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Tibetan Buddhist Self-Immolation

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

Since 2009, 141 Tibetans have engaged in self-immolation, setting their bodies alight, in protest against China's rule of their homeland. This article asks why. How has this previously unknown form of protest become the primary symbol of political opposition in Tibet today? Noting the lack of a tradition of self-immolation in Tibetan Buddhist culture, this article finds the origins of this seemingly incomprehensible act within the current sociopolitical context, wherein this fundamentally new phenomenon has taken on significant symbolic meaning in just a few years. This article further analyzes political, somatic, and religious meanings employed in Tibetan communities in interpreting this act, demonstrating how communities make sense of this phenomenon's intertwined power and horror. Finally, beyond the Tibetan community, this article reviews various parties' responses to these acts of sacrifice to begin envisioning new directions on the Tibetan plateau: a challenge demanded by the act of self-immolation.

Keywords: Tibet, China, self-immolation, protest, Tibetan Buddhism, sacrifice

Lobsang Phuntsog was a monk at the Kirti Monastery in Sichuan Province's Ngaba Prefecture. On March 16, 2008, this monastery and its surroundings were the site of peaceful protests that were met with unforgiving repression by the Chinese state, as part of a larger series of protests across Tibet in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. On March 16, 2011, on the third anniversary of these events, Lobsang Phuntsog stepped onto Ngaba's main thoroughfare, called for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet, and set his body alight in protest. The twenty-year-old was beaten by police while still in flames. When monks tried to rescue his body from officials, a struggle broke out. Phuntsog took his last breath in a hospital at 3:00 a.m. on March 17. In the aftermath of these events, Kirti Monastery and the surrounding town were subjected to an intensified "patriotic education campaign" and a large and unrelenting military presence, which continues to this day.¹

Lobsang Phuntsog was not the first monk to self-immolate; nor would he be the last. Two years prior, on February 27, 2009, a fellow Kirti monk named Tapey, twenty-four, was the first monk to self-immolate in Tibet's modern history, setting his body alight in the same area of town. Following in their footsteps, as of June 2015, a total of 146 Tibetans have chosen the path of self-immolation as political protest since 2009. An overview of data on these events gives us an initial glimpse of the rise of self-immolation in Tibet. We find that there was one case of self-immolation in 2009 (Tapey), fourteen in 2011 (twelve within Tibet, two in the diaspora), eighty-six in 2012 (eighty-five within Tibet, one in the diaspora), twenty-nine in 2013 (twenty-seven within Tibet, two in the diaspora), eleven in 2014, and five in 2015.² Of these acts of self-immolation, 141 took place within the area known as Historic Tibet (U-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo provinces), extending from the current Tibetan Autonomous Region of China through the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan. Six other incidents of self-immolation have taken place throughout the Tibetan diaspora (in Nepal and India). In terms of gender, 121 self-immolators were men, and twenty-five were women. Occupationally, their careers ranged from monks to herders to retired cadres to high school students. Of the 146 participants, 120 are known to have died; others, like Tapey, remain alive, although their whereabouts are unknown, hidden in official custody, and only appearing to the outside world in occasional state propaganda videos.³

Such basic facts are well established, despite a determined blockade by the Chinese authorities on information related to events in Tibet.⁴ Researchers examining self-immolation can thus know who has engaged in this act, when and where they acted, and how they did so. Yet, one issue remaining unanswered by such data is the question of why. This is undoubtedly the most pressing question when faced with these acts of protest: Why have more than 100 people in Tibet in recent years swallowed or doused themselves in gasoline and set their bodies alight? In her discussion of the imagery of self-immolation in Tibet, Leigh Sangster revealingly notes the incongruous and enigmatic nature of these acts of protest. On the one hand, this dramatic act makes the protesting individual all too real and all too present to us, as we view images of this horrific act and cannot help but imagine the pain involved as fellow human beings. On the other hand, however, because these acts silence the voices of their enactors, they leave us unable to know the circumstances leading to such actions.⁵ We are thus called by the dramatic impact of self-immolation to seek this most pressing, yet missing, piece of knowledge: why? This article reviews recent scholarly attempts to answer this question, looking first at the origins of the current wave of self-immolations, followed by analyses of their meanings within the current sociopolitical context in Tibet, and a final overview of the various responses to these acts of protest, which, in their unique horror, demand a response.

Seeking the Origins of Self-Immolation

Seeking to understand the sources of these protests, religious or cultural explanations are naturally tempting. As Sienna Craig observes in her analysis of self-immolation in Tibet, when confronted with this shocking form of protest, “we search for moorings in familiar places, from which to navigate a course of uncertainty and pain.”⁶ Yet, despite the temptations of a religious or culturalist explanation for this initially most incomprehensible of acts, we find that there is in fact no substantive tradition of self-immolation in Tibetan Buddhism, and such a wave of protest was essentially unthinkable prior to 2009.⁷ There are no religious rewards for these acts, and there has been lively debate in recent years in Tibetan communities about whether these acts even adhere to Buddhist principles, in light of the highly negative associations with the act of taking one’s life. We must thus look at far more recent history to understand the rapid rise and spread of this protest movement.

As a number of scholars have observed, one can find no established tradition of self-immolation in Tibet.⁸ Tsering Shakya notes that the practice of self-immolation is indeed not entirely unknown in Tibetan Buddhism, but that past occurrences have largely faded from memory and can be found only as obscure references in ancient texts.⁹ The most prominent example of self-immolation in Tibetan religious culture is the story of the Bodhisattva Medicine King, who, in the *Lotus Sutra*, swallowed various perfumes and covered himself in fragrant oils before offering his body, the ultimate donation, in an act of self-immolation.¹⁰ This tale, however, has not inspired a significant amount of imitation over the millennia. Katia Buffetrille, looking at the history of self-immolation in Tibet, cites three recorded incidents in the distant Tibetan past. The first, recorded in the ninth-century *Bashe* account of the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, refers to a case of self-immolation resulting from a doctrinal dispute.¹¹ Two other cases cited by Tashi Tsering took place in the 11th and 17th centuries, respectively. The first is the case of Dolchung Korpon, a “local functionary” who self-immolated in front of the Jowo, a sacred statue in Lhasa’s main temple. The second instance involves “Karma Chagme (1613–1678), a great master of the 17th century, who gave one of his left fingers as an offering lamp to the Jowo.”¹² Although self-immolation is, then, not completely absent from Tibetan history, this dramatic act had existed as only a footnote therein, until 2009.

Other more recent occurrences around the world initially appear more relevant for examining self-immolation in Tibet, but the actual extent of their influence remains ambiguous. The self-immolations in Vietnam by Thic Quang Duc and other monks in the early 1960s, events that became iconic symbols of the Vietnam conflict, are closer to the current wave of self-immolation than any of the historical examples discussed in the previous paragraph, as is Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Tunisia in 2010 that sparked the Arab Spring. While noting the potential importance of these dramatic acts seen around the world as an example, it is important to note that no self-immolator has made reference to these acts. As Robert Barnett has observed in his discussion of these potential influences, “news from abroad, even when conveyed by modern technology, is probably a secondary influence on people in most countries, and especially so in those where the state restricts the distribution of almost all foreign news.”¹³ Of arguably greater relevance, however, is the case of Thupten Ngodup, the first Tibetan living in exile to self-immolate, in 1998. On April 27, 1998, while participating in a hunger strike for Tibet in Delhi that the Indian police planned to break up, Thupten Ngodup doused himself in gasoline and set his body alight, shouting “Victory to Tibet!,” “Independence for Tibet!,” and “Long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama!” as he burned. Despite the

dramatic nature of this act and the shockwaves that it sent through Tibetan society, we should also note that it was only eleven years later that anyone followed in Thupten Ngodup's steps, with the self-immolation of Tapey in Ngaba on February 27, 2009. The current wave of self-immolation that followed in the wake of Tapey and Lobsang Phuntsog's acts of protest thus cannot be causally traced to obscure historical references in Tibet, nor to more recent political-cultural events in Vietnam, the Middle East, or the Tibetan exile community. Self-immolation as currently practiced in Tibet is a fundamentally new phenomenon.¹⁴

As there is no clear explanatory precedent for this wave of self-immolation in Tibetan history and culture, where should one look to begin to understand the rise of this unprecedented and extreme form of protest? Rather than seeking understanding through cultural traditions, many scholars have situated this wave of protest in the far more recent tradition of protest and uprisings in Tibet,¹⁵ which have been a feature of Tibetan political life since the Chinese incursion of 1950. And as highlighted by the case of Lobsang Phuntsog cited at the start of this article, the events of 2008 and their aftermath are of particular relevance for understanding the subsequent emergence of self-immolation within this tradition of protest. In March 2008, Tibetans across cultural Tibet rose up in protest against Chinese rule. Monks at the Drepung and Sera Monasteries on the edge of Lhasa began protests peacefully on March 10, 2008. However, confronting unrelenting state violence, the situation in Lhasa had boiled out of control by March 14, transforming into riots. The protests thereafter quickly grew to be the largest and most sustained since the Dalai Lama's flight to India in 1959, spreading through Tibetan areas of present-day Sichuan, Qinghai, and Gansu Provinces just a few months prior to the widely anticipated 2008 Beijing Olympics.¹⁶

The social, cultural, political, and ethnic grievances that led to the protests of 2008 included: severe restrictions on religious practice and forced denunciations of the Dalai Lama in the monasteries and throughout society, attempting to reshape belief in Tibet. Severe restrictions were imposed upon Tibetans in the name of "harmony," "stability," "patriotism," attempting to reshape society and people's lifestyles. Effective bans were enacted on the study of the Tibetan language in favor of Mandarin Chinese as the primary language of instruction, reshaping the linguistic and educational environment. Nomads who had lived on the grassland for centuries were subjected to forced resettlement, reshaping longstanding cultures and lifestyles. The government arranged an influx of Han Chinese migrant workers into Tibet, radically reshaping the region's demographics. Added to all of this was widespread environmental degradation, drastically reshaping the region's ecosystem.¹⁷ Although all of these policies have been rationalized by the Chinese state as "development" and disinterested or even benevolent "preferential treatment" of Tibetans,¹⁸ this perspective completely overlooks the pervasive sense of concern and, indeed, insecurity about the preservation of Tibetan identity produced by these policies, which in turn produced the 2008 uprising.¹⁹ And although some scholars have attempted to explain the 2008 unrest in Tibet as a reflection of the socioeconomic challenges and contradictions facing China as a whole on the path of modernization,²⁰ such "new leftist" miasma presents Tibet as just another Chinese province, drawing attention away from the longstanding ethnic-national tensions that are central to any substantive understanding of the "Tibet question."²¹

These ethnic-national tensions were on clear display in the relentless crushing of the 2008 protests and their aftermath. In contrast to the type of cellular, local resistance that the Chinese Communist Party usually faces in protests across China, the protests in Tibet in the spring of 2008 were far-reaching and based on a sense of "shared ethnicity and territory,"²² thus presenting a unique challenge. The official response was, accordingly, even more unforgiving than usual: the protests were crushed without mercy, leading to a highly contested number of deaths, ranging anywhere from eight (Chinese government sources) to 219 (exile government sources).²³ Charlene Makley observes that "the military crackdown on Tibetan protest institutionalized the CCP's state of exception in a state of siege targeting not a specific enemy but entire towns and districts,"²⁴ collectively punishing Tibetans as a whole. At the same time, mobilizing popular nationalist sentiment, China Central Television repeatedly broadcast carefully edited images from the protests of Tibetans burning shops and beating Han residents, thereby casting Tibetans as ungrateful, unreasonable, and violent "terrorists" who attacked an innocent populace without provocation or reason.²⁵ As a result, Han Chinese nationalism, already at a peak with the 2008 Olympics approaching, was directed inward, toward Tibetans, who were cast as an enemy. This resulted in a further deterioration in already-tense ethnic relations, the disconcerting effects of which continue to this day.

Official policy continued to follow this enemy-producing framework in the aftermath of the 2008 protests, as the authorities chose to further intensify the policies driving the grievances behind the protests.²⁶ An already tightly controlled region was quickly transformed into a militarized region, watched over by the omnipresent "People's Armed Police."²⁷ Increasing surveillance has been accompanied by the increased deployment of paramilitary

police at any sign of unrest, with the authorities even going so far as ejecting monks from monasteries²⁸ or raiding monasteries to preempt potential unrest.²⁹ An intensified “patriotic education campaign” has attempted to exercise discursive control over Tibetan society,³⁰ calling for ever more denunciations of the “Dalai Lama clique,” inculcating a “correct understanding” of Chinese rule as a benevolent gift,³¹ and pressuring Tibetans to celebrate a new holiday, “Serf Emancipation Day,” marking the Dalai Lama’s flight from Tibet in 1959.³² At the same time, the closure of all media access to Tibetan areas³³ has aimed to ensure that no unapproved stories make their way out of Tibet. Beyond Tibet proper, Tibetans in China have been subjected to marginalization, being forced to undergo additional security searches at transit points³⁴ and even finding it difficult to check into hotels or hail taxis.³⁵ Such a continual tightening of restrictions has indeed succeeded in making large-scale protests like those of 2008 impossible, while at the same time only further aggravating the very tensions that led to these protests in the first place. The Chinese state has thus remained unyielding in response to popular unrest, doing everything except addressing the sources of the problems on the ground in Tibet.³⁶

Tibetans thus face a perplexing paradox: despite the description of Tibet as an autonomous region, its people are in reality exposed to an intense degree of control, far beyond that exercised in other “nonautonomous” regions of China. As Fabienne Jagou has stated, “being a Tibetan in China is far from easy and it has become even less so since 2008”³⁷ And, as a result, similarly paradoxically, Tibetans have many reasons to protest, but have been left without any effective way to do so: there is no civil option for organizing peaceful protest and dissent,³⁸ and no other effective routes for making one’s voice heard.³⁹ Since 2008, Tibetans have continued their tradition of protest via a number of subtle, peaceful, and meaningful tactics, including “non-cooperation movements; boycotts; White Wednesdays (Lhakar) during which people eat Tibetan food but no meat, speak Tibetan, and wear Tibetan clothes; vegetarianism; abandon of monasteries by nuns and monks to escape from the new rules; demonstrations in support of the Tibetan language; [and] coded radical poetry.”⁴⁰ There have also been cases of individual protest, consisting of shouting slogans and distributing leaflets. These protestors, however, have been quickly disappeared.⁴¹

A paradoxical situation has thus emerged, in which there are abundant reasons to protest, but no effective means to do so. Within this context, self-immolation has emerged as a new form of political protest. Unlike large-scale protests of the type enacted in 2008, self-immolation’s instantaneous nature makes it nearly impossible to prevent, despite the authorities’ diligent attempts. And, unlike individual protests of the type enacted since 2008, its dramatic nature makes self-immolation as political protest an act that cannot be ignored. And, most importantly, self-immolations’ demonstration of courage, represented by a willingness to undergo the most extreme pain for a collective cause, inspires and indeed presses others to take action. Self-immolation in Tibet today is thus less Tibetan Buddhist than simply Tibetan: a product of, and response to, the current unsustainable sociopolitical situation in Tibet.

Deciphering the Meanings of Self-immolation

Self-immolation, beyond Assumptions of the Self and Despair

Having established the post-2008 sociopolitical situation in Tibet as the source of self-immolation’s emergence, another equally pressing question remains. Within this sociopolitical context, what exactly do these acts of protest mean? In any discussion of the motivations and meanings behind self-immolation, the irreplaceable voices of those who have chosen this path of protest are largely missing, precisely on account of their choice of this means of protest.⁴² There is thus no easy answer to that most pressing of questions: Why?⁴³ Yet, the act itself presses us to rise to the challenge of “making sense of an action that is, at its heart, anything but senseless.”⁴⁴

In his discussion of the causes of and influences upon self-immolation in Tibet with regards to Chinese state policy, Robert Barnett observes that “the policy-response thesis always becomes morally fraught and contentious when it is offered to justify actions which have led to violence against others,”⁴⁵ as in the case of suicide-bombing and other forms of terrorism. By contrast, self-immolation, as a means of acting dramatically yet primarily upon oneself, and not engaging in a violent manner against others, avoids precisely such a “moral and political quagmire.”⁴⁶ Self-immolation is thus an extreme but, still, morally and politically powerful means to highlight opposition when no other peaceful means are available. At the same time, although self-immolation acts upon the self, as Tsering Shakya observes, the act itself cannot begin to be explained by individual motivations:⁴⁷ self-immolation is

inevitably a social act directed toward collective causes, beyond the self, which is destroyed in this act of protest.⁴⁸ This, as Tsering Woesser notes in her study of self-immolation in Tibet, is the irony of the terms “self-immolation” in English and “*zifen*” (literally “self-burning”) in Chinese: both give undue priority to the notion of the self, while the act of self-immolation itself is directed toward broader, collective, and even inherently selfless causes.⁴⁹

Tracing these causes, we revealingly find that the first two cases of self-immolation in Tibet were intimately tied to the events of 2008, as described earlier. Tapey, the first monk to self-immolate in 2009, chose this path following the cancellation of a commemorative prayer meeting for those who had been killed in the violence of 2008,⁵⁰ acting against this erasure of violence and death by making it visible again.⁵¹ And Lobsang Phuntsog, the first monk to self-immolate in Tibet in 2011, sparking a wave of similar self-immolations in the following months, engaged in his act of protest on March 16, the third anniversary of the protests and crackdown around Kirti. Self-immolation is, thus, as Tsering Woesser argues,⁵² a continuation of the protests of 2008, as well as a dramatic means of protesting the deteriorating social and political environment in Tibet since that pivotal year.

The selflessness of self-immolation, made for the sake of broader collective causes, further highlights the pitfalls of portraying self-immolation as a symbol of despair. On a personal level, the suicidal nature of immolation easily leads to an assumption of despair, seeing this act as an attempt to escape the present via suicide. Such an interpretation, although understandable in light of the grim topic at hand, overlooks the fact that a suicidal individual has many options for killing himself or herself, and would gain little, besides even further despair, from the extremely painful experience of self-immolation. This is clearly not an easy way out. How, then, could self-immolation be seen as an escape from despair? In his early 2012 article “Beacons of resistance, not desperate acts,” Christophe Besuchet deconstructs the reflexive portrayal of self-immolation as a sign of hopelessness, asserting that such simplistic analyses lack proper respect for the motives, determination, and aspirations of self-immolators. Elevating the analysis of self-immolation from individual despair to collective concerns, Besuchet argues that these acts of profound heroism have been misrepresented as acts of individual escapism.⁵³ Rather than seeing self-immolators as personally losing hope and giving in, Besuchet argues that protestors have chosen to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of their fellow Tibetans and for the restoration of their nation’s pride.⁵⁴ According to a study of the final statements of self-immolators,⁵⁵ these latter themes appear considerably more prominently than any stated sense of despair. Rather than reflecting individual hopelessness, then, self-immolation as a form of protest that acts upon the self yet whose origins and meanings extend far beyond the self is an act of political resistance that is meant to inspire courage and hope for a collective cause: an act of construction, beyond the surface image of destruction.⁵⁶

Visual and Bodily Impacts

Self-immolation as an act of protest, based in concerns beyond the self, also clearly has repercussions far beyond the self, sparking the viral circulation of inerasable images:⁵⁷ anyone who witnesses such an act of protest, even through mediated images on the news or via YouTube, remains haunted by what he or she has seen. What about this form of protest endows it with such radical symbolic impact? Many scholars have noted the combined uncontrollability and disruptiveness of this act, bringing about a break in the patterns of everyday life: what we see in this moment reveals the resistance that has been symbolically stifled for years. As Katia Buffetrille observes in her discussion of self-immolation in Tibet, in a sociopolitical situation in which all freedoms have been lost, the ability to sacrifice one’s life may be the last freedom that one has.⁵⁸ And, as noted by Elliott Sperling, self-immolation is “a solitary, individual act of protest that can be undertaken in an instant with little chance for the authorities to prevent it, or to shut out the protestor’s message.”⁵⁹ Unlike conventional protests, whose participants can be arrested, suppressed, or disappeared, or a hunger strike, which can be forcibly halted by the authorities,⁶⁰ self-immolation as a means of protest is dramatic, fast, and effectively irreversible:⁶¹ a very visible means of enacting protest when protest is otherwise impossible. Despite repeated attempts, the authorities have been unable to stop these protests, or even to capture or punish protestors,⁶² causing state agents to engage in such logically perplexing acts as shooting and beating self-immolators while they are in flames,⁶³ as well as fighting with locals for possession of self-immolators’ bodies.

Such initially perplexing official responses are revealing upon closer analysis. Many scholars observe a link between the body in the state of self-immolation and the current state of society⁶⁴ or the nation.⁶⁵ The bodily

representation of society engulfed in flames indeed subversively contests the Chinese state's repeated attempts to portray Tibet as a liberated land overflowing with joy, or the predictable representation of Tibetans as reliably overenthusiastic and most likely joyfully dancing members of the Chinese nation-state. Janet Gyatso has accordingly interpreted the act of viewing self-immolation as the forced witnessing of a delegitimizing spectacle.⁶⁶

Returning to the question of despair versus resistance raised earlier, the impact, speed, and irreversibility of self-immolation have deeper implications for the fundamental issues of sovereignty and control at the core of current tensions in Tibet. There is no easy way to capture a self-immolator and, thus, no opportunity for punishment, making self-immolation not only a dramatic but also a uniquely defiant form of protest.⁶⁷ By enacting pain and death unregulated and uncontrolled by the state, self-immolation exercises a form of power⁶⁸ that challenges the state's status as the sole arbiter of life and death.⁶⁹ This effectively strips the state of its agency and monopoly of power.⁷⁰ In the current political context, in which the authorities attempt to exercise absolute sovereignty over all matters, and succeed to a surprising degree (at least at a superficial level) by right of their sheer determination, self-immolation is then a bold and fiery reclamation of sovereignty over oneself.⁷¹ Offering their bodies for the sake of collective identity and sovereignty, protestors finally exercise full and final mastery over their bodies and their selves for a cause far greater than themselves.⁷² Biological life is thus, as Emily Yeh has argued, "taken in an assertion of political life,"⁷³ or, as Giovanni da Col has argued, the self is denied towards the establishment of "a political agent of national courage and martyrdom."⁷⁴ Self-immolation is then a radical means of reclaiming individual sovereignty in the struggle for political sovereignty, with implications for power relations far beyond the individual: hence the authorities' frenzied attempts to exercise control over self-immolation and self-immolators, symbolically reasserting their own lost power and sovereignty.

Beyond its symbolic declaration of sovereignty through self-imposed actions upon the body, self-immolation leaves its most pronounced and lasting impressions upon witnesses. Tibetans face massive risks to their livelihoods and, indeed, their lives, to break through the state-imposed information gauntlet⁷⁵ and share videos showing protestors standing, engulfed in flames, in open and fiery defiance. And, once these videos are successfully shared, in contrast to a simplistic narrative of desensitization, one finds that there is simply no way for the viewer to look away, no way to not recognize the burning horror reflected in this act, and no way to forget. Sienna Craig has interpreted this physical spectacle as the ultimate embodiment of a common humanity that is far too often unacknowledged:⁷⁶ as individuals also in possession of a body, we are able to intimately and terrifyingly relate to the suffering embodied in this act of protest,⁷⁷ a phenomenon that Michael Biggs labels "communicative suffering."⁷⁸ Beyond the subversion of hegemonic state representations and the symbolic exercise of sovereignty over oneself, another crucial product of the act of self-immolation, then, is empathy.⁷⁹ Tenzin Mingyur Paldron accordingly interprets these acts of protest as fissures in the walls blocking understanding of Tibetan suffering and resistance.⁸⁰ Self-immolation, then, is not solely a means of taking action when all other means of protest have been blocked, but also a means of inspiring others to listen and take action through the forced witnessing of and empathy with a most symbolically vivid form of embodied suffering.

Religious Meanings and Sacrifice

Although religion and culture, as analyzed earlier, are not the primary sources of this wave of protests, religious and cultural symbols nevertheless play a central role in the rhetoric and practice of self-immolation in Tibet. Religion's role in the practice of self-immolation is most readily apparent in the restrictions that the Buddhist tradition and the Dalai Lama's advocacy for a nonviolent approach place upon resistance. Thus, while there is no tradition of self-immolation in Tibetan Buddhism, there is a well-established tradition of nonviolence, which helps to explain why the resistance movement has pursued the extreme yet nonaggressive form of self-immolation over the all-too-familiar path of violence. As one commenter notes in Chung Tsering's survey of exile debates on self-immolation, "we certainly have the courage and we could take the opportunity to hurt those who deny us freedom by stabbing them, but ours is only a small knife. But instead we have entered the path of not hurting others for the sake of our own freedom, and this is an extraordinary act."⁸¹ Self-immolation, as an extreme form of protest that nevertheless refrains from harming others, thus bears the indelible imprint of Tibetan Buddhism's advocacy of nonviolence.

Further highlighting the role of religion in Tibetan society, and self-immolation therein, we must note that the first 17 self-immolators were either monks or nuns. It was only in February 2012, when three herdsmen set their bodies

alight in Seda County, that laypeople began to be involved in this series of protests. This chronology highlights the continuing leadership of the clergy in Tibetan society, reminiscent of its role in initiating the protests of March 2008. The state's response, both in 2008 and since the increase in self-immolations beginning in 2011, has been to attempt to exercise ever greater control over these institutions and the culture that they embody.⁸² But, these actions have been to little avail, despite determined efforts, and will likely produce only further resistance.

An example of such efforts has been the Chinese state's attempt to characterize self-immolation as a violation of the tenets of Buddhism. Eager to discredit those who have sacrificed their lives in protest, official "Tibet scholar" Li Decheng has argued in the overseas edition of the *People's Daily* that self-immolation violates the core Buddhist code of ethics, self-assuredly declaring, "monks self-immolating, killing themselves in the most horrible of ways, not only violates the laws of nature and society, but furthermore violates the basic tenets of Buddhism."⁸³ These claims ironically and alarmingly turn the principle of nonviolence against self-immolation, which is precisely a means of protest produced according to the principle of nonviolence. Yet, such doubts have an audience: some Tibetans in the exile community have openly agreed with Li's assessment, casting doubts upon the morality of self-immolation as protest.⁸⁴ Others, however, have argued that self-immolation is less a violent act or suicide than an offering:⁸⁵ a notion with deep religious and affirmative meaning.

This notion of an offering is revealingly reflected in the terminology through which Tibetans talk about self-immolation. Nowhere is the novelty of self-immolation in Tibetan society more apparent than in the fact, noted by many scholars,⁸⁶ that Tibetans have had to invent new terms in recent years to describe self-immolation. Scholars and journalists writing about self-immolation are thus not the only ones at a loss for words to describe this phenomenon: Tibetans in Tibet and beyond are similarly grasping for words to describe these unprecedented developments. Some of the new terms for this act of protest include: to burn oneself (*rang sreg*), to burn one's body (*rang lus mer sreg*), to offer one's body to fire (*sku lus zhugs mer 'bul*), offering fire to the body (*rang lus me mchod*), to burn [one's body] as an offering lamp ([*rang lus*] *mar mer sbar*), to offer one's body to the fire (*rang lus zhugs 'bul*),⁸⁷ to light one's body as a lamp offering (*rang lus mchod mer bsgron pa*), and making a fire-offering with one's body (*rang lus me mchod*).⁸⁸ According to Tibetan author Tsering Woesser, the most popular stand-in for the censored term "self-immolation" among Tibetans online in China is "to make a lamp offering."⁸⁹ The vocabulary that has coalesced around this act, then, is one of offering, and thus of religious significance: the light of the flames in self-immolation are reflections of the light emanating from offering lamps, which represents the illumination of knowledge.

Lama Sopa, the best-known religious figure to have self-immolated thus far in Tibet, highlighted these notions of offering and sacrifice in the widely distributed audio recording of his final statement, recorded in early 2012. He stated: "I am giving away my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering.... [M]y offering of light is for all living beings, even as insignificant as lice and nits, to dispel their pain and to guide them to the state of enlightenment."⁹⁰ Demonstrating these ideals and relating them to religious foundations, Lama Sopa referred in his statement to the evocative story of the Buddha and the tigress. Coming across a hungry tiger mother and her cubs in the forest, the Buddha sees the animals looking toward one another as their sole potential source of sustenance in a moment of hunger. Recognizing the horror that could emerge from this tragic situation, the Buddha intervenes by offering his own body to them.⁹¹ Lama Sopa employs this story to explain his own self-immolation, saying: "I am sacrificing my body with the firm conviction and a pure heart just as the Buddha bravely gave his body to a hungry tigress."⁹² This reference implicitly points to the destructive cycle currently operating in Tibet and the corresponding hope to transcend this cycle⁹³ through dramatic and selfless sacrifice of the self.

Thus, although self-immolation is not a Tibetan Buddhist tradition, it has become intertwined with and expressed through Tibetan Buddhist beliefs in recent years. Self-immolation as protest is a product of the restrictions upon violence, was first enacted primarily by monks and nuns, and is widely referred to as an offering for a greater cause. Thus, rather than violating Tibetan Buddhism, as some critics would claim, self-immolation works within the framework of nonviolence, drawing upon religious and cultural symbols to render an extreme form of protest comprehensible. Yet, to whom are these offerings made? And how have they responded?

Responses

As James Benn observes in his study of the history of self-immolation in China, this act is not a means of departing the world, but rather a means of being actively involved in the world.⁹⁴ Self-immolation in Tibet, as an act upon oneself with implications and active involvement far beyond oneself, is directed toward a number of potential audiences, challenging each to find a response. This closing section examines the response of four key audiences to the recent wave of self-immolation in Tibet: the Chinese state, Chinese society, the Tibetan government-in-exile, and the Tibetan people.

The Chinese State and Society

Ronald D. Schwartz noted in his discussion of protest in Tibet two decades before the appearance of self-immolation that “the Chinese government cannot be the audience for Tibetan protest because the Chinese political system denies its opponents any possibility for debate.”⁹⁵ One cannot engage in a dialogue with a state trapped in a perpetually self-referential monologue divorced from realities on the ground. Although a local Tibetan audience is thus essential for understanding self-immolation as political protest and as communication, the Chinese state’s responses to these protests remain significant for understanding current state policy in Tibet and potential future directions. In this regard, the Chinese state’s response in official statements and media has been revealingly inconsistent, highlighting the difficulty of formulating a response to this most radical form of political protest. Since self-immolations began occurring increasingly often from 2011 through 2012, the state media has been largely mute on these protests, an approach that stands in stark contrast to the gratuitous representation of the protests of 2008 as irrational and cruel Tibetan violence.⁹⁶ When this silence has been broken on occasion, the narrative presented has been largely uncertain, while nevertheless attempting to present the usual air of dogmatic certainty that is characteristic of the state media.

Initial attempts engaged in the predictable political ritual⁹⁷ of blaming the “Dalai clique” for provoking and encouraging self-immolation, without providing any clear evidence to support such claims. At the same time, various media reports and commentaries cast self-immolators as individuals who were somehow mentally disturbed or otherwise unable to function properly in society. The official media claimed that some had engaged in self-immolation on account of arguments with their loved ones, sex addiction, gambling addiction, extreme debt, and generally antisocial criminal behavior.⁹⁸ The origins of self-immolation either had to be found in Dharmasala or in the disturbed minds of individual protestors, so as to ensure that they could not be found anywhere in between: in the political and social realities of Tibet from which they had in fact emerged. Later attempts at explaining these events include denouncing self-immolation as a violation of Buddhism,⁹⁹ portraying the origins of the protests solely in terms of current economic issues without implications for cultural or ethnic politics, or most provocatively labeling the act of self-immolation as a form of terrorism.¹⁰⁰

Such portrayals have important implications for the Chinese public’s understanding of self-immolation and the current situation in Tibet. As Elliott Sperling notes in his study of popular Chinese discussions of self-immolation in Tibet, “the vast majority of people in the People’s Republic of China do not think about Tibet very much, if at all.”¹⁰¹ However, when Chinese citizens do think about Tibet, state media representations are central to their understandings of the matters at hand. The result is often a disconcerting abstraction of human issues and a dogmatic simplification of a complex situation. Some intellectuals and critics of the Chinese state have broken through this monotony on new and uncensored forums for the exchange of ideas like Twitter. Yet, even in these cases, critics have presumed that the primary audience for these acts of protest is solely the Chinese state, and have thus misunderstood and tended to far too easily dismiss the protests as fundamentally naïve and inevitably failed attempts to seek mercy from a merciless government.

The state’s unforgiving approach has indeed been on clear display in Tibet in recent years, as the government has responded to the growth of these protests with an unyielding intensification of precisely the types of security, surveillance, and restrictions that have produced Tibetan grievances over the decades.¹⁰² Tsering Kyi, a journalist and former Miss Tibet, has detailed the challenges facing the families of self-immolators through a recounting of the events following the self-immolation of her nephew Tsering Tashi in early 2013: the family’s home was surrounded by police, who turned away all visitors, including monks who came to pay their respects. Despite the family’s need to mourn, the authorities ordered a quick funeral.¹⁰³ And beyond families, entire villages have been punished, with development projects delayed or cancelled for villages that are home to self-immolators.¹⁰⁴ Emily Yeh notes the expansion of security checkpoints, the recall of Tibetan residents’ passports, and the decision to make carrying

gasoline illegal, all indicating the continual expansion of the assumption of collective guilt over the people of Tibet.¹⁰⁵ And, while the Chinese state repeatedly presents any criticism of its Tibet policy as a product of ignorance about realities on the ground, the authorities have blocked researchers and media from entering Tibetan areas for years. Such policies do not bode well for the future.

The Tibetan Government-in-Exile and Tibetan Society

Similar to the uncertain situation in which the Chinese government has found itself in the wake of this series of self-immolations, the Tibetan government-in-exile has found itself in an equally uncertain position, albeit from a very different perspective. As highlighted by the editorial board of the *Tibetan Political Review* in their article "The Delicate Balancing Act of the Exile Tibetan Government," the Dharmasala government-in-exile has struggled to find an effective way to respond to these acts of protest,¹⁰⁶ striking a balance between honoring protestors and discouraging further self-immolations. Faced with the usual accusations from the Chinese government that the Dalai Lama and his "clique" are behind the protests, the exile Tibetan government has been careful to avoid any comments that could be interpreted or indeed misrepresented as encouraging self-immolation. Yet, at the same time, as the elected representatives of the Tibetan community, the exile government "has acknowledged the heroic courage and sacrifices of the self-immolators in speaking to Tibetans in Tibet and in exile, as well as the international community."¹⁰⁷ In honoring these protests and protestors, the exile government has also attempted to focus the discussion upon the issues on the ground in Tibet that are producing such extreme resistance, and away from the ritually invoked state-sponsored scapegoats.

The most significant audience for this act of protest, however, is neither the Chinese state, Chinese society, nor the Tibetan government-in-exile, but, rather, Tibetans themselves. A number of scholars¹⁰⁸ have observed that the final statements and actions of self-immolators are directed primarily toward fellow Tibetans. Final statements have called for protection from suffering; the realization of unity and freedom;¹⁰⁹ promotion of the Tibetan language, national identity and solidarity; Tibetan independence; courage; and, most importantly, simply "taking action."¹¹⁰ Within an increasingly stifling post-2008 sociopolitical environment, in which the authorities are dedicated to suppressing even the slightest sign of dissent or even discontent, self-immolation is a powerful reminder of the resistance that still survives beneath the carefully constructed surface appearance of stability. Even more importantly, however, self-immolation is a symbol of the ability to take action for the causes highlighted in these final statements, so as to make that resistance seen and heard even within this environment. As both Wang Lixiong¹¹¹ and Elliott Sperling¹¹² have noted, these protests as embodiments of courage and resistance have provided Tibetans in China and beyond with an unprecedented sense of unity, courage, and inspiration to take action. In this sense, these offerings in flames, despite their horror and despite the many resulting misunderstandings, have an intrinsic value and meaning within the current sociopolitical context in Tibet from which they have emerged and which they seek to change.

Conclusion: Thinking through the Unthinkable

Like the various audiences described in the previous section, I have attempted to respond to these acts of sacrifice as well as one can in a brief review essay, providing a general overview of scholars' contributions thus far to the study of self-immolation in Tibet, so as to begin to grasp what is driving these acts of protest and where they might be taking Tibet. Seeking the origins of self-immolation as political protest, I have found these origins in the increasingly repressive post-2008 sociopolitical environment in Tibet. Within this context, self-immolation is one of the few means available for protestors to continue to make their voices heard. Rather than a statement of despair, then, self-immolation can be seen unexpectedly as a symbol of hope, and as an act upon oneself that has implications far beyond the self. This most dramatic and unstoppable form of protest recaptures power and sovereignty from the increasingly controlling authorities, while its imagery circulates rapidly around the world, communicating to others the Tibetan people's suffering as well as their resistance in a way that viscerally demands a response from viewers. I have also discussed the responses of audiences both in Tibet and beyond, highlighting the centrality of fellow Tibetans as viewers of these delegitimizing and thus empowering spectacles. While surveying general trends in self-immolation and in the scholarly response to this phenomenon, I do not, however, purport to have provided any final conclusions on self-immolation in Tibet: this act is such that any attempt at analysis and explanation inevitably fails to live up to the event. In his *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Gaston Bachelard argues that contemplation and the pursuit of wisdom itself originate from the human relationship to fire, as can be

seen in the hypnotic and contemplative gaze directed toward the comparatively mundane embers of a fireplace.¹¹³ Seen in this light, the flames that have ignited across Tibet have provoked and will continue to provoke contemplation from scholars and other concerned individuals around the world, as they should.

Yet, even more pressing than the immediate question of why is yet another question: Where to go from here? On the topic of Tibet and Chinese rule therein, disagreements are manifold and heated. Yet, whatever one's stance may be, and however opposed our opinions may be, we can all agree as human beings that when people are setting themselves on fire, change is necessary. In her revealing discussion of self-immolation as a form of both protest and offering, Gillian Tan asserts that these acts "present to us the challenge of imagining alternatives to the present trajectory of life on the Tibetan plateau."¹¹⁴ The analyses of the social and political situation provided earlier suggest that any substantive attempt to bring an end to self-immolation must begin by bringing an end to the precipitating factors producing this response. Toward this goal, self-immolation importantly takes the debate about Tibet away from such abstracted notions as historical sovereignty or suzerainty, economic development, stability, or the so-called "Dalai Clique" around which discussions of Tibet usually revolve, and brings our thoughts back inescapably to the concrete image of real human beings wrapped in flames. These flames, which have illuminated the current situation in Tibet and inspired courage and unity in Tibetan communities, must also inspire further contemplation, discussion, and indeed action from all of us who believe that there can be other, more viable options for the Tibetan people's future.

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Notes:

(1) On the history of the Kirti Monastery, which has been at the center of self-immolations with 24 former and current monks engaging in self-immolation, see Daniel Berounsky, "Kirti monastery of Ngawa: its history and current situation." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 25 (December 2012): 65–80.

(2) For more details and updated numbers, please refer to Save Tibet's fact-sheet on self-immolations: <http://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/> Accessed January 13, 2015.

(3) Tsering Woesser, *Immolations au Tibet: la honte du monde*. (Paris: Editions Indigenes, 2013).

(4) On the blockade on journalism in Tibet, see Reporters without Borders, "Tibet cut off from the rest of the world," February 23, 2012 <http://en.rsf.org/chine-tibet-cut-off-from-the-rest-of-the-23-02-2012,41930.html>. Accessed December 17, 2014.

(5) Leigh Sangster, "The Afterlife of Images," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012 <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/114-the-afterlife-of-images>. Accessed May 20, 2014.

(6) Sienna Craig, "Social Suffering and Embodied Political Crisis," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/97-social-suffering-and-embodied-political-crisis> Accessed May 20, 2014.

(7) On the absence of a tradition of self-immolation in Tibetan Buddhism and the fundamental novelty of this form of protest, see the introductions to two special journal issues on the topic of self-immolation: Carole McGranahan and Ralph Litzinger, "Introduction—Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/93-self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet>, accessed May 20, 2014 and Katia Buffetrille and Françoise Robin. "Preface." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 25 (December 2012).

(8) Buffetrille and Robin, "Preface;" McGranahan and Litzinger, "Introduction—Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet;" and Gillian G. Tan, "The Place of Hope in Acts of Protest and Offering," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/101-the-place-of-hope-in-acts-of-protest-and-offering>. Accessed May 20, 2014.

- ⁽⁹⁾ Tsering Shakya, "Self-Immolation, the Changing Language of Protest in Tibet," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 25 (December 2012): 20.
- ⁽¹⁰⁾ James A. Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007).
- ⁽¹¹⁾ Katia Buffetrille. "Self-Immolation in Tibet: Some Reflections on an Unfolding History", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 25 (December 2012): 8.
- ⁽¹²⁾ Buffetrille, "Self-Immolation in Tibet: Some Reflections on an Unfolding History," 9.
- ⁽¹³⁾ Robert Barnett, "Political Self-Immolation in Tibet: Causes and Influences," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 25 (December 2012): 57–58.
- ⁽¹⁴⁾ On Thupten Ngodup's self-immolation, see Jamyang Norbu, "Remembering Thupten Ngodup," *Shadow Tibet: Jamyang Norbu's Blog*, May 12, 2008, <http://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2008/05/12/remembering-thupten-ngodup/>, accessed June 4, 2014, and Carole McGranahan, *Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War* (Durham, NJ: Duke University Press, 2010), 185–187.
- ⁽¹⁵⁾ McGranahan and Litzinger, "Introduction—Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet;" Tsering Woeser, *Immolations au Tibet: la honte du monde*; and Tsering Shakya. "Transforming the Language of Protest." Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/94-transforming-the-language-of-protest>. Accessed May 20, 2014.
- ⁽¹⁶⁾ Robert Barnett, "The Tibet Protests of Spring, 2008: Conflict between the Nation and the State," *China Perspectives*, 2009 (3).
- ⁽¹⁷⁾ Barnett, "Political Self-Immolation in Tibet: Causes and Influences," 49; Chung Tsering, "Online Articles on Self-Immolation by Tibetans in Exile—A Brief Survey," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 25 (December 2012): 100; Andrew M. Fischer, "The Geopolitics of Politico-Religious Protest in Eastern Tibet," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/100-the-geopolitics-of-politico-religious-protest-in-eastern-tibet>. Accessed May 20, 2014; Thubten Samphel, "Self-immolation/Tibet/China," *Tibetan Political Review*, January 18, 2014. <http://www.tibetanpoliticalreview.org/articles/self-immolationtibetchina>. Accessed August 4, 2014.
- ⁽¹⁸⁾ For scholars interested in the official Chinese discourse on all Tibetan matters, the site Tibet.cn provides a useful introduction, with pages in Chinese (Tibet.cn), English (eng.tibet.cn), German (german.tibet.cn), French (French.tibet.cn), and Tibetan (tb.tibet.cn). Accessed January 12, 2015. Another faithful representation of this perspective can be found in author Xu Mingxu's highly polemical *Xueshan xia de chouxing: Xizang baoluan de lailong qumai* [Evil acts under the snowcapped mountains: the origins and directions of the turmoil in Tibet], Chengdu: Sichuan Publishing Group, 2010.
- ⁽¹⁹⁾ Tsering Topgyal. "The Insecurity Dilemma and the Sino-Tibetan Conflict." PhD thesis submitted to the Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science. 2011.
- ⁽²⁰⁾ See, for example, Wang Hui's analysis of the "Tibet question" in "The 'Tibetan Question' East and West: Orientalism, Regional Ethnic Autonomy, and the Politics of Dignity," in Wang Hui, *The Politics of Imagining Asia*, Theodore Hutters ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Also see analysis of Wang Hui's contributions to the "Tibet question" alongside discussion of the Open Constitution Initiative (Gongmeng) Law Research Center's field-based study of conditions in Tibet in Sebastian Veg, "Tibet, Nationalism, and Modernity: Two Chinese Contributions," *China Perspectives* 3 (2009): 98–107.
- ⁽²¹⁾ Tsering Shakya, "Self-Immolation, the Changing Language of Protest in Tibet," 23.
- ⁽²²⁾ Tsering Shakya, "Self-Immolation, the Changing Language of Protest in Tibet," 22.
- ⁽²³⁾ Barnett "The Tibet Protests of Spring, 2008: Conflict between the Nation and the State," 14.
- ⁽²⁴⁾ Charlene Makley, "The Political Lives of Dead Bodies," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural*

Anthropology Online—Hot Spots, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/95-the-political-lives-of-dead-bodies>. Accessed May 20, 2014.

(25) Kevin Carrico, “Chinese State Media Representations,” Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/109-chinese-state-media-representations>. Accessed May 20, 2014.

(26) For a detailed exposition of the 2008 protests, the crackdown, and “security measures” implemented in the protests’ aftermath, please refer to the Congressional Executive Commission on China’s *Special Topic Paper on Tibet, 2008–2009*, October 22, 2009, <http://www.cecc.gov/publications/issue-papers/cecc-special-topic-paper-tibet-2008-2009>. Accessed January 11, 2015.

(27) See the Congressional Executive Commission on China’s *Special Topic Paper on Tibet, 2008–2009*, 56–63.

(28) See the Congressional Executive Commission on China’s *Special Topic Paper on Tibet, 2008–2009*, 36–38.

(29) Barnett, “Political Self-Immolation in Tibet: Causes and Influences,” 52–53.

(30) Warren W. Smith, *Tibet’s Last Stand? The Tibetan Uprising of 2008 and China’s Response* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

(31) See Emily Yeh’s analysis of the theme of development as a gift in *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

(32) See the Congressional Executive Commission on China’s *Special Topic Paper on Tibet, 2008–2009*, 64–65.

(33) Losang Gyatso, “The Information Gauntlet.” Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012. <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/107-the-information-gauntlet> Accessed May 20, 2014.

(34) Tsering Shakya, “Self-Immolation, the Changing Language of Protest in Tibet,” 37.

(35) Emily Yeh, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*, 268.

(36) Thubten Samphel, “Self-Immolation/Tibet/China.”

(37) Fabienne Jagou, “Chinese Policy Towards Tibet versus Tibetan Expectations for Tibet: A Divergence Marked by Self-Immolations,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 25 (December 2012) 84.

(38) Elliot Sperling, “On the Questions of Why and to What End,” Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/106-on-the-questions-of-why-and-to-what-end>. Accessed May 20, 2014.

(39) Tsering Woesser, *Immolations au Tibet: la honte du monde*, .

(40) Buffetrille, “Self-Immolation in Tibet: Some Reflections on an Unfolding History,” 3.

(41) See the Congressional Executive Commission on China’s *Special Topic Paper on Tibet, 2008–2009*, 56–63, 65–76 and Woesser, *Immolations au Tibet: la honte du monde*.

(42) Dechen Pemba. “Mourning Online.” Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/110-mourning-online>. Accessed May 20, 2014.

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(44) Tenzin Mingyur Paldron, “Fire Under the Snow: Tibet’s Self-Immolations of Protest,” *Tibetan Political Review*, October 14, 2011. <http://www.tibetanpoliticalreview.org/articles/fireunderthesnowtibetsself-immolationsofprotest> Accessed July 13, 2014.

- (45) Barnett, "Political Self-Immolation in Tibet: Causes and Influences," 43.
- (46) Barnett, "Political Self-Immolation in Tibet: Causes and Influences," 43.
- (47) Tsering Shakya, "Self-Immolation, the Changing Language of Protest in Tibet."
- (48) Michael Biggs, "Dying without Killing: Self-Immolations, 1963–2002," in Diego Gambetta (ed.) *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- (49) Tsering Woesser, *Immolations au Tibet: la honte du monde*,.
- (50) Tsering Woesser, *Immolations au Tibet: la honte du monde*,.
- (51) See Makley, "The Political Lives of Dead Bodies."
- (52) Tsering Woesser, *Immolations au Tibet: la honte du monde*,.
- (53) Christophe Besuchet, "Beacons of Resistance, Not Desperate Acts," *Rangzen*, April 28, 2012. <http://www.rangzen.net/2012/01/28/beacons-of-resistance-not-desperate-acts/>. Accessed June 4, 2014.
- (54) Besuchet, "Beacons of Resistance, Not Desperate Acts."
- (55) Wang Lixiong, "Ranshao de yiyang: zangren yinhe zifen? [Burning final statements: why are Tibetans self-immolating?]" *Invisible Tibet*, December 18, 2012, http://woesser.middle-way.net/2012/12/blog-post_18.html. Accessed August 1, 2014; and Tsering Woesser, *Immolations au Tibet: la honte du monde*,.
- (56) Buffetrille, "Self-Immolation in Tibet: Some Reflections on an Unfolding History," 11.
- (57) Sangster, "The Afterlife of Images."
- (58) Buffetrille, "Self-Immolation in Tibet: Some Reflections on an Unfolding History," 12.
- (59) Sperling, "On the Questions of Why and to What End."
- (60) Thupten Ngodup's 1998 self-immolation was in fact prompted by the Indian state's attempt to end a hunger strike by Tibetan exiles.
- (61) See Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, "Self-Immolation by fire versus legitimate violence in the Hindu context," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 25 (December 2012): 184.
- (62) See Biggs, "Dying without Killing: Self-Immolations, 1963–2002."
- (63) See Losang Gyatso's reference to the beating of self-immolators with batons, in some cases spiked, in "The Information Gauntlet."
- (64) Craig, "Social Suffering and Embodied Political Crisis."
- (65) Tsering Shakya, "Transforming the Language of Protest."
- (66) Janet Gyatso, "Discipline and Resistance on the Tibetan Plateau," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/96-discipline-and-resistance-on-the-tibetan-plateau>. Accessed May 20, 2014.
- (67) Biggs, "Dying without Killing."
- (68) On the relationship between pain and power, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- (69) Yeh, *Taming Tibet*, 267.
- (70) See a discussion of death, the Chinese state, and Chinese responses to self-immolation in Tibet in Ralph Litzinger, "Tibet Talk—on Life, Death, and the State," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology*

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(71) Yeh, *Taming Tibet*, 269.

(72) Buffetrille and Robin, "Preface," x.

(73) Emily Yeh, "On 'Terrorism' and the Politics of Naming." Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/102-on-terrorism-and-the-politics-of-naming>. Accessed May 20, 2014.

(74) Giovanni da Col, "Five Armchair Reflections on Tibetan Personhood," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/99-five-armchair-reflections-on-tibetan-personhood>. Accessed May 20, 2014.

(75) Losang Gyatso, "The Information Gauntlet."

(76) Craig, "Social Suffering and Embodied Political Crisis."

(77) This analysis can be usefully read in dialogue with Alan Klima's ethnography *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), in which a re-sensitization to corporeal being is envisioned through Thai Buddhist practices of viewing and meditating upon death and the dead.

(78) Biggs, "Dying without Killing."

(79) Tsering Shakya, "Transforming the Language of Protest."

(80) Tenzin Mingyur Paldron, "Virtue and the Remaking of Suffering," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/98-virtue-and-the-remaking-of-suffering>. Accessed May 20, 2014.

(81) Chung Tsering. "Online Articles on Self-Immolation by Tibetans in Exile—A Brief Survey."

(82) See the Congressional Executive Commission on China's *Special Topic Paper on Tibet, 2008–2009*, 30–40.

(83) Li Decheng, "Cong fojiao genben jielu kan zengren zifen shijian [Considering monks' self-immolations through the basic tenets of Buddhism]," *People's Daily* (Overseas edition), November 30, 2011. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/64093/82429/83083/16445605.html>. Accessed July 1, 2014.

(84) See Jamyang Norbu's discussion and critique of Bhuchung K. Tsering's affirmation of the *People's Daily* article in his "Self-Immolation and Buddhism," *Phayul*, January 5, 2012, <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=30644>. Accessed July 13, 2014.

(85) Gillian G. Tan, "The Place of Hope in Acts of Protest and Offering."

(86) Buffetrille, "Self-Immolation in Tibet: Some Reflections on an Unfolding History;" Chung Tsering, "Online Articles on Self-Immolation by Tibetans in Exile—A Brief Survey;" da Col, "Five Armchair Reflections on Tibetan Personhood;" and Cameron David Warner, "The Blazing Horror of Now." Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online- Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012. <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/115-the-blazing-horror-of-now> Accessed May 20, 2014.

(87) Buffetrille, "Self-Immolation in Tibet: Some Reflections on an Unfolding History," 10.

(88) Chung Tsering, "Online Articles on Self-Immolation by Tibetans in Exile—A Brief Survey," 99.

(89) Tsering Woeser, *Immolations au Tibet: la honte du monde*,.

(90) "Tibetan Lama Urges Unity, Nationhood before Self-Immolating," *Tibetan Political Review*, February 2, 2012. <http://www.tibetanpoliticalreview.org/articles/tibetanlamaurgesunitynationhoodbeforeself-immolating> Accessed August 4, 2014.

- ⁽⁹¹⁾ See Tenzin Mingyur Paldron, "Virtue and the Remaking of Suffering."
- ⁽⁹²⁾ "Tibetan Lama Urges Unity, Nationhood before Self-Immolating."
- ⁽⁹³⁾ Tenzin Mingyur Paldron, "Virtue and the Remaking of Suffering."
- ⁽⁹⁴⁾ Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism*.
- ⁽⁹⁵⁾ Ronald D. Schwartz, *Circle of Protest: Political Ritual in the Tibetan Uprising*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
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- ⁽⁹⁸⁾ Tsering Woesser, "Self-Immolation and Slander," Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online—Hot Spots*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/105-self-immolation-and-slander-woesser> Accessed May 20, 2014.
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- ⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Nima R.T. Binara, Tenzin Dickyi, Tenzin Wangyal and Wangchuk Shakabpa. "The Balancing Act of the Exile Tibetan Government." Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet, *Cultural Anthropology Online*, April 8, 2012, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/111-the-balancing-act-of-the-exile-tibetan-government>. Accessed May 20, 2014.
- ⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ Nima R.T. Binara, Tenzin Dickyi, Tenzin Wangyal and Wangchuk Shakabpa, "The Balancing Act of the Exile Tibetan Government."
- ⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ Biggs, "Dying without Killing: Self-Immolations, 1963–2002," 146; Sperling, "Conversations and Debates: Chinese and Tibetan Engagement with the Broader Discussion of Self-Immolation in Tibet," 93; Shakya, "Self-Immolation, the Changing Language of Protest in Tibet," 36; Woesser, *Immolations au Tibet: la honte du monde*; Wang, "Ranshao de yiyang: Zangren yinhe zifen [Burning final statements: why are Tibetans self-immolating?]"
- ⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ Barnett, "Political Self-Immolation in Tibet: Causes and Influences," 54.
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