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MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF “FEUDALISM,” AS SEEN FROM THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CHINESE  
AND WESTERN CONCEPTS OF “FEUDALISM”

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*[In Chinese today, the term feudal (fengjian) is often simply a synonym for old fashioned. In Marxist ideology it has an as-it-were technical meaning, referring in the Chinese context to pre-capitalist society. In the orthodox position (inherited from Stalin), all societies pass through similar stages—primitive communism, slave society, feudal society, capitalism, socialism). In Marx there are also indications of an alternative developmental path for “oriental” societies, with oriental despotism being an alternative for feudalism. The general Party line has always rejected this interpretation, as it implies that China was somehow outside the normal stream of human development. Liberal opinion, however, often reverts to the theme of oriental despotism. The essay translated/paraphrased below is a critical discussion of the concept as it has been used popularly and in political discourse. The term feudalism is an abstraction from the European experience. Chinese society prior to the imperial unification in 221 BC was in some respects similar to that of medieval Europe (although the author also asserts that European feudalism was based on contract, while that in China was based upon lineage). Chinese society after unification, however, was completely different from that of feudal Europe. While this is a scholarly essay, and its substance contains much worth discussing, its main thrust is probably polemic. European feudalism, he claims, was based upon a system of mutual rights and obligations, and the western liberal system of limited government, personal liberty, and democracy is a development from feudalism. The implication is that if China had enjoyed this kind of feudalism, it would have a more humane political system today.]*

The concept of “feudal” or “feudalism” in China is, I am afraid, one of our most confused, misleading, and overused terms. Because of its long-standing and broad popularity in Chinese society it has even become a term of daily use. Everyone knows what it means. But this leads to its erroneous and misleading usage as a technical term, leading to even more serious confusion. From the other side, it is precisely because of its overuse that “feudalism” has become broadly popular (it is easy for terms that have no set usage to become popular). We may say that these two aspects are mutually dependent. In recent years numbers of scholars have put great effort into an analysis of the concept of feudalism, but up to now most of this has focused on the distinctions between the meaning of the term in ancient times and today. Thus, there are analyses of how what was meant by feudalism in the Western Zhou era is different from what is meant by the term today. It seems there has not yet been enough attention to the differences between western European feudalism and Chinese feudalism (that is, the differences between the feudalism of the western Middle Ages and ancient China). A

very few scholars have discussed these distinctions (for example, Feng Tianyu says that western Zhou feudalism was “lineage feudalism,” while that of western Europe was “contract feudalism”). But apart from this there has been very little comparative analysis. But that kind of research lies precisely at the key juncture of the concept of feudalism. This is because the understanding that Chinese have of feudalism is abstracted from the western variety of feudalism. From the perspective of historical epistemology, we must first study the connotations of the western concept of feudalism in order to understand the true meaning of how the term is used in China.

### **Concrete Examination of Chinese and Western Concepts of “Feudalism”**

There are strict rules determining what counts as western European feudalism. This is something that follows from actual, concrete history. On this we should not only study the clear explanations by Marc Bloch, an expert in the study of feudalism, but also the clear understanding of the concept outlined by Marx and Engels. They did not generalize the significance of this concept in a monolithic manner. From their concrete work they concluded that this sort of feudalism did not exist anywhere but in western Europe.

From the history of the study of the “feudal nature” of China and the west we may see that those things in China deemed to be feudal have basically nothing to do with the feudalism found in the history of western Europe. Rather, the comparison has been brought in by the back way and is forced. We may even say that any term that has “feudal” in front of it is open to doubt and probing examination. A few examples follow:

**“Feudal despotism.”** A good many scholars have already pointed out the perverse nature of this term. Liu Beicheng points out: “For Marx and Engels, feudalism and despotism are two incompatible concepts. Any classical and pure feudalism is necessarily a form of ‘stratified ownership.’ Ruling authority is divided and dispersed, so it is impossible that there be any despotism. Despotism exists only in oriental society, where there is no feudalism. This is ‘oriental despotism,’ while medieval Europe is a model of feudalism, and so had no despotism.” He Huaihong also points out, for terms such as “feudal despotism” or “feudal grand unity,” “as far as their original definition goes are in fact contradictory.” “‘Feudal’ implies a division into fiefs; it implies a dispersion of power. Because of this, if something is ‘feudal’ it cannot have centrally concentrated power. There cannot be a one-man despotism nor can there be any ‘grand unity under Heaven.’” These mistakes derive precisely from the application of the term “feudalism” to China’s despotic system.

**“Feudal government.”** Medieval Europe was not united; nor was there one kind of “feudal” government. The royal family and the Church, the nobility and the cities all divided power among themselves. Some cities had their own councils and municipal governments. So should city governments be considered feudal or not? In the later Middle Ages, royal power and the power of assemblies developed together, bringing about a stratified system of state government.

That kind of government was not completely feudal. Whether or not these various forms are “feudal” or not, one thing we can say for sure is that China never had that kind of “feudal government” with a division of powers. There was only a unified state system ruled by the Emperor and the bureaucracy.

**“Feudal politics.”** Does this refer to the politics carried out by feudal rulers, or to all political behavior and all political phenomena that happen to occur in “feudal society”? The English nobility joined with the urban citizen class to limit the powers of the crown, issuing the Magna Carta, a document with constitutional implications and establishing a parliament. More commonly in western Europe the crown joined with the cities to weaken the feudal forces, leading to the development of capitalism. So forth and so on. In the end, what does “feudal politics” mean? How should we explain the politics that took place within the cities themselves? How do we define it? Going a step further, was there any such “feudal politics” in medieval China? There is no point in doubting that if China did have that kind of politics, it would not have remained stagnant and backward for such a long period of time.

**“Feudal society.”** In the past we would use the term “feudal society” without any serious examination of its content. We did not think about its structure or its composition. We figured that as long as there was a system in which landlords exploited peasants, there was feudal society. It didn’t matter whether it was in the east or the west, its nature was all the same and the societies were naturally all the same. But it happens that questions of social structure are not that simple. There was a multiplicity of structures in western “feudal society.” It has been pointed out that it is forced and arbitrary to use the term “feudal society” as a general description of the west from the 11<sup>th</sup> through the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries; it is “illogical.” West European feudal society had at least five different social components: lordship and serfdom, religious authority, society organized into territorial states, aristocratic society, and city-state society. These social structures do not all share a feudal nature. From the Qin dynasty to the late Qing China was a unified monolithic state/society ruled by the Emperor and bureaucracy. Whether or not it was a “feudal” society, in terms of structure and organization it was basically different from western society.

**“Feudal economy.”** The west European feudal economy was an individual economy. According to feudal principles, the King “depended on himself for a living,” that is, he lived off his own territory. If the King were in need of some sort of non-feudal revenue, he had to have the agreement of the taxpayers. In medieval Chinese society, the command economy occupied both the major and the supporting position. The Emperor and bureaucratic groups could obtain large quantities of wealth through their access to state power. They could either dispose of it or enjoy it. The characteristic of west European feudalism was a clear separation of the public and the private. The principle of the feudal system was a strict distinction between the private feudal economy and the non-feudal common economy or the economy of the state. In medieval China not only was there no separation between public and private, but on the

contrary there was an appropriation of the public for private advantage. We may say that it was precisely because medieval China lacked the western-style feudal economy and principle there were no limits on what could be expropriated from society.

**“Feudal thought”** In the minds of Chinese, “feudal thought” focuses on the terms “loyalty” and “filial piety.” In first place there is the concept of the loyal official, the exaltation of the ruler and the abasement of the official. Next is the concept of respect for parents and service for the sake of benefiting the family. Fully to realize loyalty and piety was the highest standard of behavior in traditional Chinese society (the more mundane aspects of “feudal thought” were not institutionalized in a set of rules—the notion of emphasizing the male and slighting the female is an instance of this). The contents and substance of western feudal thinking are nothing like this. In the west, the most important concept was that of the power of God. Next were the truly feudal ideas, such as subordination to the ruler and the awarding of fiefs to officials. The relationship of lord and vassal was a personal one and was extremely strong. According to Bloch, it was equivalent to a relationship between friends. Not only was the vassal loyal to the lord, but the lord was also loyal to the vassal. This kind of loyalty did not entail the unconditional subordination of the individual but was conditioned by mutual duties. This system of feudal duties took precedence over loyalty to the king or to the state, and also over the well-being of the lineage. As Bloch points out, “Sometimes the duty of service could not be avoided, and could come into conflict with one’s duty as a subject or to one’s kin. When this happened, it seems that the duty of service always prevailed over other obligations. This was not only manifest in actual activity but was also stipulated by the law.” Because of the constraints imposed by God and feudal thinking, there could not be the kind of loyalty and filial piety that prevailed in China.

**“Feudal privilege”** In medieval China, the nobility from the imperial family and officials and their dependents enjoyed freedom from conscription, whether military or labor. In the west, however, military service was a privilege of the nobility. The first was a privilege allowing the avoidance of duty; the second privilege was the privilege of fulfilling one’s duty. The Chinese official aristocracy also had the privilege of avoiding corporal punishment for crime. In England, however, members of Parliament had the privilege of personal inviolability. In many states today there are similar legal protections for legislators; these reflect a continuity with Medieval Europe. Privilege in China involved all sorts of personal favors granted by the grace of the emperor to his officials. Since these were acts of grace, they could be retracted at any time. In the west, the privileges in fact were rights that protected the freedom of persons and groups. Once they were given they could not arbitrarily be taken back, and the recipients of privilege would fight whenever necessary to retain them. The purpose of the privileges of the Chinese emperors and officialdom was to strengthen their rule over and exploitation of the people. In the west, rulers and people had different privileges. The people were

frequently able to win privileges for themselves, so protecting the interests of the people. As [E. P. Thompson?] says: “The newly formed bourgeoisie demanded the recognition of the rights and privileges of towns. From the political perspective this meant that the centuries-old system of effective limitations would be carried over into the non-feudal world. The common people also demanded ‘rights’ and ‘freedom’ to implement their own control over law, taxes, currency, and the market, supporting the uniform application of the rule of the feudal king over the territory under his jurisdiction.” It was precisely the existence of these “feudal” privileges that allowed the rapid development of western capitalism. In themselves privileges entail the unequal treatment of different strata of society. But in the west privileges were spread widely throughout society and so were able to promote equality, bringing about a result contrary to the nature of privilege. For example, it was the privilege of the nobility to be judged only by nobility of equivalent rank, but this was applied to other strata in the form of the principle of judgment by one’s peers. Thus, there were special courts for merchants, who could be judged only by other merchants. Feudal manorial courts were established jointly by serfs and by representatives of the lord, with serfs acting as judges and jurors. In China there was never any participation by subjects as officers of the court. Rather, everything was decided by the official court.

**“Anti-Feudalism”** In China, anti-feudalism refers to the opposition in contemporary society of the people against landlords, warlords, and the political actions of the governments controlled by landlords and warlords. But anti-feudalism in the west refers to the common political and economic action by all segments of “feudal society.” It refers to the union of the kings and the bourgeoisie against the feudal nobility. Not a few scholars in China and abroad point out that the Church in many respects was anti-feudal. For example, it limited the powers of the feudal rulers, opposed private feuds among feudal lords, so forth and so on. What does the opposition of feudal lords to feudalism imply?

There are a great many other distorted concepts of feudalism. I limit myself to discussing those above.

### **Conclusion: One Needs a Proper Understanding of Medieval Society in China and the West**

It is amazing how different Chinese and western feudalism are from each other. What’s even harder to believe is that for such a long time two things so basically different were regarded as identical. This indeed is something that requires thinking about.

There have been not a few scholars who have pointed out that “feudalism” in China is not the same as that in the west. The writer Lin Da, who resides in the United States, has often stressed the differences between China and the west. He clearly points out: “We believe that ‘European feudalism’ and ‘Chinese feudalism’ are not at all the same thing.” According to Wang Jiafan, “In textbooks today medieval Europe and medieval China are both feudal societies, but everyone knows they are not feudal in the same way.”

The differences between medieval China and the west are not limited to concrete matters. They each had their own

fundamental spirit or principle. The nature of west European feudalism was to demarcate the authority and duties of each stratum of society, not the simple exploitation of peasants by lords, as we thought in the past. There are two basic points: One is the equivalence of rights and duties; to enjoy rights one must fulfill duties; similarly, if one fulfilled duties, one should enjoy rights. The parliamentary system is established on that basis. The other is that everyone, regardless of rank, enjoyed rights and also had duties. There was never a one-sided enjoyment of rights and authority. In the past we had a mistaken view of feudalism, seeing it as something backward and ugly. We did not, therefore, see that European feudalism had its positive side—for example, the principle of contract, of mutuality, of equality within the same status, the system of separation of powers and checks and balances, so forth and so on. All of these helped the birth and development of capitalism. Even more importantly, feudal society left a relatively great amount of free space, creating conditions allowing for the appearance of new forces. But China's "grand unity" of state and society made it hard for new forces to be produced and to develop. It is precisely because it lacked this kind of feudalism that China remained static and backward.

*Xin Hua Wenzhai*, 20 August 2007