



Celebratory activities are held in various areas of the Tibet autonomous region. PALDEN NYIMA, LI XIN AND PHURBU TASHI / FOR CHINA DAILY

## What they say

Sixty years ago, Tibet had a revolution with an aim to free the serfs. The democratic reform obliterated the feudal serfdom of theocracy. It is a major historic event in Tibet's development and human rights advancement. The democratic reform was the widest, deepest and greatest movement that has ever happened in Tibet's history, setting the course for Tibet's people on the broad road of socialism. For the past 60 years, we have adhered to a people-centred ideology, made it our goal to help people achieve better lives and insisted on being together with people of all ethnic groups. We have resolutely battled separatism and invasive activities and effectively safeguarded national security and social stability.

**Wu Yingjie**, Party chief of the Tibet autonomous region

In the 19th century, many countries and regions in the world had abolition movements, including the United Kingdom, Russia and the United States. However, feudal serfdom cast a shadow on Tibet until the middle of the 20th century. It not only hindered the development of local society, but also humiliated the civilisation, conscience and dignity of human beings. Democratic reform and abolishment of feudal serfdom were necessary for the progress of society. It was the only way out for Tibet and the shared wish of Tibetan people.

**Wang Daiyuan**, head of the economic strategy research institute of the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences

I'm very happy to celebrate our festival. In old days, we did farm work and herded cattle and sheep for the serf owners with no salary. They did nothing. The workload was all on the serfs. They only gave us *zamba* (roasted barley flour) to eat. We had to pick up wild herbs to ease the hunger. They sometimes even beat us or locked us up. Before the democratic reform, serfs were regarded as "talking tools". Now we live in a 3,229-sq-ft house. My daughter and son have good jobs. My granddaughters study in Jiangsu province. I'm very satisfied with my life. The 60-year development was not easy. We should cherish today's happy life. Only by safeguarding unity and opposing separatism can people live and work in peace and contentment.

**Wangdrak Gyatso**, a 66-year-old man from Chengguan district of Lhasa

I was born in 1959. I was told that before the democratic reform, Lhasa was no larger than 741 acres at that time, surrounded by ponds and marshes. Except for the old government building, temples and houses of the rich, there were all shabby houses, with no water and power supply. Nowadays, the city has high buildings, new bridges and asphalt roads. The environment becomes better every day. City construction also saw significant progress.

**Lhakpa Drolma**, a retired official from Lhasa

This is my first time here. And we've been here for two weeks now. Honestly, such a beautiful part of China. Incredible culture. Deep faith. It's been an amazing experience here. It's interesting to look back at the history of Tibet and see how much has changed. We spent a couple of days visiting some infrastructural projects around Tibet — the railway construction site, trains and highways. That's interesting and exciting. It will be easier for people to travel within Tibet and for people from around the world to visit this incredible place. Tibet is a very special place and I hope its uniqueness is not changed too much. I also hope for more prosperity here.

**Jonathan Betz**, a reporter from the United States

# 60 years of democratic reform marked

White paper details vast achievements of the Tibet autonomous region. **Chen Meiling** reports

This year marks the 60th anniversary of democratic reform in Tibet.

The reform has been the greatest and most profound social transformation in the history of the autonomous region of China. By abolishing serfdom, a grim and backward social system, Tibet was able to establish a new society that liberates the people and makes them the masters of their own destiny, thus ensuring their rights in all matters.

The words are from the white paper, titled Democratic Reform in Tibet — Sixty Years On, issued by China's State Council Information Office in late March. The paper tells how Tibet entered a bright, open and prosperous era from a dark, closed and poor one.

Che Minghui, an expert who helped write the paper, told chinatibetnews.com that the paper is based on solid historical evidence and convincing cases and data to reveal the darkness, despotism and cruelty of old Tibet.

"The paper also tells the historical trend for socialism to replace feudal serfdom, and what achievements Tibet has made under the leadership of the Communist Party of China," he said. "The paper made us more confident. Reading the paper, we are impressed by the changes in Tibet and optimistic about its future."

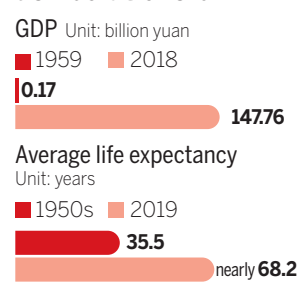
For centuries Tibet was ruled by theocratic feudal elites. About one million serfs were subjected to cruel exploitation and oppression, until democratic reform was launched in 1959.

At that time, officials, nobles and senior monks were only 5 per cent of the total population, but owned almost all of the farmland, pastures and livestock. The serfs, 95 per cent of the population, had no means of production and liberty.



Residents read a book entitled *Family Album*, which records the lives of four generations of 100 Tibetan households and the great changes made in the past decades following democratic reform. LOSANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

## Progress in Tibet since democratic reform



**Reading the paper, we are impressed by the changes in Tibet and optimistic about its future.**

**CHE MINGHUI**  
AN EXPERT WHO HELPED WRITE THE PAPER

Losang Konchok, former political adviser in Lhokha city of Tibet, experienced the dark times firsthand.

Before 1959, senior Living Buddhas and serf owners in Lhokha used to live a luxurious and dissolute life, while serfs had to live in low-rise adobe houses or slept where livestock was kept. He and his family dressed in rags, often felt starved and were sometimes beaten by the master.

"I was herding sheep when I was 8. One time, the sheep crossed over into the farmland and the slave owner said he would sue me in court. I was so scared that I climbed over mountains to Lhasa," Losang Konchok said at the celebration of the 60th anniversary on March 28. "In old Tibet, serfs struggled between life and death."

Losang Phuntsok, 71, was born to a serf family. He said they used

to live in a lair, without enough clothes, food or access to medical care.

"In those dark days, our lives were less important than straw rope, which can be traded or transferred," he said. "We were eager to be treated like humans, not livestock."

On March 28, 1959, the State Council dismissed the local government, army, court and prison, abolished the old laws and cruel punishments. Over 1 million serfs were freed. The serfs, who were known as "talking tools" at that time, became masters of the country, the society and their destiny.

That year, Losang Phuntsok was 11 years old. He and his family were given houses, land, a cow and sheep. He and other children went to school for the first time. Later, he became an accountant and also joined the army.

As quoted from the white

paper, when the serfdom land ownership was abolished in democratic reform, serfs were no longer treated arbitrarily by their owners as private property, and personal ownership of serfs came to an end.

Tibet's democratic reform destroyed the institutional shackles which infringed people's rights to subsistence, marriage, migration, residence, work, personal freedom, human dignity and education, the report said.

People's governments were established at various levels in Tibet for the peoples to exercise their rights. In the second half of 1961, a general election was held all over Tibet. For the first time, the former serfs were no longer regarded as "talking tools", and emerged on the political stage as the masters of the new Tibet.

Serf owners' land ownership became farmers' land ownership, which allowed serfs to own

the means of production, and significantly liberated and developed productive forces.

In 2018, Tibet's GDP was 147.76 billion yuan (£16.71 billion), about 192 times the 1959 figure of 174 million yuan, calculated at comparable prices. Tibet's economic structure is improving. The share of added value from the primary industry in GDP dropped from 73.6 per cent in 1959 to 8.8 per cent in 2018, while the share of the secondary industry rose to 42.5 per cent and the share of tertiary industry increased to 48.7 per cent, the report said.

Before democratic reform, due to a combination of factors such as a backward economy, high infant mortality and poor medical conditions, the growth of Tibet's population had stagnated for a long time.

Over the past 60 years, the population has grown from 1.23 million in 1959 to 3.44 million in 2018, with Tibetans making up more than 90 per cent of the total. The life expectancy of the people in Tibet increased from 35.5 years before 1959 to 68.2 now, according to the paper.

Besides a preamble and a conclusion, the white paper consisted of ten sections, Feudal Serfdom: A Dark History, Irresistible Historical Trend, Abolishing Feudal Serfdom, The People Have Become Masters of Their Own Affairs, Liberating and Developing the Productive Forces, Promoting a Range of Undertakings, Enhancing Ecological Progress, Protecting the Freedom of Religious Belief, Strengthening Ethnic Equality and Unity, and Development of Tibet in the New Era.

At approximately 25,000 words, the report is published in various languages, including Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish and Arabic.

*Xinhua contributed to this story.*

## Memorial Hall commemorates freed Tibetan slaves

By CHEN MEILING

In late March, the Tibet Serfs Emancipation Memorial Hall opened to mark the 60th anniversary of democratic reform in the Tibet autonomous region. It tells how Tibetan serfs were abused by slave owners in a feudal society and how life has dramatically changed.

On March 28, 1959, about 1 million Tibetan serfs were freed when the feudal serf system ended, accounting for 95 per cent of the region's population. They used to be seen as "talking tools", with no human rights and freedom. Since that day, they regained control of their lives. The new memorial hall is the first to display this period of history.

At the entrance to the hall, there is a stone statue of a pair of hands breaking chains. Inside, another statue shows two slave owners enjoying a feast while serfs, in rags, do farm work and are beaten with whips. Meanwhile, a 3D image of



Local residents visit the Tibet Serfs Emancipation Memorial Hall in Lhasa. JIGME DORJE AND LOSANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

an old woman talks about the dark times.

Black and white photos show serfs who lived in stables, begged on the street, and who lost ears, hands or feet as punishment. There are also items from old Tibet on display.

The history was displayed in various forms, including words, pictures, graphics, animation and documentary. The hall also quoted from Tibet-related books written

by foreigners, such as *Trespassers on the Roof of the World* written by British journalist Peter Hopkirk, and French explorer and author Alexandra David-Neel's *Old Tibet Faces A New China*.

The lighting becomes brighter when the exhibition moves to the new Tibet. There are photos showing the goods sent to Tibet by train, the People's Liberation Army entering Tibet, serfs being given land, livestock and houses. It also

shows famous people in politics, art, film and sports who used to be serfs.

Riga, 52, was one of 22 representatives who visited the memorial hall on March 28. He works as an official in a Tibetan village. He said he knew people lived a difficult life in the old days but things became much better after the reform.

Gyaltan Wangchuk, 47, is from Markham county of Chamdo city,

Tibet. He said his village has 50 to 60 people older than 60, most of whom were serfs before, including in his own family.

He said the first parts of the exhibition made him feel uncomfortable and sad.

"Life was difficult before. But the region developed fast. Much has been improved. We see hope in the future," he said, adding he will tell the villagers about the hall.

"Now, each family has television.

They can learn about the exhibition on TV?"

The exhibition in the hall is 37,674 sq ft, composed of six parts: the lobby; Tibet is one part of China; Old Tibet ruled by feudal serf system; Democratic reform; Socialistic new Tibet; and Entering the new era.

A total of 165 historical documents, 299 items, 331 photos and four sculpture groups tell how Tibetan people shook off their chains and became masters of their destiny.

Zhang Xianqun, deputy head of the region's publicity department, said during the year-long construction of the hall, staff members searched almost every corner of Tibet to find historical materials.

"For people who don't know the history of Tibet, the hall can be a visual textbook. For people who doubt our history, we must give a resounding and firm answer," he said.

The hall will be used as a patriotic education base, moral education base for teenagers and education and training base for officials. It's open to the public free.