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### A Landrace Breed

An ancient landrace breed known to have existed as early as 800 AD, the Lhasa Apso is one of the ten most closely related modern breeds to the ancestral wolf, according to the study "Genetic Structure of the Purebred Dog" published in *Science* magazine, May 2004. This hardy mountain canine developed in the heart of the Himalayas with little purposeful selection. As such, the Lhasa Apso is a significant cultural artifact of Tibet, shaped by a combination of the remote, unforgiving environment and the Tibetan people's reverence for all living beings, particularly their dogs. In 1842, a British naturalist made a sketch of two small, coated Tibetan dogs and wrote: "Tame dogs abound and are much praised by the men for guarding their flocks and herds and houses, and by the women for petting...For the former purpose the Tibetan Mastiff is used...The ladies dogs are Poodles or Terriers, many of which are pretty and have long soft hair."

Before the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, it was not unusual to find Lhasa Apsos in monasteries and villages throughout Tibet, faithfully fulfilling their role as a companion and sentinel.

What is a landrace and why is the Lhasa Apso a landrace?

A landrace is a recognizable breed of dog that develops according to the dictates of its environment and function rather than purposeful selection. A landrace will tend to have more variety than a breed purposefully selected for physical traits. In domesticated dogs, the Border Collie is a landrace. Several varieties developed in the counties along the Scottish-English border depending on what sort of sheep were being worked – slower lowland or flighty highland sheep. But all the varieties, still exemplified today in the differences between the so-called "show lines" and "herding lines", shared the common traits of having a strong "eye" to control the sheep and the intelligence and stamina to flank and gather them at a great distance from the shepherd.

The Lhasa Apso is likewise a landrace because the native mountain environment dictated its overall form and function, particularly the breed's weather-proof coat, body shaped for lung capacity, canny survival skills and overall hardiness. These traits are consistent while variations of color, size and head type existed from town to town and valley to valley. Early British dog fanciers remarked on the variation within the breed, but to Tibetans, the differences that Westerners observed were not meaningful. All small, long-haired native companion dogs were considered to be the same breed, the *apso seng-kyi*.

With the Chinese takeover of the government of Tibet in 1959, there has been a systematic genocide of Tibetans, their culture and history. The Lhasa Apso was an integral part of Tibetan life prior to the Chinese invasion, and until recently, semi-feral apso dogs were living on their own in the streets of Lhasa and being fed by local residents. In 2002, the Chinese began killing off these dogs and imposing licensing requirements on pets. With below poverty-level incomes, the imposition of a licensing fee is beyond most owners' means. Given the political climate and influx of Han Chinese, it is unlikely that this special breed will continue to survive in its native homeland.