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# Going down in flames: Self-immolation in China, Tibet and India

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Over the last twenty years, Tibetan protest against Chinese rule has transformed markedly, shifting in particular from the monastic protests by inmates of the great monasteries of Lhasa and Central Tibet to popular protest throughout the region and in particular throughout the Eastern Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo, outside what is administratively called the Tibetan Autonomous Region. In the last three years in particular, the wide-scale protests and riots of Spring 2008 have been followed by a growing lineage of personal self-immolations, increasingly attended by the writing of personal testaments, the moral authority of which is gaining rapid ground both in Tibetan regions and amongst Tibetan exiles in India. These testaments call both for Tibetan independence and the return of the Dalai Lama, and for Tibetans across the region to come together in patriotic unity. Self-immolation is very much a novelty in Tibet, and its place in the established post-1970s discourse of non-violence set up in exile by the Dalai Lama has led it to have a powerfully contested quality, with the Tibetan Government-in-Exile discouraging its use as ‘extreme’ (especially when carried out in democratic states like India, where several have also occurred) while celebrating the heroism of self-immolators themselves; by contrast, groups such as the Tibetan Youth Congress argue for the universal applicability of such protests because of a world political order, whether democratic or not, that colludes in the destruction of Tibetan culture and language within Tibet. This presentation for SAAG is primarily an augmented briefing paper written for the Scottish Parliament’s Cross Party Group on Tibet this summer, which describes for parliamentarians the basic features of the self-immolations as described above. It also has a short introduction discussing particular aspects of the process by which such papers get written, and the kinds of argument and discussion that get left out.

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## Introductory remarks

This paper is the most recent of four briefing papers produced for the Scottish Parliament's Cross Party Group on Tibet, for which the author has been acting as a regional advisor since 2007. The papers produced so far include: "The 2008 Protests in Tibet: Main Facts & Analysis" (2008); "Issues of Sovereignty in the Sino-Tibetan Dispute" (2009); "Religious Policy and State Control in Tibet" (2010); and finally the present paper, "Self-Immolation amongst Tibetans, 2009-2012" (2012). Each of these has been principally drafted by the author, and later ratified and (in one case) partially edited by the voting members of the Cross Party Group, who are all Members of the Scottish Parliament. The proceedings of Cross-Party Groups in the Scottish Parliament are open to the public, and are regularly attended by interested parties and representatives of human rights and Tibet-interested groups such the Tibet Support Groups and inter-faith organisations, as well as by Tibetan refugees living and working in Scotland. Once ratified by the Group, they are distributed to MSPs and to various outside organisations, such as other parliamentary groups on Tibet, Free Tibet, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch (Asia), etc. The first three papers were also submitted as evidence to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee of the UK Houses of Parliament, for which a consideration of its contents

provided the bulk of that committee's 2008-9 Human Rights Report section on China.

Providing reports for the Cross-Party Group has certain advantages in terms of things such as Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact statements, but at the same time presents various challenges to anthropologists. The first of these is length: at a maximum of 4,000 words, these reports can hardly carry much ethnographic nuance or context, especially given the reading requirement of providing a one page executive summary at the beginning. Moreover, they are written with public and policy considerations in mind, usually in direct response to requests by the Cross-Party Group itself.

The conditions of presenting papers led to the inclusion of some arguments and the exclusion of others, as well as the production of "executive summaries" which cannot be regarded as the equivalent of academic abstracts. In particular, one major argument was excluded following early drafts. Many of the testaments of Tibetan self-immolators included references to concepts of patriotism (rgyal gces ring lugs) and national loyalty (la rgya) that are comparatively new forms of popular political protest.

As many Tibetologists have commented, Tibetan notions of political solidarity were weakly articulated outside Central Tibet prior to the Chinese Invasion of 1949/50, and Tibet as a whole was divided on regional, linguistic

and sectarian grounds that precluded most forms of political solidarity. Even during the 1980s and 1990s, Tibetan protest was focused primarily on religious loyalty to the Dalai Lama's government, and was found mainly within those Central Tibetan areas previously loyal to that government. Over the course of the 2000s, however, protest spread throughout the outlying Tibetan areas of Eastern Tibet that had historically shown political and religious resistance to rule from Lhasa. Indeed, by the mid-2000s, these eastern Tibetan regions had become the principal site of cultural innovations stressing Tibetan nationalism, through demonstrations, internet cafe traffic and increasingly nationalist karaoke output. By 2008, such innovations led to an outburst of protests and riots that, while beginning in Lhasa on 10 March (the anniversary of the Lhasa Uprising against Chinese rule in 1959), spread within days to the Eastern Tibetan areas, which eventually formed the bulk of protests. Arguably, the self-immolations of the last three years are a deliberate attempt to maintain the momentum of the 2008 protests.

The emergence of new rhetorics of Tibetan unity and patriotism have also mirrored the trajectory of Chinese state policies. From the early 1990s to the present, in response to the Central Tibetan protests of the late 1980s, key Tibetan sites of protest (most particularly monasteries) have been the subject of extensive campaigns of Chinese Communist Party

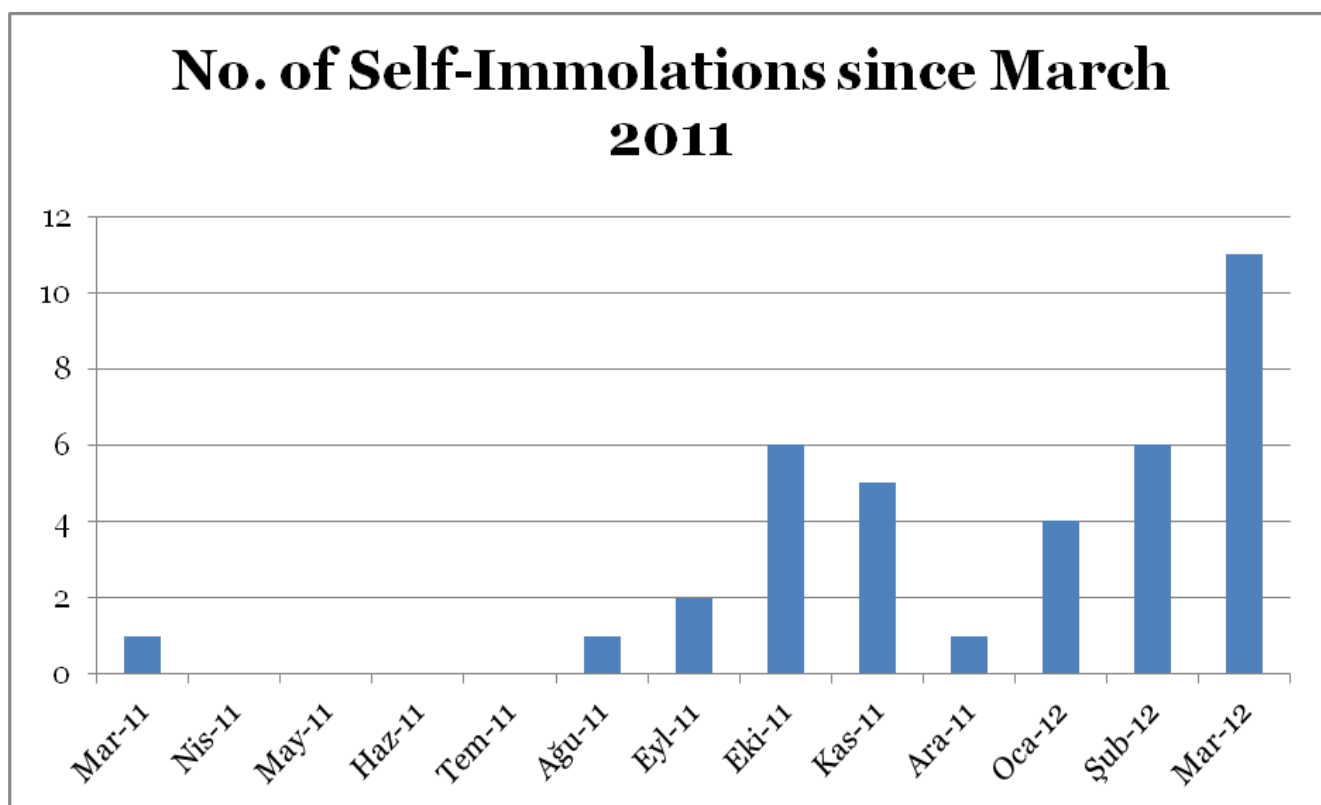
'patriotic education' (rgyal gces ring lugs kyi slob gso las 'gyul). The goal of such patriotic education is the development of a sense of loyalty to the state and the wider Chinese motherland. In particular, such campaigns focused on party policies regarding the longstanding historic incorporation of Tibet into China, the central necessity of loyalty to the state at the heart of correct religious belief, the denunciation of the Dalai Lama as a political 'splittist' and, more recently, the necessity and benefits of recent development programs. In the late 1990s, these campaigns were also carried out in areas that were technically outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region, most particularly Eastern Tibetan monasteries.

In many respects, the testaments of self-immolators both mirror and invert the fundamental political intent of the patriotic education campaigns, by calling for new forms of loyalty to Tibetan (rather than Chinese) sovereignty, and to the unity of (previously often divided) Tibetan peoples rather than the unity of Chinese ethnic nationalities. This kind of transformation is similar in overall form to the rise of Hindu and Buddhist nationalism in South Asia (Van de Veer 1996): that is, that while the terms of debate for the overall conceptual framework of the state's vision for an indigenous population may be accepted, they are transformed and inverted into a means for resisting state rule (Scott 1985). In effect,

the very means for suppressing indigenous dissent in Tibet became a principal means for consolidating it.

This argument did not go down very well with the Cross-Party Group audience when presented in some of its early drafts. Despite a long-standing acceptance of this kind of argument in anthropological and historical circles within academia, its interpretive framing was seen as speculative and difficult to prove: it was, in effect, a cultural argument,

and rejected as such. We might compare this with the argument regarding self-immolations in the Chinese mainland, which was included: whilst controversial and in effect saying much the same thing (that Tibetan politics could now no longer be understood outside the context of Chinese state transformations), this latter argument was seen as more 'concrete' and newsworthy.



***Cross-Party Group on Tibet, Briefing  
Paper No. 4: Self-Immolation Amongst  
Tibetans, 2009-2012<sup>1</sup>***

**Introduction**

Since 2009, almost forty Tibetans have committed self-immolation, either in Tibet, India or Nepal, in protest against Chinese rule or policies in the region. This form of protest, unknown amongst Tibetans prior to the 1990s, has quickly escalated, particularly in the Eastern Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo and, in combination with the large scale street protests and funerals that attend such self-immolations, is presenting the Chinese authorities with serious problems of local policing, as well as being increasingly damaging to the country's international reputation. More broadly, this most final form of protest has often been attended by testaments and wills by self-immolators that are increasingly galvanising Tibetan opinion both inside and outside China around notions of nationalism and cultural loyalty in ways unseen in the last thirty years.

**The development of self-immolation as a form of Tibetan protest**

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<sup>1</sup> The original version of Briefing Paper No.4 may be found at: [https://scotlandtibet.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/selfimmolationbriefing\\_june2012.pdf](https://scotlandtibet.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/selfimmolationbriefing_june2012.pdf), and has been reproduced here with minor edits, including omission of the original Table of Contents and Executive Summary.

The first publicly recorded Tibetan self-immolation did not occur in Tibet itself, but India. On 27<sup>th</sup> September 1998, sixty-year old Thubten Ngodup, an ex-army pensioner who lived in Dharamsala and had spent much of his youth as a monk in Tashilhunpo monastery in Tibet, doused himself in gasoline and set fire to himself in Central Delhi when the Indian police authorities tried to forcibly remove Tibetan protesters who were carrying out an extended hunger strike to highlight conditions in Tibet.

Ngodup's subsequent death galvanised the Tibetan exiled community, who had become increasingly disenchanted with the persistent failure of existing exiled policies to achieve either meaningful change in Tibet or even systematic dialogue between Dharamsala and Beijing. However, it was not until 2009 that the present spate of self-immolations began in earnest, with the self-immolation of the twenty-seven year old monk Tapey in Ngaba (Ch. Aba) county town. Ngaba town and its associated Kirti monastery have been the focus of long-running tensions over the last ten years, with the closure of Tibetan-language and monastic schools. On the 18th March 2008, 23 protesting Tibetans were reported killed by security forces during the protests that spread across the Tibetan Autonomous Region and surrounding Tibetan-populated areas. Kirti Monastery is reported to have been under a state of lockdown for several years, with a large security presence of up to five garrisons

having built up in the area. Tapey, who was protesting the cancellation of New Year religious services at Kirti Monastery, Ngaba, raised a Tibetan flag and photograph of the Dalai Lama before setting himself on fire at a market crossroads. He was shot by security services as he burned, and subsequently arrested. His whereabouts remain unknown. Two years later, in March 2011, Lobsang Phuntsok, another monk from Kirti Monastery, set fire to himself in Ngaba town, this time fatally. Combined, these began a long series of self-immolations and protests around Kirti monastery, representing almost half the self-immolators (eighteen up to 30<sup>th</sup> March 2012). Other areas where such protests have occur stretch across the eastern regions of the Tibetan Plateau: in particular the towns of Rebkong, Barkham, Tawu and Charu. These five locations, all in eastern Tibet, have presented the overwhelming majority of self-immolations; all of these areas are also linked to histories of wider communal protest against Chinese rule, especially in 2008<sup>2</sup>.

The pace of self-immolations has increased dramatically in recent months: by March 2012, it had reached almost ten per month, from one per month at this point in 2011. Most self-immolators have thus far been Tibetan Buddhist monks (20 up to 30-3-2012), former monks (7) and nuns (3), but the number also

includes a number of students and working laypeople. Most self-immolations draw large crowds of Tibetans and often erupt into spontaneous protests, especially if there is any conflict over possession of the body with local security forces. The funerals of self-immolators are now becoming mass gatherings that attract thousands from across the local Tibetan population. Whilst generally peaceful, these funerals constitute a major challenge to local security forces and have been regularly blocked in situations where the authorities have control of the body<sup>3</sup>. In many cases, the fate of injured self-immolators is simply unknown, and families have not been informed.

### **Interpreting self-immolation**

Considerable controversy exists as to the interpretation of self-immolation amongst Tibetans. The Chinese authorities have, through media outlets such as China Tibet Online and TibetInfor, sought to portray them as either the result of individual hooliganism or mental instability, or occurring at the direct instigation of the 'Dalai clique'<sup>4</sup> (shorthand for the Tibetan Government-in-Exile). However,

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<sup>3</sup> e.g. "Fiery death marks March 10 commemorations in Tibet", *Phayul* [Tuesday, March 13, 2012], <http://www.phayul.com/news/tools/print.aspx?id=31056&t=1>; "Tawu tense after monk's self-immolation", *Phayul* [Friday, August 19, 2011], <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=29894&t=1>.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. China Tibet Online, March 20, 2012. "How the Dalai clique incites self-immolation". <http://chinatibet.people.com.cn/96069/7762820.html>, accessed 11.05/2012.

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<sup>2</sup> See Scottish Parliament's Cross-Party Group on Tibet Briefing Paper No. 1



such endeavours have been more muted than is usual for such protests, and in general the principal state response has been to limit media access of any kind.

Both within China and in the international media, a principal issue that has arisen is the extent to which such acts are 'Buddhist' in nature. Many have denounced self-immolation as being a violent act, and are therefore opposed to the religious ethics supposedly espoused by Buddhist monks and nuns. Others, by contrast, have argued that self-immolation, while morally egregious, nonetheless harms no-one else and is therefore a non-violent mode of protest,<sup>5</sup> and that giving up one's life for the sake of others (here, the Tibetan people and cause) is the action of a *bodhisattva*, or Buddhist hero, and several commentators (and at least two self-immolators) have pointed out tales from the Buddha's previous lives in which he gave up his life to save others, in one particular case through self-immolation. Indeed, Tibetan exile groups have unanimously taken to referring to self-immolators as *gyalche pawo*, 'national heroes' (see discussion below). In this latter sense, debate has often centred on the use of terms such as 'desperate' and 'despairing' to describe self-immolators, which have been used by both the international media and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile but

roundly rejected by groups such as the Tibetan Youth Congress and Free Tibet. It is clear that acts of self-immolation fuse together religious and political aspirations amongst Tibetans. Lama Sopa Rinpoche, a respected incarnate lama who self-immolated in Northeast Tibet in January 2012, declared in a final tape recording:

'This is the 21st century, and this is the year in which so many Tibetan heroes have died. I am sacrificing my body both to stand in solidarity with them in flesh and blood, and to seek repentance through this highest tantric honor of offering one's body. This is not to seek personal fame or glory. I am giving away my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering, and to lead them – each of whom has been our mother in the past and yet has been led by ignorance to commit immoral acts – to the Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite light. My 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. I offer this sacrifice as a token of long-life offering to our root guru His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all other spiritual teachers and lamas.'<sup>6</sup>

Sopa Rinpoche, self-immolated Darlag county town, 8 January 2012

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<sup>5</sup> Samdhong Rinpoche (Prime Minister, Tibetan Government in Exile, 2001-2011): interview, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2012.

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<sup>6</sup> Source: <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/harrowing-images-and-last-message-tibet-first-lama-self-immolate>, accessed 12/06/12.



Whilst most self-immolators carry out the acts themselves to a now almost formulaic cry of "Long Live the Dalai Lama! Freedom for Tibet!", an increasing number such as Sopa Rinpoche have left behind testaments to explain their acts, the contents of which are proving extremely influential both inside and outside Tibet. Arguably, such statements are re-setting the political and moral landscape of resistance to Chinese rule in Tibet in the wake of the Dalai Lama's retirement. Unlike most forms of Tibetan protest testament over the last thirty years, the majority of new statements are not aimed at the international community, but at fellow Tibetans, calling upon them to develop and maintain unity and to build up a sense of patriotism (*lagya*) in the face of Chinese rule. These ideas have been evoked by both lay and monastic self-immolators. Jampal Yeshe, the 27-year-old student from Tawu town in Eastern Tibet who burnt himself to death in Delhi on March 26<sup>th</sup> 2012, wrote in his "Five Point Testament":

‘My fellow Tibetans! If you care about your happiness and future, you must have the spirit of patriotism. Patriotism is the soul of a nation. Moreover, it is the confidence in search of truth; and also the harbinger of a happy future. My fellow Tibetan! If we are spire to peace and happiness in par with other people around the world, we should hold dear to our heart

the word ‘patriotism’. You should make effort in all deliberations, big or small. In general, ‘patriotism’ is the insight that distinguishes truth from falsehood.’<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Sopa Rinpoche concluded his testament with the following call to Tibetans:

‘To all my spiritual brothers and sisters, and the faithful ones living elsewhere: You must unite and work together to build a strong and prosperous Tibetan nation in the future. This is the sole wish of all the Tibetan heroes. Therefore, you must avoid any quarrelling amongst yourselves whether it is land disputes or water disputes. You must maintain unity and strength. Give love and education to the children, who should study hard to master all the traditional fields of studies. The elders should carry out spiritual practice as well as maintain and protect Tibetan language and culture by using all your resources and by involving your body, speech and mind. It is extremely important to genuinely practice Buddhist principles in order to benefit the Tibetan cause and also to lead all sentient beings towards the path of enlightenment. Tashi Delek.’

### **Official and public attitudes to self-immolation**

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<sup>7</sup> Source: <http://choegyaltenzin.com/2012/03/27/wishes-of-the-latest-self-immolator/>, accessed 12/05/12, checked against original Tibetan.

Chinese state media organisations have been swift to blame the 'Dalai clique' for either instigating or encouraging self-immolation. While it is certainly the case that the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (that is, the Executive of the Central Tibetan Administration, led by present elected Prime Minister, Lobsang Sangay) has avoided condemning self-immolation, and the Tibetan refugee communities as a whole honour self-immolators as national heroes, there are nonetheless considerable tensions and disagreements amongst the exiled Tibetan communities as to how to respond to this turn of events.

Despite the views expressed by the Chinese authorities, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has been remarkably muted on the subject of self-immolation except to express his sadness and to reject any idea that he was instigating them. The Dalai Lama's public position has famously been one of staunch non-violence (*ahimsa*) in combination with international consciousness-raising: this has led him to denounce tactics such as hunger strikes and 'peace marches' to the Tibetan border as either being forms of violence, or inciting it. It seems clear that the self-immolations in Tibet and India constitute a limit to this logic. In the *Wall Street Journal* of

March 21<sup>st</sup> 2012, he simply concluded: "Now, I have nothing to say. Only pray"<sup>8</sup>.

As of March 2012, the CTA Executive's official strategy has been to discourage self-immolation while recognising the moral worth of each action. In doing this, the CTA distinguish between self-immolation inside and outside Tibet, as seen in their response to Jampal Yeshe's death in Delhi:

'The CTA would like to reiterate that as Buddhists, life is precious. In the long-term interest of the Tibetan cause, we urge Tibetans to focus on secular and monastic education to provide the necessary human resources and the capability to strengthen and sustain our movement. We once again remind Tibetans to refrain from drastic actions. While Tibetans inside Tibet live under the repressive system imposed by the Chinese government, with no space for conventional means of protest such as demonstrations, hunger strikes, etc., Tibetans living in the free world have freedom and space for conventional means of protests which should be utilised to the fullest. Therefore, the Central Tibetan Administration reiterates its appeal to all Tibetans and Tibet supporters to express their solidarity through activities which are peaceful, legal and dignified. We urge

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<sup>8</sup> Barbara Chai, *The Wall Street Journal*, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2012. "Dalai Lama Says He'd 'Welcome' Investigation of Tibetan Self-Immolations".

everyone to remain calm in light of the latest emotionally-charged circumstances.’<sup>9</sup>

The CTA's position has been challenged by the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), the unofficial 'opposition' within the Tibetan refugee community. Pochung Dhondup Lhadar, Vice-President of the TYC, rejected the CTA's distinction between democratic and non-democratic states in the modern context, because of the general human rights failure of the international community as a whole:

‘The leaders of this world have no right to talk about peace, freedom and equality. The twenty-first century only belongs to violence and economic might. The twenty-first century is a century shrouded in darkness ... Those who choose to self-immolate do not do so on a whim, on the spur of the moment. They think about it at length, they make a firm decision, and make plans. They decide to do this for the good of the nation and the good of all of those around them. If someone chooses to self-immolate, therefore, those who share the same cause as them should not stop them or try to save them, because in doing so they deny the fundamental reasoning that caused them to choose this action.’<sup>10</sup>

Despite this disagreement, it is entirely clear that Tibetan self-immolators are vastly honoured both within Tibet and in exile, and their statements carry incalculable moral authority. By most ordinary members of the refugee community, they are regarded as a beacon of hope in a movement which has languished in the doldrums for more than a decade, and which even the Dalai Lama has denounced as ineffective and a failure<sup>11</sup>. If the self-immolations continue, it seems to be only a matter of time before the post-Dalai Lama exiled administration renounce their present hesitancy and fully back the self-immolators, constituting a sea change in the Tibetan situation.

### Causes of the self-immolations

While the political merits and religious ethics of self-immolation have been the object of considerable debate, the actual causes of these events have largely been taken for granted. Several aspects of the immolations require attention: (a) its bushfire like development over the last three years; (b) its concentration on specific sites in east and northeast Tibet (that is, Kham and Amdo), to the almost complete exclusion of Central Tibet; (c) the predominance of monks, nuns and students; and (d), the strong emphasis on Tibetan

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<sup>9</sup> Statement by the Press Office of the Central Tibetan Administration, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2012. Source: <http://tibet.net/2012/03/27/cta-deeply-saddened-by-self-immolation-incidents/>, accessed 12/05/2012.

<sup>10</sup> Pochung Dhondup Lhadar (Vice-President, Tibetan Youth Congress), interview 31/3/2012.

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<sup>11</sup> NBC's 'Today', 2009. "Dalai Lama Declared Autonomy Proposals A Failure". <http://tibettruth.com/2012/04/11/dalai-lama-declared-autonomy-proposals-a-failure/>

patriotism evoked by the self-immolators themselves.

Firstly, immolations are clearly linked to a massive ramping up of the security presence by the Peoples Armed Police in areas such as Ngaba and Golok, direct internal state control of monasteries, and the stringent application of ideological programmes such as the 'patriotic education campaign' (*rgyal gces ring lugs kyi slob gso las 'gyul*). Such campaigns require monks and nuns to regularly denounce the Dalai Lama, adhere to the CCP's view of Tibetan history as an inalienable part of China, and concede that all legitimate religious commitment was based on loyalty to the state. As the Tibet specialist Tsering Shakya (2012) has commented:

‘What links the current incidents to religion is that most of the Tibetans who have committed self-immolation have been monks, former monks or nuns. Their actions were not an obeisance to religion or the performing of virtue. Rather, they signify something entirely different: they are a product of “rage,” induced by daily humiliation and intolerable demands for conformity and obedience. Religious figures in Tibet have been particularly subjected to the discipline of patriotic education and the campaigns opposing the so-called “Dalai clique.” These campaigns, viewed by the monks as a regime of

degradation, require them to endlessly feign compliance, obliging them to demonstrate repeatedly their patriotism and fidelity to the Communist Party. That is not an easy task to sustain, and we see that it has finally become something they refuse to do.’

Secondly, the new wave of self-immolations seem intimately linked to growing restrictions on both Tibetan religion and language schooling, hence the predominance of monastics and students<sup>12</sup>, many of whom are directly involved in such restrictions. Like Sopa Rinpoche, most immolators that leave testaments call upon their fellow Tibetans to maintain their language and religion as fundamental features of Tibetan patriotism. In many respects, this explains the focus on those eastern Tibetan regions outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region itself, where special regulations protect the local religion and language to a limited amount.

Thirdly, the epidemiology of self-immolation – its clustering in specific towns – points very clearly to the importance of local links and forms of communication. Tibetan

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<sup>12</sup> BBC, 20 October 2010. "Tibetan students in China protest over language policy". <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11581189>, accessed 12/5/2012; BBC, 27 October 2010. "Education reforms anger Tibetans". <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11634364>, accessed 12/5/2012. See also the UN Human Rights Council report on education and language in Qinghai, Document: A/HRC/17/29/Add.1, pp 3-7; <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/17session/reports.htm>.

self-immolators are clearly inspired by those that went before them, and it seems impossible to discount the impact of large funerals plus the sheer respect that self-immolators receive posthumously as motivating factors for future self-immolators. In this sense, the kind of piecemeal explanations presented by the Chinese authorities – of individual criminality and personal moral failings – are wholly unconvincing, except in the sense that they reveal an official prejudice that all protest is by definition illegitimate and therefore necessarily the inclination of the criminal or the insane. Finally, such acts are clearly part of a wider growth in political solidarity amongst Tibetans over the last twenty years, and in particular since the 2008 protests. Traditionally, Tibetans have been relatively fragmented in political terms, with political loyalties being local and sectarian within the various Buddhist schools. Until recently, there has been no indigenous equivalent for the English-language term 'Tibet': the usual term Bö traditionally referred only to Central Tibet, and was rejected by most people in regions such as Kham and Amdo. Within the last ten years, however, growing calls for Tibetan national unity and patriotism have incorporated outlying Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures in Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan, the general location of most of the self-immolations.

### **Self-Immolation within the PRC Context**

It is important to note that the growing national patriotism demonstrated within self-immolations and other forms of protest is generally not witnessed within the established exiled communities, and as noted above that these widespread changes within the Tibetan Plateau are ones that the Tibetan Government-in-Exile has had difficulties in coming to terms with. It is clear that a growing cultural and political rift is occurring between those that have spent most or all their lives inside the Tibetan regions of the Peoples Republic of China, and those that have spent all or most of their lives in exile. In this sense, we must look to the larger context of the PRC to understand the recent spate of self-immolations.

To begin with, it is impossible not to note that the recent rise in Tibetan political solidarity and patriotism has emerged precisely during the period following the widespread introduction of the Chinese patriotic education campaigns themselves, and the majority of self-immolations have been carried out by those in direct receipt of these ideological campaigns. Indeed, the precise fusion of patriotism and religion that is seen amongst the immolators almost exactly mirrors the patriotic education campaign policy on religion (see above), *but in this case advocating Tibetan rather than Chinese nationalism*. Similar political dynamics have been witnessed in

nationalist movements across the globe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, usually in response to European colonial rule: indigenous populations adopt but invert the logic of rule in order to oppose it. In much the same way, the kind of self-immolations that we have seen amongst Tibetans in the last three years, whilst innovative in Tibetan cultural terms are an established aspect of protest across the Peoples Republic of China, in which public suicide plays a major part. Modern China has one of the highest suicide rates in the world - almost 300,000 people a year or 22.23 out of every 100,000, having risen from 13.9 per 100,000 in 1999<sup>13</sup>. This rise shows little connection to rates of depressive disorders<sup>14</sup>, and has been strongly linked to socio-economic changes across the PRC that generate acute financial pressures on individuals (mainly rural women)<sup>15</sup>.

Many such suicides involve public self-immolation. Rather than the kind of overtly political suicide seen recently amongst Tibetans, these are carried out by ordinary

Chinese farmers and businesspeople who have fallen foul of rapid economic development, but who nonetheless seek to make some kind of public statement of their plight. In 2003, the Beijing authorities created an exception to the general legality of suicide by banned suicide in the sacred paving stones of Tiananmen Square. Such suicides – many of which involved self-immolation - had grown common enough in the Square to warrant special training amongst its attendant police forces. As the Asia Times correspondent Li Yong Yan commented of the affair:

‘A public suicide is usually committed to make a public protest over the way the government treats the individual and/or general public. The recent strings of public attempts in Tiananmen are proof enough. Without exception, they are hopeless victims of forced eviction from their homes. Developers, backed by local governments, never talk to the homeowners about a fair agreement. Instead, the developers talk through bulldozers. Powerless against the wrecker's ball, the owners turn to the courts, which turn them away. Then they go to the people's government, which never responds or, if it does, sends police to disperse the protesters. With nowhere else to turn to, they show up in Tiananmen Square, with a bottle of gasoline. Ever the law-abiding citizens, they douse themselves with fuel,

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<sup>13</sup> World Health Organization "Suicide rates (per 100,000), by gender, China 1987-1999".

[http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/media/chin.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/chin.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Law, Samuel and Liu, Pozi (February, 2008), "Suicide in China: Unique demographic patterns and relationship to depressive disorder", *Current Psychiatry Reports* (Current Psychiatry Reports) 10 (1): 80–86, doi:10.1007/s11920-008-0014-5, PMID 18269899

<sup>15</sup> Phillips, Michael R.; Liu, Huaqing; Zhang, Yanping (November 3, 2004), "Suicide and Social Change in China", *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* (Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry) 23: 25–50, doi:10.1023/A:1005462530658.



and end up being charged with provocative, disorderly behaviour, by the suddenly all-efficient law-enforcement authorities.’<sup>16</sup>

Information regarding self-immolations across the PRC has not been collated, and in many cases – as with the Tibetan situation - the bodies and survivors of self-immolation have been removed by the authorities, often under mental health regulations, and their whereabouts are unknown.

### **Concluding remarks**

Political self-immolations are not therefore a peculiar development of Buddhism or even the Tibetan cause, but seem rather to be a distinctive aspect of a wider malaise endemic to the modern Chinese state. That the combined march towards economic development and political consolidation in the Middle Kingdom leaves little room or security for the ordinary citizen will surprise few China watchers of course. However, that it might lead to the kind of final rejection of both personal aspiration and governmental order witnessed in political self-immolation is a troubling lesson for the entire international community – which is, in effect, all of us - that supports China's prodigious growth. 🙏

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<sup>16</sup> "Beijing tries to snuff out public suicide", 23 October 2003, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/EJ29Ad01.html>



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