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*Chapter 3: The Discourse of Serfdom in Tibet*

**Introduction**

In his 1971 *Journal of Asian Studies* article, "Serfdom and Mobility: An Examination of the Institution of 'Human Lease' in Traditional Tibetan Society," Melvyn Goldstein proclaims, "Tibet was characterized by a form of institutionalized inequality that can be called *pervasive serfdom*,"<sup>1</sup> and thereby launched his narrative of serfdom. In this chapter I will deconstruct Goldstein's narrative of serfdom and, by privileging alternative characteristics of traditional Tibetan society, propose a counter-narrative that more comprehensively represents the dynamic nature of traditional Tibetan society. However, before I begin my critique it is necessary to outline the fundamental structure of traditional Tibetan society.

Due to Tibet's extremely effective policy of isolation before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, research on traditional Tibetan society is sparse. Furthermore, that research which does exist either focuses on the philosophical and religious traditions of Tibet, and is therefore not very useful for understanding socio-economic relations in Tibet, or is saturated with overt political motivations and rhetoric, and thereby calls into question its credibility as a valid source of knowledge. On one hand, Chinese Marxists portray traditional Tibet as characterized by a "feudal-serf" system (*fengjian nongnu zhidu*) in order to justify their "liberation" of Tibet in 1951. In contrast, many Tibetans in exile paint an overly idyllic picture of Tibetan society before the advent of direct Chinese governance in 1951.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, neither group has explained clearly the characteristics of the traditional society and culture to which they make reference.

Largely rising above the murky fields of ideologically-motivated scholarship on Tibet, Melvyn Goldstein's research and publications, based on intensive and lengthy fieldwork in Tibetan exile communities in India and in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, represent the best attempt at well-rounded, dispassionate, independent, and, as best as can be hoped, "objective" scholarship on Tibet today.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the following introduction to the social structure of traditional Tibet relies primarily on his research. With the opening up of China in the early 1980's, in-depth research on both contemporary and historical Tibet

<sup>1</sup> Goldstein, "Serfdom and Mobility," p. 521 (italics mine).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Anna Louise Strong, for a very China-sympathetic account of Tibet in the 1950's, and Rinchen Dolma Taring for an idealistic portrayal of traditional Tibetan society from an aristocratic perspective.

<sup>3</sup> While few Tibetan scholars in the West agree with Goldstein's cavalier description of traditional Tibetan society as characterized by serfdom, none of them fail to acknowledge the vast amount of data he has gathered on Tibet, its culture, and its history. See Goldstein, *An Anthropological Study of the Tibetan Political System*, pp. 1-14, for a methodological introduction to the fieldwork on which several of his articles ("The Balance Between Centralization and Decentralization," "Serfdom and Mobility," "Taxation and the Structure of a Tibetan Village," and (partially) "Reexamining Choice, Dependency, and Command,") are based, and out of which his theory of "serfdom" emerged.

has begun to flourish, and several works published in recent years bear testament to the value of this fruitful and credible research.<sup>4</sup> When possible, these works will be used to enhance Goldstein's remarkable studies and thus provide a more multi-dimensional understanding of traditional Tibet.

**The Socio-Economic System of Traditional Tibet**

Traditional Tibetan lay society was, according to Goldstein, first and foremost differentiated into two hierarchical and hereditary strata: "aristocratic lords (*sger pa*) and serfs (*mi ser*)."<sup>5</sup> Lords and *mi ser* were linked by an landed estate, which was held either privately by a large aristocratic family, or by the central government in the person of a provincial district representative.<sup>6</sup> Notably, when estate ownership shifted, *mi ser* remained with the estate, rather than with the family that previously owned it. Bound to an estate, *mi ser* were also subject to heavy taxation and labor obligations by their lord, and could not legally abandon their estate. Nevertheless, *mi ser* had distinct legal identities and significant rights, both *de jure* and *de facto*.<sup>7</sup> For example, many *mi ser* possessed a hereditary plot of land (*tre-ten*)<sup>8</sup> on which their taxes were based, maintained complete control over their private possessions, and could initiate legal action against their lord. Not unlike medieval European peasants, *mi ser* were granted tenement fields for personal use (subject to taxation by the lord) in exchange for tilling demesne fields on a manorial estate.

Significant legal and practical differences existed with *mi ser* themselves, who were divided into two main categories: "taxpayers" (*khral pa* or *tre ba*) and "small householders" (*dud chung*) [see Figure 1, page ??]. Taxpayers hereditarily maintained large plots of agricultural land as stipulated in contracts between their individual families and their lord. Holding titles to their plots, taxpayers could not be evicted from these plots as long as they fulfilled their lord's obligations. However, they also could not permanently leave their land. The large plot of land thus served as the "basis" (*brten*) for a *mi ser's* heavy tax and labor responsibilities.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, "tax-base" landholders held plots on both private manorial estates and *shung gyu ba*, estates under direct government administration.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking here primarily of works by Robert Barnett, ed.; Graham E. Clarke; Rebecca French; A. Tom Grunfeld; Geoffrey Samuel; and Warren Smith. This trend of openness by the People's Republic of China that has resulted in such informative studies is certainly a hopeful portent for those of us interested in Tibet and China.

<sup>5</sup> Goldstein, "Serfdom and Mobility," p. 522. I am postponing at this point an in-depth philological analysis of *mi ser*, and a critique of Goldstein's contentious translation of this term as "serf." Rather than propose my own translation of this term, in the interest of scholarly fairness, I will also at this point leave *mi ser* untranslated. Tibetan terms are transcribed in this thesis according to the Wylie system of transcription. See Turrell V. Wylie, pp. 261-67.

<sup>6</sup> Goldstein, "Serfdom and Mobility," pp. 522-24.

<sup>7</sup> Goldstein, "Serfdom and Mobility," p. 522, claims that there was no uniform legal code of these rights. However, Rebecca French's pioneering research in Tibetan legal history suggests Goldstein's claim may be based on a lack of information, and thus inaccurate. See Rebecca French, pp. 208-10.

<sup>8</sup> Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice," p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> Goldstein, "Serfdom and Mobility," pp. 524-25.

<sup>10</sup> Goldstein, "Taxation and the Structure of a Tibetan Village," p. 4.

In contrast, small household (*dud chung*) *mi ser* had, at some time in the past (either in their lifetime or in previous generations), held "taxpayer" status on their estate, but for various reasons relinquished this status (and therefore the obligations it entailed) while still maintaining their legal relationship with the estate.<sup>11</sup> Such *mi ser* can be classified into several different categories. For example, one important category of *dud chung* was the "human lease" (*mi bogs*) *mi ser*. Not bound to any estate, "human lease" *mi ser* had unbridled freedom of movement and employment in exchange for annual payments to their lords and occasional *ad hoc* labor requirements. Some "human lease" *mi ser* leased land from tax-base landholders and cultivated it, others took advantage of the constant labor shortage in traditional Tibet and "sold" their labor to the highest bidder, while others pursued employment in construction, trade, or the military. Other *dud chung* were considered "bound," in that they possessed small, non-inheritable plots of land from their lord. Their obligation in return for this land was often only to cultivate their lord's demesne fields.

A third sizeable category of *dud chung* were *mi ser* who had effectively ran away from their lord. While relatives of runaway *mi ser* often tried to negotiate with the lord to grant the runaway "human lease" status, this did not always occur.<sup>12</sup> Of lesser social and economic status were the "tax appendage" (*khral rogs* or *tre-non*) *dud chung*. These people were generally destitute *mi ser* who were assigned by their lords to work for taxpayer families based on the family's tax burden, for which they received a daily wage.<sup>13</sup> However, commanding a peasant to serve as a tax appendage occurred only "intermittently...and affected only a small number of the 'common serfs'."<sup>14</sup> The final category of *dud chung* were hereditary house servants who had no land but were provided food and clothing by their lords.<sup>15</sup>

Thus was the basic socio-economic structure of lay society in traditional Tibet.

### A Critique of "Serfdom" in the Works of Melvyn Goldstein

With an understanding of the basic socio-economic structure of traditional Tibetan society in mind, let us now turn to a critical discussion of Goldstein's analysis of this structure. Goldstein argues that the socio-economic structure of traditional Tibet is definitively characterized by "serfdom," which he posits is, "a system of productive relations" with four distinct components. As his definition of serfdom is a crucial part of this thesis, I thus quote these components at length:

- 1) Peasants (serfs) who are hereditarily tied to land and obligated to provide free labor on the landholding elites' agricultural estates. The holders of these estates, the lords, possess the legal right to command this labor from their serfs

<sup>11</sup> Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice," p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> Goldstein, "Serfdom and Mobility," pp. 525-31.

<sup>13</sup> Goldstein, "Taxation," pp. 23-24.

<sup>14</sup> Goldstein, "Serfdom and Mobility," p. 533.

<sup>15</sup> Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951*, p. 3.

on demand without recompense, although there may be customary or legal limits to this extraction.

2) Such peasants (serfs) subsist primarily by means of agricultural fields provided on a hereditary basis by their lord. This land, however, was not owned by the serfs and could not be sold by them.

3) Serfs do not have the choice or legal right to terminate this relationship. They are hereditarily bound to serve and cannot unilaterally relinquish their land and obligations.

4) Lords exercise a degree of judicial control over their serfs, although a central government may also exercise judicial control over the serfs.<sup>16</sup>

This definition of "serfdom" is, at best, ambiguous and as a result ultimately interferes with a clear understanding of socio-economic relations in traditional Tibet. It is merely a jural definition that is qualified with significant and conspicuous exceptions which I will highlight below. Furthermore, because Goldstein's definition of this culturally-loaded term is ambiguous, his scholarship is commonly mis-represented by China as "objective" western support for Communist history of Tibet, within which feudalism and serfdom play a significant role. In the following deconstructive critique of Goldstein's representation of traditional Tibetan society as characterized by "serfdom" I will reinterpret the evidence presented above. This reinterpretation will in turn serve as a foundation for a counter-narrative of tangible *de facto* rights among *mi ser* in traditional Tibet which will, I suggest, undermine Goldstein's definition of *mi ser* as "serf."

However, before I begin my critique, an important criticism regarding Goldstein's chronology must be considered briefly. Goldstein fails to indicate in any of his studies when the system of "serfdom" as defined above developed in traditional Tibet. This oversight is particularly precarious in light of early documents that indicate that peasants during the time of King Srong-brtsan sgampo (c. 609-649)<sup>17</sup> could buy and sell land.<sup>18</sup> It is unfortunate that a scholar as rigorous and prolific as Goldstein has not addressed such an elementary historical concept.

As outlined above, there are two primary divisions within the Tibetan peasant<sup>19</sup> underclass: "tax-base" landholders (*khral pa*) and landless peasants (*dud chung*).<sup>20</sup> I will address the tax-base landholders first. These landholders can be divided into manorial estate peasants and government peasants. Manorial estates included demesne and tenement sections, and peasants who held a section of tenement land on such estates were responsible for tilling the demesne fields,

<sup>16</sup> Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice," p. 82.

<sup>17</sup> See David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, pp. 27-32.

<sup>18</sup> See Dung-dkar Blo-bzang 'phrim-las, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> For reasons which I will be made evident later, I will now translate *mi ser* as "peasant."

<sup>20</sup> In "Reexamining Choice," Goldstein refers to *dud chung* as "landless" *mi ser* despite the fact that in an earlier study, "Serfdom and Mobility," pp. 525-26, he states that there existed a category of "bound" *dud chung* that actually held small plots of land.

paying taxes, and fulfilling other labor-intensive tasks specified by their lord. In return, peasants had complete control over their tenement fields. They owned their own farming tools, controlled planting, and even maintained the right to sublease their fields. The only right withheld from tax-base landholders regarding their fields was the right of disposal, i.e., they were not allowed to sell their plot of land.

Goldstein emphasizes that this relationship between tax-base landholder and lord was not voluntary. He states, "*Miser* were hereditarily tied to their estates and could not leave them permanently *without the permission of their lord* even if they were willing to return all their hereditary tenement fields to the lord/estate."<sup>21</sup> He also argues that lords reserved the "jural right" to refuse a peasant's request to marry out of the estate, or to join a monastery, although he acknowledges that lords rarely practiced this right. As another example of the involuntary relationship between peasants and lords, Goldstein asserts that peasants were subject to unchecked punishment and adjudication by their lords.

While not denying Goldstein's assertions, I suggest a high degree of autonomy (if not freedom) existed within the tax-base landholder/lord agreement. For example, landholding peasants maintained complete control over their land, except disposal. It is also important to note that tax-base land (*tre-ten*) was not inherited by individual persons, but collectively by family units. Because of this tradition, large families could more easily fulfill their demesne field and other labor obligations, and thus relieve some of their children of such responsibilities. This would in turn ensure their children a high degree of autonomy.<sup>22</sup>

Government peasants (*shung gyu pa*), of which there were two types, made up another significant category within the tax-base landholder group. One type of government peasant was analogous to the manorial taxpayer peasant, except that rather than cultivating the demesne fields of a manorial estate they tilled lands overseen by an estate steward of the government.<sup>23</sup> The second type of government peasant was responsible directly to the central government in Lhasa and typically provided heavy taxes and corvée labor for the government-sponsored country-wide network of transportation. While this locally-supported system of transportation was commonly abused and therefore (depending on the location) often demanded heavy labor and expensive preparation on the part of government peasants, apart from these obligations, these government peasants were free to pursue their own labors and interests. Furthermore, it is important to note that the central government considered those villages inhabited by government peasants to be political-economic corporations, and thus levied taxes not on individual government landholding families, but on the village as a collective entity. It was thus up to individual families to apportion the tax burden across the community. It is not difficult to imagine opportunities for corruption and unfair distribution of these taxes within such a system, thus further suggesting that a degree of *de facto* autonomy existed in traditional Tibet.

Significantly, Goldstein does acknowledge that autonomy did exist within this system in the form of varying degrees of social and economic

<sup>21</sup> Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice," p. 88 (italics in original).

<sup>22</sup> This collective inheritance is confirmed by Clarke, pp. 404-405.

<sup>23</sup> See Goldstein's, "Taxation," for an in-depth discussion of one such community under direct government supervision.

mobility between categories of tax-base landholding peasants. However, to meet the requirements of his definition of "serfdom," he emphasizes that regardless of the degree of autonomy and/or mobility tax-base peasants may have maintained, they always remained hereditarily, and thus legally, tied to their land.<sup>24</sup> Goldstein asserts that "the basic Tibetan social equation" was that "*it was the lord who approved and enforced the upward...and... downward mobility*"<sup>25</sup> of these peasants. While I do not challenge this assertion, I do want to emphasize that privileging ultimate legal approval of lords over peasants unnecessarily clouds our understanding of the actual social and economic situations in traditional Tibet. Therefore, while Goldstein's narrative of *de jure* serfdom is valid, I propose that another more powerful narrative of *de facto* autonomy rooted in actual social and economic situations in traditional Tibet is also extant.

The social and economic mobility among landholding peasants created *mi ser* with wealth, status, and privilege—conditions that seriously challenge the rational use of the term "serf" to describe such peasants. For example, some peasants in traditional Tibet held substantial amounts of land (albeit with heavy tax and labor obligations), were quite wealthy, and even had numerous tenant peasants and servants of their own. It does not follow that "serfs" could have personal tenant farmers and servants. Goldstein's assertion that final legal approval over changes in status among taxpayer peasants came from lords, and was thus beyond the control of an individual peasant, seems in general to be true.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, final legal approval with little, if any, *de facto* control does not warrant such peasants being called "serfs."<sup>27</sup> Goldstein's reliance on a legal definition of "serfdom," as we shall see, seriously undermines the strength of his narrative.

Goldstein continues his narrative by discussing the second primary category within the Tibetan peasant class, the "small householders" (*dud chung*) or landless peasants. Consisting of approximately two-thirds of the entire Tibetan population, they made up the majority of Tibetan peasants and, because they had no hereditary tax-base land, largely had *de facto* independence from their former lords. Goldstein acknowledges this autonomy when he writes that it was "the empirical reality that most landless *miser* were basically left alone...."<sup>28</sup> However, he goes to great lengths to show that on top of any financial obligations that lords demanded of their landless peasants (e.g., the annual fee required of human lease peasants), lords also maintained the ultimate (legal) right to "command" their landless peasants. Goldstein's discussion is based on a

<sup>24</sup> Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice," p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93 (italics in original).

<sup>26</sup> A notable exception to this jural control over the mobility of peasants by their lords is found in Chen Han-Seng, p. 101. He asserts that due to the large supply of labor in eastern Tibet (Kham) relative to central Tibet, peasants in eastern Tibet retained a greater freedom of movement and did not have to secure the permission of their lords to travel or enroll in a monastery. However, the reliability of Chen's data is debatable. He later, p. 127, addresses what he calls "the scarcity of labor in eastern Tibet."

<sup>27</sup> Very little research has been conducted on wealthy non-aristocratic families in historical Tibet. In his discussion of the integration of the native chieftain (*tusi*) system into the Qing dynasty, John Herman, pp. 47-74, makes reference to such families in the Kham region of ethnographic Tibet (western Sichuan), but does not discuss them. Chen Han-Seng, p. 124, also mentions, but does not discuss, "local chieftains," which may or may not be equivalent to *tusi*.

<sup>28</sup> Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice," p. 97.

collection of case studies conducted during his research.<sup>29</sup> Rather than highlight the *de jure* control of lords over landless peasants, I want to underscore the *de facto* autonomy and freedom obtained and maintained by the peasants in several of these studies.

In Case One, Drokar, a human lease peasant who was mistakenly sent to a tax-base landholding family as a tax appendage, eventually obtained a *tre-ten* (tax-base plot) by means of her hard work and became a tax-base landholder. This upward movement in socio-economic status not only evinces a high degree of autonomy among peasants, but also indicates that the boundaries between the two types of peasants in traditional Tibet were fluid. In Case Two, Wangchen's mother successfully negotiated for his exemption from *mi ser* labor obligations by enrolling him as a monk at Sera Monastery, another example of autonomy among Tibetan peasants.

Case Three also illustrates the notable ability of peasants to negotiate successfully with their lords for various privileges. Fearful that she would not be able to survive as tax appendage to an already destitute family, Yanchen's entreaties convinced the officials of Sera Che (the estate where she was to be sent) to grant her a small tax-base of land. While it is true that Yanchen did not question the right of her lord to send her away (as Goldstein emphasizes), she in fact substantially influenced the outcome of the "command" that Goldstein suggests was beyond her control. To privilege rights over practice, as Goldstein does with his definition of "serf," ultimately interferes with a clear understanding of the issue at hand, in this case the status of *mi ser* in traditional Tibet.

Each of the above three cases illustrates two salient *de facto* characteristics of peasants in traditional Tibetan society. One, as discussed above, a high degree of social and economic mobility, and therefore autonomy, existed within the peasant class. Here it is also necessary to discuss the works of other scholars on traditional Tibet. For example, presenting evidence that challenges Goldstein's claim that lords possessed ultimate legal authority over their peasants, Graham Clarke's ground-breaking research among Tibetan pastoral communities in Amdo indicates that, in times of economic prosperity, hierarchical reallocation of pastoral lands through marriage and inheritance may occur. Significantly, Clarke presents nothing that suggests the need, either historically or in the contemporary era, for approval by peasants' lords over this reallocation of grazing lands.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, based on research conducted in the 1940's, Chen Han-Seng argues that some *la-da*, which he identifies as tenants of a monastery, had no rent obligations and thus could engage in other activities, such as trade, to acquire wealth.<sup>31</sup> Finally, Franz Michael confirms the existence of social and economic mobility in his careful, if sometimes flawed, study of traditional Tibet's political and social structures.<sup>32</sup> In light of such evidence, it now seems that a very significant degree of mobility and autonomy existed within the peasant class of traditional Tibet.

The above three cases also illustrate the fact that peasants maintained a *de facto* right to negotiate with their lords to obtain higher status or privilege, to

<sup>29</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 98-103, for an in-depth discussion of seven of these case studies.

<sup>30</sup> Clarke, pp. 404-405.

<sup>31</sup> Chen Han-Seng, p. 108.

<sup>32</sup> Franz Michael, pp. 117-20.

seek labor assistance in order to fulfill agricultural or corvée labor responsibilities, and/or to obtain human lease status. Notably, these negotiations were frequently successful. Furthermore, despite some degree of economic dependence, peasants had the right to legally challenge decisions by their lord to increase taxes or labor obligations by appealing to higher lords, or to representatives of the central government. Appeals could even reach the Cabinet.<sup>33</sup> In what I suggest is an uncharacteristic occurrence in a society defined by "serfdom," these legal challenges were often decided in favor of the peasants. Goldstein himself cites an example in the government village of Samada in which the peasants collectively opposed an increase in taxes by providing legal records on their behalf. As a result, "the Regent (and indirectly the aristocratic family who administered the estate) was unable to alter the tax."<sup>34</sup>

In Case Four, the lord of the Sambo family (one of Tibet's largest aristocratic families) recalled approximately 3,000 of his human lease peasants. This case does clearly show the ability of lords to command their human lease peasants. However, not only do we not know how many of these recalled human lease peasants actually returned, but available evidence also indicates that practices such as this (and particularly of this magnitude) rarely occurred. Goldstein himself confirms this when he writes, "once a *miser* obtained 'human lease' status he/she could, in general, expect to maintain physical mobility so long as he/she paid their 'human lease' fee annually and performed whatever other intermittent labor the lord wanted."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, due to the rarity of such occurrences, it is necessary to examine the extraordinary circumstances that framed (and most likely caused) this event. The massive recall mentioned above, for example, was issued in response to a drastic increase in taxes implemented by Lungshar, a reformist intent on modernizing Tibet, against Tibet's largest and richest aristocratic families (including the Sambo family) to support the growing Tibetan military and to fight corruption in the government.<sup>36</sup> No one with ideas as radical as Lungshar and the power to implement them (expect, perhaps, the current Dalai Lama), existed in Tibet before or after him.

Finally, Case Six reveals an important and increasingly common outlet for autonomy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for landless peasants: flight, which effectively terminated the peasant-lord relationship. Consider, for example, the case of Lhundrup, a peasant who did not want to serve as a soldier as commanded by his lord and therefore abandoned his regiment and went to Lhasa, where he survived by begging for food. After some time he began to hire himself out as a domestic and agricultural servant to various households there, and eventually he secured the assistance of a tax-base landholding family who helped him become a monk. Peasants fled from their lord/estates for reasons such as unpayable debts or exorbitant labor obligations, abuse or fear of punishment by their lords, or simply over disagreements with their lords. Because of the perpetual labor shortage in traditional Tibet,<sup>37</sup> flight represented a very strong bargaining chip for

<sup>33</sup> French, pp. 215-17.

<sup>34</sup> Goldstein, "Taxation," p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice," p. 107.

<sup>36</sup> For more on Lungshar and his reform movement, see Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, especially, pp. 156-212.

<sup>37</sup> See Goldstein, "Taxation," pp. 23-25, for a discussion of the critical importance of agricultural laborers (peasants) for successful economic production.

peasants. Significantly, it was "fairly common" for relatives of a runaway peasant to negotiate with the lord of the runaway peasant to grant him/her human lease status, and for the peasant to accept in turn the accompanying financial and legal responsibilities. Goldstein asserts, "This process occurred frequently in such situations."<sup>38</sup>

There is some debate on when the option of running away began to be commonly exercised among peasants, but by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the number of runaways had reached tremendous size.<sup>39</sup> As a result, on the advice of the Chinese representative of the Manchu government in Lhasa, the central government of Tibet created the Agricultural Office in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This office allowed peasants who had run away from their lord/estates and not been caught for at least three years to register as human lease peasants of the Office. For the first time in recorded Tibetan history, peasants were able to legally and unilaterally abrogate their relationship with an estate. By registering with this office, peasants also afforded themselves some protection from exploitative employers. However, while they initially had few responsibilities and a great deal of personal freedom, the Agricultural Office soon began assigning these human lease peasants to various estates who had petitioned the government for aid.<sup>40</sup>

Thus far I have attempted to outline a narrative that privileges not only the jural control of lords over peasants as emphasized by Goldstein, but also the *de facto* autonomy and freedom that existed within this socio-economic structure, as seen in the high degree of social and economic mobility of the peasants, their ability to negotiate successfully with their lords, and the ability to flee from their lords and live freely, if not always comfortably. Does this evidence dispute the existence of "serfdom" as defined above by Goldstein in traditional Tibet? No, it does not. However, consider the fact that Goldstein's narrative, with his definition of serfdom as its core, is supported by *jural* underpinnings. Recent scholarship by Rebecca French has shown that Tibet's legal system was extremely flexible and unpredictable, and that all legal relationships, including signed contracts, were subject to unlimited negotiation.<sup>41</sup> She writes, "Cases in Tibet, then, were very flexible, and did not decay, *rulsubmé*, until both parties to the dispute achieved true agreement, *loka zotap su dowa*. In the interim, most cases remained dynamically open [not unlike the ambiguous status of runaways] and capable of being brought to the same forum repeatedly or to a mixture of forums, levels, and procedures in any sequence."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, suggesting that the degree of centralized legal authority in Tibet may have been much greater than expected, French has uncovered a large collection of local petitions regarding conflicts over taxation in the records of the Cabinet and Accounting Office in Dharamsala. She also suggests that the Mountain Valley Decree, a

<sup>38</sup> Goldstein, "Serfdom and Mobility," p. 529. This process also illustrates the prevalence of the ability of peasants to negotiate successfully with their lords.

<sup>39</sup> Chinese sources suggest that the number of runaway "serfs" began to increase as early as the Qianlong era (1736-1796) due to landlord exploitation. See "Further on Seminar," p. 28. In contrast, Goldstein, "Serfdom and Mobility," p. 533, seems to indicate that the size of this floating population had not become a problem until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>40</sup> Goldstein, "The Balance Between Centralization and Decentralization in the Traditional Tibetan Political System," p. 179.

<sup>41</sup> French, pp. 115-17, 138-40, 160-61.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

binding, albeit informal, set of edicts may have existed as a national law code in Tibet before 1959.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, while Goldstein insists on a legal definition of serfdom to bind his narrative together, French has shown that legal relationships in Tibet were neither static nor representative of *de facto* socio-economic practices. With the legal underpinnings of Goldstein's narrative thus removed, his narrative of "serfdom" in traditional Tibet collapses under its own weight.

The intention of my above critique is not to paint an idealistic picture of old Tibet. For *mi ser*, life in old Tibet was, I am confident, lived at or below a bare level of subsistence amidst widespread exploitation and corruption.<sup>44</sup> However, despite Goldstein's cogent rebuttal of earlier critics (to which none have responded in publication),<sup>45</sup> I have shown that an important counter-narrative of autonomy and freedom existed within the traditional socio-economic structure of Tibet. Furthermore, the inherent flexibility of the Tibetan legal system has called into question the validity of Goldstein's legal definition of "serfdom."

### Towards a New Historiography of Traditional Tibet

Having deconstructed the content of Goldstein's narrative of serfdom in traditional Tibet, in this section I will shift the focus of my critique away from the identifiable content of his narrative to the theoretical foundation of his definition of "serfdom."

Goldstein's theory of a "cross-cultural 'serf' type,"<sup>46</sup> rests on two primary points: 1) "serfdom" is characterized by hereditary and involuntary servitude, and 2) "serfdom" can exist independent from "feudalism." In formulating his first point Goldstein aligns himself with classical historical interpretations of European feudalism. Citing Marc Bloch, he suggests that European serfdom was derived from past voluntary submission or vassalage which had been transformed into hereditary, involuntary servitude.<sup>47</sup> Goldstein goes on to write, "Bloch...delimited three main components of *French* serfdom: 1) the serf was hereditarily tied to land and lord, 2) the serf, unlike the slave, had rights and possessed (but did not own) productive resources (land)..., and 3) the lord had the legal right to command his serfs including judicial authority."<sup>48</sup>

As I have discussed in Chapter 1, Susan Reynolds has presented a scathing deconstructionist critique of classical notions of feudalism as outlined by Bloch and Ganshof. Questioning the relationship—known in classical texts as vassalage—between land(fief)holders (vassals) and the accompanying responsibilities that go along with landholding, and their lords, she concludes that the laws of fiefs that are classically assumed to have emerged out of customary

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208-17.

<sup>44</sup> For one of the few accounts of life among the lower classes in traditional Tibet, see Melvyn Goldstein, William Siebensschuh, and Tashi Tsering, *The Struggle for Modern Tibet: The Autobiography of Tashi Tsering*.

<sup>45</sup> See Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice."

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>47</sup> See Marc Bloch, especially pp. 260-66.

<sup>48</sup> Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice," p. 81 (italics mine).

(read: traditional) law and are associated with the institution of personal vassalage were actually "the creation of the stronger, more centralized, more bureaucratic, and more effective government that developed after the twelfth century, and of the professional law that went with it."<sup>49</sup> Moreover, she goes to great lengths to point out the salient differences between laws of fiefs in France, Italy, England, and Germany, and argues that the use of the singular concept of "feudalism" to describe these vastly different laws of property (read: vassalage) ultimately obscures more than it clarifies. Could not classical ideas of "serfdom" based on Bloch's definition of serfdom in *France* be similarly ineffective?

Reynolds' critique of fiefs and vassalage is relevant to our discussion of "serfdom" in Tibet precisely because Goldstein asserts his intellectual alliance with Bloch, who maintains that serfdom was originally derived from a form of vassalage. Now that Reynolds has revealed the classical mis-interpretation of personal vassalage, we must also consider the institution of "serfdom" (fundamentally a derived form of vassalage) as expressed in the classical narrative of medieval feudalism to be grounded in a more socially, economically, and politically complex context than it was previously thought. Therefore, not only can we consider Goldstein's representation of traditional Tibetan socio-economic relations to contain within it a salient counter-narrative of autonomy and freedom, but the very theoretical basis of his narrative, i.e., his definition of "serfdom," has, under critical analysis, crumbled. These two reasons alone provide more than sufficient evidence against using the term "serfdom" to describe the socio-economic system of traditional Tibet. However, we must also address the relationship between feudalism and serfdom in Goldstein's narrative.

Attempting to expose the discontinuousness of feudalism and serfdom, Goldstein follows the Marxist scholar Sweezy, who asserts, "*Some* serfdom can exist in systems [of production] which are clearly not feudal."<sup>50</sup> However, another Marxist scholar, János Bak, argues that there was no clearly defined sphere of social reality known as "economy" in medieval European feudalism (which seems to be the kind of feudalism Goldstein uses in his analyses, although he never states this explicitly), and therefore the feudal mode of production is not only the *defining* characteristic of medieval Europe, but it is also the *only* characteristic of this society. According to Bak, serfdom is necessarily subsumed under the larger discourse of feudalism and cannot exist independent from it.<sup>51</sup> At this point, we are at an intellectual impasse. Goldstein cites Sweezy who asserts that serfdom can exist apart from feudalism, and I cite Bak who argues that serfdom cannot exist outside of the larger institution of feudalism. Under these circumstances alone I might concede to Goldstein's argument that serfdom can exist apart from feudalism. However, as I have shown in Chapter 1, the fact remains that in Chinese Marxist discourse, feudalism and serfdom are intimately related. It is unfortunate that Goldstein fails to recognize this relationship and does not consider the consequences of his use of the term "serfdom" for this discourse, however distasteful it may be.

Before departing from my critique of the theoretical foundation of Goldstein's scholarship, I want to address his justification for the use of the term

<sup>49</sup> Reynolds, p. 74.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Sweezy, p. 33 (italics in original), as quoted in Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice," p. 82.

<sup>51</sup> János M. Bak, pp. 13-15.

"serfdom" as outlined in an introductory note to "Reexamining Choice," to which I strongly disagree. Deflecting criticism from diaspora Tibetans and western scholars who object to his use of the term, Goldstein insists "serfdom" can and should be used given that he has "carefully defined [it] in a scholarly fashion."<sup>52</sup> He states,

The People's Republic of China did not "invade" or "liberate" Tibet in 1950 to free it from serfdom or feudalism. To the contrary, China publicly pronounced that it would respect the old society including the serf system and religion.... Furthermore, the traditional estate-serf system continued to function in Tibet until *after* the uprising and flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959. In 1950-51, the Chinese proclaimed they were "liberating" Tibet to free it from *imperialist* influences, not the serf system....<sup>53</sup>

I do not deny the validity of Goldstein's justification up to 1951. It is true that early Communist rhetoric focused on the influence of external forces of imperialism in Tibet. However, with the institution of Democratic Reforms and collectivization after 1959, the Communist Party also began to attack internal forces of "feudalism" and "serfdom" in Tibet. Failing to address this expansion of rhetoric on the part of the Communist Party, Goldstein continues, "Thus, whether or not there was a set of relationships we can call serfdom in Tibet has no bearing on the controversy over the political status of Tibet and there is no reason to attempt to glorify or gloss over exploitative aspects of traditional Tibetan peasant-lord relations because of contemporary political expediency."<sup>54</sup> On the contrary, as I have shown above, and will continue to argue below, even carefully-defined "scholarly" nomenclature can be re-(or mis-)interpreted, appropriated, and used (or abused) by those in power. Such comments on the part of Goldstein, in combination with his failure to address the Marxist discourse in China, suggests that he feels by simply ignoring the discourse of feudalism in the People's Republic of China he has made it disappear. While he insists that he is not arguing for the existence of "feudalism" in traditional Tibet, but merely "serfdom," the intimate relationship between feudalism and serfdom in the Marxist discourse in China is undeniable. We need look no further than the *Hanyu Da Cidian* (referred to in Chapter 1) to see this relationship. However, for those not literate in Chinese, there exists a wealth of Chinese sources published in English that evince the relationship between feudalism and serfdom. For example, the editor of *Great Changes in Tibet* writes, "Before liberation Tibet was hell on earth, where the labouring people suffered for centuries under the darkest and most reactionary *feudal serfdom*."<sup>55</sup> Also, the recently released "New Progress in Human Rights in China's Tibet Autonomous Region" discusses the

<sup>52</sup> Goldstein, "Reexamining Choice," p. 109, note 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* (italics in original).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109-10, note 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Great Changes in Tibet* (italics mine), as quoted in Grunfeld, "Some Thoughts on the Current State of Sino-Tibetan Historiography," p. 569.

end of the "feudal serf system" in Tibet after 1959.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, whether he admits it or not, Goldstein's insistence that "serfdom" characterizes traditional Tibet *at best* only indirectly supports the Chinese discourse of feudalism as it relates to Tibet.

### A Philological Exegesis on "Serfs" in Traditional Tibet

"Return to Shaoshan"

I regret the passing, the dying, of the vague dream:  
my native orchards thirty-two years ago.  
Yet red banners roused the serfs, who seized the three-pronged  
lances  
when the masters raised whips in their black hands.  
We were brave and sacrifice was easy  
and we asked the sun, the moon, to alter the sky.  
Now I see a thousand waves of beans and rice and am happy.  
In the evening haze heroes are coming home.

—Mao Zedong, June 25,

1959<sup>57</sup>

The contemporary discourse of feudalism (which includes serfdom) in China has its roots in such works by Mao Zedong. Having evinced on several levels the ambiguity of Goldstein's assertion that "serfdom" characterized traditional Tibet, I want to depart from this critique and illustrate more carefully the contentiousness of Goldstein's translation of the pivotal word in his narrative, *mi ser*, as "serf" through an exegetical analysis of various definitions of *mi ser* and related terms in several dictionaries commonly used by contemporary Tibetan scholars. The following dictionaries (grouped by linguistic format) will be used in this philological analysis:

#### **Tibetan**

Loden Sherab Dagyab, *Tibetan Dictionary*. (Dharamsala, 1966).

#### **Tibetan-English**

Alexander Csoma de Körös, *Essay Towards a Dictionary, Tibetan and English*. (Calcutta, 1834).<sup>58</sup>

Sarat Chandra Das, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*. (Darjeeling, 1902).

Melvyn C. Goldstein, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*. (Kathmandu, 1975).

H.A. Jäschke, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*. (London, 1881).

<sup>56</sup> World Tibet Network News, "China Praises Its Rule Over Tibet."

<sup>57</sup> Lines 3-4 are cited as an illustrative example of *nongnu* in the *Hanyu Da Cidian* (volume six), p. 6. The translation of the entire poem is based on Willis Barnstone, p. 95, with my adjustments.

<sup>58</sup> This volume has been reprinted as Csoma de Körös, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*. Subsequent citations refer to this reprinted volume.

#### **Tibetan-Chinese**<sup>59</sup>

Gexi Qujizhaba [Dge Bshes Chos Kyi Grags], *Gexi Quzha Zangwen Cidian* [*Brda Dag Ming Tshig Gsal Ba Bzhugs*]. (Beijing, 1957).

Xie Qihuang, *et al.*, *Zangzu Chuantong Wenhua Cidian*. (Lanzhou, 1993).

*Zang-Han Duizhao Changyong Cihui*. (Chengdu, 1980).

#### **English-Tibetan**

Melvyn C. Goldstein, *English-Tibetan Dictionary of Modern Tibetan*. (Berkeley, 1984).

Tashi Tsering, *English-Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary*. (Beijing, 1988).

Dawasamdub Kazi, *An English-Tibetan Dictionary*. (Calcutta, 1919).

Analytical comparison and contrast between these dictionaries, published across a century and a half and, importantly, in widely varying socio-political and cultural contexts, reveals the contentiousness of Goldstein's definition of *mi ser*. Furthermore, this critique will trace how Goldstein has unknowingly injected his already ambiguous definition into the Chinese discourse of feudalism as exemplified most generally in Mao's poem, "Return to Shaoshan." Before I begin it is important to note that I am undertaking the following exegesis not merely as an academic exercise to elucidate the meaning of various key terms lost in history. Rather, as Graham Clarke confirms, terms such as *khral pa* (tax-base landholder), *dud chung* (landless peasant), and *mi ser*, which he translates as "subordinate commoner," are still used among indigenous Tibetans today, and therefore highly relevant to obtaining a clearer understanding of socio-economic relations in both traditional and contemporary Tibet.<sup>60</sup>

As we have seen above, *mi ser* is the Tibetan word Goldstein defines as "serf." In the *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, the earliest authoritative dictionary of its kind, Csoma de Körös locates *mi ser* within a discourse of social, political, and/or economic servitude by defining *mi ser* as, "a subject, a vassal."<sup>61</sup> Jäschke, a Moravian missionary whose "chief motive" for compiling his dictionary was to hasten the spread of Christian religion and civilization among the believers of Tibetan Buddhism, yet whose dictionary is more comprehensive and widely-used today than Csoma de Körös's, defines *mi ser* similarly as, "1. subject, servant, menial, drudge. 2. robber, thief, sharper."<sup>62</sup> However, the translation of *mi ser* by Das, whose dictionary supercedes both Csoma de Körös's and Jäschke's in

<sup>59</sup> I regret that I have been unable to obtain a copy of the most comprehensive Tibetan-Tibetan-Chinese dictionary edited by Zhang Yisun, *et al.* for the following philological exegesis.

<sup>60</sup> Clarke, pp. 393-412.

<sup>61</sup> Csoma de Körös, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 130. I realize the danger of citing any source as "authoritative" and as a general rule refrain from doing so (except under very finite circumstances). While Csoma de Körös's dictionary is limited in scope and contains many errors, it was praised in its time (and now) by scholars of Tibet as a valuable and pioneering effort in Tibetan studies. See the opening essay in this volume for more on Csoma de Körös's life and early efforts in Tibetan studies, as well as his *Tibetan Studies*.

<sup>62</sup> Jäschke, p. 413.

value and accuracy and remains a standard resource for both beginners and experts in Tibetan-English translation, situates this word in a significantly different discourse. Das translates *mi ser* as, "'bangs, a common term for: agricultural tenants, husbandmen with lands held subject to payments but from which they are non-ejectable."<sup>63</sup> Das therefore agrees with Goldstein that *mi ser* are subject to taxation (in unspecified form, but ranging from payment in kind, i.e., a percentage of annual harvest, to cash payment or varied forms of labor service). However, Das's assertion that *mi ser* could not be evicted from their land suggests a degree of ownership, and therefore autonomy, that Goldstein does not address.

Examining the meaning of *'bangs*, the ambiguity of *mi ser*, which Dagyal confirms is an equivalent of *'bangs*, begins to emerge.<sup>64</sup> Das defines *'bangs* as, "1. ... *chab 'bangs*, a subject or dependent; ... *'bangs* collectively= the people, the subjects. 2. servant, one who serves."<sup>65</sup> Not denying that *'bangs* maintains elements of dependency or servitude and thus supports Goldstein's translation of *mi ser* as "serf," *'bangs* also introduces notions of collective commonality into the meaning of *mi ser*. Such notions effectively relocate the term *mi ser* at least partially outside of Goldstein's discourse of socio-economic relations. The definitions of *'bangs* by both Csoma de Körös and Jäschke suggest a similar collective commonality that confirms Das's definition, therefore suggesting the possibility that *mi ser* may belong in a different discourse. Csoma de Körös defines *'bangs* as, "subject, vassal, folk."<sup>66</sup> Jäschke provides a more thorough definition, stating that *'bangs* is a "subject" or "gen. [genitive case] collectively: the people, the subjects." He goes on to explain that *'bangs* are "subjects" *vis-à-vis* "the king, ... officers, magistrates, ... etc."<sup>67</sup>

Tibetan-Chinese dictionaries also confirm the narrative of collective commonality extant in these two pivotal terms (*mi ser* and *'bangs*). For example, the *Gexi Quzha Zangwen Cidian* defines *mi ser* as, "*'bangs*, *renmin* [the people], *minzhong* [the common people, the masses]" and *'bangs* as, "*shuxia* [subordinates], *renmin*, [and citing Das] *puren* [(domestic) servant]."<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the *Zang-Han Duizhao Changyong Cihui* defines *mi ser* merely as, "*laobaixing* [ordinary people]," and *'bangs* as, "*renmin*, *baixing* [common people], *shumin* [the multitudes]."<sup>69</sup> By the very fact that none of these definitions contain any socio-economic determinants whatsoever, these two dictionaries are further evidence that convincingly asserts the fallibility of Goldstein's definition of *mi ser* as "serf."

The strongest affirmation of Goldstein's translation of *mi ser* as "serf" is contained in the *Zangzu Chuantong Wenhua Cidian*. Here, .. (*miza*, a Chinese transliteration of the Tibetan *mi ser*) has the following entry:

<sup>63</sup> Das, p. 962.

<sup>64</sup> Dagyal, p. 493. It is unfortunate that, due to poor printing quality, I am unable to decipher or reconstruct Dagyal's definition of *'bangs*, which, as an indigenous language definition, would shed much light on the matter at hand.

<sup>65</sup> Das, p. 916.

<sup>66</sup> Csoma de Körös, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 206.

<sup>67</sup> Jäschke, p. 391.

<sup>68</sup> Gexi Qujizhaba, pp. 636 and 598.

<sup>69</sup> *Zang-Han Duizhao Changyong Cihui*, pp. 614 and 533.

"dependents," "slaves," "root people." In old Tibet agriculturalists, pastoralists, and slaves were all subordinately under the command of the three great overlords: government officials, aristocrats, and monasteries. They did not have their own land, and they were only able to farm a section of their landlord's land. Agriculturalists and pastoral slaves each had their own lord, from whom they could never separate, and thus we can see why they are called "dependents" and "root people." *Chaba* had to provide services for their lords, *duiqiong* had to provide corvée labor, and vagrants and non-local persons had to pay rent in the form of human labor to their lords. These all reflect the subordinate relations among the people.<sup>70</sup>

It is without question that the editors of this "Cultural Dictionary" locate *miza* primarily within a socio-economic discourse of unequal class relations, i.e., a Marxist discourse. However, privileging the term "root people (*rogen*)," which I suggest refers to "common folk,"<sup>71</sup> reveals that even within this Marxist discourse, a degree of collective commonality is extant. This germ of difference should not be overlooked.

Clearly, Goldstein's insistence on translating *mi ser* as "serf" stands in opposition to most widely-accepted definitions of the term (with the above-mentioned citation as an exception). Moreover a careful examination of his writings reveals that Goldstein himself has provided strong evidence suggesting the contentiousness of his translation. I am referring specifically to his own *Tibetan-English Dictionary of Modern Tibetan*. In this dictionary Goldstein defines *'bangs* as, "subject, dependent,"<sup>72</sup> thus overlooking the collective commonality of this term as indicated by several other dictionaries. However, he defines *mi ser*, the seminal term that delimits the parameters of his socio-economic discourse, as, "1. serf 2. people, citizens, subjects, civilians."<sup>73</sup> In this second definition, Goldstein suggests that *mi ser* refers not only to "people" in a collective sense, but also to recognized members of a demarcated political entity, i.e., "citizens." Such an assertion arguably removes *mi ser* even further from his original discourse.

Having relocated *mi ser* outside of Goldstein's socio-economic discourse by privileging its characteristics of collective commonality, an important question remains unanswered: Is there a word in Tibetan (more closely equivalent to the English word "serf"? Let us examine the three English-Tibetan dictionaries listed at the beginning of this section. Goldstein naturally defines "serf" as, "*mi ser*."<sup>74</sup> In a much earlier English-Tibetan dictionary, Dawasamdup Kazi defines "serf" as, "(Sik. *nang bzan*;) *khyim gyi bya ba byed mkhan sger gyog*."<sup>75</sup> The two key phrases in this definition are *nang bzan* and *sger gyog*. Finally, Tashi Tsering, a Tibetan of non-aristocratic background who was

<sup>70</sup> Xie Qihuang, *et al.*, p. 267 (my translation).

<sup>71</sup> I have yet to locate *rogen* in any dictionary.

<sup>72</sup> Goldstein, *Tibetan-English Dictionary of Modern Tibetan*, p. 791.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 832.

<sup>74</sup> Goldstein, *English-Tibetan Dictionary of Modern Tibetan*, p. 387.

<sup>75</sup> Kazi, p. 701. Kazi's work does not contain a list of abbreviations, and therefore my suggestion that "Sik." stands for Sikkim and that *nang bzan* is used only in that area is tentative at best.



educated in India and the United States and later returned to his homeland, defines serf as, "*zhing bran, zhing pa bran gyog, nongnu*."<sup>76</sup> An exegetical comparison of English and Chinese definitions of these key terms and phrases reveals much that is important in understanding the meaning and location of *mi ser* in Tibetan discourse.

Beginning with Kazi, a definition of *nang bzan* (not in Csoma de Kőrös) may be constructed by combining Jäschke's definition of *nang*, "the interior, the inside," and by extension, "family, household,"<sup>77</sup> with *bzan*, "pasture, pasturage."<sup>78</sup> *Nang bzan* thus means "a family [=owned by another?] pastoralist." Das provides a clearer definition of *nang bzan* as, "clerks or ministerial officers who receive allowance in kind or money; also domestic servants who receive food for the work they do."<sup>79</sup> Goldstein agrees with Das, defining *nang bzan* as, "1. household servants 2. clerks in traditional Tibetan government."<sup>80</sup> Among the three Tibetan-Chinese dictionaries mentioned above, only the *Gexi Quzha Zangwen Cidian* contains the compound *nang bzan*. However, it overlooks the narrative of servitude contained within the term, which it glosses simply as, "*guan shi de* [official affairs], *guan jia* [officials]."<sup>81</sup>

The second key phrase in Kazi's gloss of "serf" is *sger gyog*. Csoma de Kőrös, omitting *sger* from his compilation, defines *gyog* as, "a servant, client, subject."<sup>82</sup> Again reconstructing the compound in Jäschke, which tentatively glosses *sger* as, "different, dissimilar, foreign,"<sup>83</sup> and *gyog* as, "servant, man-servant,"<sup>84</sup> I suggest that *sger gyog* may mean, "a non-local domestic servant." Das in turn provides a lucid gloss of this term: "private servant, also one who does his own work; servant or employee of an independent party or estate which has no connection with the Government."<sup>85</sup> This definition is significant precisely because of the unique narrative it represents. Clearly, *sger gyog* can be located within Goldstein's socio-economic discourse. However, Das's gloss also intimates the presence of some degree of autonomy and freedom in Tibet as early as the late nineteenth century, when Das began compiling his dictionary. This autonomy is seen in the fact that Das has identified a group of people who are able to employ themselves and are seemingly not bound to any estate or the central government. Upon careful examination, the *Gexi Quzha Zangwen Cidian*, which again cites Das as a resource, also corroborates the uniqueness of this narrative. While it glosses *gyog* simply as, "*puren* [servant],"<sup>86</sup> *sger* is defined as,

<sup>76</sup> Tsering, p. 914.

<sup>77</sup> Jäschke, p. 301.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 496.

<sup>79</sup> This citation is found under *nang bzan pa*, Das, p. 734. The syllable *pa* is a nominalizer suffix (e.g., *Khams pa* is a person (or persons) from Khams), not unlike the Chinese *zhe* or *ren*.

<sup>80</sup> Goldstein, *Tibetan-English Dictionary of Modern Tibetan*, p. 637.

<sup>81</sup> *Gexi Qujizhaba*, p. 461.

<sup>82</sup> Csoma de Kőrös, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 35.

<sup>83</sup> Jäschke here makes the following disclaimer: "This word [*sger*] I repeatedly met with in books of physical science, without finding the signification given above applicable." p. 114.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 519.

<sup>85</sup> Das, p. 323.

<sup>86</sup> This definition is cited under *gyog po*, in which *po* is a masculine nominalizer suffix, *Gexi Qujizhaba*, p. 811.

"*sizi* [private, individual]... *ban duli de* [semi-independent]."<sup>87</sup> The fact that a Communist Party-sponsored dictionary<sup>88</sup> acknowledges a degree of independence among a servant-class problematizes Goldstein's assertion that an institution of "serfdom" defined traditional Tibet. Reconstructing Goldstein's individual entries, we find that he does not go as far as Das and the *Gexi*, defining *sger gyog* merely as, "private, individual servant."<sup>89</sup> Likewise, the *Zang-Han Duizhao Changyong Cihui* glosses *sger gyog* simply as, "private servant."<sup>90</sup> Therefore, while an exegetical critique of Kazi's Tibetan gloss of "serf" is quite revealing, it is clear that neither *nang bzan* nor *sger gyog* can be considered equivalent to "serf," and we must therefore look elsewhere to fill the void that has been left after dislocating Goldstein's translation of *mi ser*.

Tashi Tsering defines "serf" as, "*zhing bran, zhing pa bran gyog, nongnu*."<sup>91</sup> Again, I will examine the meanings of key words in this definition so as to locate them within the larger context of the Tibetan language. Excluding the nominalizer *pa*, each of the words in Tashi's definition must be addressed. As we have seen above, *gyog* is widely accepted as, "servant," and does not need to be considered further. Also, *nongnu* (lit. agricultural slave) is a neologism rooted in Marxist discourse used by the Chinese Communist Party, and is commonly translated as "serf."<sup>92</sup> We are therefore left with the words *zhing* and *bran*. Csoma de Kőrös defines *zhing* as, "land, field, ground," and *bran* as, "a slave, a vassal, subject, a servant."<sup>93</sup> His definition is strikingly consistent with the Chinese *nongnu*. Jäschke similarly defines *zhing* as, "field, ground, soil, arable land," and *bran* as, "slave, servant,...subject."<sup>94</sup> Significantly, in his definition of *gyog* Jäschke distinguishes between *gyog* and *bran*, stating that, in comparison, *gyog* represents a higher degree of social status.<sup>95</sup> Das also defines *zhing* as, "field, ground, soil, arable land, cultivation,"<sup>96</sup> and *bran* as, "a servant, a slave; also= '*bangs*, a subject." Furthermore, within Das's list of thirteen synonyms for *bran*, Goldstein's pivotal word *mi ser*, which is becoming increasingly marginal in our understanding of "serf" in the native Tibetan discourse, is absent.<sup>97</sup> Having reviewed the preceding definitions of *zhing* and *bran*, it is apparent that the compound is a close approximation of the Chinese *nongnu*. It should therefore not be surprising to see that the *Gexi* defines *zhing* as, "*tiandi* [fields]," and *bran* as, "1. *nupu* [servant, flunkey] 2. *shumin* [the multitudes],"<sup>98</sup> and the *Zang-Han Duizhao Changyong Cihui*, accepting the Chinese Marxist neologism, defines

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>88</sup> In the preface, the editors state that this dictionary was compiled in order to "follow the development of the socialist construction project of the motherland." *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> Goldstein glosses *sger* as, "private, individual," p. 287, and *gyog* as, "servant," p. 1062.

<sup>90</sup> *Sger* is defined as, "*si, siren* [private]," p. 134, and *gyog* is defined as, "1. *puren, yongren* [servant] 2. *zhushou, bangshou* [assistant]," p. 779.

<sup>91</sup> Tashi Tsering, p. 914.

<sup>92</sup> See *Hanyu Da Cidian* (volume six), p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Csoma de Kőrös, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, pp. 161 and 98.

<sup>94</sup> Jäschke, pp. 475 and 380.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 519.

<sup>96</sup> Das, p. 1070.

<sup>97</sup> In this entry, Das also identifies *bran gyog* as, "house servant," p. 895.

<sup>98</sup> *Gexi Qujizhaba*, pp. 736-737 and 577.

*zhing bran* as, "nongnu [serf]."<sup>99</sup> Goldstein himself also accepts this definition by defining *zhing bran* as "serf" in his own Tibetan-English dictionary.<sup>100</sup>

While I cannot deny the possibility that *mi ser* may represent a class of people equivalent to the classical understanding of "serfs" as tenuously put forth by Bloch and Ganshof, I do want to emphasize that based on the above exegetical critique *mi ser* contains within it alternative narratives (e.g., collective commonality) that must be considered carefully before we accept that "serfdom" was the defining characteristic of traditional Tibet as posited by Goldstein.

Moreover, by defining *mi ser* as "serf," Goldstein effectively injects his scholarship into the Chinese discourses of feudalism as it relates to Tibet. It is not insignificant that Goldstein's *magnum opus*, *A History of Modern Tibet*, is one of very few independent (i.e., written without the sponsorship, official or unofficial, of the Chinese Communist Party) works on Tibet written by a western scholar to have been translated into Chinese and widely read in Tibet in recent decades.<sup>101</sup> Always looking for independent sources to support their interpretation of Tibetan history, Goldstein has also been one of the few professional western academics granted privileges by the Chinese government to conduct extensive research among Tibetans in the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

However, it is important to note that the appropriation of Goldstein's scholarship by the Chinese Communist Party rests on untenable grounds. As we have seen above, in the Chinese discourse of serfdom in Tibet, *zhing bran* is widely accepted as the equivalent to *nongnu* ("serfs"). Furthermore, in discussing the characteristics of Tibet's feudal past, Chinese author Jin Zhu describes in detail the primary divisions of these "serfs" in Tibetan society before 1959. As his description is a primary source example of the Chinese discourse of "serfdom" in Tibet, I quote from it at length:

*Chaba*, tenant serfs who tilled the manorial estates. They got from manor masters a [piece of] land for which they had to pay rent. They were tied as person[s] to the manorial lands owned by the serf masters. Serfs did not have personal freedom and were not allowed to leave the land at will. Every year they had to put themselves at the service of their serf owners, undertaking various kinds of corvee labor, tilling and tending the serf masters' directly administered lands without compensation and paying various levies (in kind or in currency). Serfs had only the right to use, but not own, the rented land, and so could not sell it. In general, 60 to 70 percent of serfs were *chaba*.

*Duiqiong*, small household serfs who had an even lower social status and harder livelihood than *chaba*. Some of them obtained some leased land from manorial lords in return for

<sup>99</sup> Zang-Han Dui Zhao Changyong Cihui, p. 712.

<sup>100</sup> Goldstein, *Tibetan-English Dictionary of Modern Tibetan*, p. 974.

<sup>101</sup> The Chinese translation of this work, *Lama Wangguo de Fumie*, was done by Du Yongbin. Most Tibetans who read this work disagreed with its primary thesis. This translation must be added to Heather Stoddard's otherwise comprehensive account of the flourishing of Tibetan publications in recent years.

unpaid labor and service for the manorial lords' directly administered estates, maintaining a subsistence level with the crops from the leased land. Some made a living with their handicrafts or through selling their labor, and every year had to pay corvee taxes to manorial lords. In general, 30 to 40 percent of serfs were *duiqiong*.<sup>102</sup>

While Jin's portrayal of these two groups of "serfs" is not unimportant, what is salient here is the absence of the term *mi ser* in his discussion. Therefore, not only has Goldstein utilized a word that is, at least in the contemporary Tibetan-Chinese discourse, marginal to that very discourse, but he has also contentiously and unnecessarily translated it into English as "serf."

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have critiqued the discourse of serfdom in Tibet as put forth in the works of Melvyn Goldstein. I began by outlining the fundamental socio-economic structure of traditional Tibet. Within the Tibetan peasant underclass there were two primary divisions: "tax-base" landholders and landless peasants, yet the socio-economic status within and among these sub-classes varied from the well-off and privileged to the destitute.

I then systematically deconstructed Goldstein's representation of traditional Tibet as characterized by "serfdom." Rather than highlighting Goldstein's narrative of *de jure* control of lords over their peasants, I argued that there existed among peasants in traditional Tibet a counter-narrative of *de facto* autonomy and freedom. This autonomy is evident in the high-degree of socio-economic mobility among peasants, the fact that peasants' obligations to their lords fell on families and not individuals, the ability of peasants to negotiate successfully with their lords for various privileges, and the prevalence of runaway peasants in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Tibet. I also discussed how the flexibility of the Tibetan legal system effectively undermines Goldstein's definition of serfdom. It is unfortunate that Goldstein has insisted on using a fundamentally legal definition of serfdom in describing traditional Tibet. This definition, as I have shown, in its ambiguity ultimately interferes with a clear understanding of Tibetan socio-economic relations.

I continued my argument by critiquing the theoretical underpinnings of Goldstein's definition. Having shown the derived relationship between vassalage and serfdom and, following the deconstructive critique of the classical narrative of feudalism by Susan Reynolds, I argued that "serfdom" can only be used inappropriately to describe traditional Tibet. Moreover, I highlighted the intimate relationship between feudalism and serfdom in the Chinese Marxist discourse of feudalism and suggested the precariousness of Goldstein's oversight in realizing the significance of his use of the term "serfdom" in describing traditional Tibet to the Chinese discourse in light of this relationship.

In an attempt to elucidate a more in-depth meaning of Goldstein's seminal term *mi ser*, and thereby to locate more precisely its position in

<sup>102</sup> Jin Zhu, p. 2. Jin's descriptions are consistent with the Chinese definitions of *chaba* and *duiqiong* in Xie's, et al., *Zangzu Chuantong Wenhua Cidian*, pp. 524 and 657, respectively.

contemporary Tibetan discourse, I also conducted a careful philological analysis of *mi ser* and related terms. Highlighting further Goldstein's contentious translation of this word as "serf," this analysis revealed that a degree of collective commonality exists within the term *mi ser* that effectively dis-locates the term outside of Goldstein's socio-economic narrative. Further analysis showed that *zhing bran* may more closely represent Goldstein's classical (and contentious) understanding of "serf." Finally, I outlined how Goldstein scholarship has been appropriated as a supporting narrative in the contemporary Chinese discourse of feudalism.

#### Chapter 4: Conclusion

"He thinks I am not liberated. I say it is simply that his thinking isn't liberated, it is still that feudal head!"<sup>103</sup>

In this thesis I have critiqued the various salient aspects of the discourses of feudalism and serfdom in Chinese and western historiography as they relate to Tibet. I began by outlining the development of the discourse of feudalism from its ideal form as a decentralized form of governmental administration in the early Qing as reflected in the works of Gu Yanwu, to its status as a reformist narrative in late Qing and early Republican era China. Feudalism then underwent a paradigmatic shift in meaning as it gradually came to represent a counter-narrative that stood in opposition to the centralizing discourse of the modern nation-state in later Republican era China. With the advent of Marxism and its accompanying ideas of historical evolutionism in China, the trope of feudalism was used as a political expedient to malign and thereby dis-empower China's pre-national past as the dichotomous Other of universal History. In the contemporary discourse, feudalism is used by the Chinese government as a pejorative expression that essentializes Tibetans and other "minority" peoples vis-à-vis the Han majority. Moreover, despite some progressive indications of potential change, feudalism is used in contemporary China to deflate the historical foundations of those ideas and institutions deemed by the Chinese nation-state to be seditious, i.e., counter-hegemonic to state authority.

My critique of the discourse of serfdom—inseparable from feudalism in the Chinese discourse, is based on the research of Melvyn Goldstein, the most prolific (and perhaps controversial) western scholar of modern Tibetan history and anthropology. Goldstein asserts that serfdom characterized traditional Tibet, and while he does present a valid *jural* definition of serfdom, salient exceptions to this definition reveal that a strong counter-narrative of *de facto* autonomy existed in traditional Tibet. Moreover, I have suggested that Goldstein's narrative

<sup>103</sup> Cao Ming, in *Cheng Feng Po Lang*, as cited in *Hanyu Da Cidian* (volume six), p. 1254.

of serfdom, which is fundamentally *jural* in nature, is untenable in light of recent scholarship that reveals the flexibility of traditional Tibet's legal system, and that the theoretical underpinnings of this narrative, grounded in the classical western understanding of feudalism, collapse under the critical eye of deconstructive analysis. Finally, I have highlighted how, however uncomfortable it may be to admit, Goldstein's scholarship has been appropriated by the Chinese government and incorporated into the contemporary discourse of feudalism in China.

Words, particularly politically-charged words, should clarify as best as possible our understandings of a subject. "Feudalism" and "serfdom" more times than not confuse and complicate, rather than refine, our understandings of the nature of Sino-Tibetan relations today. Moreover, the strength of the discourses of feudalism and serfdom as outlined in this thesis effectively hinders the growth of new, alternative historical narratives with the potential to clarify further our understandings of China and Tibet. Through the critiques presented in this thesis I have attempted to highlight the salient aspects of the dominating discourses of feudalism and serfdom in the hopes that well-informed historical paradigms that are sensitive to the unique natures of diverse social, political, and economic contexts will emerge in the near future.

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