

## LETTER

### A Response to Goldstein's "Reexamining Choice, Dependency and Command in the Tibetan Social System"

Goldstein's article in *THE TIBET JOURNAL*, XI #4 (Winter) 1986, pp. 79-112 cannot be faulted. It is an outstanding example of his exemplary collection of sound data. At the same time, I reserve the right to question the heuristic value of his stretching a term/concept such as "serfdom" or "feudal" (or "democratic") to encompass an extremely broad range of variation. To so stretch is to dilute the concept and to render the term meaningless. Therefore, unlike Goldstein, before I would apply such terms beyond their original setting, I would prefer to make sure that the new setting bore more than a superficial resemblance to the original. (cf. p.82)

Goldstein quotes Paul Sweezy to validate the existence of "serfs" *sans* "feudalism", and Marc Bloch—with modifications—regarding the Tibetan variance from a *root* characteristic of "feudalism", i.e. the lord's *legal* and judicial authority over his serfs. He acknowledges that the Tibetan system had another, overriding, *central* legal and judicial system to which *all*—including the aristocracy—were subject. Moreover in Tibet the "personal" nature of the ties between "serf" and "lord", which Bloch stressed (p. 80), terminated if/when the "lord" was replaced by another.

Along these lines, Goldstein (p. 82, para, 2-4) points out the inability of the "serf" to "own" or to "sell" his/her land, or to terminate the relationship to it (cf. p. 87), but he makes no comment about the equivalent constraints on the estate holder, who *also* was not free to combine, divide, or otherwise "free" himself/herself from obligations to the "ultimate landlord", without suffering serious consequences.

The socioeconomic differences between Goldstein's "serfs" and "lords" *cannot* obscure the fact that the lords themselves were not "free agents". (As a government official—"bound" to such status by being an estate holder, the individual noble could be assigned to service anywhere in the country, regardless of where "home base" was located. In fact, the major—if not *only*—avenue open to the lords to free themselves of often burdensome obligations demanded by their estate-holding, was to donate their estate(s) to a monastery).

On the other hand, the "ultimate landlord" (the Dalai Lama's government including regents acting on his behalf, or on behalf of monastic hierarchs) could—and did—confiscate estates from these lords, who were powerless to assert their claims, or to contest the actions against them. The noble's "shackles" may have been golden, while the *miser's* were cast in brass, but they cannot be overlooked!

I point out that although Goldstein objects to my use of “choice”, (p. 84-85 *et passim*) he himself frequently refers to “runaways”, who—as we say in the United States—“voted with their feet”. (cf. also p. 108).

According to Goldstein’s own figures, (p. 86), the aristocratic, or lords’, estates amounted only to 25%, while the bulk of “manorial estates” belonged to monasteries or incarnate lamas. Consequently, Bloch’s and Sweezy’s definitions of “serf”, which still stressed *personal* ties between “lord” and “serf” can hardly be regarded as relevant, when the “lord” was an *impersonal* monastery or similar institution !

Furthermore, Goldstein himself (p. 93-94), distinguishes between “*individual*” *mi-ser* who, he states, *could* leave freely, and the family “collectivity”, which was responsible for fulfilling obligations to the lord.

Although Goldstein uses bold capital letters on p. 95 to decry my suggestion that a *mi-ser* had a CHOICE to “...make use of himself as a human resource as he pleased...” at the top of the same page he had already referred to “5) *miser* who were illegally free as a result of running away from their lord and estate...” (cf. ftnt. 25, p. 110: “In reality, lords rarely tried to or could apprehend runaway *miser*). Also cf. p.104-105 on “Runaway *miser*).

His example of Wangdu, (p. 96), who rose from sheep herder’s servant to “higher ‘taxpayer’ *miser*” status actually appears to be an instance of the lord “ratifying” a *fait accompli*. He apparently did not intercede on Wangdu’s behalf at any time between when the latter joined/then separated from his father and when he and Dorje had their dispute.

On p. 97, Goldstein himself refers to the “empirical reality that most landless *miser* were basically left alone.” Along these lines, on p.10. he states that “...The sons, however, appeared to have had no lord. It is not clear why this was so but it is assumed to have resulted from their deceased father running away from his lord or having left a ‘taxpayer’ household in the area. The boys, therefore, only had to do labor taxes on the infrequent occasions when the District Commissioner of the Central Government ordered *all* households in the area to come to work.” Although the boys served subsequent intervals as “tax appendages”, Goldstein’s prime example seems to have spent more time fending for himself in various positions.

Furthermore, “whatever the precipitating cause, (p.105), once a *miser* ran away there was no national or local police system to check for him, and he/she could be caught only if the lord himself was able to trace them escape capture..... Yet, there is no question but that the ease of being able to run away *greatly moderated the potential and actual abusiveness of the miser’s subordination to their lord* and resulted in large numbers of *miser* moving to different areas where they in effect had no lord and thus had actual (though not legal) physical mobility. And though they might still be working as servants for large *miser* families, the element of legal compulsion was no longer present and they could quit a servant job whenever they wanted.”

Such *de facto* freedom is fully consistent with my statements about “choice.” *Choice* does not imply making an easy decision, but it does suggest that if a *miser* was determined to make sacrifices in order to free himself/herself from some intolerable conditions he could succeed in doing so.

At the same time, as Goldstein points out, one cannot dispute the considerable advantages of having “a lord” and, consequently, “legal status.” I cannot help suspect that, above all else, it is *these* advantageous aspects that contributed to the relative stability of the relationships between “lords” and their “dependents.” However, these very aspects were (*contractual*) in nature (cf. p. 107), and consequently, *any* unilateral abrogation of the terms of the contract was legally a “breach of contract.” Somehow, this does not seem to bear much resemblance to “serfdom,” since the lord was equally bound by the contract. The lord “. . . had to comply with traditional custom and written documents,” while the so-called “serf” could appeal his/her grievances against the lord to the central government, and ultimately to the Dalai Lama.

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