

The Circulation of Estates in Tibet: Reincarnation, Land and Politics¹

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ONE of the most salient features of traditional political life in Tibet was the intense and pervasive competition for power and prestige that took place within the ranks of the politically relevant, particularly within the aristocratic lay-official segment of the government. Plots, disputes, and confiscations were key elements in the dynamics of the system. Although this competition appears, synchronically, to be part of a stable circular process, when the Tibetan political system is viewed diachronically, the apparent stability is seen to be part of a larger, ongoing process of change. Thus, while it is possible to analyze the "structure" of this competition from a synchronic point of view, a diachronic perspective is necessary to understand the forces which have generated it, as well as the overall nature of the system.

Critical to the diachronic perspective is the idea of reincarnation succession. Although the idea of reincarnation is widespread, Tibet was unusual in using it as a mechanism for political succession. The rulers of Tibet, the Dalai Lamas, were succeeded by children who were considered their incarnations. This paper shows how features inherent in reincarnation as a mode of political succession, together with economic-ecological factors regarding land, generated an inevitable "circulation of estates," which, in turn, produced the political competition and conflict that were characteristic of the traditional Tibetan political system at any synchronic point in time. Moreover, reincarnation generated a process of change which, had the Chinese not come in 1950, would have ultimately transformed the system. In this paper, the nature of this process as well as its synchronic manifestations will be discussed.

Although the Fifth Dalai Lama (and the Gelugpa sect) first came into power in Tibet in 1642, their position underwent a variety of vicissitudes in the early part of the eighteenth century. During this period Tibet fell under the control of the Manchu Emperors of China. For the Dalai Lamas, the civil war of 1728 in particular led to the diminution of their temporal authority and the emergence of aristocratic rule. Richardson writes of the fate of the Seventh Dalai Lama:

It was therefore decided to remove the Dalai Lama from Lhasa and in 1728 he was invited to Peking. He set out on the journey but was taken no further than Litang where he stayed for seven years, after which he was allowed to return to Lhasa on the strict condition that he refrain from political activity.²

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¹ Much of the information on which this paper is based was collected during a field study among

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² Hugh Richardson, *A Short History of Tibet* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962) 52.

At this same time, the Tibetan Council of Ministers was reconstituted under the leadership of Pholane (*Pho lha nas*)³ the aristocrat who had been victorious in the civil war. He completely overshadowed the Council and in 1740 was awarded the title of 'prince' or 'king' by the Manchu Emperor. After his death in 1747, he was succeeded by his son. This son, however, ruled arrogantly and ruthlessly and was assassinated in 1750 by the Emperor's representatives in Lhasa.

Following this, the Emperor abolished the office of 'king' and restored the Council of Ministers to its earlier position of importance. Furthermore, the Emperor in 1751 restored to the Seventh Dalai Lama much of the temporal authority that had earlier been exercised by the Fifth Dalai Lama. From this point on there were no more "kingly" interludes and the line of Dalai Lamas ruled (at least in name) until 1959. The year 1751, therefore, will be used as a base line for the process discussed in this paper.

The Dalai Lama is an emanation (incarnation) of the bodhisattva Avaloketiśvara. A bodhisattva is an 'enlightened being' who postpones his final entry into nirvana to work to liberate all sentient creatures from the misery of samsāric existence. Avaloketiśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, thus continually returns to human form through the line of the Dalai Lamas and the Dalai Lama is not, like the Pope, the representation of the deity, but rather a manifestation of it.

When reincarnation is used as a principle of succession, legitimization of the individual selected as the incarnation is of critical importance to the successful operation of the system. In other words, the selection mechanism must eliminate doubts as to whether the person chosen is the "real" incarnation. In Tibet, this was achieved through an elaborate selection procedure that was interlaced with supernatural supports. The speeches and comments of the late Dalai Lama were examined for possible clues as to where he would be reborn. Other unusual occurrences, such as strange cloud formations or a shift of the position of the corpse of the late Dalai Lama toward a particular direction, were analyzed by high Lamas, oracles, the Regent, and high ranking government officials. The Regent and other high dignitaries also visited a holy lake in which visions concerning the Dalai Lama's rebirth were traditionally seen. All these preliminary examinations of cryptic, supernatural signs ended with the dispatch by the Regent of one or more search parties composed of government officials and high Lamas to areas where it was deemed probable that the late Dalai Lama would return to Tibet. In these areas, the search parties investigated stories of wondrous or strange births and ultimately administered a series of tests to the prospective candidates. Neither the children under consideration nor their parents were told by the search party that they were searching for the incarnation of the late Dalai Lama.⁴ Typical tests consisted of showing the candidates several pairs of articles such as rosaries or walking sticks, one of which had been the personal possession of the late Dalai Lama. Selection of the objects belonging to the late Dalai Lama was taken as confirmation of being the incarnation since it indi-

³ Transcription follows the system described in T. V. Wylie, "A Standard System of Tibetan Transcription," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 22, 1959.

⁴ The parents of the candidates suspect only that their son is being considered for one of the

numerous lesser incarnation lines. The fourteenth Dalai Lama gives an excellent account of this selection procedure in his autobiography *Dalai Lama, My Land and My People* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962, pp. 20-25).

cated residual knowledge of the past, and the ability to recall events of one's past life was a characteristic of bodhisattvas.

On the basis of the reports sent by the search parties, and after consultation with important religious leaders and government officials, the Regent informed the National Assembly⁵ of the situation. Guided by him, the Assembly accepted one candidate as Dalai Lama. The selection process, therefore, not only incorporated supernatural supports but also included in the decision-making process all the politically relevant segments (aristocracy, monk officials, monastic elements). So long as the chosen candidate was alert and seemingly intelligent, it was of little consequence who he was, and on some occasions the selection was made by lottery.⁶

Although the Tibetan system dealt efficaciously with the potential problem of legitimacy, continuity of rule could not be attained. With succession by reincarnation there must, of necessity, be interim periods when the newly found incarnation (here the Dalai Lama) is a minor. All such succession systems must consequently have some mechanism to handle these interim periods. In Tibet, the age of majority for the ruler was eighteen years of age. This represented a significant span of time and the Tibetan solution was a Regent who ruled in the Dalai Lama's name.

Beginning in 1757, when the seventh Dalai Lama died, the Manchu Emperors of China selected Regents from among the great "incarnate" religious figures of the Gelugpa sect (the so-called "Yellow Hat" sect of the Dalai Lama). The Regency became the prerogative of a small number of incarnate Gelugpa religious Lamas. But the problem of continuity in reincarnation succession also existed for the Regents, since they, too, were incarnations. Like the Dalai Lamas, when one of these incarnations died a child was selected as his reincarnation and thus a continuity across time was achieved for the named incarnation. I shall call such a lineage of reincarnations an incarnation line. Six different incarnation lines (each, as we shall see, a corporate unit) were represented among the eleven Lama Regents who ruled after 1757 (see Table 1).

As a result of both natural misfortune and more sinister machinations, Regents came to rule Tibet most of the time. When viewed diachronically, the Dalai Lamas were little more than legitimizing figureheads. From 1757 to 1895 the apex position in the Tibetan government was actually held by Regents. Even when a Dalai Lama such as the 8th managed to reach majority, a Regent was retained to administer secular affairs. The following table illustrates this graphically.

By examining the above figures (which were abstracted from Petech),⁷ one can see that from 1751-1950 there was a shift in ruler on the average of every 13 years, with Regents ruling 77 percent of the time. If we exclude the reign of the 13th Dalai Lama (1895-1933) from this, Regents ruled approximately 94 percent of the time.

With this in mind, let us now examine selected aspects of the socio-economic

⁵ The National Assembly was really the platform for the great Gelugpa monasteries.

⁶ This is, of course, the author's "outsider" point of view. Tibetans consider the selection of the correct child to be a matter of great consequence. It should also be noted with respect to the use of lotteries, that H. E. Richardson (personal communication) contends that even when the Manchu

Emperor ordered the use of the lottery method the candidate chosen was invariably the one the Tibetans had already decided upon. In any case, my point is simply that for the system to work it made little difference who was selected so long as he was selected in the "proper" manner.

⁷ L. Petech, *China and Tibet in the Early 18th Century*. (Leiden: Brill, 1950).

TABLE I—REIGNS OF DALAI LAMAS AND REGENTS

<i>Dalai Lama</i>	<i>Ruled</i>	<i>Regent</i>	<i>Ruled</i>
7th Kesarng Gyatso (1708–57) (<i>bskal bzang rgya mtsho</i>)	1751–57	Demo I (<i>de mo</i>)	1757–77
8th Jampal Gyatso (1758–1804) (<i>'jam dpal rgya mtso</i>)	1781–1804*	Tshemoling I (<i>tshe smon gling</i>)	1777–86
9th Lungtok Gyatso (1806–15) (<i>lung rtogs rgya mtso</i>)		Kundeling I (<i>kun bde gling</i>)	1789–1810
10th Tsultrim Gyatso (1816–37) (<i>tshul khrims rgya mtsho</i>)		Demo II	1811–19
11th Khedrup Gyatso (1838–56) (<i>mkhas 'grub rgya mtsho</i>)		Tshemoling II	1819–44
		Reting I (<i>rwa sgren</i>)	1845–62
		Shatra** (<i>aristocrat</i>) (<i>bshad sgra</i>)	1862–64
12th Trinley Gyatso (1856–75) (<i>'phrin las rgya mtsho</i>)	1873–75	Ditru (<i>sde drug</i>)	1864–72
13th Thubten Gyatso (1876–1933) (<i>thub bstan rgya-mtsho</i>)	1895–1933	Kundeling II	1875 86
		Demo III	1886–95
		Reting II Taktra (<i>stag brag</i>)	1934–41 1941–50

* The eighth Dalai Lama was very otherworldly and the Regent was kept even though he reached majority age. The Regent actually ruled during his reign.

** Shatra was a Council Minister who, in the confusion of the coup of 1862, was charged with restoring order by the Manchu Amban and confirmed by the Emperor. This was an exceptional situation, and on his death in 1864, a high Lama was again selected.

system. Significant wealth in Tibet meant land and serfs to work the land. The aristocracy, in the form of corporate families, all held hereditary estates (with serfs), which were the foundation of their income. Religious institutions, however, were also corporately organized and held estates with serfs. Of particular interest to us is the religious corporation called *labrang* (*bla brang*). The literal translation of *labrang* is "Lama's house," and this delimits the general meaning. The *labrang* was a named, property owning corporation, control over which was transmitted through a line of incarnate Lamas. Although these were usually a part of larger monasteries, they were autonomous units with full control over their resources. Originally one of these might have consisted of no more than a Lama with a few monk servants who were supported by the gifts of patrons, and in fact, most *labrang* are not huge and wealthy. However, it often happened that a particular incarnation, because of his learning or spirituality, acquired a reputation and a large following who gave him numerous gifts. Gradually the wealth of his *labrang* grew and with it the number of associated monks. Those *labrang* that became very wealthy built their own residences and even their own monasteries and hermitages, all of which were under the direct control of the Lama and not the monastery they were initially affiliated with. They were the possessions of the line of Lamas. On the Lama's death, the corporation was controlled by stewards until the newly found incarnation reached

majority age. What is important, then, is that many of these *labrang* became holders of huge estates. This was particularly the case with the Regents, whose *labrang*s became fantastically wealthy during the reign of their Lama. For example, when Taktra became Regent in 1940 he was an old, relatively unknown Lama with a small, inconsequential *labrang*. However, when he turned over the reins of government to the Dalai Lama in 1950, his *labrang* ranked among the largest. In other words, the rulers for most of Tibet's history were intimately involved in the estate-serfdom system. Moreover, because the Regents were reincarnations, their infant successors could not immediately become Regent (for the infant Dalai Lama). Thus, no single incarnation line (*labrang*) could continuously control the Regency and there were actually six Regent incarnation lines which, over the past 200 years, held the Regency and came to possess tremendous land and serf holdings (see Table 1). Each time the Regent changed, the new one always represented a corporate interest different than his predecessor, and inevitably increased the holdings of his unit.

The corporations of the Regents were not the only ones to acquire numerous estates and serfs. So too did the families of the Dalai Lamas. The (natal) family of the Dalai Lama was "ennobled" and became a part of the highest stratum of the Tibetan aristocracy. Each such family received estates sufficient to match, on an economic scale, their newly-found social status. A recent Chinese Communist publication claims that the family of the 14th Dalai Lama possessed (i.e. received) 27 estates,⁸ a figure which is not too unreasonable. Certainly they acquired huge land and serf holdings.

Every change of ruler, whether Dalai Lama or Regent, entailed a new demand on land (estates). Given the fact that the ruler changed on the average of every 13 years, we see that reincarnation succession produced a recurrent demand on the basic economic resource in Tibetan society: land. However, while the demand was ever expanding, the supply was fixed. New estates were not created through the conversion of previously virgin land to agricultural purposes. The reasons for this seem to have been techno-environmental in nature. Tibetan traditional agricultural technology simply was not capable of converting marginal pasture areas into profitable farm land. Even under the modern technology of the Chinese Communists, one usually reads of increasing yields and only rarely of opening new lands. Nevertheless, what concerns us here is that the only source available for the satisfaction of this recurrent demand consisted of the estates already in existence. On a recurrent basis, then, some holders of estate inevitably had to lose their holdings in order for the demands of the rulers to be satisfied. This was what actually occurred. There was an inevitable "circulation of estates."

The inevitable "circulation of estates" produced a pattern of pervasive and intense competition among elements of the politically relevant segments of Tibetan society. Space limitations preclude an intensive analysis of this competition, but I should like to discuss briefly certain aspects of it, particularly with respect to the aristocracy.

The formal governmental structure consisted of a network of hierarchically arranged permanent offices staffed by a bureaucracy. This bureaucracy was divided into two segments: one comprising only lay aristocrats and the other only Gelugpa

⁸ "Lhasa's New Look," *Peking Review*, Vol. 41, 1971, p. 12.

monks. I shall hereafter refer to the former as lay officials and the latter as monk officials.

Lay officials were recruited exclusively from an aristocracy that was essentially a closed status group, membership in which was ascribed through birth. It comprised approximately 200⁹ named corporate families which, at the rate of six people per family, would have totaled about 1200 people out of a population of 1–3 million. Each of these corporate families held one or more agricultural estates. The most important type of estate closely resembled the manorial estate of feudal Europe. This estate was divided into *demesne* and tenement land, the former being the land held by the lord and the latter the land held by the serfs. Such estates were the basic source of aristocratic power and wealth.

The aristocracy controlled a large segment of Tibet's arable land, and although the total land it held was quantitatively less than that held by either the monasteries or the government, their economic importance was still considerable. While the aristocracy formed a status group in the Weberian sense, complete with a distinctive "style of life" and a variety of differential status symbols and rights, internally it was differentiated with respect to prestige evaluation and wealth. Since this internal stratification played an important role in the political system, let me briefly indicate the four substrata.

The highest and most prestigious element of the aristocratic substrata was called *yab-shi* (*yab gzhis*). This substratum comprised all the corporate families that were descendants of the ennobled natal family of one of the Dalai Lamas. In 1950 there were only six such *yab-shi* families.¹⁰

The next substratum consisted of four families and was called *de-bon* (*sde dpon*). These families were descended from ancient aristocratic lineages, some claiming descent from families extant during the age of the great Tibetan empire (seventh to ninth centuries A.D.). Like the *yab-shi* families, each of the *de-bon* families possessed extensive estate holdings.

Beneath these two was the somewhat larger, but still very prestigious, substratum called *mi-dra* (*mi drag*) which consisted of approximately fifteen families. Each of these families at one time had distinguished itself in government service, and from that derived its special status. This distinguished service generally meant the attainment of one of the highest governmental offices such as that of Council Minister.

The remaining 175 or so aristocratic families were lumped together in the status called "common" or *gyu-ma* (*dkyus ma*). Because of its residual character and its large size there was considerable variation among the families within it with regard to the number and size of estates they held and their overall wealth. A few actually equalled in wealth some of the *mi-dra* families, but most did not, having only one or two small estates. In fact, many were extremely poor. What is therefore most characteristic of the dichotomy between the three numerically small but high strata and the large lower one was that in addition to the difference in prestige, the lower families were also decidedly inferior in terms of economic and political resources. Consequently, while it was theoretically possible for the officials from the "common" families to attain any, even the highest, governmental positions, gen-

⁹ Prince Peter. *The Aristocracy of Central Tibet* (Kalimpong, 1954) lists 205 families including about 50 Tashilhunpo aristocratic families.

¹⁰ Merger-marriages with other families accounts for the discrepancy.

erally the top twenty-five families of the superior substrata dominated and almost monopolized the most important and powerful government offices and therefore the effective decision making apparatus of the lay segment of the bureaucracy.

This differentiation in estates and prestige was directly related to the circulation of estates. It has been indicated that in every generation some estate holders had to lose estates in order to satisfy the inevitable demand for estates produced by reincarnation succession. But since estates were the most prized economic possession, they were not voluntarily given up by families, and the basic means of redistribution was confiscation. In every generation, then, some estate holders lost estates through confiscation, while a few others received new estates.

However, all estate holders were not equally threatened. Aristocratic holders were in much more precarious straits than their religious counterparts. The rulers of Tibet were Lamas and a basic orientation of the government was to provide an environment in which religion—the monastic system—could flourish. Since the monks were in large part subsidized through their estates, confiscation of monastic estates hit directly at the vitality of organized religion and was rarely done. This is not to say that religious estates were never confiscated. There were rare instances of confiscation of the estates of monasteries and *labrang* whose leaders had committed serious political offenses. For example, in 1895, after an abortive plot to kill the Dalai Lama, the ex-Regent (Demo Rinpoche) and his brother were imprisoned for life and all of the estates he acquired in this incarnation were confiscated. However, to leave the monks an economic base, the estates acquired by the previous Demo incarnations were left in the hands of his monastic followers. Similarly, in 1948 a plot of the Reting ex-Regent against the present Regent was uncovered. The ex-Regent (Reting) was imprisoned (and then murdered in prison) and many estates belonging to his *labrang* and allied monasteries were confiscated. But, in general, although monastic-*labrang* estates were sometimes confiscated, they normally were confiscated only as a result of very serious crimes and the confiscation was usually not permanent. After some lapse of time, many, if not most, of the confiscated estates were returned to the “innocent” monks of the monasteries in question.

The aristocracy had no such leverage and it was from this group that the major portion of estates were confiscated. However, even within the aristocracy not all families were equally threatened. Small families possessing only one estate were not in real danger since confiscation of their lone estate meant, in effect, denoblement, and this action was taken only for serious crimes when the aim was clearly the destruction of the family rather than the mere acquisition of an estate. The main source of estates, then, was the multiple estate holders, and for the most part, the thirty or so high status families were the primary targets.

But since estates were hereditary, and since the owners held formal land tenure documents issued by the government, the ruler could not simply take back an estate. Some excuse was needed. Usually this excuse involved some question concerning validity of the title or some offense against the government on the part of the owner. Confiscated estates reverted to the government and remained as such until the Ruler redistributed them.

For example, the historical section of the title document of the Tsecholing (*tshe mchog gling*) Monastery's Phu-shi (*phu gzhis*) estate in Trengo (*phren sgo*)

(Central Tibet) states that the estate was confiscated by the government (the Regent) as a consequence of a dispute that arose between the collateral relatives of an aristocratic family all of whose immediate members had died. The dispute afforded the Regent the opportunity to intervene and decide that none of the disputants had "valid rights" to the estate and that the estate should revert to the government. He then redistributed it to the *labrang* of one of his teachers. Another example involved an estate which had been willed to a bride's family by a relative and subsequently brought by her into a marriage-merger. After about a year the couple was divorced and the bride claimed the estate should revert to her and her newly born daughter. The husband's family protested and said the estate should remain with it and an infant son. The ensuing dispute was referred to the government for adjudication. The Regent was hostile toward the bride's family and ended the controversy by confiscating the estate. Later he gave it to his own religious corporation (*labrang*).

The above two examples reveal an important difference between the reasons for the confiscation of religious and aristocratic estates. Whereas religious estates were only confiscated for very serious crimes against the state, aristocratic estates were confiscated for relatively minor reasons. Thus, not only did aristocrats permanently lose titles to their confiscated estates but they were victimized for reasons which would never be sustained for the religious sector.

The dangers inherent in this type of situation led various segments of the aristocracy to employ very different strategies in the political area. The segment comprising officials from the powerful, high status families were interested in competing for positions with high authority. Each of the larger families attempted to manipulate its resources so as to maintain a continuity of people in high positions across generations. They carefully tried to prepare a younger member of their corporate family unit so that he would have the necessary experience to obtain high positions when the elder official from the family was ready to retire. This strategy often entailed procuring positions which, in terms of income, cost the family money in the short run. But the fact that the young official was adequately prepared for higher position was well worth the investment. The motivation behind this warrants some comment.

One obvious motivating factor was the differential prestige accruing to government position. Relative prestige and rank were important determinants of interpersonal behavior. Lhasa was not only the political center of the polity, it was also the hub of Tibetan "high society." The elegant life style of the capital emphasized rank and prestige through various institutionalized asymmetrical deference patterns. Clothes, seating arrangements, titles, honorifics in speech, and so forth, all mirrored differences in governmental rank. Entrance into high governmental position meant that the individual and his family received deferential behavior from lower officials and their families not only in official contexts, but also socially. Wealth without high governmental status did not confer social esteem among the status conscious Lhasa society.

But high governmental status meant more than social esteem. It meant power and authority and this was certainly the fundamental motivating factor. Power and authority, however, had an added dimension in Tibetan politics. This is what Tibetans sometimes verbalized as "defense" or "protection."

The circulation of estates insured that the stakes of the political game would always be high. The threat of loss of estate was a real one, and for many officials

the acquisition of a high governmental post was perceived as protection against their being easily victimized. The higher the position of a government official, the more resources he had available to retaliate for attacks against himself. In any case, both the status and the protection motives led the larger families to adopt a strategy aimed at obtaining high positions in the government, in many instances regardless of their salary or income potential.

A second category consisted of a handful of officials, lay and monk, who were primarily oriented toward directly influencing the highest level of decision making by becoming favorites of the ruler. This was the high risk strategy. Fabulous wealth and power awaited the successful, while demotion and poverty were the lot of the losers.

For the overwhelming majority of the aristocratic government officials, however, the primary motivation was not prestige, nor power, nor protection. Rather, it was the acquisition of wealth. These officials were oriented toward obtaining lucrative government posts, and since most of the lucrative jobs were located in the provinces, these officials spent a large part of their time outside of the capital. Although a few tried to use wealth obtained in the provinces to procure high positions, most tried to avoid becoming deeply entangled in the intense political machinations of the capital.

The results of this differentiation in terms of political strategies is clearly seen when we examine those who in fact held the high posts in the government in this century. For example, from 1900–1950 there were 41 Council Ministers. Twelve of these were monk officials, and 29 were lay officials. Of the lay officials, 72 percent were from *mi-dra* or higher families, and of the remaining 28 percent, 14 percent were from very wealthy families. Thus, a total of 86 percent of the lay Council Ministers were either from *mi-dra* or higher status or from very wealthy families. Of the 12 monk officials, 33 percent were from aristocratic families, and 33 percent from a type of wealthy corporate monastic family (*shag tsang*) which was perpetuated by adoption of close relatives. Thus, even in the monk official segment, wealthy corporate units dominated. This pattern of domination of the important government positions by the large families could be shown to pervade all the important positions in the government.

The circulation of estates was paralleled by what might be called a circulation of victims. Upon entering office every new ruler, particularly the Regents, sought to build a network of loyal supporters among the government officials. The most obvious source of supporters were those disgruntled officials who had been victimized by the last administration. There was, therefore, a circulation of the larger families from in-group to out-group status and vice versa. Across generations the victimized eventually regained their status and prestige, although usually not their estates. The manner in which this circulation operated and the way aristocratic officials entered into alliances and client relations is too complex to be discussed here. Nonetheless, it is clear that the circulation of estates generated an intense pattern of competition for high office among the larger aristocratic families who were seeking in that way to secure their positions. Someone was going to be victimized with each shift of ruler, and the focus of political life for the larger families was to defend themselves against victimization. The mass of smaller families, on the other hand, were interested not so much in prestigious and authoritative positions, but rather

in posts where they would derive economic benefits in the form of a good income. However, although the strategies these different segments adopted were markedly different, ultimately all were integrated into the competition system. The smaller families had of necessity to approach higher officials to obtain lucrative posts and often came to be associated as clients of large families. Kinship ties with larger families were also relevant here. Even though a smaller family might not be actively involved in the political arena the dominance of particularistic values in the day-to-day operation of the Tibetan government, insured that no one could ever be completely neutral or safe from the inherent and everlurking threat of partial or complete ruination. Consequently, even the smaller families were to an extent drawn into this web of political competition.

Now that the effects of the circulation process on the nature of political competition have been discussed, the diachronic consequences of this process must be examined. Given the existence of this circulation of estates and given the fact that the aristocracy was the main source for the confiscation of estates, one would expect that over the two hundred year period the process existed (1751–1950) the economic base of the aristocracy would have deteriorated and the aristocratic segment would have become increasingly impoverished. Unfortunately, there is no quantitative comparative data either on the number of aristocratic families extant in 1751 or the percent of arable land they held at that time. Nonetheless, if we examine the state of the aristocracy in 1950, it's condition is consistent with this assumption of a process of gradual deterioration.

In the twentieth century the aristocracy held land less than either the government or the religious (monastic and *labrang*) segments of society. Carrasco¹¹ states that in 1917 the monasteries held 42 percent of the land, the government 37 percent, and the aristocracy only 21 percent. Moreover, of the two hundred or so aristocratic families, a large percent were in a state of relative impoverishment. They were not poor compared to poor peasants, but wealthy "taxpayer" peasants¹² were often much better off economically. In any case many families did not have wealth adequate to sustain the aristocratic style of life. These poor aristocrats usually could not afford either basic aristocratic status symbols such as owning a house and maintaining horses in Lhasa, or ritual necessities such as the various dresses and ornaments required for special government functions. Mrs. Taring (a Tibetan aristocrat) comments in passing in her autobiography¹³ that "some estates could not meet the family needs and therefore trade was greatly exercised among the nobility." In some instances the plight (and debts) of these impoverished aristocrats became so bad that they gave up government service and ceded their estates to a monastery (the main moneylenders) in return for a guaranteed income for the rest of their lives.

But the deterioration of the aristocracy has not gone unimpeded and several important factors have acted to restrain the rate of decline. First, it should be reiterated that several of the important recipients of the flow of estates were the families of the Dalai Lamas. Since these became the highest level of the aristocracy,

¹¹ Pedro Carrasco, *Land and Polity in Tibet* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959), p. 86.

¹² See M. Goldstein, "Taxation and the Structure of a Tibetan Village," *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. XV, No. 1, 1971, pp. 1–27, and "Serfdom and

Mobility: An Examination of the Institution of 'Human Lease' in Traditional Tibetan Society," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. xxx, No. 3, 1971, pp. 521–534 for a discussion of these serfs.

¹³ R. D. Taring, *Daughter of Tibet* (London: John Murray, 1970), p. 6.

the total amount of land alienated from the aristocratic segment was lessened. This, however, as the large number of poor aristocrats indicates, did not increase the viability of individual families and merely exacerbated the gulf between the wealthy aristocratic families and the rest. On the whole, then, while the cumulative result of the circulation of estates was the ever increasing domination of land by the monastic and government segments, the rate of this alienation, due to the institutionalized mobility of the Dalai Lama's family, was less rapid than might otherwise be thought.

Another important brake on this process was the increasing involvement of the aristocracy in trade and commerce. Aristocrats, particularly in this century, engaged widely in intra- and international trade which, of course, again served to impede the decline of the aristocracy as an economically important segment.

While these factors slowed the inevitable deterioration of the aristocracy, they did not reverse it. It seems likely that had this process continued without outside interference eventually the system would have been transformed. The seeds of its own destruction were clearly built into it. It is interesting to note with respect to this that the only known attempt at revolution (i.e. changing the system rather than the incumbents) in Tibet was masterminded in 1933 by an aristocrat, and throughout the twentieth century it has been elements of the aristocracy who have favored and tried to implement major changes.

Conclusions

This paper has shown how the characteristic form and processes of the political system in Tibet derived from the interaction of a cultural rule—political succession by reincarnation—and the techno-environmental matrix in which it existed—the absence of new sources of economically viable agricultural land. It also has shown how these inevitably produced a “circulation of estates” and how this in turn generated the intense and pervasive competition patterns that so characterized the traditional Tibetan polity. Furthermore, it has shown how, from a diachronic perspective, the system was inherently unstable and the deterioration of the aristocratic segment could only have ended in a radical change in the political system itself.

Finally, it is suggested that the Tibetan example illustrates the importance of considering cultural as well as ecological/materialistic variables in explaining synchronic structure diachronically. Whatever the initial causes of the institutionalization of reincarnation succession in Tibet, once begun, it itself became a critical force in shaping the structure of the political system. Thus, it would seem that the type of intense competition characteristic of Tibetan politics will merge whenever a cultural rule institutionalizes recurrent demand for a resource which is at once paramount in importance and fixed in quantity.