tibetan handicrafts were becoming increasingly dominated by Han Chinese craftsmen. What happened to the Tibetan artisans? Where did they go?

I got my first clue in Baiyu (Pelyul), where a Women's Federation official mentioned that the county government has been giving support to metal crafts production, mostly of religious implements such as charm boxes, ceremonial instruments, decorative components that are incorporated into stupas and temples, and cast statues. No traveler in Tibet can avoid seeing these things, but I had always thought that they were mass-produced in Chengdu and other cities. Not so. Many are made by hand. The highest quality metal crafts are certainly exportable to the Buddhist world, and a potential source of increased income. But they are probably of little interest to non-Buddhists, so the market is limited.

Tibetan smiths also produce nonreligious items such as purses - which are made of metal-decorated leather - and various kinds of jewelry. (note: much of the cheap jewelry you see in the shops in Kham are imported from India, only a little is locally made). Among these, jewelry alone has some potential, but needs development in order to meet the tastes of non-Tibetan buyers.



**Ceremonial vessel.**

These days, Chinese smiths are busy cranking out both religious and nonreligious items in small storefront workshops in virtually all towns in Kham. I was told that these Chinese smiths use cheaper alloys, and turn out their products very quickly, and their stuff is therefore inferior both in materials and workmanship to that made by Tibetans. These imitators survive - and flourish - because most Tibetan buyers are acutely price-sensitive, and will buy the cheapest they can find. As a result, Tibetan craftsmen have lost significant market share to Han competitors. To help Tibetan craftsmen regain their competitive edge seems a worthwhile endeavor, but it's hard to do unless new customers can be found who appreciate quality and are

willing to pay for it.

In Dege (Derge) County, I stumbled onto a handicraft mecca. It's located in Maisu District, a region that is most noted for Dzongsar Gonpa, a large Sakya school monastery strikingly situated on top of cliff overlooking the Khamje Valley. Loosely attached to the monastery is an associated Buddhist Institute (shedra), itself a complex of several buildings. The shedra is itself worth an article all on its own, for it is one of a few (perhaps the only one) that transmit 'rig-me' (nonsectarian) teachings incorporating eight different traditions. It therefore attracts students from all over Tibet, as well as visitors from other parts of the Buddhist world.

One leading personality at Dzongsar is Lodre Puntsok. Though not a monk, he spearheaded reconstruction of the monastery after it was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. He himself is an expert in traditional medicine, and has run a traditional pill production facility adjoining the monastery for years. With the help of a French donor, this facility is now in the process of moving into a new 200,000-yuan building that will produce medicine and also function as a teaching

hospital. In addition to Tibetan medicine, Lodre Puntsok undertaken to promote many other Tibetan traditions, using the Shedra as an organizing base.

One result of Lodru Puntok's organizing efforts is a large metal craft production and training facility located about 10 km upvalley from the monastery. Tashi Dorje, 68, is the shop's leading craftsman and master instructor. Since its founding five years ago, the school has graduated 40 students, and there are 13 currently studying there. He says, "I don't charge a penny for instruction. Some of the young men in my shop I recruited because they were earning their living in bad ways, by hunting or by banditry. I'm proud that my students don't hunt or steal anymore."

Tashi Dorje teaches young men how to make Buddhist items and instruments of finely worked sheets of silver or gold, and statues that are cast of bronze or composite material. The shop was large, with many rooms, but their equipment was simple: hand tools, molds, wax, clay, and ovens where metal is melted. A gasoline-powered generator supplies power to lights and fans, for the local hydroelectric generator is not yet on-line.

Like most traditional activities, Tashi Dorje's smithing stopped during China's Cultural Revolution. "It was not allowed. I had to be a farmer, grow millet, yoma, and barley," like the other farmers in the neighborhood. "I stopped my work for ten years. In 1976, I began teaching part-time. Because I don't take any payment from my students, I have no salary, but if I sell protector (statues) then I can earn about one thousand yuan [US\$120] per month."

To learn to make simple metal objects in Tashi Dorje's shop takes one or two years. More difficult things take 4-5 years, and it takes 15-16 years to be a master. Tashi Dorje's items are sold all over Ganzi Prefecture, and in Chengdu. There is no smith to match him in Dege County, but there are a scattering of other masters around the prefecture.

Unfortunately, demand for these expensive metal products is not high enough to support all of school's graduates. "Some of my students, when they finish, can't get jobs."



**Lodre Puntsok**



**Tashi Dorje, master metal smith.**

Another handicraft enterprise attached to the Shedra and founded by Lodre Puntsok is a painting school. It was started in 1989. When I visited, the students were on holiday, but I was able to inspect four large canvases stretched on frames, in various stages of completion. These canvases were about six feet square and destined for the wall of a temple. One painter was present and he had a wonderful thanka (scroll painting) made with gold, silver, and blue pigments applied to a black background.

At least two other activities are pursued at Dzongsar, wood carving, and pottery. Carving is used mainly in furniture and decorative objects for homes and temples. Two types of hardwoods are used for carving: huamu and poplar. They also use spruce and pine for components that do not need to be carved. Trees are still plentiful enough in Dege to support many carvers, and the environmental laws put in place in 1998 do allow cutting for local use. However, before a tree can be felled, the woodcutter must pay a small fee to the Forestry Bureau.

Woodcarvers in Dege do suffer from one big problem: the climate, which is variable and humid at times, making it difficult to dry wood properly and prepare it for carving. The problem can be solved by purchase of a special wood-drying oven, but the cost is prohibitive for small-scale carvers. They would also benefit from power tools, especially saws.

Another local Maisu product is pottery. Clay is abundant in the area, and is widely used for making rammed earth and wattle-and-daub walls. Craftsmen produce clay vessels for storing Tibetan medicines, and wonderful teapots that are used for serving butter-tea, and keeping it warm. I was not able to visit the pottery-making shop, but from the samples I was able to procure, it appears that the pots are shaped by hand, without a wheel. The pots are not glazed, but are sometimes painted.



Clay teapot

Crafts like these are termed 'Zoripa' in Tibetan, and all are taught at the Dzongsar Institute. 'Zo' means "to make." Zoripa includes: (1) thanka painting (2) pounded and worked metal (3) casting (4) painted home decoration (5) pottery (6) carving (7) clay statues. Zoripa is one of five fields of study taught at Dzongsar; the others are Soripa (medicine), Draripa (language), Tsemaripa (philosophy/debate), and Nandoripa (Buddhism). Together, these comprise Tibet's ancient intellectual traditions.

The county government is interested in promoting these crafts as an adjunct to tourism. Deputy Director Wu of the Dege County Culture and Tourism Bureau told me that his office has prepared a proposal for establishing a woodcarving center in Maisu, with a total budget of rmb200,000 (\$24,400), including the wood-drying machine all other needed equipment. What they have not yet done is researched the market. I feel that, before money is invested into production, it would be wise to develop a strategy for where the products are to be sold.

Even bigger is a plan hatched by the Ganzi Prefecture Cultural Relics Management Office to make the entire Maisu area a protected "heritage arts village." Director Tashi Tsering told me that in this village, all aspects of traditional Tibetan life will be preserved and developed, including architecture, customs, crafts, and arts. However, this plan is only in the dream stage.

They have neither funds nor expertise to create a community development plan, and implement it. For now, Maisu is preserved by virtue of its remoteness: 3 1/2 days by road from Chengdu. But this will soon change, for the county government is planning to pave the road to Maisu in the next couple of years. This will mean accelerating change, with perhaps greater income for Maisu's craftsmen, but at the cost of traffic, garbage, and an influx of non-Tibetans.

I have not yet worked out what Kham Aid Foundation might do to develop markets for Tibetan handicrafts, and improve production. If anyone out there has any ideas, please let me know.

[handicrafts home](#) | [economic development programs home](#) | [kham aid home](#)