

# Serfdom in Tibet controversy

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The **serfdom in Tibet controversy** rests on both a political and an academic debate. In the political debate, Chinese sources claim moral authority for governing Tibet, based on narratives that portray Tibet as a "feudal serfdom" and a "hell on earth" prior to the invasion of Tibet in 1950.<sup>[1]</sup> Tibetologists have presented a range of opinions as to the accuracy of this characterization, and there continues to be a lack of consensus on the topic. Accusations of the existence of a variety of unfree labour have been a recurrent theme, covering periods both before and after the Chinese takeover. Supporters of the Chinese position highlight statements by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that, prior to 1959, 95% of Tibetans lived in 'feudal serfdom',<sup>[2]</sup> and cite cases of abuse and cruelty in the traditional Tibetan system.<sup>[3]</sup> Human rights organizations and supporters of the Free Tibet movement have highlighted reports of Communist-run forced labour camps in the region<sup>[4]</sup> and point out the efforts made by the Tibetan authorities to modernise the country and improve conditions in Tibet in the first half of the 20th Century.

In the academic debate of the 'Serfdom in Tibet' controversy, the nature of serfdom and its applicability to Eastern societies is contested amongst academics. Tibetologist Melvyn Goldstein wrote in 1971 that "Tibet was characterized by a form of institutionalized inequality that can be called pervasive serfdom".<sup>[5]</sup> However many academics have questioned the applicability of the concept to Tibet, a recent example being Heidi Fjeld who in 2003 argued that feudalism and the use of the term 'serf' was misleading in relation to the social system of Tibet and instead described it as "a caste-like social hierarchy".<sup>[6]</sup>

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## Tibet: region or regions?

The term "Serfdom in Tibet" can be misleading since Tibet cannot simply be defined as one political entity or social system; its political and socio-economic structures having varied greatly over time and between sub-districts. Although the central leadership in Lhasa had authority for various periods this did not imply the kind of political control of modern Western states. According to Luciano Petech, in the 18th Century CE "K'ams [Kham] was practically independent of Lhasa under its great lamas".<sup>[7]</sup> In the 1940s the Kuomintang Muslim warlord Ma Bufang ruled Qinghai province.<sup>[8]</sup> Even the definition of Tibet has been contested with a map of competing claims identifying six distinct types of Tibetan region claimed by various entities. Generally, the government of the PRC limits Tibet to the area it has designated the Tibet Autonomous Region, consisting of the provinces of Ü and Tsang; whereas the Tibetan government in exile claims that other ethnically Tibetan areas to the east also belong to Tibet.<sup>[9]</sup> Scholarship frequently represents a limited survey, restricted to the central region of Tibet and may not accurately represent the whole of cultural Tibet or all Tibetan speaking peoples.

Discussing the social structure of Tibet inevitably leads to difficulties with defining terms. Not only may serf and feudalism be Western terms inappropriate for Asian use but the geography and peoples of Tibet vary according to interpreter. The lack of agreement of the various sides as to terminology highlights that the 'Serfdom in Tibet' controversy is a politicised debate, with the term 'feudal serfdom' largely being used by the People's Republic of China as a justification for their taking control in Tibet. According to the PRC:

...there was a historically imperative need for the progress of Tibetan society and the welfare of the Tibetan people to expel the imperialists and shake off the yoke of feudal serfdom. The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 brought hope for the deeply distressed Tibetan people. In conforming to the law of historical development and the interests of the Tibetan people, the Central People's Government worked actively to bring about Tibet's peaceful liberation. After that, important policies and measures were adopted for Tibet's Democratic Reform, regional autonomy, large-scale modernization and reform and opening-up.<sup>[10]</sup>

However, the Tibetan government in exile responds:

...the Chinese justifications make no sense. First of all, international law does not accept justifications of this type. No country is allowed to invade, occupy, annex and colonize another country just because its social structure does not please it. Secondly, the PRC is responsible for bringing more suffering in the name of liberation. Thirdly, necessary reforms were initiated and Tibetans are quite capable of doing so.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Competing versions of Tibetan history

It is difficult to find academic consensus on the nature of society in Tibetan history. Sources on the history of Tibet are available from both pro-Chinese and pro-Tibetan writers.

Pro-Chinese materials may be published by mainstream Western printers, or within the People's Republic of China. Tibetan materials, similarly, may be published by mainstream Western printers, or by the Tibetan Government in Exile. In both cases, the materials published by mainstream Western printers are moderate in their tone and content, compared to the other materials.<sup>[12]</sup> Both sides hope to persuade foreign readers to support their own point of view through these publications.<sup>[13]</sup>

Many of the pro-Chinese works in English on the subject were translated from Chinese. Translators are not named, but censors are. Asian studies scholar John Powers concludes that ideology was the most powerful influence on the translations: "In contemporary China, the Communist Party strictly controls the presentation of history, and several formal 'Resolutions' have been issued by the Central Committee, which are intended to guide historians in the 'correct' interpretation of historical events and actors."<sup>[14]</sup> The writings of contemporary Chinese historians conform to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, which asserts that societies progress from primitive communism, to slave societies, which are then overthrown and replaced by feudalism, which are in their turn overthrown and replaced by capitalism, which is followed - via rebellion, again - by socialism, which may progress peacefully toward communism. Several Chinese sources insert peasant rebellions into their accounts of Tibetan history, to achieve conformity with this structure required by political dogma. Historians in China are prevented from performing research that could challenge orthodoxy. Marx condemned religion as "the opiate of the masses", and this doctrine is also infused in Chinese writings on history.<sup>[15]</sup> In accordance with their political perspectives, Chinese sources claim that the common Tibetans suffered appallingly before the Chinese takeover.<sup>[16]</sup>

Western authors typically claim fact-oriented objectivity in their writings on Tibetan history, but often turn out to be just as rhetorically polarized.<sup>[17]</sup> For example, whilst Hugh Richardson, who lived in Lhasa in the 1930s and 1940s, before the takeover by the PRC in 1951, writes in *Tibet and Its History* that Chinese versions of Tibetan history are contemptible and he considers the Chinese rule brutal and illegal,<sup>[18]</sup> Israel Epstein, a naturalized Chinese citizen born in Poland who similarly claims the authority of first-hand knowledge, although following the Chinese takeover, supports Chinese rule.<sup>[19]</sup> There are few academic assessments of the recent history of Tibet. Anthropologist and historian Melvyn Goldstein, who is fluent in Tibetan and has done considerable fieldwork with Tibetans in exile and in Tibet, considers pre-1950 Tibet to have been a feudal theocracy impaired by corrupt and incompetent leaders.<sup>[20]</sup> It was *de facto* independent of China from 1911 to 1949, but not recognised as *de jure* independent of China by any nation, including its protective power Great Britain.<sup>[21]</sup>

The Chinese side seeks to persuade international perception as to the appropriate nature and justifiability of Chinese rule in Tibet. Their position is that Tibet truly and historically belongs to China, and that affairs of Tibet are internal matters, the Tibetans seek to internationalize their cause, in part by convincing readers that

Tibet was independent.<sup>[17]</sup> Concentrating as it does on questions of national sovereignty, the Tibetan Government in Exile, position is more moderate in tone than some of its more extreme supporters who conflate the rule of the lamas with Tibetan Buddhist ideals, seeking to promote a Buddhist dogma that competes with the Marxist dogma of 'feudal serfdom' by portraying Tibet under the lamas as, in Robert Thurman's words: "a mandala of the peaceful, perfected universe".<sup>[22]</sup>

Tibetologist Robert Barnett<sup>[23]</sup> writes:

"Chinese references to preliberation conditions in Tibet thus appear to be aimed at creating popular support for Beijing's project in Tibet. These claims have particular resonance among people who share the assumption—based on nineteenth-century Western theories of "social evolution" that are still widely accepted in China—that certain forms of society are "backward" and should be helped to evolve by more "advanced" societies. This form of prejudice converges with some earlier Chinese views and with vulgar Marxist theories that imagine a vanguard movement liberating the oppressed classes or nationalities in a society, whether or not those classes agree that they are oppressed. Moreover, the Chinese have to present that oppression as very extensive, and that society as very primitive, in order to explain why there were no calls by the Tibetan peasantry for Chinese intervention on their behalf.

The question of Tibet's social history is therefore highly politicized, and Chinese claims in this respect are intrinsic to the functioning of the PRC, and not some free act of intellectual exploration. They have accordingly to be treated with caution. From a human rights point of view, the question of whether Tibet was feudal in the past is irrelevant. A more immediate question is why the PRC does not allow open discussion of whether Tibet was feudal or oppressive. Writers and researchers in Tibet face serious repercussions if they do not concur with official positions on issues such as social conditions in Tibet prior to its "liberation," and in such a restrictive climate, the regime's claims on this issue have little credibility."<sup>[24]</sup>

## The political debate

Chinese sources portray Tibet before 1950 as a feudal serfdom in which serfs suffered terribly under the despotic rule of lamas and aristocrats. Some Tibetan sources describe the people as happy, content, and devoted to Buddhism.<sup>[25]</sup> On the other hand the Tibetan Phuntsok Wangyal, who founded the Tibetan communist party in the 40's, describes the old system as unequal and exploitative.<sup>[26]</sup>

One of the earliest publications in English to apply the term *serf* to Tibet was Marxist sympathiser Anna Louise Strong's work from 1960, *When Serfs Stood up in Tibet*, published by the Chinese government.<sup>[27]</sup> Another seminal promoter of the term is historian<sup>[28]</sup> A. Tom Grunfeld, who based his writings on the work of British

explorers of the region, in particular Sir Charles Bell. It has been argued that his book is not supported by traditional Tibetan, Chinese, or Indian histories, that it contains inaccuracies and distortions,<sup>[20][27]</sup> and that Grunfeld's extracts from Bell were taken out of context to mislead readers.<sup>[29]</sup> Grunfeld is a polarizing figure for the Chinese, who praise his work, his scholarship, and his integrity; and the Tibetans, who match this praise with condemnation,<sup>[30]</sup> calling him a "sinologist" who lacks authority on Tibetan history due to his inability to read Tibetan and his not having been to Tibet before writing his book.<sup>[17]</sup> Political scientist Michael Parenti's 2003 (revised in 2007) essay *Friendly Feudalism: The Tibet Myth*<sup>[31]</sup> was largely based on the preceding work of Stuart and Roma Gelder (*Timely Rain: Travels in New Tibet* 1964), Strong and Grunfeld.<sup>[29]</sup>

Melvyn Goldstein has produced many works on Tibetan society since the 1960s and used *serf* to translate the Tibetan term *mi ser* (literally "yellow person";<sup>[32]</sup> also translated as peasant<sup>[33]</sup>) and to describe both the landless peasant classes and the wealthier land holding and taxpaying class of families. He has written, "with the exception of about 300 noble families, all laymen and laywomen in Tibet were serfs (*Mi ser*) bound via ascription by parallel descent to a particular lord (dPon-po) though an estate, in other words sons were ascribed to their father's lord but daughters to their mother's lord."<sup>[34]</sup> In his 1989 book *A History of Modern Tibet* Goldstein argued that although serfdom was prevalent in Tibet, this did not mean that it was an entirely static society. There were several types of serf sub-status, of which one of the most important was the "human lease", which enabled a serf to acquire a degree of personal freedom. This was an alternative which, despite retaining the concept of lordship, partially freed the 'mi ser' from obligations to a landed estate, usually for an annual fee.<sup>[5]</sup> In 1997 Goldstein used the term 'serf' in the following, more cautious, way "...monastic and aristocratic elites ... held most of the land in Tibet in the form of feudal estates with hereditarily bound serflike peasants."<sup>[35]</sup> Powers has characterized Goldstein as "generally pro-China"<sup>[36]</sup> but also called his *History of Modern Tibet* "the most balanced treatment".<sup>[37]</sup> Goldstein describes himself as having conservative political views.<sup>[38]</sup> According to William Monroe Coleman, China misrepresents Goldstein's usage as support for their version of Tibetan history.<sup>[33]</sup>

Goldstein distinguished serfdom from feudalism, and applied the term "serfdom" but not "feudalism" to old Tibet.<sup>[39]</sup> Furthermore, he made some effort to avoid appearing to support China's invasion of Tibet, writing that the PRC left the traditional system in place, not only after the invasion of 1950, but even after the Dalai Lama's flight into exile in 1959. He pointed out that in 1950, Chinese rhetoric claimed that China was freeing Tibet, not from serfdom, but from imperialist influence.<sup>[40]</sup> Nevertheless, his usage has been misinterpreted as support for the Chinese Marxist viewpoint, in which feudalism and serfdom are inseparable, and old Tibet is consistently described as "feudal serfdom".<sup>[39]</sup>

Not all writers who use the term "serfdom" to describe pre-Communist society in Tibet do so pejoratively. Pico Iyer, a journalist whose father is a friend of the Dalai Lama and who has himself been in private conversation with him for over thirty years writes: "Almost as soon as he came into exile, in 1959, the Dalai Lama seized the

chance to get rid of much of the red tape and serfdom that had beset Tibet in the past".<sup>[41]</sup> The Dalai Lama himself used the term 'serf' in 1991, saying: "The relationship between landlord and serf was much milder in Tibet than in China and conditions for the poor were much less harsh."<sup>[42]</sup>

Several Tibetan sources portray Tibetan peasants and workers to support their own view of a Tibetan people who were not only independent of China, but found the Chinese alien and incomprehensible, and who suffered genocide under Chinese rule.<sup>[43]</sup> Richardson, the British Trade Envoy to Tibet in the 1940s, agrees with Tibetan authors, stating there was little difference between the rich and the poor.<sup>[44]</sup>

Journalist Thomas Laird notes that scholars debate the applicability of these terms to Tibet, and struggle with a lack of sufficient data.<sup>[45]</sup> Journalist Barbara Crossette asserted in 1998 that "scholars of Tibet mostly agree that there has been no systematic serfdom in Tibet in centuries."<sup>[46]</sup>

The Tibetan Government-in-Exile says about conditions in Tibet pre-Communism:

Traditional Tibetan society was, by no means, perfect and was in need of changes. The Dalai Lama and other Tibetan leaders have admitted as much. That is the reason why the Dalai Lama initiated far-reaching reforms in Tibet as soon as he assumed temporal authority. The traditional Tibetan society, however, was not nearly as bad as China would have us believe.

[11]

## The academic debate

The academic debate as to whether "serf" is an applicable term for a society such as pre-Communist Tibet continues to this day. Goldstein and Miller's exchanges in an academic journal between 1986 and 1989 were a notable part of this debate. The applicability of the concept of serfdom to Tibet was debated between Melvyn Goldstein and anthropologist Beatrice D. Miller of Wisconsin University over a series of five articles in the *Tibet Journal*.<sup>[47]</sup> The debate was initiated by Goldstein in the XI edition of the *Tibet Journal*, in which he defended his description of the features of Tibetan society as being very comparable to European serfdom.<sup>[48]</sup> He based the comparison on the features of serfdom described by French historian Marc Bloch including:<sup>[49]</sup>

- The status was hereditary.
- A serf, unlike a slave had rights and possessed but did not own productive resources (land).
- The lord had the legal right to command his serfs, including judicial authority over him or her.

Goldstein argued that Tibetan society fulfilled all these requirements, and argued in detail against the specific diverging opinions of fellow scholars Miller, Micheal, Dargyay and Aziz. He underpinned his assertions by research, first hand accounts and case studies, and responded to criticisms which had been voiced by these researchers in the preceding years.

Only Miller responded in the next *The Tibet Journal*, in a short letter, in 1987. She acknowledged Goldstein's scholarship, stating "Goldstein's article ... cannot be faulted. It is an outstanding example of his exemplary collection of fine data."<sup>[50]</sup> She disagreed however with his interpretation, specifically the use of the word "serf" and challenged him by asserting the following:

- That a lord also had obligations to the central government, so the specific obligations of a peasant (Tibetan: "mi ser") to a lord were only examples of societal obligations which everyone had.<sup>[50]</sup>
- That the obligations owed to a lord were by the family collective, and not "personal" or individual.<sup>[51]</sup>
- That the obligations of a peasant were not so onerous as it was easy to run away.<sup>[52]</sup>

In the following issue Goldstein replied in brief arguing:

- The nature of the lord's relation with the central government was radically different from the peasant/lord relation and not relevant to the peasant/lord relation he was discussing
- While corvee obligations fell primarily on households, a peasant's legal status very much related to his person, was hereditary and not rescindable.<sup>[53]</sup>
- He pointed out that running away was illegal, punishable and European serfs also ran away.<sup>[54]</sup>
- He strongly disagreed with Millers assertion that the peasant/lord relation was fundamentally contractual.<sup>[55]</sup>

In a later publication and response Goldstein agreed to differ on the use of the word "serf" to prevent a terminological discussion distracting from the examination of societal conditions. He argued that running away was an act of desperation severing familial, social and economic ties.<sup>[56]</sup> He discussed the form of partial manumission known as "human lease" and argued that it: only temporarily freed from daily service but not occasional service at the lord's discretion; the payment of an annual fee decided by the lord was required; it was revocable at will by the lord. Thus he felt it was a very weak form of manumission.<sup>[57]</sup>

Coleman, integrating Goldstein's research with subsequent work done by other scholars including Rebecca French, Graham Clarke, and Franz Michael, argues that Goldstein overemphasized the *de jure* status of the *mi ser* at the expense of *de facto* characteristics - a high degree of social and economic mobility, and hence autonomy; frequently successful negotiations with lords to improve their status; and flight from untenable situations such as unpayable debts and exorbitant labor requirements.<sup>[58]</sup> He concludes that "serf" is a misleading term for the Tibetan *mi ser*.<sup>[59]</sup>

## Human rights in Tibet

In the political debate regarding the nature of pre-Communist Tibet, Chinese sources assert human rights abuses as a justification for the Communist invasion. Both before and after the Communist takeover of 1950 there have been examples of human rights abuses, both state-sanctioned and otherwise. The political debate associated

with the Serfdom in Tibet controversy rests on whether these incidents justify the positions of the opposing parties. Sympathisers of Chinese government's position view the pre-1950s abuses as justifying the Communist regime in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Supporters of the Tibetan Government in Exile argue that the 13th Dalai Lama had already effected reforms which were ahead of the world at the time, and that further reforms were underway, and no outside intervention was justified.

## Prior to 1950

Judicial mutilation - principally the gouging out of eyes, and the cutting off of hands or feet - was formalized under the Sakya school as part of the 13th century Tibetan legal code, and was used as a legal punishment until being declared illegal in 1913 by a proclamation of the 13th Dalai Lama.<sup>[60]</sup> In this same reform, the Dalai Lama banned capital punishment, making Tibet one of the first countries to do so (preceding, for instance, Switzerland, Britain, and France).<sup>[61]</sup> The 14th Dalai Lama's brother Jigme Norbu reports that, along with these reforms, living conditions in jails were improved, with officials being designated to see that these conditions and rules were maintained."<sup>[62][63]</sup>

Incidents of mutilation have been recorded in Tibet in the period between the start of the 20th century and the Chinese occupation. Tibetan communist Phuntso Wangye recalled his anger at seeing freshly severed human ears hanging from the gate of the county headquarters in Damshung north of Lhasa in 1945.<sup>[64]</sup>

Robert W. Ford, one of the few westerners to have been appointed by the Government of Tibet at the time of *de facto* independent Tibet, spent five years in Tibet, from 1945 to 1950, before his arrest by the invading Chinese army. In his book *Wind Between the Worlds: Captured in Tibet*, he writes

"All over Tibet I had seen men who had been deprived of an arm or a leg for theft (...) Penal amputations were done without antiseptics or sterile dressings".<sup>[65]</sup>

Heinrich Harrer who lived in Tibet at the same time (1944 to 1951) wrote in his book "Return to Tibet" that these treatments had already ceased at that time:

"The so-called "chamber of horrors" at the foot of the Potala is also no longer shown. I believe that the Chinese were perfectly well aware that they were conning the tourists with displays of desiccated human arms, flutes made from femurs, and silver-mounted skulls; these objects, they used to maintain, testified to torture, flogging and other atrocities. Even Wangdu was so much under Chinese influence that he confirmed the atrocity stories spread by the Chinese about the Tibetans. He reminded me that in the days of the fifth Dalai Lama (in the eighteenth century), and even under the thirteenth (1900- 33), Tibetans still had their hands and feet chopped off. In reply to my direct question he had to admit that this had ceased to happen during my time in Tibet."<sup>[66]</sup>



Because Tibetan Buddhism prohibits killing, mutilation and other extremely cruel punishments were widely used in old Tibet. The mutilation of top level Tibetan official Lungshar in 1934 gave an example. Tsepon Lungshar, an official educated in England introduced reform in the 1920s; after losing a political struggle the reformist was sentenced to be blinded by having his eye-balls pulled out. "The method involved the placement of a smooth, round yak's knucklebone on each of the temples of the prisoner. These were then tied by leather thongs around the head and tightened by turning the thongs with a stick on top of the head until the eyeballs popped out. The mutilation was terribly bungled. Only one eyeball popped out, and eventually the ragyaba had to cut out the other eyeball with a knife. Boiling oil was then poured into the sockets to cauterize the wound."<sup>[67]</sup><sup>[68]</sup> This was sufficiently unusual that the untouchables (*ragyaba*) carrying it out had no previous experience of the correct technique and had to rely on instructions heard from their parents. An attempt was made at anesthetizing the alleged criminal with intoxicants before performing the punishment, which unfortunately did not work well.<sup>[68]</sup>

As late as 1949 the Tibetan government still used mutilation as a form of punishment. In one case involving the killing of an American, six Tibetan border guards were tried and sentenced in Lhasa. "The leader was to have his nose and both ears cut off. The man who fired the first shot was to lose both ears. A third man was to lose one ear, and the others were to get 50 lashes each."<sup>[69]</sup>

Whipping was legal and common as punishment<sup>[70]</sup> in Tibet including in the 20th century, also for minor infractions and outside judicial process. Whipping could also have fatal consequences, as in the case of the trader Gyebo Sherpa subjected to the severe *corca* whipping for selling cigarettes. He died from his wounds 2 days later in the Potala prison.<sup>[71]</sup> Tashi Tsering, a self-described critic of traditional Tibetan society, records being whipped as a 13 year old for missing a performance as a dancer in the Dalai Lama's dance troop in 1942, until the skin split and the pain became excruciating.<sup>[72]</sup>

In its *100 Questions and Answers About Tibet*<sup>[73]</sup> the People's Republic of China states that human rights were 'severely infringed upon' by the Dalai Lama's administration. The evidence for these accusations is disputed.<sup>[74]</sup>

According to writer Rebecca French, Tibetans viewed criminal offenses as uncommon, but there are few records to establish frequency. However, Tibetans also believe that theft and banditry were common especially along trade routes.<sup>[75]</sup> Because it was considered harsh by most Tibetans, they tended to seek alternative settlements and leniency from local courts instead of pursuing government action in disputes. Local officials were also more likely to find peaceful outcomes in a community setting than to resort to harsher government resolution.<sup>[75]</sup>

Political power could play a role in a judicial process in Tibet. In the eye gouging case above the alleged criminal was a deposed member of the Kashag called Lungshar who had proposed democratic reform. The charge was planning a coup and the attempted murder of another Kashag member who opposed reform. It was strenuously denied by the accused. Conviction was based on the evidence of one informer who claimed to have seen a document which was never produced. He was richly rewarded, and the trial seems to have been a show trial by traditionalists seeking to prevent reform. From arrest to execution of the sentence was only ten days, limiting the possibilities of appeal.<sup>[76]</sup>

One evidence of Chinese brutality in Eastern Tibet was reported by a American missionary in the following terms:<sup>[61][77]</sup>

There is no method of torture known that is not practised in here on these Tibetans, slicing, boiling, tearing asunder and all ... To sum up what China is doing here in eastern Tibet, the main things are collecting taxes robbing, oppressing, confiscating and allowing her representatives to burn and loot and steal.

Believing that the American missionary's account might be an mistake, Sir Eric Teichman, a British diplomat noted that whatever brutality existed, it was "in no way due to any action of the Chinese government in Peking or the provincial authorities in Szechuana."<sup>[77]</sup>

## **Problem of "Slavery"**

Israel Epstein wrote that prior to the Communist takeover, poverty in Tibet was so severe that in some of the worst cases peasants had to hand over children to the manor as household slaves or nangzan, because they were too poor to raise them.<sup>[78]</sup> On the other hand, Laird asserted that in the 1940s Tibetan peasants were well off and immune to famine, whereas starvation was common in China.<sup>[79]</sup> According to other sources, the so-called "slaves" were domestic servants (nangtsen) and managers of estates in reality.<sup>[80]</sup>

In 1904 the British army invaded and held the Tibetan Chumbi Valley, in the border region adjacent to Bhutan and India. Sir Charles Bell was put in charge of the district from September 1904 to November 1905<sup>[81]</sup> and wrote that slavery was still practiced in Chumbi but had declined greatly over the previous thirty years. He noted that only a dozen or two dozen slaves remained, unlike nearby Bhutan where slavery was more widespread. Bell further remarked, "The slavery in the Chumpi valley was of a very mild type. If a slave was not well treated, it was easy for him to escape into Sikkim and British India."<sup>[82]</sup>

## **Tibetan welfare after the Chinese takeover**

Just as the Chinese and the Tibetan exile community argue over whether common Tibetans suffered or flourished before the Chinese takeover, they take diametrically opposing views on the fate of ordinary Tibetans since 1950. This is understood to be highly important in persuading readers of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of Chinese rule. Chinese sources in English claim rapid progress for prosperous, free, and happy Tibetans participating in democratic reforms, although nothing like a free and open election has ever occurred in Tibet under Chinese rule. Tibetans, on the other hand, write of Chinese genocide in Tibet, comparing the Chinese to the Nazis.<sup>[83]</sup> According to Powers, scholar Warren Smith, whose work became focused on Tibetan history and politics after spending five months in Tibet in 1982, portrays the Chinese as chauvinists who believe they are superior to the Tibetans, and claims that the Chinese use torture, coercion and starvation to control the Tibetans.<sup>[84]</sup>

There is also evidence of human rights infringements since the Communist takeover in Tibet, including the 2006 Nangpa La shootings. See human rights in the People's Republic of China and Human rights in Tibet for an overview. The *Human Rights Watch World Report 2008:Events in China 2007* states:

Widespread and numerous instances of repression target ordinary citizens, monks, nuns, and even children in an effort to quash alleged "separatism." Seven Tibetan boys in Gansu province were detained for over a month in early September after they allegedly wrote slogans on the walls of a village police station and elsewhere calling for the return of the Dalai Lama and a free Tibet. Ronggyal Adrak was detained and charged under state security offenses by police on August 1 after he called for the Dalai Lama's return at a horse race festival in Sichuan province. He is awaiting trial. The Chinese government has failed to bring to justice those responsible for the shooting death by People's Armed Police officers of a 17-year-old nun, Kelsang Namtso, while trying to cross the border into Nepal on September 30, 2006.<sup>[85]</sup>

## Comparison to other regions

In Europe, serfdom is associated with manorialism and was a historical phenomenon primarily of the Middle Ages. Friedrich Hayek and Mikhail Gorbachev argued, however, that the PRC's experimentation with collective farming and People's communes in the 1950s and 60s amounted to a return to government-owned serfdom. (See the Alleged Return of Serfdom.)

Debate continues as to whether pre-Communist Tibetan society was especially oppressive or was comparable to, or better than, similar social structures in nearby regions. According to the Tibetan Government-in-Exile: "In terms of social mobility and wealth distribution, independent Tibet compared favourably with most Asian countries"<sup>[11]</sup> the fact that most Dalai Lamas, including Thubten Gyatso, 13th Dalai Lama and Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama, came from peasant families being cited as an example of this. Travelers who witnessed conditions in both China and Tibet in the 1940s found the Tibetan peasants to be far better off than their Chinese counterparts.<sup>[79]</sup> Academics debate whether tribal cultures, such as the Mongolian nomadic steppe culture, are feudal in nature.<sup>[86]</sup> Much of Mongolian, Tibetan and Chinese political history is inter-related but the extent of their shared social culture is uncertain.

According to the 'United Nations Research Institute for Social Development', bonded labor and other forms of economic exploitation currently exist in nearby regions including India, Nepal, and several Chinese provinces.<sup>[87]</sup> Kamaiya, the bonded labour system in neighbouring Nepal, was formally abolished in the year 2000.<sup>[88][89]</sup> In 2007 Shanxi, China was the scene of its own slave scandal that turned out to involve human trafficking and slave labor in Hebei, Guangdong and Xinjiang provinces as well. According to the U.S. Dept of State "Trafficking in Persons Report 2008"<sup>[90]</sup> Bangladesh, Nepal, Mongolia and Pakistan are all Tier 2 countries, with China and India both on the Tier 2 watchlist. However no local regions are in Tier 3. Bonded labour may have been officially sanctioned in pre-Communist Tibet, while no bonded labour that still exists in nearby regions today is officially sanctioned by the authorities.

## See also

- Serfs Emancipation Day
- Tibetan sovereignty debate

## Notes

1. Powers 2004, pg. 122
2. "White Paper on Tibet's March Forward" (<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/features/Tibetpaper/tb1.html>). Retrieved 2008-07-10.
3. Goldstein 1997, p.56
4. Amnesty International, "Peoples' [sic] Republic of China: Repression in Tibet, 1987-1992"
5. Goldstein, *Journal of Asian Studies*, May 1971, pp. 521-34
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