


Briefing Paper: Serf Emancipation Day—The Facts		
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This year the Chinese government has declared March 28<sup>th</sup> “Serf Liberation Day” in Tibet to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1959 ‘liberation’ of Tibetan ‘feudal society’. The question of Tibet’s social history is highly politicised by China and therefore Beijing’s claims have to be treated with caution. The Chinese claims pertain to a region that, before 1951, was not under Chinese control. The PRC does not allow open discussion of whether Tibet was ‘feudal’ or ‘oppressive’. Chinese and Tibetan officials in Tibet and China face serious repercussions if they do not concur with the state’s position on issues such as social conditions in Tibet prior to its ‘liberation’ and in this climate the authorities’ claims have little credibility.\*

Chinese sources describe conditions in Tibet pre-1959 as ‘feudal serfdom’.

- Most Western scholars broadly agree that before 1959, many or most Tibetans were bound by written documents to the land on which they were based and to the lord who owned that land, so some argue that they could be described as ‘serfs’. Some Western scholars have argued that a more appropriate term would be ‘commoner’ or ‘subject’ because of evidence that a large number of Tibetans were able to moderate their obligations to their lords by paying off some of their dues, and so could move from place to place. Tibet also had a functioning legal system to which they could appeal in some cases.
- Some historians argue that in practice Tibetans had more autonomy than appears in the written documentation of the era, and that they could equally well be described simply as peasants with particular kinds of debts and taxation responsibilities, rather than the politically and morally loaded term of ‘serf’.
- The Chinese claim of serfdom depends on its linkage to feudalism and oppression. It is taken for granted that these are inseparable from serfdom.
  - Many historians have challenged this linkage. Goldstein for example notes that although the system pre-59 was based on serfdom, it was not necessarily feudal, and he refutes any link with extreme abuse.
- There is no question that Tibet was an extremely poor society and that the poorest were most liable to exploitation. The Dalai Lama readily acknowledges the injustices of society at that time. This is true of most of Asia and elsewhere, including China, and is still true in many areas.

- Without Chinese rule, there is no doubt that Tibet would have embarked on its own process of modernization, as has been the case with all the countries of Asia.
- However, the current 14th Dalai Lama was a reformer who sought to create a better society in Tibet and can be credited with implementing a democratic government in exile. The version of events pre-1959 presented by China ignores the ways in which the 13th and 14th Dalai Lamas sought to improve the social system - in 1913, for instance, the 13th Dalai Lama declared an amnesty for all 'serfs' who had run away from their landlords and gave all vacant land to whoever was working it.
- Also according to scholars (Goldstein, Barnett, among others), there is limited evidence of the systematic savagery described by Chinese writers, at least since the late 19th century. (There was a famous case of mutilation as a punishment in 1924 but officials involved were punished by the 13th Dalai Lama, who had banned all such punishments in 1913. The case of judicial eye gouging often mentioned in press coverage of the Tibet story was clearly exceptional, since no one living knew how to carry it out).
- On the other hand, there are hundreds of reports, many of them first-hand, of Tibetans being severely tortured in Chinese prisons and detention centers in addition to deaths in custody, none of which have been independently investigated.
- Another important question is why Chinese officials raise the issue of conditions in pre-1959 Tibet at all - a country is not entitled to take over a neighbor merely because social and political conditions there are backward. Nor does a government usually argue that its abuses are justified because they are less than those of a regime half a century earlier.
- According to Western scholars (Barnett, Goldstein), China made no claims at the time of its 'liberation' of Tibet to be freeing Tibetans from social injustice. It claimed it was liberating them from 'imperialism' (i.e. American and European influence). The issue of freeing Tibetans from feudalism appeared in Chinese rhetoric only after around 1954 in eastern Tibet and 1959 in central Tibet.

\* These points draw upon Professor Robert Barnett's essay in response to the question: 'What were the conditions regarding human rights in Tibet before Democratic Reform?' in *Authenticating Tibet: Answers to China's 100 Questions*, edited by Anne-Marie Blondeau and Katia Buffetrille, University of California Press.