

## **CTA's Response to Chinese Government Allegations: Part Three**

17 June 2008

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Ever since peaceful protests erupted in Tibet, starting from 10 March, the Chinese government used the full force of its state media to fling a series of allegations against the "Dalai Clique". These allegations range from His Holiness the Dalai Lama masterminding the recent Tibet protest to His Holiness the Dalai Lama making attempts to restore feudalism in Tibet.

This is the third in a series of response by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) to these accusations.

The Chinese translation of this response will be available at the end of this month [www.xizang-zhiye.org](http://www.xizang-zhiye.org)

The Tibetan translation is available on the Tibetan edition of this website [www.tibet.net/tb/](http://www.tibet.net/tb/)

### **Tibet's Traditional Society, and Democracy in Exile**

The Chinese authorities accuse His Holiness the Dalai Lama of attempting to restore what they call Tibet's old feudal system. They say the ultimate goal of the Tibetan struggle is to achieve this. China's official news agency, Xinhua, on 8 April 2008, quoted the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Jiang Yu, as saying that "the Dalai Lama is the chief representative of the serf system which integrates religion with politics in old Tibet." Jiang Yu said, "Such a serf system, which harbours no democracy, freedom and human rights in any form, is the darkest slavery system in human history."

There is nothing further from the truth than this. His Holiness the Dalai Lama considers himself the free spokesperson for the Tibetan people. It is for the Tibetan people to decide the nature of governance of Tibet in the future. When the time arrives when His Holiness the Dalai Lama and his people in exile can return to Tibet in circumstances that satisfy the majority will of the Tibetan people, then the exile administration will be dissolved and the local government in Tibet will continue to be run by the Tibetans who are currently working in the Chinese establishment. As for His Holiness the Dalai Lama when that day arrives he said he would hold no political office.

To characterize Tibet's old society as "feudal" or "serf system" is not an accurate portrayal of traditional Tibetan society. It is true that traditional Tibetan society - like most of its Asian contemporaries, especially China - was backward and badly in need of reforms. However, it is completely wrong to use the word "feudal" from the perspective of medieval Europe to describe traditional Tibetan society. Tibet before the invasion, in fact, was far more egalitarian than most Asian countries of that time. Hugh Richardson, who spent a total of nine years in Lhasa as British India's last, and independent India's first, representative, wrote: "Even communist writers have had to admit there was no great difference between the rich and poor in [pre-1949]

Tibet." Similarly, the International Commission of Jurists' Legal Inquiry Committee points out that: "Chinese allegations that the Tibetans enjoyed no human rights before the entry of the Chinese were found to be based on distorted and exaggerated accounts of life in Tibet."

Even the Tibetan Government based in Lhasa was far more representative than its counterparts elsewhere in Asia. In his autobiography, *My Land and My People*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama states, "The National Assembly could be convened in three forms. Its smallest form, which was almost continuously in session, included the eight officials of the Yig-tsang and Tse-khang, together with other high lay officials and representatives of the three great monasteries near Lhasa - about twenty representatives in all. This nucleus assembly could convene a larger body of about thirty members to consider specific problems, and on matters of great importance, such as the confirmation of the discovery of the new reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, a full assembly of about 400 members from all the official and non-official levels were called into session."

In terms of social mobility and wealth distribution, independent Tibet compared favourably with most Asian countries of the time. The Tibetan polity before the Chinese occupation was not theocratic as China wants us to believe. The system of rule was referred to as *choesi-sungdrel*, which describes a political system based on the Buddhist tenets of compassion, moral integrity and equality. According to this system, the government must be based on high moral standards and serve the people with love and compassion, just as parents care for their children. This system of governance is based on the belief that all sentient beings have the seed of Buddhahood and should be respected accordingly.

The Dalai Lama, head of both the spiritual and secular administration, was discovered through a system of reincarnation that ensured that the rule of Tibet did not become hereditary. Most of the Dalai Lamas, including the 13th and the present 14th, came from average, yeoman families in remote regions of Tibet.

Every administrative post below the Dalai Lama was held by an equal number of monk and lay officials. Although lay officials hereditarily held posts, those of monks were open to all. A large proportion of monk officials came from non-privileged backgrounds.

Furthermore, Tibet's monastic system provided unrestrained opportunities for social mobility. Admission to monastic institutions in Tibet was open to all Tibetans, and all nationalities, including Chinese, Mongols people from India from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh. Large majority of monks - particularly those who rose through its ranks to the highest positions - came from humble backgrounds, often from far-flung villages in Kham and Amdo. This is because the monasteries offered equal opportunities to all to rise to any monastic post through their own scholarship. A popular Tibetan aphorism says: "If the mother's son has knowledge, the golden throne of Gaden [the highest position in the hierarchy of the Gelugpa School of Tibetan Buddhism] has no ownership."

The peasants, whom Chinese propaganda insists on calling "serfs", had a legal identity, often with documents stating their rights, and also had access to courts of law. Peasants had the right to sue their masters and carry their case in appeal to higher authorities.

Ms. Dhondub Choedon comes from a family that was among the poorest in the social strata of independent Tibet. Reminiscing on her life before the Chinese occupation, she writes: "I belong to what the Chinese now term as serfs of Tibet... There were six of us in the family... My home was a double-storied building with a walled compound. On the ground floor we used to keep our animals. We had four yaks, 27 sheep and goats, two donkeys and a land-holding of four and a half khel (0.37 hectares) ... We never had any difficulty earning our livelihood. There was not a single beggar in our area."

Throughout Tibetan history, the maltreatment and suppression of peasants by estate-holders was forbidden by law as well as by social convention. Starting from the reign of Emperor Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century, many Tibetan rulers issued codes based on the Buddhist principle of "Ten Virtues of the Dharma". The essence of this was that the rulers should act as parents to their subjects. This was reflected in Songtsen Gampo's code of 16 general moral principles, and the code of 13 rules of procedure and punishment issued by Phagmodrupa in the 14th century, and revised by the Fifth Dalai Lama in the 17th century.

There were some punishments, sanctioned by law, in the past which included mutilation such as the cutting off of a hand or foot and putting out an eye. Such punishments were never lightly used but were decreed only in cases of repeated crime. Flogging was the principal punishment. Even in the 19th century although the power to inflict mutilation existed in theory it was only rarely put into practice. Capital punishment was banned in Tibet, and physical mutilation was a punishment that could be inflicted by the Central Government of Lhasa alone. In 1898, Tibet enacted a law abolishing such forms of punishment, except in the cases of high treason or conspiracy against the state. The 13th Dalai Lama issued a regulation conferring on all peasants the right to appeal directly to him in case of mistreatment by estate holders.

All land belonged to the state which granted estates to monasteries and to individuals who had rendered meritorious service to the state. The state, in turn, received revenues and service from estate holders. Lay estate holders either paid land revenues or provided one male member in each generation to work as a government official. Monasteries performed religious functions for the state and, most vitally, served as schools, universities and centres for Tibetan art, craft, medicine and culture. The role of monasteries as highly disciplined centres of Tibetan education was the key to the traditional Tibetan way of life. Monasteries bore all expenses for their students and provided them with free board and lodging. Some monasteries had large estates; some had endowments which they invested. But other monasteries had neither of these. They received personal gifts and donations from devotees and patrons. The revenue from these sources was often insufficient to provide the basic needs of large monk populations. To supplement their income, some monasteries engaged in trade and acted as moneylenders.

The largest proportion of land in old Tibet was held by peasants who paid their revenue directly to the state, and this became the main source of the government food stocks which were distributed to monasteries, the army, and officials without estates. Some paid in labour, and some were required to provide transport services to government officials, and in some cases to monasteries. Land held by the peasant was hereditary. The peasant could lease it to others or mortgage it. A peasant could be dispossessed of his land only if he failed to pay the dues either in

kind or labour, which was not excessive. In practice, he had the rights of a free-holder, and dues to the state were in the form of land tax paid in kind rather than cash.

Small sections of the Tibetan population, mostly U-tsang (Central Tibet) were tenants. They held their lands on the estates of aristocrats and monasteries, and paid rent to the estate-holders either in kind or by sending one member of the family to work as a domestic servant or agricultural labourer. Some of these tenant farmers rose to the powerful position of estate secretary. (For this, they were labelled by the communist Chinese "agents of feudal lords"). Other members of these families had complete freedom. They were entitled to engage in any business, follow any profession, and join any monastery or work on their own lands. Although they were known as tenants, they could not be evicted from their lands at the whim of estate holders. Some tenant farmers were quite wealthy.

Kham and Amdo regions had, since early times, remained in numerous and contiguous compact societies, or social groups. Similar to Central Tibet, the economic mainstay of the people living in these areas were farming and pastoral nomadism. These areas were administered either by a chief lama or by a chieftain, or by both. They held their posts hereditarily. Many of them, however, enjoyed recognition from the Central Government of Tibet based in Lhasa. As regards the high lamas of the monastic institutions, the process of identifying their reincarnations was mostly undertaken by the Lhasa Government. The final degree for the religious education of all senior lamas, in particular, must be obtained from the three Great Monastic Seats in Lhasa, and this recognition from the central monasteries is considered the highest in the academic lives of lamas and tulkus. The other important posts of the respective monasteries were also appointed on the same basis. There were nearly 4,000 monasteries in Kham and Amdo regions, and each of these monasteries had its own, permanent estate. If we draw a map of these estates over which the monasteries exercised authority, we can say with absolute certainty that there was not a single area in Kham and Amdo that did not fall under the administrative jurisdiction of the monastic estates.

The 13th Dalai Lama had abolished the system of demanding free transport from the local land-holding peasants by officials travelling on duty and had fixed charges for the use of horses, mules and yaks. The 14th Dalai Lama went one step further and ordered that in future no transport service should be demanded without the special sanction of the government. He also increased the rates to be paid for transport services.

Foreigners like Charles Bell, Hugh Richardson, and Heinrich Harrier, who lived and worked in independent Tibet, were impressed by the average standard of living of ordinary Tibetans, which they said was higher than in many Asian countries. Famine and starvation were unheard of in Tibet until after the Chinese invasion. There were, of course, years of poor harvests and crop failures. But people could easily borrow from the buffer stock held by the district administrations, monasteries, aristocrats and rich farmers.

When the 14th Dalai Lama assumed the throne, he constituted a reform committee to introduce fundamental land reforms, but the Chinese communists, fearing that these would take the wind out of their sails, prevented His Holiness the Dalai Lama from carrying out his proposed reforms. In his autobiography, *My Land and My People*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama writes, "I managed

to make some fundamental reforms. I appointed a Reforms Committee of fifty members, lay and monk officials and representatives of the monasteries, and a smaller standing committee to examine all the reforms that were needed and report to the larger body, and thence to me."

In 1959, after his flight to freedom, His Holiness the Dalai Lama re-established his government in India and initiated a series of democratic reforms. A popularly-elected body of people's representatives, the parliament-in-exile, was constituted. In 1963 a detailed draft constitution for future Tibet was promulgated. Despite strong opposition, the Dalai Lama insisted on the inclusion of a clause empowering the Tibetan parliament to revoke his executive powers by a majority of two-thirds of its total members in consultation with the Supreme Court, if this was seen to be in the highest interests of the nation.

In 1990 further democratic changes were introduced by increasing the strength of the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies (ATPD) - the defacto parliament - from 12 to 46. It was given more constitutional powers such as the election of Kalons (ministers), who were previously appointed directly by the Dalai Lama. The Supreme Justice Commission was set up to look into people's grievances against the Administration.

In 2001 the Tibetan parliament, on the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, amended the exile Tibetan constitution to provide for the direct election of the Kalon Tripa (the chairman of the Cabinet or Kashag) by the exile population. Since the establishment of the new system the Tibetan exiles have elected the Kalon Tripa two times.

Years in exile have also seen the growth of a strong and vibrant Tibetan civil society with its own distinct voice and vision. The emergence of NGOs like the Tibetan Youth Congress, the Tibetan Women's Association, the Tibetan National Democratic Party, Gu-Chu-Sum, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy and many others in the fields of education, health, culture and environment, which have strengthened the roots of democracy in exile and have also served as a forum for the training of future leaders. The degree of the openness of the exile Tibetan community is reflected by the fact that in the late 1970's a Tibetan Communist Party appeared on the exile Tibetan scene.

Looking to future Tibet, in February 1992 the Dalai Lama announced the Guidelines for Future Tibet's Polity and the Basic Features of its Constitution, wherein he stated that he would not "play any role in the future government of Tibet, let alone seek the Dalai Lama's traditional political position". The future government of Tibet, the Dalai Lama said, would be elected by the people on the basis of adult franchise.

In the 10 March 2003 statement, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said, "It is necessary to recognise that the Tibetan freedom struggle is not about my personal position or well-being. As early as in 1969 I made it clear that it is up to the Tibetan people to decide whether the centuries-old institution of the Dalai Lama should continue or not. In 1992 in a formal announcement I stated clearly that when we return to Tibet with a certain degree of freedom I would not hold any office in the Tibetan government nor any other political position. However, as I often state, till my last day I will remain committed to the promotion of human values and religious harmony. I also announced then that the Tibetan Administration-in-Exile should be dissolved and that the

Tibetans in Tibet must shoulder the main responsibility of running the Tibetan government. I have always believed that in the future Tibet should follow a secular and democratic system of governance. It is, therefore, baseless to allege that our efforts are aimed at the restoration of Tibet's old social system. No Tibetan, whether in exile or in Tibet, has any desire to restore old Tibet's outdated social order. On the contrary, the democratisation of the Tibetan community started soon upon our arrival in exile. This culminated in the direct election of our political leadership in 2001. We are committed to continue to take vigorous actions to further promote democratic values among the ordinary Tibetans."