

A History of Modern Tibet, Volume 2

The Calm before the Storm: 1951–1955

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley Los Angeles London

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University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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First paperback printing 2009

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Goldstein, Melvyn C.

A history of modern Tibet, vol. 2. The calm before the storm, 1951–1955 / Melvyn C. Goldstein.

p. cm.—(Philip E. Lilienthal Asian studies imprint)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-25995-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Tibet (China)—History. I. Title.

DS786.C635 2007

951'.5055—dc22

2006038083

Manufactured in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09
11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on Natures Book, which contains 50% postconsumer waste and meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R 1997) (*Permanence of Paper*).

THE ESTATE SYSTEM

Tibet's estate system was roughly analogous to the manorialism found in medieval England and western continental Europe in the sense that both were characterized by lands held by lords who were supported by a legally bound peasant population. In Tibet, estates (tib. shiga) could be held by aristocratic families, monasteries, incarnate lamas, or the government itself. Such estates were granted by the ruler (the Dalai Lama or regent), who had the right to confiscate such estates and occasionally did so, although in reality the estate holders held their land hereditarily across generations. The Tibetan ruler also had the right to grant new estates, as he did for the families of new dalai lamas, thus ennobling them and making them part of the lay aristocracy.

Tibet's estates combined the means of production—economically productive land—with a hereditarily bound peasant labor force. The estate's land was made up of two sections—the lord's land (in European manorialism called demesne land) and the peasant's land (called tenement or villein land). The lord's land typically constituted about one-half to three-fourths

of the total arable land on the estate and was cultivated entirely by the estate's hereditarily bound peasants as a *corvée* obligation (tib. *ula*), that is, as a labor tax with no reimbursement. On most estates, peasant families had to provide their lord one worker *every* day and two or more at peak agricultural times.¹³ If there was no agricultural work to be done, the lord could have his *corvée* workers do other things, such as collect firewood or spin wool. All of the yield from the demesne land went directly to the lord.

The remainder of the estate's land was allocated to the estate's hereditarily bound peasants and was the means by which they derived their subsistence. They did not own this land in the sense of having the right to sell it, but they normally held hereditary usufruct rights so long as their *corvée* obligations were fulfilled.

The defining feature of the Tibetan estate system was that the peasants did not have the right to relinquish their land and seek their fortunes elsewhere. They were not free; they belonged to their estate hereditarily, and if they ran away, the lord had the right to pursue and forcibly return them to the estate.¹⁴

The peasants' linkage to an estate and lord was transmitted hereditarily by parallel descent; that is, a man's sons became subjects of the estate/lord to which *he* belonged, and a woman's daughters became subjects of the estate/lord to which *she* belonged (if they were different). If an estate changed hands as sometimes happened, its bound peasants remained with the land and became the subjects of the new lord.

The authority of estates over their peasants was political as well as economic. Lords adjudicated disputes, meted out punishments, and controlled the movement of their peasants. The permanent subservience—bound status—of peasants to their estates/lords was manifest clearly when individuals sought to leave their estate permanently, for example, to marry a person from a different estate or to join a monastery. In both such cases, permission from the lord was required.

In marriage, the simplest method of securing such permission was via "person exchange" (tib. *mije*). This involved the replacement of the person marrying out with someone marrying in from the other estate. Each in-marrying spouse then became the subject of his or her spouse's estate and lord. This option was ideal for lords, since neither estate lost a subject—a free worker.

If there was no in-marrying spouse to serve as the exchange for the bride

13. Land was calculated in basic units called "tax land units" (tib. *tregang*). Households holding one such unit had to provide the customary one person per day for work on their estate. Households holding half such a unit had to send a worker every other day, and so forth.

14. This right was called "retrieving people from an area" (tib. *mitsa yüügug* or *mitsa yüü-gong*).

who left, occasionally a servant or landless peasant was sent by the receiving lord as a substitute. That person would then physically move to the other lord's estate and become part of it.

Another common practice for handling an out-marrying situation involved the bride or groom leasing his/her physical freedom from the estate by paying a fee in perpetuity to his/her lord that was called "human lease" (tib. *mibo*). In such cases, the human-lease holder remained the subject of his/her lord but was free to marry or live and work where he/she chose so long as the fees specified in the human-lease agreement were paid annually. Under this arrangement, even though a woman was living on the estate of her husband, she would still be a subject of her original lord, as would all of her female children (and their female children in perpetuity). Her male offspring, however, would belong to their father's lord.

Human lease status fees varied significantly in size and nature. The fee was typically money but sometimes also labor or goods, or even both. Lords kept detailed records of their subjects, including household births and deaths and annual human lease payments.¹⁵ In essence, therefore, virtually the entire Tibetan peasantry was hereditarily tied to estates/lords either directly or through "human lease" status.

Monks and nuns, however, were partly an exception to this. Peasants seeking to become monks or nuns required the permission of their lord.¹⁶ This was invariably granted, and so long as the person remained in the monastic order, he/she had no obligations to the estate/lord. Jurally, however, the lord retained residual ownership rights over the person such that if he/she was later expelled from or voluntarily left the monastic community, his/her previous subject status was reactivated.¹⁷

The authority of lords over their subjects also included the right to transfer them unilaterally to other individuals, both other lords and rich peasants, although this was not common in Tibet. For example, lords sometimes sent house servants (tib. *yogpo*; *nangsen*) or poor landless peasants as "tax appendages" (tib. *trenön*) to larger taxpaying peasant households that were short of labor.¹⁸ Similarly, aristocrats often sent one of their maid-servants as part of the dowry of their daughter when she went as a bride to another family, even if this meant breaking up the maid-servant's family. Lords could also physically move their peasants to other locations in accordance with their own labor requirements.

An example of this occurred in the late 1940s on one of Drepung Mon-

15. An examination of this institution is found in Goldstein 1971b,d.

16. This was called *chödrö*, or literally, "religion release."

17. This residual right of lords was called *gyatsa rangdag* ("revert to original lay status and lord").

18. See Goldstein 1986 for a discussion of such peasant transfers.

astery's estates. Drepung required large quantities of firewood for the daily "mangja" tea it served its ten thousand monks and decided to use its corvée peasant labor force to provide this at no cost to the monastery. It did so by moving twelve young unmarried men from one of the monastery's estates to a noncontiguous mountain area, where they lived in tents and were responsible for cutting and transporting firewood for a ten-year period. These youths were drafted on the basis of their families' obligation to provide corvée labor to the lord, so they received no salary or food during the ten years the monastery kept them there, although their families did receive credit for providing one corvée laborer per day to the estate. The peasant households, of course, did not have the option to refuse to send their son for this task.¹⁹

The Tibetan political economy, therefore, not only provided elites with productive resources but critically guaranteed them a "captive" labor force. From the lords' vantage point, this was an extremely efficient system that required miniscule expenditures of their money or time. Lords did not have to compete for workers in a labor market, nor did they have to worry about the feeding, clothing, and housing of the workers as in a slavery system. The lord, whether an incarnate lama, a monastery, an aristocrat, or the government itself, needed only to supply a manager or steward to organize the hereditarily bound labor force on its estate. It is this feature of Tibet's traditional society that has led many, including myself, to classify it as a variant of European manorialism and to refer to these peasants as serfs.²⁰ I will use this term in the subsequent chapters rather than repeatedly using *bound peasants* or Tibetan terms such as *miser*, *treba*, *düjung*, and *nangsen*.

Despite this structural rigidity, rural life at the ground level was simultaneously characterized by considerable flexibility. Lords were concerned exclusively with their estate's economic output—with transforming their land into economically valuable products. Beyond extracting the full measure of corvée labor and fees from their serfs, they were unconcerned with exercising control over the other aspects of their lives. How a peasant spent his or her time outside corvée labor was of no concern to them. And since the tax obligations actually fell on the household rather than on its individuals, household members were free to do as they wished, including travel to other areas, for example, on a pilgrimage or for a visit to relatives, so long as the household fulfilled its corvée obligations. Being bound to an estate and lord, therefore, meant subjects were not free to relinquish their corvée labor obligations unilaterally by returning their land to the lord, but in another sense, peasant households retained substantial individual freedom of day-to-day ac-

19. Samdrup (interview, 1989, Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region, China). Samdrup was a monk working under the overall manager of Drepung (tib. jiso) and was personally in charge of this operation.

20. See Goldstein 1971b and 1986 for data on and analysis of this institution.

tion, so long as all the obligations owed to the estate were performed when the lord demanded it.

Finally, the fact that virtually the entire peasantry was hereditarily bound to an estate and lord did not mean that the peasantry was homogeneous in terms of standard of living and status. First, government-owned estates differed significantly from aristocratic- and monastic-owned estates in that they generally had only tenement land; that is, all of a government-owned estate's land was divided among the peasants, who in turn had heavy obligations not only in labor but also in kind. Second, significant differences existed within the general category of serf, which included (1) the subcategory "taxpayers," who held land from their estate and had heavy obligations, (2) the subcategory called *düjung*, who were tied to estates but did not possess taxable arable land and therefore had fewer obligations to the estate, and (3) the subcategory of hereditary servants of the lord, called *nangsen*. Consequently, being a serf—a bound peasant—did not necessarily mean poverty. Many taxpayer families were actually wealthy and had their own servants.

In summary, the Tibetan feudal politico-economic system was based on estates, each of which had hereditarily bound serfs who provided free labor and often other taxes in kind. The monasteries, incarnate lamas, aristocrats, and the government itself all depended on this system of relations.