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Nomadic pastoralists and the traditional political economy—a rejoinder to Cox.

Rejoinder by Melvyn C. Goldstein (Case Western Reserve University)

Introduction

Romanticizing traditional Tibetan society and revising its history in accordance with contemporary political expedience is growing as the political contest between the Dalai Lama and China over the status of contemporary Tibet intensifies. Cox's response to my rejoinder seems another thinly veiled example of this revisionist trend. I found particularly astonishing his comment that, "The fact that Tibetans (in the face of considerable Chinese propaganda to the contrary) are trying to convey to the world the fact that the nomadic inhabitants of their country did have considerable freedom and autonomy before the Chinese invaded,¹ makes Goldstein's irresponsible use of the term [serf] particularly reprehensible." (Cox 1991: 151)

Mr. Cox is apparently suggesting that use of the term "serf" for Tibetan social institutions is "irresponsible" because (1) there is no empirical justification for use of the term, and (2) because its use hurts the political cause of the Tibetans in exile.

With regard to the latter point, if Mr. Cox believes that scholars of Tibetan society have an obligation to support Tibetans who are engaged in a political struggle with the Chinese over the status of Tibet, then I disagree strongly. Scholarship should produce objective and insightful analyses regardless of whether they support or contradict the claims of any particular political interest group.

And with regard to the evidence for serfdom in Tibet, I am astonished that Mr. Cox believes that there is no justification for the use of this term and thus that its use is academically irresponsible. There is a long and detailed literature on the nature of Tibet's peasantry and its relevance to serfdom, including a detailed exchange between myself and Professor Beatrice Miller on precisely the issue of the applicability of "serfdom" to Tibetan institutions in *The Tibetan Review* (Goldstein 1986, 1988, 1989).² In other words, my use of "serfdom" is an issue about which I have presented my views in-depth. And while I certainly accept the right of others to disagree with my interpretations, to suggest they are irresponsible is simply preposterous. If there is any scholarly irresponsibility, it is Mr. Cox's incomprehensible failure to mention the existence of this literature and evaluate it.

Since Mr. Cox made the very serious accusation of academic irresponsibility, I feel compelled to respond to his charge by discussing the basis of my classifying the Tibetan political economy as a variant of the institution of serfdom. I will start with a discussion of Tibet's agricultural peasants since they will serve as a baseline against which to compare the new ethnographic data on the nomadic pastoralists of Pala in western Tibet.

The traditional Tibetan agricultural mode of production

Eric Wolf (1982:75) has written that "each major way human beings organize their production constitutes a mode of production—a specific, historically occurring set of social relations through which labor is deployed to wrest energy from nature by means of tools, skills, organization, and knowledge."

Wolf (Ibid.) sets out three basic modes of production: the kinship, tributary and capitalist modes. In the tributary mode of production, the workers have access to the means of production—land—but they are compelled to provide "tribute". i.e., services in kind and labor, to lords who use political force to compel the workers to comply. States utilizing the tributary mode of production ranged from decentralized feudal polities to highly centralized states, and over time, individual polities have shifted in both directions along this continuum.

(and their sub-units) and the Lhasa government. The aristocratic (*sger gzhis*) and monastic estates (*chos gzhis*) typically consisted of two components: (1) the means of production—arable land and/or pastureland, and (2) laborers—hereditarily bound peasants that provided the lord of the estate a captive labor force.

Characteristically, the farming estates consisted of a “demesne” or lord’s land segment (roughly 50-70% of the total arable land) and a “tenement” or peasant’s land section. All work on the demesne land was done by the bound peasants as a corvee (*‘u lag*) obligation without reimbursement. The lord received the entire yield from this land. This corvee obligation was known in Tibetan as *nang khral* (“inner tax”) and was a type of *rkang ‘gro* (“going on foot”) corvee tax. Peasants on such estates may or may not have had to provide goods in-kind also.

The basic unit of peasant taxation was the *khral rkang* (“tax-*rkang*”). It was a unit of tenement land whose size was based on the amount of seed sown on the field.³ There was no national standard for the size of *tax-rkang* and it varied from lord to lord, but in the areas around Lhasa one *tax-rkang* ranged typically from 10 *son khal* to 14 *son khal*.⁴ Corvee taxes were owed to the lord on the basis of the number of *tax-rkang* a household held, for example, holders of one *tax-rkang* of land had to provide one person to work for the estate every day, and two persons at times of peak agricultural activities in Spring and Fall (called *gnyis bkul*).⁵ On top of that a third person was required at particularly heavy work times. This right was called *dud gnam gtong* (“[households] “that send smoke into the sky” [i.e., everyone]). Peasant families rarely held more than one *tax-rkang* of land.

The authority of lords over their people can be seen by the lord’s right to move people from their estate to provide corvee labor elsewhere. For example, in the late 1940’s the Para Chiso (*pha ra spyi so*—one of the two chief economic managers of Drepung monastery) implemented a new scheme for collecting firewood for the daily prayer tea the monastery served monks. He found a mountain area in Phembo (north of Lhasa) with extensive firewood and moved 12 young unmarried men from the Drepung Chiso’s Phembo estates to that mountain. They were required to cut wood and transport it to the Lhasa River where it was shipped by coracle boat to Drepung. These young men were taken by their lord as a corvee tax (i.e. they had no choice), and had to work there for the term of office of the Para Chiso—ten years. They received no salary during that time, but the lord gave each of their households a one person exemption from the daily worker corvee obligation on their estate.⁶

Each estate usually had a resident manager/steward (*gzhis sdod* or *gnyer pa*) sent by the lord to oversee production on the demesne portion of the estate. The peasants also had a headmen (*rgan po*) who was generally appointed from among the peasant households by the estate steward, but sometimes also rotated among the peasant households.

The part of the estate not allocated as the lord’s demesne fields was divided among the peasant households. They farmed this “tenement” land and derived their subsistence from it. Usufruct rights to this land were hereditary, but peasant households were not free to sell such land as it was owned by the estate.

In addition to religious and aristocratic estates, a substantial segment of farm and pasture land was controlled by the central government. This land sometimes was organized in the form of manorial estates similar to those described above, but more often consisted of villages in which there was no demesne land, i.e., all of the arable land in these villages was distributed as tenement land among peasant households. This kind of peasant was known as a *gzhung rgyug pa* (“government server”). The peasants on these government estates were also bound to their land, and had corvee labor and in-kind tax obligations on the basis of *tax-rkang*.⁷

The Tibet political economy in farming areas, therefore, centered around the institution of the manorial estate with its concatenation of arable land and a captive labor force. Peasants were hereditarily bound to their estates and did not have the legal right to give up their land and seek their fortune elsewhere. They could of course run away—as could slaves in the U.S. south—but legally they could not decide to move somewhere else and unilaterally terminate their obligation to the estate. Lords had the right to pursue runaway peasants and forcibly bring them back to their estate and punish them. This right was called *mi rtsa yul bkog* (“uprooting people from an area”). This linkage to an estate and lord was transmitted hereditarily by parallel descent—

men's sons became subjects of their father's lord, and women's daughters became subjects of their mother's lord. If estates changed hands, as sometimes happened, the bound peasants remained with the land and became the subjects of the new lord.

The permanent subservience—bound status—of peasants to their estates and lords is seen clearly when individuals desired to leave the estate permanently, for example to marry or to join a monastery. If a person wanted to go as a bride or groom to the household of someone belonging to a different lord, his or her lord had to grant permission. Several institutionalized options were available.

The simplest was known as “person exchange” (*mi brje*). In this option the person marrying out was replaced by someone coming from the estate to which he or she was going. This normally involved someone from the other estate coming as a bride or groom, but sometimes a servant or person without any tax-*rkang* land was sent as an “exchange” person. This option meant that neither lord lost a subject.

A second option was for the lord of the out-going bride or groom to permit the person to leave but not to change her or his subject status. The person marrying-out would remain a subject of the original lord as would all of her/his same-sex children, in perpetuity.⁸ Such persons were given a status called “human lease” (*mi bogs*) since they were “leasing” their freedom to live and work elsewhere. They typically paid an annual tax (usually in money but sometimes also in labor or in goods) to the original lord as did their children of the same sex. Lords kept detailed records of their “human lease” subjects, including births and deaths and annual *mi bogs* payments. An examination of this institution including an example of a “human lease” document is found in Goldstein (1971).

A third, rare, option occurred when a lord completely relinquished his rights over the person and their future same-sex progeny by granting them “human release” (*mi 'khrol* [or *dpon 'khrol*—“release from lord”). This, however, was not often granted. A variant of this was the “religion release” (*chos 'khrol*) given to persons becoming monks or nuns. Although this permission was inevitably granted, it did not permanently sever the subject's obligations to his lord. It was valid only while as the person remained a monk in good standing. If a monk was expelled from the monastery his previous serf status was reactivated. This residual right of lords was called: *skya rtsa rang bdag* (“layman—own lord”).

In addition to these options, lords had the right to transfer (give) certain types of their subject peasants to other lords. Usually this occurred with their house servants (*nang zan*) or with peasants without tax-*rkang* land. In such cases, the lord transferring the person usually gave the receiving lord a '*khrol 'dzin* (“release document”) which certified that the person now belonged to him. Although this was not a common practice in Tibet, and there was no custom of buying and selling people, it is clear that such transfers of people from one lord to another did occur.

Similar to this was the institution of “tax appendage” (*khral snon*). This involved a lord giving a person to one of his taxpayer peasant households that was short of labor (see Goldstein 1986 for a discussion of this).

It was, therefore, this pervasive jural system in which peasants were hereditarily bound to agricultural estates held by lords that I have referred to in numerous past articles as serfdom. This system also clearly fits the definition of serfdom offered by Cox—“A serf is an agricultural laborer who is bound to the land to such an extent that he may be transferred with the land to another owner.”

The reader will have noted that I did not use the term serf to describe the “peasants” in the above discussion. I did this deliberately to indicate, as I have in the past, that conceptually there are two separate issues with regard to the study of the political economy in traditional Tibetan society. The first, and certainly the most important issue, is to delineate objectively the fundamental structure and functioning of that system in its various permutations throughout Tibet—i.e., the nature of obligations and rights of peasants and lords and the estate system in which they coexisted. This can be done without the raising the issue of serfdom.

The second issue concerns the place of that system vis-a-vis other traditional states. In the case of Tibet, I find serfdom a heuristic construct because it focuses attention on the similarities shared

by a range of political economies that have existed in different parts of the world in different eras—namely, their utilization of a system of extraction in which a labor force was hereditarily bound to a productive resource controlled by a lord.

Given this background, let me now turn specifically to the situation of nomadic pastoralism in the traditional Tibetan state.

The nomadic pastoralists of Pala

The notion of nomadic pastoralists as autonomous or semi-autonomous tribes that roam the far-flung hinterlands of agricultural states has so dominated the popular and scholarly imagination, that it is now commonly believed to be a fundamental characteristic of pastoral nomadism per se. Consequently, obtaining a better understanding of how nomadic pastoralists functioned within the Tibetan state was one reason why my colleague Dr. Beall and I decided to conduct fieldwork in Pala (*Bar la*), a nomadic pastoralist group in what is now called the Tibetan Autonomous Region. We conducted research there in 1986, 1987, 1988 and 1990. Fieldwork was conducted in all seasons and data were collected by participant observation, focused interviews on sub-topics such as pasture rotation, local records, and a range of physical anthropological and ecological measurements. Information on the traditional society was collected through open-ended interviews with nomads who were adults during that era.

The findings from this fieldwork indicate that the nomadic pastoralists of Pala were organized in a manner analogous to the farming peasants described above—i.e., they were hereditarily tied to an estate and did not have the freedom to unilaterally terminate the relationship and leave. Rather than free-ranging, semi-autonomous tribes, they were completely integrated into the political and socio-economic system of the Tibetan state.

The Pala nomads belonged to a pastoral estate known as *La rgyab lho byang* that consisted of 10 sub-units (*tsho*) of which Pala was one. It was spread over a vast area covering hundreds of square miles on the Changdang (Northern Plateau) at altitudes of 16,000-175,000', and was surrounded by other nomadic pastoral areas such as *Zangs zangs* to its south and *Nag tshang* to its north. The lord of *La rgyab lho byang* was the Panchen Lama, one of Tibet's most famous incarnate lamas. His administrative government was called Labrang (*bla brang*).

La rgyab lho byang was subordinate to *Bshad mthong smon*, one of the Panchen Lama's five district-like estates. Three local nomad officials (two *tsho dpon* and one *sgar dpon*) were appointed by the lords as overall leaders. Each of the 10 sub-units (*tsho*) also had one or two headmen (*'go pa*) who were nomads appointed by the three nomad officials in consultation with *Bshad mthong smon*'s official called the *'Jad pa sde pa*.

Since nomadic pastoralists live in tents and move their campsites to different pastures over the year, it seems counter-intuitive initially to suggest that they were analogous to agricultural peasants. But, actually, it was not difficult for lords of nomadic estates to implement parallel systems of land tenure, taxation and subordination.

Land in Pala, just as in farming estates, was owned by the lord. And like farmers, the nomads had usufruct rights on that land, but had no legal claim to it. Moreover, although nomads owned their animals, they were bound to their estate (and lord) for the same reason as peasants on agricultural estates. Labor was necessary to convert the lord's resource—pastureland—into products that generated wealth.

The Pala system was organized around a basic tax unit called *mar khal* ("butter khal") that was the equivalent of the tax-*rkang* used in farming areas. The entire area of *La rgyab lho byang* was divided into named pastures each with an allotted number of *mar khal*.⁹ Each *mar khal* was equal to 13 yaks in 1956. In turn, 6 sheep or 7 goats were considered equal to 1 yak (so that 78 sheep or 91 goats were equal to one *mar khal* (13 x 6=78). The entire *La rgyab lho byang* region, therefore, contained a fixed number of *mar khal* (of pastureland) for which a fixed amount of taxes had to be provided to the lord on the basis of these *mar khal*. Individual nomad households held pastureland in proportion to the number of livestock they held, and paid taxes to their lord on that basis. For example, a household with 13 yaks would be allocated one *mar khal* of

pastureland and had to provide 1 *mar khal* 's worth of taxes—about 11 pounds of butter and various amounts of the other products such as baby sheep skins, live animals, soda, yak saddles, salt, money, wool carrying bags, felt yak saddle pads, yak skins, woven wool, rawhide ropes, and cheese.

Every three years, the lord conducted a formal census of livestock and people called *lebso* (*leb rngod*). On the basis of this, the allocation of pasture to each household was adjusted depending on whether its livestock had increased or decreased. This, in turn, was the basis of taxation for each household for the next three years regardless of changes in herd size during that period.

The jural link between nomad and lord paralleled that of farmers in most ways. Pala nomads were hereditarily subject to their lord, the Panchen Lama, and even single-person households with no animals (locally known as *pho rang* and *mo rang*) were compelled to pay taxes called *mgo tam* (“head-tranga [a type of Tibetan money]”). Like farmers, the nomads of *La rgyab lho byang* did not have the right to leave their area permanently for another lord. The above mentioned customs of “human lease” (called in Pala *mi khral* [“person tax”] instead of *mi bogs*), “person exchange” (*mi brje*) and “person release (here called *dpon 'khrol*) existed here, as did the right of forcible return of runaways (*mi rtsa yul bkog*).

Immediately south of *La rgyab lho byang* was another nomadic pastoralist area called *Zangs zangs*. These nomads differed from *La rgyab lho byang* in that their lord was the Tibetan government (in the person of *Sa dga'* district). In other words, these nomads were the equivalent of the agricultural *gzhung rgyug pa* mentioned earlier. However, like *La rgyab lho byang* they employed a system of three year censuses with pasture reallocation,¹⁰ and the institutions of *mi khral*, *dpon 'khrol* and *mi brje* were present as was the right of retrieving runaway serfs (*mi rtsa yul bkug*).

Consequently, the nomadic pastoralists in both *La rgyab lho byang* (Pala) and *Zangs zangs* were incorporated into the Tibetan “tribute” political economy in a manner analogous to farmers. The basic logic of the serf farming economy—ensuring that lords had a productive resource—land—and also a permanent, subordinate labor source was applicable to these nomadic areas.

Cox's Example of Sakya monastery

Mr. Cox's recent response presented quotes (taken from Dr. Dawa Norbu's book *Red Star over Tibet*)¹¹ meant to show that Changtang nomads were not serfs of monastic lords to whom they provided taxes. Without identifying who these nomads are or where they lived, he presents two kinds of “evidence.” One is that the nomads mentioned in Norbu's book gave products to monasteries only as gifts or offerings:

Once every year or two the Sakya monastery would send a mission, consisting of the chief contractor, a tantric practitioner and three servants to collect donations for both the monastery and the governor of western Tibet from the Changtang's different nomadic groups. These donations consisted of yak, sheep and butter. The resources to be given, however, were never just arbitrarily imposed on nomads by monastic official. Rather, the amount to be donated was left up to the nomads themselves. (Cox 1993:151-152).

The second is that they had their own local administrators:

The Changtang nomads maintained a high degree of independence and autonomy in their relations with Tibet's monastic officials. Indeed, the central Tibetan government appointed a local administrator from among the nomads themselves (Norbu 1987: 2). The fact that this administrator worked independently, did not have to answer to other locally present state officials, and was a member of the nomad community, enabled him to be flexible in the implementation of his administrative duties, in such a way as to protect the autonomy of the nomadic community. (Cox 1993: 151)

Both of these statements demonstrate a glaring lack of understanding of Tibetan ethnology and of the essential meaning of serfdom.

The first issue—missions collecting donations—reveals nothing about whether these nomads were subjects of a lord (monastic or otherwise) to whom they paid taxes/tribute. Missions such as the one mentioned were known as *'bul sdud* (“collecting offerings”), and were commonly sent by monasteries to remote areas that had no regular access to religious practitioners. The missions included a “tantric practitioner” because the function of the mission was to provide services to the nomads in terms of rituals, divination and so forth. In turn, the nomads gave offerings to the monk practitioner which were turned over to the originating religious institution, although in some cases the practitioners themselves kept a portion of this and became wealthy. The target nomad population was often not subject to the monastery sending the mission, and even if it were, this provision of religious services had nothing to do with a lord’s collection of taxes. Consequently, the existence of such a mission says nothing about the politico-economic status of the nomads to whom the mission was sent, i.e. whether they had a lord, who that lord was, and what obligations they owed to that lord.

Although Dawa Norbu apparently does not say anything about who these nomads were, it seems from Cox’s citations that the lord of these nomads was the government, i.e., that they were *gzhung rgyug pa* in the same manner as the nomads of *Zangs zangs*. I suspect this for the following reasons. First, Cox says that their headman was appointed by the Tibetan central government. If they were subjects of Sakya monastery or some other monastic lord, Sakya or that lord would have appointed their leader. And if they were truly autonomous, they would have had leaders independent of the government (or lords). Moreover, if, as it seems, they were under the government, this would also explain the cryptic comment that the mission was collecting donations for the governor of Western Tibet. I have never heard of *anyone* in traditional Tibet giving “donations” to the government—only taxes—so that it is likely these “donations” were in fact tax obligations. In any case, Cox’s example is too unclear to allow any conclusion about the status of these nomads, whoever and wherever they were.

Cox’s second argument makes an amazing jump of logic. He argues that because the local officials were nomads, they could not be serfs (or bound subjects) of a lord. First, appointing local officials from among subjects is the custom throughout Tibetan. On agricultural estates, the lord appoints a steward to manage his demesne fields, but at the same time also appoints village headmen who function as the liaison between the steward/lord and the villagers. Second, the presence of such local headmen in no way changes the “bound” status of the villagers, nor does it free villagers from fulfilling their corvee and in-kind tax obligations, or give them freedom to abrogate their bound status.

And as for local autonomy, serfdom does not mean that serfs had no local autonomy. Lords were not interested in micro-managing the lives of the villagers or nomads. As long as their corvee obligations were fulfilled, what serfs did with their time was of no concern to their lord. The genius of serfdom was precisely that it enabled lords to generate substantial income with minimal input of their own time, energy and money. Consequently, on a day to day basis, serfs/subjects could do as they pleased so long as they fulfilled their hereditary obligations. In fact, the custom of having local people serve as officials meant the lords did not have to bother with the mechanics of tax organization within the village. The lord only had to deal with the headman, who, in turn, was responsible for seeing that the corvee and in-kind taxes were provided on time. The essence of systems of serfdom is hereditarily tying labor to land resources, and the nature of the recruitment of local officials is irrelevant to that issue.

Finally, whatever the mode of production of these unidentified nomads, it in no way affects the validity of my data on Pala. There may well have been nomads in Tibet who were lordless, but their existence in no way implies that there were no nomads who were part of estates. Mr. Cox apparently has the naive notion that there was one uniform nomad culture in traditional Tibet.

Conclusion

The Pala data reveal clearly that these nomadic pastoralists were integrated into the dominant political economy found among Tibetan farmers prior to 1959. They show clearly that a nomadic subsistence economy could be incorporated into a system of estates and lords. For the reasons stated above, I consider this mode to be a form of serfdom.¹² Whether this will turn out to be valid for all of political Tibet's nomadic groups is of course not certain since there are still no data on most of these. It appears to be valid for the adjacent nomad areas such *Zangs zangs*, but more empirical research is needed before we can really begin to discuss Tibetan nomadic pastoral society throughout the plateau.

Finally, a broader issue embedded in my exchange with Mr. Cox should be mentioned explicitly. Tibetan ethnology is a relatively new field. With only a few exceptions, professional ethnographic research in the ethnic Tibetan areas outside of China began only in the 1970s, and even today there is hardly any socio-cultural literature on Tibetans within China, e.g. those in the Tibet Autonomous Region and Kham and Amdo. As I look at this literature, it is becoming increasingly evident that a key issue for contemporary Tibetan anthropology is to delimit the range of social, cultural and political systems under which "ethnic Tibetans" lived traditionally. All areas in the Tibetan culture area appear to share similarities in language, but there is growing evidence of substantial variation in social arenas such as kinship, politics, and religion that will have to be unraveled by careful, objective scholarly studies. For example, whereas the nomads of *La rgyab* had to seek permission from their lord to join a monastery (chos 'khrol), the nomads of *Zangs zangs* did not. Similarly, the *Zangs zangs* nomads organized pasture reallocation on a community level whereas the *La rgyab lho byang* nomads did it on a household basis. Another study reports that the nomads in Damshung allocated pasture on a lineage basis (Clarke 1992). Hopefully in the next decade we will be able to assess these differences and similarities and develop an empirically based ethnology of the Tibetan culture area. If we are to succeed, however, researchers will have to view Tibetan society objectively rather than through the emotional lens of contemporary politics.

Notes

- 1 While some Tibetans have argued that serfdom is not a valid term for Tibet's institutions, they have done so with regard to villagers, *not nomads*. If there is a literature arguing that Tibetan nomads were not serfs I do not know it and Mr. Cox cites no references for this assertion.
- 2 I am writing this response from Lhasa where I am currently conducting fieldwork so do not have exact references for most publications other than my own.
- 3 The measure unit for this was the *son khal* ("seed-khal"), one *khal* being a volume measure that equaled roughly 31 lbs of barley.
- 4 A tax-*rkang* of 12 *son khal* would mean planting 372 pounds (12 x 31 lbs.) of seed. At an average yield of 5 times the seed planted, the total yield would be 1860 pounds of barley or a net yield of 1488 pounds after the seed for the next year is subtracted. For a household of 5 people, the per capita yield would have been 298 pounds per person—slightly more than what an adult would need for subsistence.
- 5 The corvee work obligation was not limited to farming the lord's demesne land. Corvee laborers did a range of non-agricultural tasks such as wool work and collecting incense and firewood.
- 6 Interview with Sandrup, an official of the Chiso who was in charge of this operation.
- 7 This is a merely an overview of a very complex system with a variety of types of estates and peasants (e.g., *khral pa*, *dud chung*, and *nang zan*), and those interested in greater detail about different types of peasants and obligations should consult the literature in the references.

8 In other words, even though a woman was living on the estate of her husband, she would still be a subject of her original lord as would all of her female children (and their female children). Her male offspring, however, would belong to their father's lord.

9 A formal book called the *rtswa khra* ("pasture list") listed every pasture area and the number of *mar khal* it contained.

10 The pastures in *Zangs zangs* were reallocated on the basis of sub-units (called *rtswa shog*) rather than individual households

11 Although Dr. Norbu is a well known Tibetan scholar with a Ph.D. in political science, the information in this book on nomads derives from Dr. Norbu's recollections about his childhood, not from a scholarly study he made of nomads.

12 While Mr. Cox implies that Tibetans are in favor of their traditional politico-economic system, I disagree. Regardless of the political views of today's rural Tibetans (in Tibet) with regards to independence or autonomy, I am confident that no one would agree to return to the system of estates and hereditary subservience that existed in Tibet before March, 1959.

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