

BRIEF COMMUNICATION :

On the nature of the Tibetan Peasantry : a rejoinder

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In the Summer, 1987 issue of *The Tibet Journal* (Volume XII, No. 2, pp. 65-67), Dr. Beatrice Miller raised a number of interesting questions regarding my article titled "Reexamining Choice, Dependency and Command in the Tibetan Social System" which was published in that same journal in the Winter edition of 1986 (Vol. XI, no. 4, pp. 79-112). In particular, Dr. Miller disagreed with my contention that the traditional Tibetan social system can be considered an example of the general comparative type known as "serfdom."

In my original paper, I used new data on the institution of "tax appendage" (Tib.=*khral snon*) to support the argument that the Tibetan peasantry (Tib.=*mi ser*) were hereditarily bound to manorial estates and under the judicial/administrative authority of the lord of such estates. Pointing out that the authority of the estate lord was jural or legal, i.e., it was in accordance with, and derived from, the political and legal norms of the Tibetan polity, I argued that this system was typical not only of Tibet, but also of other European countries where it is known as "serfdom."

My aim in the original paper was to apply a comparative perspective to the status of the Tibetan peasantry during the traditional period (the pre-1959, 20th century). Comparative analysis lies at the very heart of scholarship and the advancement of knowledge. All scientific fields employ this perspective, and our understanding of the world around us (including its social systems) would be woefully deficient if we were to eschew the attempt to discover and explain similarities between social systems existing in different spatial areas and at different historical periods.

In all comparative analysis, the particular systems that are subsumed under a larger category share essential defining characteristics. However, they are never completely identical. Thus the mere presence of differences between two items does not preclude their being subsumed under a more general category. For example, houses need not be the same shape or color to be subsumed under the category "house." Similarly, while there are differences between the system of Tibetan *mi ser* and that of European serfs (as well as within the category *mi ser* in Tibet), the structural similarities far outweigh the differences. Thus I argued that it is heuristically efficacious to place the Tibetan system in a broader comparative context and I suggested that a persuasive case can be made for *mi ser* being considered an instance of the general category known as "serfdom." My above mentioned paper made this argument at considerable length. However, Dr. Miller apparently

was not convinced and has presented a number of reasons why the evidence I cited is not satisfactory. I disagree and would like to take this opportunity to comment critically on Dr. Miller's counter arguments. Since it is obviously impossible to restate the detailed case I made in the original paper, I shall instead focus this rejoinder on demonstrating the invalidity of the points Dr. Miller presented to counter my arguments.

Dr. Miller's first point contends that although the secular (aristocratic) lords of Tibetan estates had legal and judicial authority over their serfs (or peasants), these lords were subject to the authority of the central government. This, she says, is important because it shows that the lords were not free to sever their relationship with the central government, a right which she implies existed in feudal Europe where the ties were based on voluntary oaths of fealty. Therefore she argues that the situation in Tibet was fundamentally different from that in Europe and the concept serfdom is consequently inapplicable for Tibet.

This argument, however, is incorrect for several important reasons. First it does not accurately represent the situation in Europe. Second it addresses the nature of the political system (i.e., the question of whether feudalism or some more centralized form of polity was present in Tibet?) instead of the issue I raised, that is, the nature of the relationship of the peasantry to their lords (i.e., the question of whether serfdom was or was not present in Tibet?).

Miller's first point, the fact that the Tibetan aristocracy was not semi-independent is not new, and I have myself written in detail on the relationship between the aristocracy and the Lhasa Government.¹ However, as indicated above, the subordination of the aristocracy to the central government is relevant primarily to the nature of the Tibetan government and the degree to which it was centralized rather than feudal. It does not say anything about the relationship of the peasantry to their lords.² I tried carefully in the earlier paper to indicate that "serfdom" is fundamentally an economic system in which elites hereditarily tie peasants to arable land to guarantee themselves a source of labor to work the land they control and thus produce their income. Whether or not the Tibetan aristocracy (and the monastic/religious lords) were subordinate to the central government is conceptually *irrelevant* to the question of whether the situation of the peasantry can be considered serfdom.

Moreover, contrary to what Dr. Miller implied, serfdom in Europe clearly existed independent of medieval feudalism where lords were bound to their king by voluntary oaths of fealty. That is to say, it existed under different political systems. For example, in 19th century Czarist Russia the subordination of the aristocracy to the central government existed coterminously with the institution of serfdom. Thus, the fact that Tibetan aristocratic and monastic lords were not bound to the central government solely by oaths of fealty and therefore could not unilaterally declare themselves independent of the central government is no different than the situation

of the Russian aristocracy. Consequently, rather than the Tibetan situation having only trivial similarities with European institutions of serfdom as Dr. Miller states, it in fact is very similar to the situation found in Russia as well as other instances of later feudalism in Western Europe. Application of the concept "serfdom" to Tibet, therefore, does what comparative analysis should do—it points up fundamental similarities between spatially and temporally disparate systems, in this case Czarist Russia and Tibet, and both these and medieval Europe.

Dr. Miller's second point asserts that unlike Europe, the ties between Tibetan serfs and their aristocratic (and monastic) lords were predominantly *impersonal* not personal. What Dr. Miller means by personal versus impersonal, however, is not clear. Certainly, in no part of Europe did serfs ever have the right to unilaterally sever their relationship to their lord. Thus their status was not based on a "personal" (and rescindable) tie but on a hereditary and legal tie. In both Tibet and Europe, serf status was based on being hereditarily bound to an estate and lord.

However, in another sense, European serfs can be said to have had personal ties with their lord since they lived under the jurisdiction of a specific lord. The serfs were not impersonally paying taxes to the central government who was in turn paying aristocrats. Rather, the lords derived their income directly from the labor of the serfs whom they controlled in many legal and juridical ways. When estates remained under control of one lord, such relationships continued for generations. However, the presence of "personal ties" in this sense is no different from what existed in Tibet where serfs were personally linked to a specific lord through an estate, rather than impersonally linked to the central government. Again, the similarities between Tibet and parts of Europe are striking.

In her use of the term "personal" (versus "impersonal") Dr. Miller apparently is thinking of an "emotional" tie to a lord—a voluntary oath of fealty. However, that is clearly not necessary or basic to European serfdom and thus its absence in Tibet in no way invalidates the similarity between European and Tibetan serfdom.

Dr. Miller's third point relates to her view that because serfs could, as she says, "vote with their feet" and run away from their estate (and lord) they had considerable "choice" with regard to their lives, and that this somehow negates my contention that the essential characteristic of the Tibetan peasantry was that their status was ascribed—that they were hereditarily tied to estates and did not have the jural or legal right to sever their relationship to their estate. To argue this way is to elevate the ad hoc to the level of the jural. Certainly slaves in mid-19th century United States could flee their masters, but this does not mean that they had the choice of whether or not to remain slaves in the legal sense. Similarly, it would be incorrect to use the fact that there are many murders and other crimes which are never punished to argue that the American socio-political system is really not a system of "law", but rather a *laissez-faire* system in which individuals have the choice

of deciding disputes (or earning a living) by murder and crime. Deviation from norms and laws are an important part of any social analysis, but should not be confused with defining the nature of the jural system under which a population exists or existed. Thus, while it is true that many serfs ran away from their estates, this does not alter the basic fact that it was illegal to do so and that the serf could be punished by the lord if he or she was caught. Moreover, this Tibetan "fact" is not substantially different from traditional serfdom in Europe where serfs also ran away from abusive lords and estates. Choice on this level is always possible, but it in no way changes the jural structure of society.

Dr. Miller also has commented critically on several of the examples I briefly presented in support of my position, and has tried to indicate that they somehow contradict my basic argument. I must again disagree. In the case of Wangdu (p. 96 in my article) the lord clearly had the ultimate authority to decide his case, and did. Similarly, the fact that most peasants were simply left alone by their lords, is in no way contradictory to the presence or absence of serfdom in Tibet. As I have tried to indicate on various occasions, the lords in Tibet were not interested in interfering in the daily life of their serfs. Since the system was fundamentally economic in orientation, the lords really only cared that the upwards flow of good and products was continuous. The beauty of serfdom from the perspective of the lords was precisely that they did not have to get involved in the day to day management of the lives of their laborers as was the case in forms of slavery. Thus, while the lords were very concerned with issues of serf inheritance of land and family viability because the maintenance of viable family units meant that the serfs would be able to produce their own subsistence and work the lord's lands, they were not generally interested in the daily life of the serfs. This aspect of the Tibetan social system, consequently, is completely congruent with the argument that the nature of Tibetan peasant social and economic organization falls under the rubrick of serfdom.

Another disagreement I have with Dr. Miller's critique, is her use of the term "contractual" to describe the relationship between *mi ser* and their lords. While there clearly were rules and norms governing the relationship between a serf and his/her lord, to call these "contractual" is incorrect. A contractual relationship is one in which both parties freely enter and can freely leave. The serf-lord relationship was absolutely not contractual, since it was hereditary and the serf had no legal right to unilaterally leave that relationship, even if he was willing to return the land he controlled to his lord.

Throughout my paper, and in earlier publications, I have tried to indicate that the use of the concept "serfdom" for Tibet does not imply that lords tortured and otherwise grossly mistreated their serfs. Having a lord had positive features particularly with regard to the lords responsibility to support his serfs in disputes with the serfs of other lords. I have also indicted that the serf system in Tibet did not result in serfs being relegated to the level

of semi- or real starvation. There is no theoretical reason why serfdom should be inexorably linked to such abuses, since the essence of the system was for a lords to ensure that he had enough serf laborers to farm his part of the estate and continue the flow of food and other products without interruptions, and to do so he needed a viable peasant labor force. It was to the lords advantage to have serf household which could produce their own subsistence and work his land—a starving serf population would be unable to do this. To say a society was characterized by serfdom, does not mean that the serfs were destitute—that is an empirical not a structural or jural question.

For these reasons I suggest that Dr. Miller's critique of my paper does not in the least invalidate my arguments. Within the general category of serfdom, there are certainly differences between each of the specific instances, even between the European examples, but this is an inherent feature of all comparison. What appears, clear, however, is that the essential attributes of serfdom were present in Tibet, and that the similarities between Tibet and Europe are significant.

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1. Because this paper was written while I was conducting field work on nomads in Tibet, I am unable to cite references to the previous articles.
 2. I did not argue in the paper in question that the Tibetan political system of the 20th century should be categorized as a feudal system, and in fact, have specifically rejected that argument in my dissertation and in a later paper in which I argued that Tibet possessed a centralized type of state.