NOTES ON ECONOMIC PLANTS

The Role of Barley among the Shuhi in the Tibetan Cultural Area of the Eastern Himalayas.—Barley (Hordeum vulgare L.) derives from the wild species Hordeum spontaneum K. Koch and was one of the earliest domesticated grains. Like many other domesticated plants, it originated in the Near East, where it was first cultivated around 6000 B.C. Barley spread out from Mesopotamia, along the coast of North Africa, up the Nile to Eritrea and Ethiopia, into Europe where it reached Spain in about 5000 B.C., then eastward to India, and reaching China in the late second millennium B.C. (1, 2, 3). Because of barley’s adaptability to rough climates and its short vegetation period, it can be cultivated near the Arctic Circle as well as on the Tibetan plateau at altitudes of over 3,500 meters (m), where other crops are difficult to grow (1, 4, 5, 6, 7). The wide geographical distribution of barley, its local adaptation to different habitats, and its diverse uses in different communities have led to a great number of varieties. barley is differentiated by the two-rowed type and the six-rowed type as well as the naked and hulled varieties. In Tibet, almost all cultivated varieties are naked six-rowed barley, which is well adapted to the harsh environment and can be processed easily (3, 6, 8). Barley is the main crop of Tibetan agriculture; in the form of tsampa, i.e., flour prepared from roasted grains, it is a staple food of the area. Furthermore, it plays a manifold role in cultural and religious activities. Its cultural importance also is reflected in its use as a unit of measure in Tibetan iconography, where eight barley grains are equal to a “finger-width” or “small-measure” (9).

Based on observations during eight months of fieldwork in 1996, 2004, and 2005, this paper’s focus is on the cultivation, processing, and ritual uses of barley among the Shuhi in the eastern Himalayas, and their reflection of the strong Tibetan influences in the area. The Shuhi are a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group of around 1,500 people living exclusively in the subtropical area near the bottom of the Shuiluo valley (2,000–2,400 m) of southwest Sichuan (China). They speak their own Tibeto-Burman language and although the kinship with other ethnic groups is unclear, they are officially counted among the Tibetans (Chin.: zangzu).

Crop Cultivation. The Shuhi practice subsistence agriculture with crop rotations, cultivating barley (Shuhi: maze) and wheat (ze) during the winter, and wet rice (shue) and corn (kashe) during summer. They use terraced fields irrigated with multiple irrigation channels. To keep the fields fertile, they spread organic fertilizer twice a year. The fertilizer consists of manure mixed with oak leaves (preferentially Quercus guajavifolia H. Lév.). During the Tibetan New Year (December 8th, agricultural calendar), they place a bunch of plants (called telasyi) in the middle of the barley and wheat fields to ask the gods for good growth and large yields. A telasyi is made of Cornus oblonga Wall. (xiuga), Pistacia weinmannifolia Poiss. ex Franch. (igi), Pinus yunnanensis Franch. (thoru) and Phyllostachys sp. (tlahu). A similar ceremony is conducted in March for the rice seedlings. At that time, Clematis spp. (ginier) and other flowers are added to the bunch, as rice is believed to be fond of flowers. For corn, no such ritual exists. The rice cultivation distinguishes the Shuhi from neighboring ethnic groups, such as the Pumi and Gami-Tibetans. This distinction is reflected even in their name Shuhi, which can be translated as “rice people.”

Table 1 summarizes the local names of the crop varieties, the size of cultivated areas, and yields. While the traditional wheat varieties were replaced 20 years ago, the two main local barley varieties, a blackish (mazeni) and a whitish one (mazeho), both of which belong to the naked six-rowed type, have been cultivated and exchanged between households since ancient times. Barley and wheat take up about the same field area, but wheat yields are considerably larger per cultivated acreage. Interestingly, drying, threshing, and winnowing of the harvested crop take place on the flat roofs of the houses (Fig. 1A and 1B).

Processing of Barley. Like in other Tibetan areas, barley is processed into tsampa (hui), barley wine (xie), and spirit (aji). Before each meal,