

# CULTURAL HERITAGE

## A stone testament to enduring ties

Ancient palaces in Xizang show how local leaders maintained relations with central dynasties across centuries through architecture, reports **Palden Nyima**.

The Lhagyari Palaces in Chusum county, Xizang autonomous region, stand as magnificent historical landmarks that reflect centuries of cultural exchange and ethnic integration between Tibetan chieftains and the central dynasties, according to historians and scholars.

Dating back to the 13th century, this royal complex embodies a distinctive architectural style that blends Tibetan traditions with intricate Han craftsmanship, a convergence that is rare for historical palaces in Xizang.

Among the palaces, the Ganden Lhatse Palace, built in the 17th century, serves as a tangible testament to the enduring relationship between Tibetan and Han ethnic groups.

Scholars regard the palace as an invaluable asset for studying regional history and the architectural evolution of the region.

Despite the site's significance, time and environmental degradation have left parts of the Lhagyari Palaces in a fragile state, underscoring the urgency of preservation efforts.

### Roots of royal lineage

Sonam Yontan, a PhD student at Xizang University specializing in the Lhagyari royal lineage, traces its origins to the ninth century, following the collapse of the Tubo kingdom.

A branch of the Tubo royal descendants found refuge in present-day Chusum county by the 13th century, where they rose to power as local rulers until Xizang's peaceful liberation in 1951.

In 1658, Depa Lhagyari, a local chieftain, was formally authorized by the local authorities to govern the Ae area, the broader historic name for Chusum. During his rule, the Ganden Lhatse Palace was constructed, marking the height of the lineage's local power and influence.

The renaming of Chusum in 1965 by the State Council further underscored the region's geographical heritage, referencing the "three rivers" — Karchu, Serchu and Gongpopochu — that run through the area.

The Lhagyari Palaces illustrate the evolution of Tibetan palace architecture across three distinct phases.

The early phase includes remnants of walls and gates at the Tashi Chodzong Palace, which were built by local chieftain Lha Taley Namgyal in the late 15th century.

The middle phase is represented by the Ganden Lhatse Palace, built in the 17th century, and famous for its scale and strategic design.

The main surviving structures of the Ganden Lhatse Palace include a palace, warehouses and stables.

A later addition, constructed in the mid-20th century by local chieftain Lha Namgyal Gyatso, is the Summer Palace, designed as a quadrangular courtyard that embodies a blend of Han and Tibetan architectural styles.

"The architectural design, which integrates Tibetan styles with *dougong* (interlocking brackets) — a hallmark of Han craftsmanship — demonstrates the remarkable cultural synthesis of the time," says Sonam Yontan.



A bird's-eye view of the surrounding areas of the Lhagyari Palaces, Chusum county, Xizang autonomous region.

PHOTOS BY PALDEN NYIMA / CHINA DAILY



From top left: Visitors tour the Ganden Lhatse Palace, also in Chusum; Sonam Yontan, a PhD student at Xizang University, during a survey at the palace in March; a mountain god worship site next to the same palace.

Below: The palace has been given a facelift recently.



Like many Tibetan palaces, Ganden Lhatse was multifunctional, combining elements of a defensive stronghold, cultural center and trading hub.

Perched atop a small hill with steep cliffs to its north and east, the Ganden Lhatse Palace was naturally fortified, while stone walls protected its southern and western sides.

The palace includes servants' quarters, stables, a scripture library, and a ceremonial square (*karshal* in Tibetan). The square is paved with black and white pebbles arranged into auspicious Tibetan Buddhist symbols as well as elements inspired by the Great Wall.

Sonam Yontan notes that the pebble-paved square also had practical advantages, particularly the effective drainage system during rainfall — a testament to the ingenuity of its designers.

"In the past, locals called the area *karshal* — referring to the square, because the palace square was so well known," he says.

### Restoration and revitalization

Years of neglect, along with historical damage, posed serious threats to the preservation of the palaces.

Recognizing their historical value, authorities designated the site as a regional cultural relic protection unit in 1996, and later elevated it to national key cultural relic protection status in 2001.

In 2006, the Lhagyari Palaces Preservation and Restoration Project was included in Xizang's 11th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Relics Protection (2006-10), with significant funding from the central government.

More than 20.5 million yuan (\$3 million) was allocated to support conservation efforts.

Restoration work carried out between 2010 and 2012 focused on stabilizing the structures, restoring the pebble-paved square, clearing debris, reinforcing underground passageways, and securing surrounding slopes.

These efforts helped return the complex to its present condition.

The palaces have long symbolized Tibetan culture, political resilience and religious devotion.

Like the Potala Palace, the complex is divided into White and Red sections, representing political authority and religious significance, respectively, unified within a single architectural composition.

Lha Namgyal Gyatso, one of the later rulers of the lineage, brought influences from Beijing back to Chusum in the early 20th century, incorporating Han architectural styles into the Summer Palace.

Sonam Yontan says that palace complexes equipped with a central square are rare in Xizang, making Ganden Lhatse a notable exception. Its design clearly reflects influences from traditional Han palace architecture.

"It shows that even in remote parts of Xizang, there were connections and cultural exchanges with the central dynasties several hundred years ago," he says.

Contact the writer at [palden\\_nyima@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:palden_nyima@chinadaily.com.cn)

## County blends preservation with tourism-led economic growth

By **PALDEN NYIMA**  
in Lhokha, Xizang autonomous region

Over the past two years, Chusum county in the Xizang autonomous region has made steady progress in cultural tourism development, drawing on its rich heritage and unique plateau landscapes to attract visitors and improve local livelihoods. At the center of this transformation is the Lhagyari Palaces, a site of deep historical significance that now plays a growing role in the local economy.

Since officially open to the public in March 2025, the complex has quickly become a draw for tourists and social media influencers, according to the county's bureau of culture and tourism.

The site's rising profile has been amplified by local influencer "Phurta", whose promotion has brought national attention to the site, which dates back more than 800 years.

"Visitors can explore the site free of charge, but their presence supports local industries such as dining and accommodation, creating wider economic benefits," says Kelsang Lhamo, deputy head of the bureau.

Kelsang Lhamo says that beyond Lhagyari, the county is expanding its broader tourism offerings. From hot springs and grasslands to lakes and

ancient tombs, its natural and cultural assets are being gradually developed into accessible destinations.

The hot spring area already features guesthouses, with ticket revenues flowing directly to village collectives and residents, she says.

Plans are also underway to upgrade the county's primeval forests to attract trekking and eco-tourism, with a long-term goal of linking these sites to Lhagyari through a comprehensive tour route, in the outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30).

Recognizing the value of its heritage, Chusum has registered 83 protected sites, ranging from national to local levels. Investments in preservation efforts have surpassed 46.9 million yuan (\$6.88 million), including 14 key conservation projects.

Exhibition spaces at Lhagyari have benefited from additional investments, totaling over 34 million yuan, Kelsang Lhamo says. She adds that these efforts reflect a commitment to protecting heritage while enabling sustainable tourism growth.

By turning cultural assets into accessible experiences, the county is working to balance preservation with development. The approach is already delivering results.



Left: A visitor tries on a colorful Tibetan hat at the Ganden Lhatse Palace, Chusum county, Xizang autonomous region. Right: A Tibetan woman demonstrates how to operate a traditional treadle loom in the same palace. PHOTOS BY PALDEN NYIMA / CHINA DAILY



This synergy has propelled tourism-driven revenue while elevating the quality of life for local residents. In 2025 alone, visitor numbers

reached 120,000 — a 56.23 percent increase year-on-year, generating 77 million yuan in tourism revenue.

"More than 30,000 residents took

part in tourism-related activities, underscoring the sector's reach and inclusiveness," Kelsang Lhamo adds.

For many locals, cultural tourism has been transformative. Kunga Drolkar, a native of Chusum and a guide at the Lhagyari Palaces, embodies this change. "It's interesting to work as a guide at the palaces, and our living conditions have improved," she says.

Sharing the history of her hometown has also given her a strong sense of purpose, while creating opportunities that allow residents to stay close to home.

Through storytelling tours, Kunga Drolkar connects visitors to Lhagyari's rich legacy, blending historical narratives with personal anecdotes. "When visitors develop a love for this place, they ensure its growth and sustainability — and support local businesses along the way," she remarks.

Chusum county's embrace of cultural tourism is reshaping its identity while delivering concrete benefits to its people.

As the region continues to integrate preservation into development, it aims to provide a more enriching experience for visitors while fostering prosperity for its local population.

"I hope Lhagyari will become a lasting symbol of Chusum and a source of economic opportunity," says Kunga Drolkar.