

Serfdom and Mobility: An Examination of the Institution of "Human Lease" in Traditional Tibetan Society

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THE literature on Tibetan society suffers from chronic religious indigestion. The "great tradition" of Tibetan Buddhism has tended to dominate the energies of most scholars interested in the area and topics such as social organization have generally been neglected. One of the most important of these neglected subjects has been stratification, an understanding of which is basic for any comprehension of the traditional social system as well as for the adaptation of both the Tibetans who fled to India and those who remained behind in Chinese controlled Tibet.

But what little has been written on social structure and stratification in Tibet is contradictory and confused. Some authors emphasize mobility and the open aspect of social relations whereas others talk of a rigid, closed system of institutionalized inequality. All tend to be vague and imprecise and to treat the subject only peripherally.

This paper will attempt to clarify this problem. It will show how the dichotomy between flexibility and rigidity is misleading and inappropriate when applied to Tibet and how, in reality, one of the most salient features of Tibetan social organization was its incorporation of a significant potential for personal mobility within a matrix of hereditary and pervasive serfdom.

With the exception of a handful of aristocrats, all laymen in Tibet were serfs hereditarily linked by ascription to estates and lords. However, there were several distinct categories of serfs between which a degree of mobility existed. In particular, the previously unnoticed serf sub-status of *mi bogs*¹ or "human lease" afforded a critical channel for personal mobility and it is on this status that this essay will focus.

Tibet was characterized by a form of institutionalized inequality that can be called pervasive serfdom. Although the concept 'serfdom' is commonly associated with subjected agricultural populations (e.g., Bergel² writes that "... serfdom is normally *agricultural* servitude. The serf is a *subdued peasant*" [italics his]), this approach is too narrow. Most nomads in Tibet, for example, clearly had relationships to lords and estates that were structurally equivalent to those of peasant

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paper see: "Stratification, polyandry and family structure in Tibet," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 27, no. 1 (Spring, 1971).

¹ Tibetan terms will be transcribed according to the system cited by Professor Turrell V. Wylie in "A Standard System of Tibetan Transcription," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 22 (1959), 261-67.

² Egon E. Bergel, *Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), p. 76.

agriculturalists. In this essay, therefore, the term serf is defined as a type of hereditary superordinate-subordinate relationship in which the subordinate (the serf) possesses a legal identity independent of the superordinate (the lord). The lord-serf relationship differs from the relationship of slave to master in that slaves do not possess this legal identity being considered rather as the property of their masters. Moreover, it differs from the relationship of client to patron in that it is hereditary. Clients can unilaterally sever their link to a particular patron whereas serfs cannot.

Without further introduction, then, let me now briefly examine the general parameters of the lord-serf relationship in Tibet.

All laymen in Tibet were differentiated into two hierarchical, endogamous strata that will be referred to as aristocratic lords (*sger pa*) and serfs (*mi ser*). Membership in these strata was hereditary, the linkage of serf to lord being transmitted through parallel descent, i.e., daughters were ascribed to the lord of their mother and sons to the lord of their father. Demographically, with the exception of approximately 250-300 aristocratic families, the remainder of the lay population were serfs.

The hereditary link between a lord and a serf occurred through a landed estate, and if that estate changed hands (lords) the serf remained a part of the estate coming under the authority of the new lord. It was fundamental to Tibetan serfdom, then, that serfs were linked primarily to an estate rather than to the families or institutions that held it, although there is no question but that ties of loyalty and affection between serfs and their lords played an important role in the operation of the system.

In its basic form, the serfs attached to an estate were "bound" to that estate. They did not have freedom of movement. They could not legally and unilaterally leave the estate land and abandon their hereditary obligations to their lord. If a serf attempted to run away permanently from his estate, the lord had the right to give pursuit and forcibly return and punish him. Before this century, there was no time limitation on this apprehension right.³

Although hereditarily bound to land and lord, Tibetan serfs nonetheless had legal identities. They had heavy obligations to their lords but also had certain rights. There was, however, no uniform code of these rights and they varied not only with respect to different types of serfs but also with respect to the same type of serfs under different lords and even the same types of serfs and the same lord on different estates. Still, certain very general statements can be made.

Although serfs had heavy tax obligations to their lords, serfs had the right to have access to some *brten* or "basis" from which to fulfill these obligations. For agricultural serfs this invariably consisted of arable land although, again, the amount and type of tenure varied with respect to different types of serfs.

Serfs also had the right to have their obligations as well as their access to land (or other *brten*) clearly delimited. Tax obligations and land tenure were generally stated in written documents for each estate and these did not fluctuate according to the needs or whims of the lord. Lords could not unilaterally (and legally) alter the amount of taxes required or the amount of land the serfs held.

³ See the section concerning the new policy of the Agricultural Office on p. 533 for the change that occurred in this century.

Another right was that serfs maintain full control over all their possessions (with the exception, of course, of those given by the lord as “basis”). It was, therefore, fully possible for certain types of serfs to become very wealthy.

Basic to these general rights was the serfs’ right to initiate legal action against their lords. If a serf felt his lord had (or was) overstepping his authority—whether this involved land, taxes, or the lord’s settlement of some dispute—the serf could unilaterally take his grievance to the central government for adjudication. Such drastic action, to be sure, occurred very infrequently and then only in situations of major importance, but it is undeniable that serfs not only could, but sometimes did, take their lords to court. The dispute cited in connection with estate organization on page 524 aptly illustrates this.

But while serfs clearly had rights, the lords legitimately held diffuse authority over the actions of their serfs and in practice tended to use their superior position and resources to exceed the already broad authority parameters. This vulnerability of serfs was exacerbated further since lords held primary adjudicative rights over their serfs, including the right to mete out even severe punishment and imprisonment. Thus, although serfs clearly had rights, the general pattern of life in Tibet tended to be one of broad domination of lords over their serfs.

The statuses of lord and serf were hereditary, and mobility between them was virtually absent. Although it was possible for the ruler to ennoble commoners and although this regularly occurred in the case of the ennoblement of the natal family of each new Dalai Lama, such events were extremely rare (as of 1950 there were only six such families descended from Dalai Lamas) and were numerically insignificant. They had no significant effect on the overall mobility potential of the system, and serfs did not in fact perceive the status of lord as an even remotely attainable goal.

Entering the monastic order, however, was another more common form of mobility since monks (or nuns) were not considered serfs and did not owe obligations to their original lord. Still, such monks did not permanently alter their initial serf status. It is more accurate to view their initial serf status as being held in abeyance while the individual was a monk for should a monk or nun leave the monastic order, he (or she) reverted back to his initial status of serf. Moreover, serfs wishing to become monks or nuns had to obtain their lord’s permission (*grwa sgröl*). In short, there was virtually no mobility between the lord and serf strata, and whereas serfs could become monks and nuns, this was not jurally their right and was an escape from the binds of serfdom only so long as they remained monks.

Earlier I emphasized that serfs in Tibet were linked to lords through estates. Although there were a variety of estate types in Tibet, one of the most important was equivalent to what in feudal Europe was known as a manorial estate. The manorial estate was the hereditary possession of a lord (of which there were three types in Tibet: aristocratic corporate families, monastic-religious corporations, and offices of the central government). Such estates consisted of a formerly delimited land area along with a group of associated serfs. The core of the land area was agricultural land that was divided into a *demesne* (or reserve) area held by the lord and teneement areas held by the serfs. The latter was the economic resource from which the serfs derived their subsistence. They worked that land and kept the yield. The demesne land, on the other hand, was also cultivated by the serfs, but here as a *corvée* obligation with the yield retained by the lord. Although the entire estate was

under the control of the lord, as mentioned earlier, he could not unilaterally alter the demesne-tenement ration. Around 1920 a dispute occurred that illustrates this.

The dispute took place on one of the manorial estates of a large aristocratic family and centered around the lord's attempt to permanently alienate a part of the estate which had always been held by the serfs. Normally, when a serf family became extinct, its land reverted back to the other serf families who, of course, had to absorb the obligations previously performed by the extinct serf family. But when, on the estate in question, some serf families had become extinct in the previous generation, the lord used the land as if it was a part of his demesne lands. At the time of the dispute, these fields were still clearly distinguishable from those the lord "legally" held and, consequently, it was still possible for the serfs to request it be returned to them. They petitioned their lord regarding the land, but he simply ignored their requests. Finally, the serfs collectively took their complaint to the central government for adjudication. At this point, for reasons we need not elaborate here, the lord backed down and returned the land in question on the condition they withdraw their complaint—which they did.

A second important type of estate found in Tibet was actually a corporate village. The lord for this type of estate was invariably the central government in the person of a specific provincial district (*rdzong*), and they consequently were called *gzhunggs rgyugs pa* ("the ones who serve the government"). This estate's most salient feature was that there was no division of the land into demesne and testamentary sections. All the land was held by serf families who nonetheless were still bound to the village land. More will be said later about this type of unit.

Until now I have discussed the status of serf as if it were an undifferentiated category. In actuality, however, there were a number of important serf sub-statuses in Tibet, and while mobility was absent between the lord and serf statuses, there was significant mobility between the various serf sub-statuses.

Tibetans classified serfs into two main categories: (1) *khral pa* and (2) *dud chung*.⁴ The first term literally translates as "taxpayer" or "the one who does taxes" and the second as "small householder" or more literally, "small smoke." The "taxpayer" status was superior in terms of prestige, rights, basic economic resources and, generally, also actual wealth.

The most characteristic feature of the "taxpayer" status was the fact that named corporate family units *hereditarily* held sizable amounts of agricultural land from their lord. The "taxpayer" family units held title to their land and could not be evicted as long as they fulfilled specified obligations to their lord. These obligations, however, were very extensive with taxpayers being required to provide wide-ranging corvée services in the form of human and particularly animal labor as well as a variety of taxes in kind and in money. "Taxpayers," through corporate family units, hereditarily held considerable amounts of land but reciprocally had very heavy tax responsibilities.

⁴ There was considerable variation in terminology between different regions and dialects and the terms cited above are those that were widespread throughout central Tibet.

Note should also be made that even in particular localities a variety of names sometimes were used

with the different terms connoting a level of respect, e.g., in one area in Tsang the usual term was *dud chung*. However, there was also the more respectful term *snying chung* and the more pejorative term *kyang kyang* or *mo rang pa*.

Dud chung, on the other hand, referred to two discernable statuses (see diagram 1). One type, like the "taxpayers," was bound to the land while the other was not. Unlike the "taxpayer" serfs, the "bound" type of *dud chung* normally held only small, nonheritable subsistence plots of land. This, moreover, was held on an individual rather than a corporate family basis with no necessary transgenerational continuity between parcels of land and family units, although they were normally permanent for the life of the serf. In accord with this we find that whereas the "taxpayers" had extensive and varied tax obligations, the bound *dud chung* were required primarily to provide only human corvée labor related to the cultivation of the lord's demesne land.

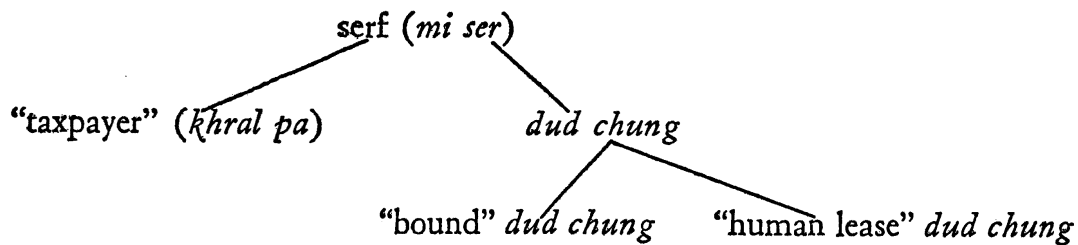


DIAGRAM 1. THE BASIC SERF SUB-STATUSES.

The other type of *dud chung*, the one with which this paper is primarily concerned, was unique in that they were not bound to land (estate). This type of serf retained control over their movements. They were free to go wherever they wanted and to work at whatever and for whomever they wished, although, as we shall see, they were in fact still linked to their lord to whom they owed certain obligations.

The *dud chung* serfs who possessed this freedom of movement were verbally differentiated from the other types of *dud chung* by indicating that they held *mi bogs*, or "human lease" as it literally translates. The remainder of this paper will examine the nature of this status of "human lease," the manner in which it was procured, and the important role it played in Tibetan society.

The origins of the institution of "human lease" are not clear. W. G. Surkhang, a former council minister and learned Tibetan who is writing a history of modern Tibet at the University of Washington, feels that "human lease" is a relatively recent development because the term seems to appear first in eighteenth-century textual materials.⁵ The emergence of an institution such as "human lease" at this time, moreover, fits the historical context. It is likely that the preceding century of strife and warfare which saw the rise to power of the Gelugpa Sect (Dalai Lamas) and the domination of Tibet by the Manchu emperors of China had, on the one hand, diminished the power of the lords and, on the other, increased the value of agricultural labor by decimating the rural population. As we shall see, these conditions would have been ideal for the emergence of an institution such as "human lease."

The term "human lease" breaks down into the word *mi* ("human") and the word *bogs* which in turn is an abbreviation of the term *bogs ma* meaning "lease." *Bogs ma* is used with a number of verbs to indicate the leasing of items such as land, and standard constructions would be: *bogs ma btang* "to give out on lease (*nh*)";

⁵ Personal communication, May 1969.

bogs ma zhu "to request (from someone higher) a lease of something"; and *bogs ma len* "to take on lease."

By far the most common item leased in Tibet was agricultural land. When land was leased, the lessee obtained rights of use for some specified time but not, of course, rights of disposal or of hereditary transmission. The lease was drawn up in a written document that cited the terms, including the lessee's responsibilities toward the lessor. Analogously, when an individual asked for and obtained "human lease" from his lord, he (or she) obtained control over the item leased—in this case the individual's body as a physical resource—although ultimate "ownership" was retained by the lessor, the lord. The serf remained a serf and was still linked hereditarily through an estate to his lord. But just as the lessee of agricultural land was free to plant any crop whenever he wanted, the "human-lease" holding serf was free to decide how and for what purpose to commit himself as a resource. He could work where and at whatever he liked and for contracted wages or lease rather than as *corvée* service. Of all the types of serfs in Tibet, the "human-lease" variety had the most personal freedom. Nonetheless, their serf status was still transmitted to their children in the same fashion as "bound" serfs, i.e., through parallel descent.

The basic obligation of the "human-lease" holding serf to his lord was the payment of an annual sum in cash that was stipulated by the lord at the time he issued "human lease." This annual amount varied tremendously from lord to lord as well as in terms of the sex, age, and productivity of the serf. In addition to this monetary obligation, it was typical for the "human-lease" holding serf to be liable for one or more vaguely specified, open-ended *corvée* services. The nature of these services again varied widely, but a common requirement was for the serf to perform *corvée* labor for a few days at harvest and sowing times (or to hire a replacement). It was also usual for *ad hoc* construction jobs to be included in the serf's potential obligations. But the heart of the obligation of the "human-lease" holding serf was the annual money fee, and even granting the existence of ruthless and harsh lords, the burden of this type of serf was not overly oppressive.

At this junction, a brief presentation of the context of village life in traditional Tibet hopefully will facilitate both what has passed and what will follow. While no single village can exemplify Tibetan "villages" per se, the village to be examined, Samada (*sa mda*), is a typical representative of the type of village most closely associated with the institution of "human lease."

Samada was one of the government serf (*gzhung rgyugs pa*) corporate-type villages mentioned on page 524. It was located at an altitude of about 12,500 feet in the Gyantse district of Tsang (in central Tibet), about 40 miles southwest of the district seat of Gyantse. For Tibet, Samada was a productive area. The dominant subsistence technique was agro-pastoralism (*sa ma 'brog*), that is to say, families practiced both agriculture and herding, although in Samada the agricultural phase was clearly the more important of the two with herding being limited in the main to the more well-to-do families.

As mentioned earlier, in corporate village-estates such as Samada the village was not a part of a larger manorial estate with demesne lands but was rather a self-contained unit. The borders of Samada were formally delimited in documents issued by its lord (the government in the person of the district of Gyantse), and the land area of the unit consisted of about 1000 acres of arable land as well as a number of pasture

areas. All of this land was divided among the (“taxpayer”) serfs who held it as the “basis” from which they fulfilled their obligations.

In keeping with Samada’s corporate nature, taxes were levied by the lord on the corporation as a whole rather than on individual serf families. The village, then, was responsible for internally allocating land and obligations as well as for collecting and transmitting the taxes and organizing the corvée services. In actuality, the government did not interfere with the internal village administration as long as the obligations were satisfactorily fulfilled. There were no resident overseers (as was the case on manorial estates), and serfs on this type estate had considerable internal autonomy.

As a jural entity, the corporation of Samada consisted of eight corporate-family units (taxpayer serfs). Each of these was named, had a diachronic continuity, and hereditarily held rights over a portion of the land resources that made up Samada. Together, the holdings of these eight family units comprised the total of Samada’s area. The units held written title to their land and individuals had rights to land only through such family corporate units. The land held by these families ranged from about 30 acres for the smallest to about 300 for the largest with the majority of families holding somewhere around 100 acres. These serfs were recruited into their status by ascription at birth and like all taxpayer serfs were “bound” to the estate, i.e., the village.

But although these eight family units held substantial land resources, they also had staggering obligations which included taxes in kind (such as grain, money, and animals) as well as very difficult and varied corvée services. One of the more difficult of these corvée taxes was the military tax. It required the village unit to provide 6¼ men to serve permanently as soldiers, and whereas these could be actual members of the taxpayer families, the usual practice was for the village as a whole to hire other (“human lease”) serfs to serve in their place. The salaries they had to pay these hired soldiers were a substantial burden. Another, and probably the single most difficult obligation, was the corvée animal transport tax. This tax required the serfs to provide carrying and riding animals to persons and goods authorized by the central government on an open-ended basis. The serfs were required to move the persons and goods to the next station (*sa tshig*) in the communication network which, for Samada, was approximately 10 miles either north or south. At this point the serfs unloaded the goods and returned home while the serfs of the other village moved the materials on to the next station. This corvée tax required the serfs to maintain at great expense carrying animals such as donkeys and to have these, together with accompanying personnel, ready at all times.⁶

The jural dimension of Samada, however, is only part of the story. The village

⁶The type of corvée taxes listed above were characteristic of “taxpayer” serfs in general and the government ones in particular. The “bound” *dud chung* serfs, in contrast, were primarily obligated to work their lord’s demesne lands. They were organized into tax units (*r̄kang*) either on the basis of the size of their land holdings or on a set number of people (*mi r̄sis*). From these units the lord could demand the labor of usually one, but at peak labor times two and even three, persons to work his demesne fields. Although

there was great variation regarding this, three persons typically comprised such tax units. The life of these serfs was generally considered to be the hardest, and this aspect of tradition Tibetan social organization will be dealt with in a separate essay.

However, for a more detailed discussion of taxation and village structure in a “government taxpayer” village, I refer the reader to Melvyn C. Goldstein, “Taxation and the Structure of a Tibetan Village,” *Central Asiatic Journal*, in press.

population consisted not only of the 40 or 45 members of the eight corporate taxpayer families but rather of about 280 persons. These additional people were "human-lease" *dud chung* serfs. They did not legally have any rights in the corporation of Samada and they resided there actually only by the sufferance of the taxpayers. They could not own land and consequently had to lease even the houses in which they lived. Still, it was typical for them to be the numerical majority in government taxpayer-serf corporate villages.

These "human-lease" serfs, although they had no rights and were under the authority of the village, were nonetheless necessary to the operation of the village. They formed the labor force without which the landholding "taxpayer" serf families could not have managed. They worked on a day-wage basis or, more typically, leased land annually from the "taxpayers" on a work basis. For a set amount of land, the "human-lease" serf was required to work for a set number of days at the demand of the lessor. The strategy of the taxpayer serf was to guarantee himself a competent labor force when he needed them, and with this end in mind the lease-work system was practiced not only on land but also for such things as houses, plowing animals and tools, and even for straight loans of seed or eating grains. But, given Samada's complex dual agro-pastoral "economy," the large landholdings, and the requirements for labor generated by the various corvée tax obligations, extra-taxpayer labor was necessary and energetic and competent "human-lease" serfs could economically do very well. In any case, the relationship between these serfs and the taxpayer serfs was clearly an open economic one. The "human-lease" serfs were free to work for whomsoever they wanted and ultimately could move to another village if the taxpayers abused him. In actuality, a form of market competition for labor resources existed within the framework of hereditary serfdom.

With this as background, let us return again to this rather peculiar institution of "human lease."

An obvious question arises regarding the "human-lease" status. Although the reasons for "bound" *dud chung* serfs seeking it are relatively straightforward, e.g., escape from harsh lords, from difficult economic straits, or because of a strong desire for more individual freedom, why would a lord relinquish his control over a valuable labor resource when one of the most important features of rural Tibet was a shortage of such human laborers due to underpopulation and a vast celibate monastic institution. The answer to this problem is simply that in reality the lords did not usually volunteer to give "human lease."

The largest percentage of new "human-lease" holders were children recruited by ascription from "human-lease" holding parents. What concerns us more, however, is how "human-lease" serfs emerged from "bound" serfs, in other words, the achieved characteristics of the status of "human-lease" serf. For this it will be necessary to treat separately the serfs of aristocratic-monastic units and the government-taxpayer serfs such as those we saw in Samada.

Since monastic and aristocratic lords were losing valuable labor resources when their "bound" serfs obtained "human lease," they were extremely reticent to give it voluntarily. In actuality, it was obtained predominantly as a secondary consequence of running away from an estate. Although it certainly was not a common occurrence, some serfs did attempt to flee from their estates, and although lords had legal rights to seek out and apprehend the runaways, this was not as easily done as said. The ad-

ministrative apparatus of the central government did not maintain facilities in the districts for seeking and apprehending criminals. There was no police force, and the main burden of responsibility for apprehension fell on the victim, in this case the lord. Taking into consideration the size of Tibet and the concomitant factors of large landholdings and demographic pressures, runaway serfs generally encountered little difficulty obtaining some sort of employment in another area, and employers were not concerned with the origins of new individuals in their area. Thus, since local assistance could not usually be counted on, the lords were hard pressed to locate and apprehend runaways.

However, as advantageous as was the great personal freedom which resulted from running away, it was not without its disadvantages. First, there was always the outside possibility that the lord would someday find and punish the serf. Second, there was a possibility that the lord would—either directly or indirectly—vent his anger on the runaway serf’s remaining family and relatives. Third, running away meant a complete break with one’s family and friends and sometimes even one’s local region. Visits were obviously out of the question. And finally, running away placed the serf in a netherland where—since he had no lord—he had no powerful person from whom to seek aid in disputes. He could of course take grievances and disputes before the central government’s District Commissioner (*rdzong dpon*), but because of the normal operation of the adjudicative process in Tibet, a poor person without wealthy supporters could not really avail himself of the theoretically universalistic open legal system. However, a “human-lease” serf—wherever he might reside—was within his rights to request aid from his lord even in cases of disputes with other lords since one facet of the lord-serf relationship was that the lord was expected to protect his serfs from outside injustices and aid them in litigations and disputes.

In many cases the disadvantages outlined above did not lead the runaway to attempt some accommodation with his lord. However, it was fairly common for the relatives of a runaway to attempt to mediate between the serf and the lord. They attempted to convince the lord to give the runaway serf “human lease” and the serf to accept the financial obligations that went with it (including back payments). For the lord, the individual was already lost to his labor pool and he therefore stood to gain by granting this status since he both reasserted control over the serf (and his progeny) and received financial remunerations. The serf received “legal” status and the rights that went along with it. This process occurred frequently in such situations.

Another method of obtaining “human lease” was direct formal petition to one’s lord without first fleeing the estate. The most frequent application of this mode occurred at the time of marriage. Residence after marriage was usually patrilocal. Therefore, a proposed marriage between individuals of different lords produced an obvious problem. If lord X’s female serf married lord Y’s male serf and went to reside with his family, her labor was lost to her lord. Consequently, such mixed marriages first had to receive the permission of the female’s lord. Although several mechanisms to compensate the bride’s lord were available, e.g., the groom’s family replacing the loss of the bride with a substitute person (*mi tshab*), the most frequent pattern regarding out-marrying spouses was for the lord to issue “human lease” to the girl.

But marriage was not the only time lords were directly approached for “human-lease” status. It was also possible to obtain it from one’s lord in special circumstances, an example of which appears in the following document:

tshe mchog gling bla brang gi mchod gzhis me rtsa gzhis 'og khral khongs rdzing khag mi rtsa khyo nyi ma zer ba de sngon nas bla brang nang gzam khongs gsol zhab zhabs zhu zhu mus de ltar yang/ de brjes bstan lcog dwags po bla gnyer 'du phebs skabs zhabs skur bla brang du dgongs zhus don smin son te bla gnyer 'phos mtsham phu gzhis las 'khur du bzhang par da cha me khyi lo phu gzhis 'phos mtshams bla brang du zhabs zhur bar dgos bkā' khyab gnang bar don snying kho pa nyi mar rdo brag 'phreng do rdzong/ rang khongs nang pa sa nag pa sogs nas bun rdzob [sic] rigs pas ma 'dug pa byung te rgyu ngos phran bu yod pa rnam bun bdag khag nas ri rdo klung bskyel gyi khang po rgyug 'khur rang la song 'dug na yang rang nyos rta po'i dpe ltar mi bogs gtong bde med yang/ rang khongs bla dpon mchod yon la dgongs mi ser skyongs 'os la brten nyam thag la dgongs bñhes bla med kyi spyi 'brel mi bogs lo re srang bco lnga re lnga mchod mtshun 'bul lam gleng med zhu phyin slad khral 'gyel/ nang gzam sogs lags gtong 'os ma mchis pa dang/ 'di ga'i bla brang gi mdzad chen phyogs 'gro sogs la dgos gnas shar tshe 'de nas bkā' khyab byung mtsham bkā' mthun byung phyin mdzod las rims 'byor sus khang bsnyad gtser mi chog pa'i lag khyer du tshe mchog gling phyag khang lhan sdeng nas me phag dza tshes la

This man named *Nyi ma*, from the taxpaying family of *Rdzing khag*, a serf of one of *Tshe mchog gling Bla brang's* estates, requested and obtained permission to be relieved temporarily from his duties as kitchen aid in order to serve *Bstan lcog* during his term of office as *Bla gnyer* of *Dwags po*. After the expiration of *Bstan lcog's* term of office, *Nyi ma* returned and was sent by the *Bla brang* to take charge of a minor estate of the *Bla Brang* called *phu gzhis*. In the year of the Fire-Dog (1946) he was called back to resume his duties in the *Bla brang*. *Nyi ma* has now requested to be granted *mi bogs* because due to his stupidity he has accumulated a large amount of debts to such ones as *Nang pa Sa nag pa*, *Rdo rje brag* monastery and '*phreng gzhis do rdzong* and has no means of repaying them being already stripped of all his belongings like a gypsy-beggar. Viewing the relationship between a serf and master as equivalent to that of Lama and patron, and in consideration of *Nyi ma's* pitiful situation, his request is granted, despite all the inconvenience to the *Bla brang*. Henceforth he shall pay fifteen *srang* to the *Bla Brang* before the twenty-fifth of the tenth month each year without excuses, and if he does this he is relieved of all taxation and labor obligations. However the *Bla brang* can call him for service when the need arises on occasions such as celebrations and trips. Fire-Pig year (1949), twelfth month, seventh day.

The above document was issued as part of the settlement of a dispute between two serfs of a monastic lord. The dispute centered around the responsibility for some debts and culminated when one party to the dispute stole and used for the corvée (*rta'u*) carrying tax an expensive horse of *Nyi-ma*. The latter then took the case to the administrative head (the steward or *phyag mdzod*) of the monastery for adjudication. It was common practice in Tibet for litigants to present "gifts" to the adjudicator, and in this instance both parties competed to outgive the other. The case dragged on without settlement until finally *Nyi-ma* told the monastery's steward that unless the case was settled soon he would take the affair to the central government. Consequently, a compromise decision was promulgated which was aimed at satisfying both parties to the dispute, both of whom, of course, had given the steward sizable gifts. *Nyi-ma* was given "human lease" and the other party was allowed to keep the horse without having to make any payment. Although the actual document presents a somewhat more derogatory image of *Nyi-ma*, it is very likely that the truth lies closer to what the

recipient said. It was hardly in character for a monastic lord—particularly the one in question—to magnanimously offer “human lease” simply because a serf was heavily in debt. Be that as it may, what concerns us in this study is that they did give him “human-lease” status.

The document stipulated that the recipient was required to pay an annual amount of 15 *srang* (150 *zho*) to the monastery. This amount was not extremely high, but was substantially more than that required by the government when it began to issue “human-lease” documents (cf. p. 32). The *corvée* requirements, as can be seen, were vague and open-ended. The document gave the lord considerable leeway in interpretation. If the lord was generous, the serf might not be bothered so long as he paid his annual sum, but if the lord was ruthless, the *corvée* obligations could have easily become oppressive. Nonetheless, “human-lease” status, even at a high cost, was considered by those who sought it as being better than remaining a “tied” *dud chung* serf. On the other hand, however, an argument could be made for the “bound” status based on its greater security, and this obviously was one of the main restraints limiting the size of serf runaways.

Up to now, the discussion has focused on aristocratic and monastic serfs. The situation for government “taxpayer” serfs such as we saw in Samada was considerably different from these others.

Like the other serf statuses, the government serf “taxpayer” status was ascribed at birth, and like other taxpayers, they were tied to the land. However, unlike the aristocratic and monastic taxpayers these government ones were readily able to relinquish their taxpayer status in order to become “human-lease” *dud chung* serfs of the type called *spyi mi*. *Spyi mi* aptly translates as “common serf” (*spyi pa'i mi ser*) the “common” denoting not a sense of low prestige but rather the sense of collective. They were the serfs of the village as a corporate entity.

Recruitment to the status of “common serf” occurred in a number of ways: (1) as in all serf statuses, once entered it became hereditary and was transmitted by parallel descent; (2) it was automatically given to government “taxpayer” females who married anyone other than a “taxpayer” of the same village without arranging for “person exchange (*mi tshab*)”; or (3) by voluntary relinquishment by a “taxpayer” of his rights in the corporate family unit. In the latter case, the change of status was relatively simple as long as the male in question was not the only adult male in the family, in other words, so long as the family was able to fulfill its obligations to the village. If there was internal agreement between the members of the family in question, they had actually to inform the village headman (*rgan po*) or, at most, the village “council” (i.e., a meeting of the heads of each “taxpayer” family) to finalize the shift, although the district officials (the lord) ultimately had to be informed.

I stated earlier that the “taxpayer” status was evaluated by all as significantly higher in terms of prestige and was superior in terms of all forms of political power and authority as well as, usually, wealth. Why then did numerous “taxpayer” males desire to move downward into a lower prestige status? The answer to this is related to problems generated by the social structure.

One important factor concerning this was the “monomartial” pattern of marriage. This was relevant for all social categories that held hereditary land, including the “taxpayers” and the aristocracy. It was based on the belief (which was substantiated by my data) that compound extended families in which brothers took separate wives

and remained within the family corporation were unstable. Such marriages eventually led to partition of the corporation and the land. The monomarital principle was, then, a semi-verbalized norm which rephrased in anthropological terms stated that for any given generation only one marriage should be contracted, the offspring of which possess full jural rights in that corporation. Since Tibetan norms held that all males had such rights, the type of marriage contracted therefore had to account for all males in the family. Thus, in Tibet, the normal marriage pattern for "taxpayers" and aristocratic families with multiple males was either fraternal polyandry, bigenerational polyandry, or some similar form of polygamous arrangement.

However, such marriages often generated serious tensions and conflicts between the spouses, particularly regarding sexual jealousy. A wife might show preference for one of the brothers, or one brother might not reciprocate a wife's affection. Such situations were often intertwined with underlying conflicts regarding the exercise of authority by one of the males and often led to severe tension and conflict within the household. In such cases the discordant male could litigate to partition the family corporation, but this was a very difficult and expensive procedure and was rarely attempted. Usually, the individual took the relatively simple option of relinquishing his "taxpayer" status and becoming a "common serf." The member who left received a small share of the movable corporate possessions, which generally amounted to some household utensils and perhaps some grain. Very generally, then, we can say that the causal factors leading to such changes in status usually involved either a conflict of authority, a conflict concerning affect in polygamous, usually polyandrous, marriages, or a conflict between the restrictions of the monomarital pattern and love.

The status of "common serf," however, was not without aspects which were evaluated positively in and of themselves. Tremendous obligations and responsibilities went along with the prestige, authority and, usually, wealth associated the status of "taxpayer"; the life of the "taxpayer" was filled with stress and pressure. The "taxpayer" had to organize and manipulate varied and often extensive resources and pay heavy taxes. In contrast to this, the life of a "common serf" was relatively carefree. Almost always he married out of "love" (choice) rather than arrangement and set up a neolocal nuclear household. Consequently, he had no elders or plural spouses to contend with. Typically, the "common serf" either leased land or worked for wages. He could work for anyone he wanted, when he wanted, and he did not have to worry about heavy taxes, although he did have some tax obligations to the village (i.e., lord). As long as he was able to earn enough to subsist, he was relatively free from interference; it was this relative personal freedom which made the status appealing, particularly when viewed in conjunction with the factors already cited. It was, then, in this sense that the "human lease" "common serf" was an important status in the pattern of mobility.

However, like the other "human-lease" holders mentioned above, the "common serfs" had certain limited tax obligations to their lord. Basically, they were obligated to pay an annual sum of money to their lord, in this case, to the village as a collectivity. But they were also liable for various corvée services, the most difficult and restrictive of which were military service as the village's soldier and service as *ḳhral rogs*, or "helper of the 'taxpayer.'" "

These obligations differed somewhat between the "common serfs" who continued to live in the village and those who moved to other ones. While both paid the annual monetary payment, the latter were never *ḳhral rogs* and were rarely, if ever, required

to serve as soldiers, although they might well be told to contribute some money toward supporting a hired soldier. Residence in the village therefore made a “common serf” more liable for *corvée* duties, but since only a small number of soldiers were required at any given time, the chances were good that any given man would not have to serve. Moreover, a person was liable only while a youth.

The nature of the *khral rogs* obligation is indicated from the semantic content of the term, i.e., “helping a ‘taxpayer.’” Poor “common serfs” were sometimes forced by the village council to help (*rogs*) a particular “taxpayer” family fulfill its tax (*khral*) obligations. Such serfs were then required to work for that family, albeit at the standard daily wage rate. *Khral rogs* were thus a means for abetting the hard-pressed larger “taxpayers” families to mobilize sufficient labor at critical times. Both of these restrictive obligations, however, were only intermittently applied and affected only a small number of the “common serfs.” Consequently, they did not really significantly diminish the valued individual freedom associated with the status.

This, then, was the traditional form that “human lease” took in Tibet. However, during the first decade of this century the Thirteenth Dalai Lama—the first Dalai Lama to actually accede to political power in over one-hundred years⁷—on the advice, it is said, of the Manchu emperor of China’s representative, created a new governmental office and promulgated new laws which drastically altered the structure of serfdom. This new office was called the Agricultural Office (*so nams las khungs*). Its function was to look after “extra men and extra lands” (*mi lhag dang sa lhag*). Over the years, the number of serfs who had run away and either did not want to ask for “human lease” or were unable to obtain it, had become considerable. Similarly, because of underpopulation, large segments of previously dispensed land were not being used. The new Agricultural Office was created to address itself to these problems. One of its most important innovations was a law authorizing it to accept any persons who had been in the state of having no lord for three years. In other words, it was authorized to issue “human-lease” documents to any former serf three years after his initial flight. These lordless individuals then became serfs of the office itself. For the first time, therefore, it was legally possible for a serf to change lords and to eliminate the linkage to land. These serfs were issued formal “human-lease” documents and the annual monetary fee they had to pay was the relatively small sum of 5 *zho* (cf. p. 531) for men and 2¼ *zho* for women. When such individuals were asked “who is your lord?” (*khayed rang gi dpon po su red*) they invariably replied: The Agriculture Office (*nga so nams las khungs gi mi khungs yin*). During the early years after this innovation, these serfs had unquestionably the fewest obligations and the most personal freedom and, consequently, people flocked to obtain “human lease” from that office and become its serfs. Subsequently, other government offices also began to issue these documents.

However, these changes did not persist in this form. Eventually, a new restrictive practice called *khhab gong gzer* was introduced and the potential threat to the system of serfdom greatly diminished. *Khhab gong gzer* literally translates as “to fasten a needle to a lapel,” and the analogy is well taken. The new practices consisted of the Agricultural Office attaching their “human-lease” serfs to estates or to corporate government serf villages which were short of labor and had petitioned that office for aid.

⁷ From 1757 to 1895 the position of ruler was actually held by Regents. Even when a Dalai Lama like the Eighth managed to reach majority age, a Regent was retained who carried out secular affairs.

Such serfs were in effect *khral rogs* since they were required to work for the village or estate to which they were attached and were paid for their labor according to the going daily wage rate, although they could not refuse the work and could not leave the general area. For example, the village of Samada petitioned the Agriculture Office for labor on the basis that they were unable to fulfill their tax obligations due to a dearth of manpower available. They were given a written document stating that they could make the "needles" (the specified serfs of that office in their area) do whatever work was needed. This blanket decree included even the authority to use these serfs to fulfill Samada's military tax obligation.

It can be seen from the previous sections why the stratification system in Tibet could have been characterized as both rigid and flexible. It exhibited both of these characteristics, and this ultimately was its most salient feature. Serfdom as a general status was pervasive among laymen. There were no "free" peasants outside of the numerically small aristocratic stratum. All Tibetans were serfs in the sense that they were incumbents in statuses (or sub-statuses) which hereditarily linked them to lords through estates. However, as we have seen, there were several types of serf sub-statuses between which a degree of mobility existed. Particularly, the status of "human-lease" holding *dud chung* serf afforded a major channel of mobility which gave the overall system its air of flexibility. Within the basic framework of statuses initially transmitted via parallel descent, namely, via ascription, achieved alteration of status was possible. Although the overwhelming majority of serfs remained in their initial serf sub-status throughout their lives transmitting it in turn to their same-sex offspring, a significant number did in fact enter into new sub-statuses, namely, that of "human-lease" *dud chung* serf. This avenue for mobility was especially significant because it offered an alternative in which the serfs were not physically bound to landed estates and, consequently, possessed a considerable degree of relative freedom. It provided a vehicle for reconciling the individual serf's realizable desires for greater personal freedom with the disadvantages of lordlessness within the basic premises of the Tibetan social system. And critically, it allowed certain individuals to leave the confines of specific estates without jeopardizing the estate system. It helped to maintain and reinforce the ideology underlying the estate system while providing the system the flexibility it needed to sustain itself in a situation where the power of the lords was limited and the value of human labor high.