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Burning for a Cause: Self-immolations, Human Security, and the Violence of Nonviolence in Tibet

Antonio Terrone¹

Abstract

In Tibetan areas of the People's Republic of China, more than 150 Tibetans have immolated themselves in the past decade to protest what they perceive as limited religious, cultural, and civil rights. Revered as national heroes in exile and passionate human rights fighters among Euro-American audiences, Tibetan self-immolators are considered mere terrorists in China. This article brings studies in terrorism into its analysis of the Tibetan self-immolation crisis, examining the ways in which both are heightened by modern communication technology and media. Rejecting any interpretation that aligns self-immolation with suicide terrorism, I argue that although Tibetan self-immolators

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uphold Buddhist scriptural principles of bodhisattvic self-sacrifice, their martyrdom is nevertheless a form of violence with far ranging causes, both political and religious.

So many people have self-immolated. I can understand them now, because we have very few ways to solve problems. No one wants to live in an environment that's full of pressure and fear. In effect, there is a systematic slaughter of our culture . . . The whole Tibetan issue cannot be solved through the law . . . Have I ever thought of self-immolation (*zifen*) as an option? If this comes to an end and I am locked up and cannot proceed with what I am doing, and they force me to say and do things I don't want to say, I will choose suicide (*zisha*).

—Tashi Wangchuk,² Tibetan activist (Kessel)

We are not terrorists, we are Buddhism [sic], so we are not going to harm any other people.

—Unidentified Tibetan (Holly Williams)

² When not following the Wylie system of transliteration, Tibetan terms and proper names follow the THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan elaborated by David Germano and Nicolas Tournadre (2003) <http://www.thlib.org/reference/transliteration/#!essay=/thl/phonetics/>

On August 27, 2015, a 55-year old Tibetan woman named Tashi Kyi died in Ngulra, a small village in Sangkog township, in Gansu Province, after setting herself on fire in protest against China's repressive policies (TYC).³ Tashi Kyi was the 143rd Tibetan to self-immolate in the most recent and long-lasting spate of deadly protests that began in February 2009. The contemporary phenomena of self-immolations and political violence by Buddhist monks and civilians in Tibetan regions of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have raised concerns in international media and human rights organizations about human security in the region. Immolation is the act of offering a sacrifice; the "devotion to destruction or severe loss for the sake of something else" (OED *Immolation*). The immolations that have taken place in Tibet since 2009 have involved this act directed toward one's own life. The fact that the sacrifice is self-inflicted without threatening the life of others at first seems to have nothing to do with violence, a contested term, since self-immolation can be considered a peaceful expression of despair and an act of political protest (Fierke 186). But the general methodological approach of this study considers self-immolation as a form of (self-inflicted) violence, defined as "the deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property, etc.; physically violent behavior or treatment" (OED *Violence*).

³ This article is a revised and extended version of two lectures, including "Tibetan self-immolators are rational actors, not suicide terrorists" given at the conference "Buddhism and Politics in the Twentieth Century," organized by André Laliberté at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, June 6-7, 2014, and "Challenging the Motherland: Religion, Terrorism, and the Violence of non-Violence in Western China" Edmund Perry Lecture, Department of Religious Studies, Northwestern University, May 27, 2015. I would like to take the opportunity to thank André Laliberté for including me in the project, the anonymous reviewer for the useful comments, and Sarah Jacoby for her patience in reading several versions of this article. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Daniel Cozort, the editors of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, and the anonymous reviewer for detailed insights and comments.

One of the features of the recent self-immolation phenomenon is that it echoes Buddhist attitudes to extreme acts of altruism, generosity, and sacrifice for the sake of other living beings. A high number of Tibetan self-immolators, who I refer to as suicide activists, were monastics. Those who were not monastics were either ex-monastics or lay Buddhist devotees (Terrone “Suicide Protesters”). There is ample evidence in Buddhist hagiographical and biographical documents especially in the Chinese tradition that self-immolation was not solely conceived of as ritual performance for the spiritual advancement of the individual based on scriptural models. Rather, Buddhist monks also sacrificed themselves for the sake of solving mundane issues such as natural calamities and war. James Benn has demonstrated that in ancient China self-immolations had no real fixed meaning; they were interpreted and publicized as bodhisattvic actions that targeted the reestablishment of moral and social order, protected against invaders, defended against severe weather conditions (especially floods), safeguarded the *dharma*, prevented banditry, and even operated as forms of political protest and propaganda (Benn *War*). It is also worth noting that both ancient and contemporary instances of widespread self-immolation gained momentum at times of socio-political crisis, perceived injustice, and state-sanctioned violence (Rivera 24; 83). In these contexts, self-immolations and suicide protests have been interpreted as nonviolent attempts to trigger change, attract sympathy and support in times of suffering and perceived injustice (Biggs *Ultimate* 2012; Pape *Win* 13).

There has been no shortage of publications by Tibetan studies scholars on the modern wave of Tibetan self-immolations in the past few years. However, still more needs to be done to understand these events in the larger contemporary context of global activism and both hostile and non-hostile political violence. This article aims to stimulate further discussion and understanding of Tibetan self-immolations within their socio-political, historical, and religious contexts in order to better comprehend

the ongoing occurrence of self-immolation as a new form of political protest in Tibet. This study argues that self-immolations in Tibet are a form of political violence deliberately chosen to express the anguish, despair, frustrations, and grievances of a people and therefore these function as acts of protest for a cause their perpetrators perceive as prosocial, aiming at political change, and serving as an instrument of mass communication. Self-immolations are here considered social events, tragic acts by individuals who take upon themselves the task of expressing the social malaise they experience by means of public auto-cremation (Rivera 10-11). As a consequence, in my view, self-immolators are fundamentally suicide activists who, unlike suicide terrorists, kill themselves and not others with the intent to trigger a political response.

In order to further investigate the nature of Tibet's suicide activism, this article examines the following questions: Can the recent surge of self-immolation in Tibet be explained by Buddhist influences? Alternately, is self-immolation a form of political violence, even terrorism? If not, why did official Chinese state media outlets portray self-immolators as terrorist actors in the early years of the outbreak? What implications do these questions have on how the PRC and members of the international community should react to Tibetan self-immolations? This article suggests that even though self-immolation has Buddhist scriptural and historical antecedents, Tibetan self-immolators are suicide activists who are engaging in a form of political violence. Though it is inaccurate and misleading to align their acts of self-sacrifice with terrorism, the two forms of martyrdom share a relationship to modern communication technology and media that merits further analysis.

This article focuses on the points of intersection between religion and political violence through a critical analysis of the phenomenon of self-immolations in Tibet from the perspective of human security. Human security is the desire for safety and stability in a given society, entailing

human welfare, human rights, and freedom of self-expression (Wellman *Dance* 18-19). Among other things, freedom of self-expression includes the practice of religion, the use of one's national language, and the ability to express a common sense of purpose and social priorities. In the specific case of Tibet, where morality is strongly influenced by Buddhist principles and views, religion is at the forefront of individuals' behavior and human relations.

For centuries, monastics have been the custodians of Tibetan intellectual knowledge and Buddhist morality. However, just as in previous centuries, the history of Tibet in the twentieth century does not lack instances of Buddhist monks embracing violence and armed combat. In resistance to attempts of Chinese assimilation, despite the ideals of peace and compassion they are expected to represent, Tibetan monastics have actively engaged in political protests, violent demonstrations, and even armed combat to protect their religious, cultural, and socio-political patrimony (Shakabpa 239-241; 293-294). In this regard, violence, for instance, has been predominantly discussed and analyzed within theological and doctrinal frames that addressed it as compassionate killing, ritual sacrifice, and selfless generosity (Delhey 2006; Meinert 2006; Schlieter 2006; Jenkins 2011; Cabezón 2013; Dalton 2011). But what happens when the actual violence is perpetrated not with compassion and generosity let alone ritual intent in mind? What if violence is aimed at political change and nationalist agendas? Is this anathema to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and praxis?

In this essay, I propose an alternative conceptualization of the discursive formations of the relationship between Buddhism and violence by arguing that self-immolation can be characterized as both an act of violence that is justified, if not legitimized, by normative religious scriptural and oral traditions, and also a phenomenon situated in particular cultural and socio-political circumstances. I analyze the role of auto-cremation in

Tibet through a religious lens, considering it in terms of the Buddhist sanction of violent means (Cabezón; Buffetrille and Robin; McGranahan and Litzinger). Numerous Buddhist scriptures contain ideological references to the use of self-sacrifice to achieve ethical goals (Ohnuma 249-256). However, even if Buddhist ethics seem to be a factor influencing Tibetan self-immolations, this study does not consider only religion as the primary explanation for these events. It looks also at recent studies in political violence, terrorism, and suicide attacks to better understand the function and the perception of self-immolations as political violence in the recent history of Sino-Tibetan relations.

In line with progressive studies on terrorism, this study identifies self-immolations not as irrational acts of religious fundamentalists, but as rational political and communicative responses to perceived injustice through violent self-sacrifice. Drawing on terrorism studies to analyze Tibetan acts of self-immolation reinforces their characterization as political violence with the intent to agitate for a political cause and/or resist perceived inequity and unfairness perpetrated by a government (Barnett *Self-immolations*; Briggs *Dying*; Yeh). This paper therefore problematizes some of the core themes of the self-immolation phenomenon including self-inflicted violence, sacrifice, and politics in line with Ananda Abeysekara's recent study of violence and Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Just like "religion," other categories such as "violence," "terrorism," and even "suicide" are subordinate to specific cultural systems and are "discursively produced thus shifting within the context of different debates" (Abeysekara 40).

In their seminal study, *Violence as Communication*, Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf provocatively announce that "Without communication there can be no terrorism" (Schmid and de Graaf 9). Building on this conclusion, I suggest that we can consider self-immolation in Tibet as a strategy of "communication." Along with terrorism, insurgencies, and revolutions, self-immolations as sacrificial acts of self-inflicted violence that aim

at political communication rely on the technological, digital, and media revolution begun in the twentieth century. Tibetan suicide activists engage in sensational suicidal actions and make use of communication technology including smart phones, digital video recording, and photography to record the events to virtually disseminate these self-executions in real time to the world. Information is passed on to monks in India via Internet phone calls where monks document the events. In 2013, the Kirti monastery in India published *Rang lus mer sreg dang 'brel ba'i lo rgyus yig tshags. Tibetans Self-immolations 1998 to 2012: News, Views, and Global Response*, a set of five volumes of collected data about the self-immolations in Tibet, making it the first encyclopedia-like work of self-immolations in the world.

I argue that despite the PRC's portrayal of self-immolators as terrorists, the two cannot be conflated. Many academics and commentators have issued quite a robust discourse about the nonviolent character of self-immolations and others have discussed their religious or secular influences (Cabezón; Verini; Mapanoo). Instead, I understand violence in both religious and secular environments as a political and communicative act (Heath-Kelly 12; Schmid and de Graaf 9). Self-immolations are a form of violence that is practiced with political goals in mind since they are means to achieve or coerce a political result either with or without the sanction of religion. Most of the protests in Tibetan regions of China in the past decades, including self-immolations, emerged as expressions of concern about Chinese government-led crackdowns and interference in century-old Tibetan religious traditions they considered threatening to national security instead of government attention to education, employment disparities, and the development of public services. As discussed below, religious devotion is not the only or even the main motivator behind these acts of sacrifice as most of the issues instead concern political leadership (return of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama) as well as social and educational matters, including language, equality, and employment. Tibetan self-immolations, therefore, are strategic tools of mass communication

shared by other forms of protest and politically-motivated violence (Biggs *Ultimate* 2012; Bradatan 2011; Pape *Win* 13).

Buddhism has often been understood as a nonviolent religion canonically against any form of harm to living beings. However, at least in Euro-American public and academic circles, only recently the relationship between Buddhism and different forms of violence has become the object of critical inquiry (Sperling; Dalton; Demieville; Jerryson and Jeurgensmeyer; Faure; Benn *Burning*). Canonical and non-canonical Buddhist literary works do not encourage direct and intentional harm or killing of other living beings. They do allow violent measures when motivated by defensive or protective intent or to train for such defense, as exemplified, for instance, in the Sanskrit *Āryabodhisattvagocara* (Jamspal 47-64; Jenkins *Merit* 64). In canonical and noncanonical Buddhist literature, there are a number of texts that analyze the legitimacy of violence, or “compassionate violence,” and that even encourage it in certain circumstances without the risk of generating negative karmic repercussions (Jenkins *Compassionate Violence* 299-300). This is the case, for instance, of the *Upāyakausal-yasūtra*, the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, and the Sri Lankan historical poem *Mahāvamsa* (Harvey 238; Kent; Bartholomeusz 10).

In Tibet, the Buddhist view of suicide, just like in most religious traditions, is a complex issue, and, so far, still understudied. The act of offering one’s own life out of altruistic intentions is doctrinally and ethically associated with the ideals of compassion, selflessness, and generosity. For some observers, however, the long chain of Tibetan auto-cremation does not conjure only images of violence. In the case of Chinese state-backed media, it also borders acts of terrorism with the intent to disrupt social harmony and create chaos. While on the one hand it will be unlikely to find governments around the world in agreement with the Chinese la-

belling of Tibetan self-immolations as acts of terrorism, it would be legitimate to wonder if Beijing policy makers exploit this sensitive and ambiguous concept for propagandistic purposes (Terrone *Public Square*).

Although there are a few rare examples of the practice of auto-cremation predominantly reported in non-canonical Tibetan sources dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, what is most shocking in the contemporary context is the high number of young people who in rapid succession have decided to take their lives from 2009 until 2018 using this violent act as their weapon of choice. As a modern form of political protest, self-immolations appeared in 1998 when Tupten Ngodrup became the first Tibetan in exile to offer his life for the Tibetan struggle for independence. To date, since February 2009 when the twenty-year old Lobsang Tashi (also known as Tapey) from Kirti Monastery in eastern Tibet self-immolated until March 2018, 153 young Tibetans have self-immolated in the Tibetan regions of Northwestern China as well as in the Tibetan community in exile in India, generating one of the longest and largest episodes of this extreme form of political protest in the history of Tibet (TYC), and indeed in Asia more broadly. Of the total self-immolations, approximately forty-five percent of the self-immolations were monastics or former monastics, while the rest were ordinary Tibetan civilians living in China.⁴ When self-immolations started to increase in number, monastics

⁴ For this study, I have used two sources of information regarding the collection and data analysis of Tibetan self-immolations. One is a document titled CECC Update: Tibetan Self-Immolations produced by the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (last update April 22) available at <https://www.cecc.gov/tibetan-self-immolations-0> (last accessed 08/15/18). The other source is a fact-sheet organized by the Washington DC-based International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) titled “Self-immolations by Tibetans” that can be viewed at <https://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/> (last update March 7, 2018). Another helpful source of information on the demographics of modern self-immolations in Tibet is the chart created by Tsering Shakyapa for Asia Pacific Memo; see Terrone Suicide.

were leading this phenomenon in Tibet. The immolators were predominantly young Tibetans, many in their twenties or younger, who allegedly set themselves ablaze to express anguish about their perception of China's repressive control. They called for self-determination, freedom of religion, justice, and the return of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to Tibet, creating an image problem for China. The original epicenter of the self-immolations is in the Tibetan areas of what are today parts of Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai provinces of the PRC.

This controversial phenomenon reached its momentum at a time of widespread violence and social upheavals in 2012 with eighty-six self-immolations, the highest number in a single year. These deaths add to the latest wave of violence started in 2008 that affected numerous Tibetan regions in China, and capitalized on the once-in-a-decade change in political leadership that occurred in 2012 at the 18th National Congress of the Community Party of China. Given their temporal contiguity to these political events, I suggest that self-immolations can best be understood within a broader frame of self-inflicted violence as a modern form of mass communication and a globalized political tool (Shakya *Changing* 37). In this context of suicide as "communication," therefore, when we consider self-immolation as a form of political violence resulting in human casualties, an important distinction should be made between hostile (physical harm to others) and non-hostile violence (no physical harm to others). In its broader ethical outreach, Buddhist theory offers rigorous regulations about communication. Communication (harsh speech, lying, gossiping) can also be harmful and should be avoided in order not to harm others and uphold virtuous living with respect to all sentient beings. Altruistic suicide or self-immolation as a statement is certainly a communication that is unwelcome and painful. The fact that self-immolators do not cause physical harm to others does not actually mean that their actions do not cause psychological trauma, distress, and anxiety to family, friends, and bystanders.

If we consider suicide terrorists and suicide activists, the former evidently include various forms of outward destructive and lethal violence and terrorism, while the latter is emblematic of self-inflicted violence avoiding destruction to things and people aside from themselves. This being said, both suicide attackers and suicide activists offer their life for the purpose of a greater cause. It is a sacrifice that has the effect of “sacralizing” a life by transforming it into something meaningful for others. Sacrifice is a way of making something holy, of purifying it (Jones *Blood* 50), and then making it into an offering to the divine and to the community. But sacrifices are a special kind of offering in that what is given is destroyed and transformed, and often also transforming the surrounding community. It is worth-noting here how the spiritual and the mundane, the sacred and the profane intersect. The political intent to solve a social issue triggers an action that shifts the focus to a higher end, a spiritual outcome, resulting in the generation of a martyr.

Another connection that many scholars have recognized in the study of terrorism and politically motivated violence which I find instructive for understanding their root causes is the connection between humiliation, shame, and religion. James Jones points out that humiliation is one of the most important factors that motivates individuals in the Middle-East to embrace terrorism and become suicide bombers. With the Palestinian example in mind, he observes that in a land continually struggling with occupation and the perceived denial of its history, the sense of humiliation and shame felt by the local population can be conducive to acts of violence (Jones *Blood* 36). Humiliation is not foreign to the motivations embraced by some of the Tibetan self-immolators. Scholars including Tsering Shakya and Andrew Fisher have shown how various Chinese-enforced programs in Tibetan regions including resettlement, progressive sedentarization of nomads, in combination with state intervention in cultural, language education, and social projects have had profound impacts

on Tibetans' understanding of themselves and their place in China (Shakya *Changing* 28-32; Fisher *Geopolitics*).

Other scholars have expressed skepticism about the possibility that past episodes of self-immolations in other parts of the world influenced recent Tibetan protesters (Barnett quoted in Ortolani). However, considering the modalities chosen (public auto-cremation), the knowledge of the procedure (kerosene, barbed wire), and the use of media (digital photography, video-recording, Internet, the social media), it seems to me that Tibetan self-immolators may have acquired knowledge and accessed information about other contemporary episodes of self-immolations around the world as extensively reported in the media. The Vietnamese self-immolations in the 1960s, Mohamed Bouazizi and more than hundred Tunisian self-immolating protesters since 2010, and the thousands of cases of self-immolation that occurred in India in the 1990s are but a handful of highly publicized examples. Several Tibetans including Tsering Woeser, the well-known activist in China, discuss the analogies between Tibetan self-immolations and that of Thich Quang Duc (Thích Quảng Đức, 1897-1963) (Woeser *Immolations* 15; Topden). In our age of hyper-connectivity, even considering the forms of strict censorship in China, young Tibetans regularly find ways to access news and information. The rise in forms of extreme protest that target one's self rather than bystanders in other parts of the world seems to indicate a general increase in social malaise and an inability or unwillingness of local authorities to effectively tackle its causes. In the first decade of the 2000s, Turkey witnessed hundreds of cases of suicide among young girls (in many cases, honor killings disguised as suicide) from south-eastern Turkey. The cases prompted Turkish novelist and Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk to dedicate his novel *Snow* to the events. In the 1990s India experienced an overwhelming wave of thousands of suicides that often used self-immolations to protest discontent at the government's new plan to increase the quota in university enrollment and employment for low caste members (Biggs

Dying 177). Furthermore, since the dramatic news of Bouazizi's self-immolation in 2010, numerous cases of self-immolation followed in his footsteps in Tunisia and Algeria among people expressing social discontent and personal anguish over perceived local injustices (Rivera 29-36).

Human Security, Religion, and Political Violence

Violence is behavior that embodies various degrees of destructive and aggressive force, both verbal and physical, typically expressed outwardly, but in numerous instances against one's own body as well. Interest in exploring the relationship between religion and various manifestation of violent behavior has intensified recently in Euro-American academic circles, especially after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on US territory. These marked a distinct transition toward the resurgence of radicalized religious fundamentalisms across the world (Toft et al. 3-4). In the *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict*, Michael McClymond and David Freedman define "religious violence" as "violence that is somehow directly sanctioned by religious authorities - leaders or councils, rituals, myths, symbols, or sacred texts" (Freedman 2008). Such a definition, however, tends to present religious violence as a monolithic practice in civil disobedience, pacifism, or nonviolent protest, instead of an active revolutionary performance of resistance aimed at both expressing a people's grievances, frustrations, and agitation for social change. In other words, religious violence often refers to instances in which individuals employ their bodies as weapons against adversaries as a way to protect their collective sense of identity.

In recent years, scholars, analysts, policy makers, and journalists have looked with greater attention at the role of religion in international politics and the study of the intersection between religion and violence in various conflicts around the world. Some scholars portray religion in the

world as a “revival,” while others claim religion is instead declining (Toft et al. 48-49). Decline or resurgence notwithstanding, politically assertive religious movements seem eager to cut themselves a space in globalized politics (Wellman 18). Literature on religion and political action points to the frequent intersection between terrorism and religion, revealing that often religious motivations underpin conflict, terrorist movements, and even civil wars (Toft et al. 17). Other scholars, however, such as Robert Pape, present nationalism, not religion, as the main factor behind suicide terrorism (*Dying* 79-96). According to some analysts the reason for this is that not only is religion resurging globally, but also that “domestic regimes failed to deliver on the secular promises of equality and development” (Toft et al. 17).

In the specific case of China, the long period of religious marginalization and consolidation of local ethnic identities has resulted in the emergence of resistance groups in some of its most restive regions. Activist groups and individuals in these regions have frequently expressed their discontent by embracing political tactics including hostile violence, suicide operations, and violent self-sacrifice such as Uyghur protesters in Xinjiang and self-immolators in Tibet. Tibetan writer and analyst Li thang 'Jam bzod claims that Tibetans are self-immolating to protest the Chinese government's persistently biased policies in Tibet. Many causes have led to this situation according to him, including restrictions on freedom of religion and religious education, political oppression, cultural genocide, racial discrimination, environmental degradation, and economic marginalization ('Jam bzod 144-145). Both in the testaments and in the screams of protest while ablaze, the immolators seem to be conscious of their actions and the motivations behind them. Their main slogans, written or yelled while wrapped in deadly flames, call for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet, Tibetan independence, the release of the eleventh Panchen Lama Gedün Chökyi Nyima (b. 1989), and the return of Kirti Rinpoche, among other things ('Jam bsod 145; Woenser 23-28).

Given that violence proclaims subjects and generates power that transcends religion or religious motivations (Heath-Kelly 3), it is important to transcend religion as the essential motivating factor for self-immolation in Tibet's recent history. Emphasizing also the political motivation of those dramatic actions offers the opportunity to recognize self-immolators not as actors with limited mental capacity or passive members of a grieving community, as PRC rhetoric often portrays them, but as agents exercising their right to express nationalistic discontent and resistance to perceived social inequality and injustice (Ruggiero 168). The struggle to maintain control over their land, the demise of their theocratic leadership, and the massive exodus of Tibetans to seek refuge and political asylum abroad have contributed to instability, insecurity, and unrest over the past several decades. By virtue of the profound role of Buddhism in Tibetan history and culture, as well as the influential image of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso as a nonviolent actor on the world scene, Tibetans are commonly presented in international media as pacifist, nonviolent, and pious people despite the numerous violent episodes in their history that indicate a more nuanced and realistic story (Sperling 326-328). Tibetan political activists could choose a less painful form of public sacrifice such as hanging, hunger strike, poisoning, cutting one's veins, and so forth. Their choice to endure excruciating pain and brutal death by fire heightens the shock value of their act and the discomfort and potential shame in their intended audience, which is not just the Chinese leadership, but the international community as well (Woeser 32-34).

Severe restrictions on religion, but also control over national minorities' culture and language imposed by the state in China to various degrees since the rise of the Communist Party in the 1950s, have had serious repercussions on Tibetans, many of whom resist the Chinese government's territorial and political claims to their land. In countries where constraints on religious practice and congregation have been the most severe such as China, but also Vietnam, there is great religious vitality and

activism, making the government's attempts to repress or limit religion from public life self-defeating (Toft et al. 214-215). This recent phase of violence in the form of self-immolation in Tibetan regions of the PRC seems to underscore the continued strength of Buddhism as a symbolic resource for Tibetan protesters, both those in robes and not. Even so, explaining Tibetan self-immolation by means of religion alone fails to adequately account for the political and social triggers for the present crisis.

Burning for a Cause: Religiously Sanctioned Suicide?

Although religious devotion is not the main impetus for the recent spread of self-immolations in Tibet, it is a meritorious ritual action and an extreme gesture of generosity with deep Buddhist roots. Mortification of one's own body and self-sacrifice in their most extreme forms are distinctive cultural and doctrinal features of Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. Reiko Ohnuma discusses various stories in Sanskrit Buddhist literature where the "gift-of-the-body" gesture is used to exemplify sacrifice as a bodhisattva's extreme act of generosity (Ohnuma 168-182). Most notably, in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra*, the Mahāyāna text attributed to Nāgārjuna, we read that the bodhisattva's fulfillment of the perfection of giving (Skt. *dāna-pāramitā*) includes examples of giving one's own body. Within Asian Buddhist cultures self-immolation or auto-cremation (自焚) appears most commonly in dynastic China and more recently in Vietnam (Benn *Text; Burning*). Benn observes that self-immolation by auto-cremation mostly refers to ascetic practices that include both offering parts of one's body, especially fingers, as well as the whole body (Benn *Self-immolation* 758; ter Haar 259). He has also found evidence of the use of self-immolation for social and political purposes that included resistance against banditry and aggression, moral safeguarding of Buddhist doctrine, and as a form of protection against extreme weather disasters (Benn *Peace*).

In Tang dynasty Chinese Buddhist devotional literature, self-immolation for the aspirant to awakening was just one of a number of forms of ascetic practice including abstinence, dietary restrictions such as vegetarianism, acts of penitence, long vigils, physical austerities, and acts of mortification of the body for the sake of oneself or others. One reason for the preponderance of auto-cremation practices in Chinese Buddhism is the influence of Confucian ethics. According to Erik Zürcher this form of “fanatical asceticism” recalls the paramount act of Confucian filial piety, mourning one’s father and mother, which often reached “the point of self-destruction” (Silk/Zürcher 411). The Chinese *Biographies of Eminent Monks* narrates the lives of those who would engage in self-sacrifice and auto-cremation practices meticulously prepared for this act from making a preliminary vow to offer their life, then preparing oil-soaked bandages to wrap their bodies in, and finally maintaining a certain demeanor and chanting recitations while ablaze during the cremation (Silk/Zürcher 412). Recently, Jimmy Yu also convincingly demonstrated that various practices of self-inflicted violence including suicide existed in dynastic China among Buddhist monks (Yu).

A prominent influential scriptural reference to auto-cremation in Chinese Buddhism can be found in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra* (Ch. *Mi-aofa lianhua jing*, henceforth *Lotus Sutra*). The passage or passages on “fire sacrifice” run through the twenty-third chapter titled “The Original Acts of the Medicine King.” This chapter narrates the act of self-immolation as exemplified in the deeds of the Bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyagururāja, the Medicine Buddha, who offers his own body through auto-cremation to the Buddha and to the *Lotus Sutra* itself.⁵ This is a well-known scriptural source for Buddhist self-immolation that has been recited by contemporary self-immolators while burning themselves alive, sometimes performed in private

⁵ For a recent synthesis of Buddhist attitudes and scriptural references to violence see Michael Jerryson (2018).

and sometimes in public events. Another popular parable representing the nobility of offering one's life is "The Story of the Tigress" in which the Buddha offered his body to a hungry tigress in order for her to feed her starving cubs as narrated in the *Jātakamālā* (Āryaśūra 3-11). Even more in tune with the self-immolations is the Buddhist *jātaka* tale "Story of the Selfless Hare," which recounts the story of a hare (the Buddha in one of his previous lives) who offers her own body out of selfless generosity to feed a hungry Brahmin (the god Sakra, Lord of Devas) by jumping on an open fire (Āryaśūra 6).

Despite these Buddhist scriptural referents for self-immolation and offering of the body, this practice was highly controversial and not always unequivocally accepted by historical Buddhist societies. In China some witnesses of ritualized suicide would show signs of awe and respect for the courageous act and would collect relics and ashes from the remains. Others, instead, such as monastic and lay people, would react with shock, objecting to the practice as repulsive, offensive, and worthy of prohibition (Silk/Zürcher 412-413). Self-immolation was particularly censured by the Chinese state (Benn *Self-immolation* 759). Authorities found themselves caught in the difficult task of having to respond fairly to these forms of extreme worship that generated as much confusion as they did admiration. Bernard Faure notes that while ordinary Buddhist devotees are forbidden from deliberately ending their lives, those who have achieved awakening, have abandoned desire, and refrain from any karmic-producing actions are not only accepted, but even encouraged to do so (Faure *Bouddhisme* 105). Normative Mahāyāna scriptures contain several examples of acts of generosity that border extremism when it comes to voluntary offerings including one's life through auto-cremation. Nor is it uncommon to find Buddhist scriptures that address the moral failure of anyone who refrains from acting out of compassionate and loving intention for the benefit of others, including harsh, threatening actions. Recently Stephen Jenkins has shown that suffering for the sake of others is

encouraged in a number of Mahāyāna works such as the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (Jenkins 304-309). However, Śāntideva's *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*, the eight-century Mahāyāna classic, is an example of the ambiguity some Buddhist texts demonstrate with regard to violence and self-sacrifice:

For the sake of an insignificant benefit,
one should not harm the body
that practices the sublime Dharma,
for only in this way can one quickly fulfill the hopes of sen-
tient beings.

Therefore, when the thought of compassion is impure,
one should not sacrifice one's life,
but it should be sacrificed when one's thought is unbiased.
Thus, life must not be wasted. (Śāntideva 57)

Very popular among Tibetans, this text also exists in numerous translations and editions. It is part of many monastic curricula and regularly commented upon and quoted by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama during teachings, mass empowerments, and public talks (Dreyfus 129). When considering the impact, if any, that such Buddhist scriptural referents have on promoting or prohibiting suicide among contemporary Tibetans, it becomes important to ask: Was sacrifice in the works discussed above merely a rhetorical model of devotional offering or concrete advice on how to practice? Despite the various scriptural references to offering the body for sacrifice, including one's own flesh for medicinal purposes, no substantive evidence has emerged so far suggesting that self-sacrifice through fire was a real life devotional practice beyond rhetoric in India at any time (Benn *Self-immolation* 759; Durt), thus raising doubt about how literally textual references such as these served as models of behavior for Tibetans.

Although rare, in the history of Tibet some evidence of self-immolation (*rang lus mer sreg*), both as auto-cremation and burning parts of the body, can be found in non-canonical and biographical literature. Pawó Tsuklak Trengwa (Dpa' bo gtsug lag 'phreng ba, 1504-1566), in his *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*, for instance, reports that a certain Buddhist teacher Dölchung Korpön (Mdol chung bskor dpon) performed auto-cremation (*mer spar*) in front of the Jokhang temple in Lhasa to promote virtuous conduct (*bzang spyod smon lam*) (gTsug lag phreng ba 447). Additionally, the well-known charismatic Buddhist master Karma Chakmé (Karma chags med, 1610-1678) burned two of his fingers on separate occasions in Lhasa for the purpose of offering them as butter lamps (Sangye Khandro 8; Warner *Horror*). Perhaps most famously, in *The Life of Milarepa* (*mi la'i rnam thar*, 15th c.), the young protagonist Milarepa contemplates suicide while struggling to receive Buddhist initiation and instructions. Overwhelmed by guilt for the immense negativity he has accumulated, Milarepa considers taking his own life but is soon reprimanded by his Master Marpa:

Layman Great Magician, don't do such a thing! You must understand that according to the tradition of Secret Mantra, the Victor's ultimate teachings, our aggregates, constituents, and the sense fields are deities. Performing transference before its time carries the offence of killing a deity. Killing oneself is an even greater sin. Even in the tradition of the sutras, there is no worse negative act than taking one's own life. Therefore, listen to those injunctions and give up all thoughts of suicide. (Heruka 78-79)

Milarepa is dejected because his root-teacher Marpa continually refuses to introduce him to Buddhist practice, and therefore his thought of suicide is motivated by personal anguish over defeat and disappointment. In this case, suicide would not be justified according to traditional Buddhist

ethical standards because it would be performed for selfish and personal reasons and not for a noble and altruistic purpose. In other words, suicide has an ambivalent nature in Buddhism: in some cases, suicide is purely negative because it is motivated by afflictive emotions (Skt. *kleśa*), including grasping, revulsion, ignorance, but it is accepted in others when performed in the “appropriate state of mind” (Blum 205). Later Mahāyāna texts offer an ambivalent stance on the value of suicide in which it is especially the bodhisattva’s intent to offer her life for the higher and noble intent of assisting others that works to justify and legitimize the extreme act of generosity. Therefore, even though it violates the otherwise universally accepted Buddhist precepts of not killing or harming living beings, killing oneself could be justified if the intent is “to reduce the suffering of others” (Reed 264).

The ambivalence toward suicide in Buddhist scriptures is also a reflection of Buddhist conceptions of the human body as something to respect and appreciate. The Buddhist understanding emphasizes the unique opportunity that a human body offers to practice the Buddhist doctrine in order to achieve its ultimate goal of spiritual awakening. The human body, however, is also something to see with aversion due to the potential to generate desire and attachment, themselves mental obstacles on the path to liberation. The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Dza Patrul (Rdza dpal sprul o rgyan ’jigs med chos kyi dbang po, 1808–1887) evokes this central Buddhist notion of the body with clarity in his *Words of my Perfect Teacher* (*Kun bzang bla ma’i zhal lung*), an introduction manual to Buddhist practice (Patrul 21, 46–48). He writes: “Without a human life, it would not be possible even to encounter the Dharma. So this human body is the advantage of support” (Patrul 22). He also warns, however, that “Nothing has as much power to drag you down to the lower realms as human life. What you do with it, right now, is up to you alone” (Patrul 35).

Therefore, Buddhism suggests to purify one's thoughts about the body and one's life before using it toward higher goals. The Dalai Lama also has expressed caution on this point, commenting that the practice of sacrificing one's body following the model of the bodhisattva's ideal can be done, but not lightly or "prematurely" (Dalai Lama *Healing* 59). In an oral commentary to the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*, he discusses the practice of sacrificing one's body for altruistic reasons specifically in reference to Śāntideva's passage above. He believes that anyone is free to mentally sacrifice her life for others in the fashion of a bodhisattva, but to make this altruistic sacrifice meaningful, a person first has to achieve "perfect realization of emptiness" otherwise such an act will be useless (Dalai Lama *Folgore* 83-84). This link between body, purification of intent, and sacrifice is not limited to the Buddhist tradition. Others have discussed how theological understandings of the human body as an impure and sinful object in Judeo-Christian traditions may have implications in the formation of feelings of humiliation and shame that could eventually reinforce an attitude towards violent behavior (Jones *Blood* 37).

The literary and historical evidence of the practice of self-immolation, auto-cremation, and self-mortification in Asian Buddhist societies came to the fore during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Led by Ven. Thich Quang Duc, five Vietnamese monastics embraced death in sequential cases of sacrificial self-immolation to protest the perceived injustice toward Buddhism and in general toward non-Catholic religions in their country under the leader Ngo Din Diem (Ngô Đình Diệm, 1901-1963). Their sacrifice became iconic of the peaceful struggle for political change in a country devastated by perceived unjust domestic policies and increasingly foreign intervention that would bring the country into chaos.

Likewise, modern Tibetan self-immolators both inherit and interpret this legacy of scriptures that seem to simultaneously prohibit and ad-

vocate for this extreme act. But the motivations of contemporary self-immolators themselves are somewhat ambivalent and mixed as there are those who are influenced partly by these scriptural referents and partly by other contemporary discourses on suicide as a gesture of political resistance. Some of the Tibetans who left behind notes before committing auto-cremation referred to the Buddha's brave gesture of offering his body to the hungry tigress as a model of sacrifice (ICT *Harrowing*; Cabezón). Key images of martyrdom for many Tibetans seem to emerge from canonical scriptures studied in scholastic circles as part of textual curricula for monastics, but also as part of Buddhist teachers' sermons, parables, instructions, and moral advice offered in public speeches as well as oral histories and story-telling among lay people.

Because self-immolation involves violence and a breach of the precept against taking life, it has never been widely practiced in Tibet, except for a few sporadic episodes, until very recently. Even some prominent Tibetans including activist and writer Tsering Woeser seem to be oblivious of episodes of self-immolation in the history of Tibet that precede the contemporary ones (Woeser 11). Other scholars believe the ideal of sacrificing the body for the welfare of sentient beings contained in the scriptures mentioned above and others is well known to Tibetans, but there is no record that the Tibetans took it literally (Tsomo 25; Whalen-Bridge 83). It is also worth noting that as the brief quotation by Tashi introducing the essay demonstrates, at least in the mind of some Tibetans, the difference between self-immolation and suicide is not clear, given that when asked about the option of self-immolation (*zifen*), Tashi responded in Chinese by saying that based on the circumstances he might opt for suicide (*zisha*). Therefore, even though the presence of exemplary actions of auto-cremation or self-sacrifice motivated by Buddhist ethics and ideals of generosity, selflessness, and altruism are widely attested in various Buddhist narratives and doctrines, they alone do not explain the recent surge in suicide activism in Tibet.

Tibetan Suicide Activism as Political Violence

If this surge is not necessarily inspired by Buddhist principles, to what degree can it be understood in relation to other forms of politically motivated suicide? Suicide attacks, or “martyrdom operations” as they are also often called, are the most dramatic and deadliest tactics used by terrorist groups (Cook 7). A popular assumption is that these violent actions are triggered by psychotic behaviors, or “narcissistic personality disturbances” (Pearlstein ix; 15-19). President George W. Bush once referred to the 9/11 suicide terrorists as “evil cowards,” while U.S. Senator John Warner announced that suicide attackers “are not rational and are not deterred by rational concepts” (Atran 1535).

Since the first self-immolations in 2009 Chinese media also began a campaign aimed at criminalizing Tibetan self-immolators and blaming the rise of violence to external causes. State-backed media have branded Tibetans’ acts of self-immolation as “suicide terrorism,” and held the Dalai Lama and his supporters responsible for encouraging and even assisting these and other forms of protest with the intent of separating Tibet from China (Sehgal). An editorial in the state-backed *China Daily* in 2011 read: “Those that encourage monks and nuns to commit self-immolation are engaged in religious extremism and terrorism, which is why such suicides are committed in public in such a dramatic way. It is the consensus of people around the world that we should not bow to terrorism and religious extremism” (Li). In 2012, the Chinese government reportedly denounced Tibetan self-immolators as “outcasts, criminals and mentally ill people manipulated by the exiled Dalai Lama,” and that some of the self-immolations had been committed “by clerics returning to lay life, and they all have criminal records or suspicious activities” (Associated Press 2012). But are Tibetan self-immolators operating on the same level as terrorists who kill others for their political agenda? If this comparison holds true, we

should be able to draw parallels between suicide bombers from terrorist groups around the world and Tibetan self-immolators.

The recent definition of terrorism that the Chinese government has publicly announced in the wake of its new counter-terrorist law launched in December 2015 conveys their official position on terrorism, despite its vagueness and broadness:

The term “terrorism” is defined as any proposition or activity—that, by means of violence, sabotage or threat, generates social panic, undermines public security, infringes on personal and property rights, and menaces government organs and international organizations—with the aim to realize certain political and ideological purposes. [. . .] [China] opposes all extremism that seeks to instigate hatred, incite discrimination and advocate violence by distorting religious doctrines and other means, and acts to eradicate the ideological basis for terrorism. (*Xinhua* 2015)

The fact that this definition does not state harmful or lethal violence against people specifically but only propositions or activity makes the law potentially applicable to a broad array of offences or actions perceived as such. The generality of this law renders it a pretext for incorporating a much wider number of activities in the definition of terrorism that the government considers illegal and threatening to the authority of the Communist Party and the state.

Although still lacking consensus, the internationally accepted definition of terrorism is more specific and mentions hostile or lethal violence against people. In his “The Revised Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism” Alex Schmid offers one of the most comprehensive lists of criteria for academic definitions of terrorism. If we use it to consider

whether or not Tibetan self-immolators are terrorists, we realize that although self-immolators share some important features with terrorist actors, they hardly fit into the rich profile described therein. Reading Schmid's definition, we find that contemporary Tibetan self-immolators do engage in the "conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints . . . performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties." As a "tactic," their violent actions are employed in the context of "propagandistic agitation by non-state actors in times of peace or outside zones of conflict" and the physical violence employed toward themselves involves single-phase acts of lethal violence. The public and publicized "victimization initiates threat-based communication processes whereby, on the one hand, conditional demands are made to individuals, groups, governments, societies or sections thereof, and, on the other hand, the support of specific constituencies (based on ties of ethnicity, religion, political affiliation and the like) is sought." Motivations to engage in political violence can have various roots, including "redress for alleged grievances, personal or vicarious revenge, collective punishment, revolution, national liberation and the promotion of diverse ideological, political, social, national or religious causes and objectives" (Schmid *Definition* 86-87).

There is a "family resemblance" to use Karin Fierke's expression between suicide terrorists and self-immolators (Fierke 36). They both destroy a body/several bodies in the process of their actions, their acts are meant to benefit the community they represent, and their aim is not primarily death per se, although some terrorist groups do act in vengeance with intention to punish and kill. But their most important goal is to communicate a political message they cannot otherwise convey by any other means. As a way to "make sense" of suicide missions, Gambetta observes that "suicide bombers, like pacifist self-immolators who kill nobody else,

so often seem intent on an ultimate form of protest, on showing the world how unjust their enemy is, how genuine their suffering” (Gambetta 269).

Despite Chinese propaganda portraying Tibetan self-immolators as disturbed terrorists, this characterization does not accord with scholarly research on terrorism. Several scholars contest the popular stereotypical assumption that terrorists are irrational and psychologically troubled individuals by employing socio-psychological perspectives. They argue, instead, that terrorism displays a collective rationality and terrorists are not generally mentally disturbed people (Post 195). Others consider suicide terrorists “rational fanatics,” concurring that “most terrorists are ‘normal’ in the sense of not suffering from ‘psychotic’ disorders” (Sprinzak).

There seems to be a growing consensus among scholars of terrorism that “suicide terrorism follows a strategic logic” and “aims at strategic objectives” (Pape *Win*). Recent research suggests that suicide bombers as well as self-immolators (not only the Tibetan ones) are not typically afflicted by serious psychological problems, do not have pathological suicidal tendencies, and represent a counter-intuitive profile in that they are young, usually educated, and sometimes married, thus sharing much in common with ordinary people (Gambetta 270; Atran 2003; Merari 2005). This data confirms that even though some individual suicide terrorists may show traits of irrationality or fanaticism, their recruiters and the larger leadership behind them do not, thus reinforcing the argument that in terms of organization, suicide attacks are rational and strategic actions and, as a consequence, not the result of psychotic behavior (Richardson 15; Pape *Strategic* 344). So far as suicide activists and suicide terrorists have a political goal, they also tend to find moral or ideological support among many in their societies (Pedhazur 122). Most suicide terrorist attacks are sponsored by terrorist campaigns with coherent political and military logic, and aimed at precise strategic objectives (Pape *Kill*). As we will see

in my discussion below, Tibetan suicide activists who embrace self-immolation are honored as heroes in most Tibetan diaspora communities in the world.

Rationality in this context refers to the ability of an individual to base her decisions and actions on a cognitive process that is not affected by emotions, feelings, and delusion. In psychology “rational” refers to “[t]hinking or behaving reasonably or logically,” thus emphasizing that to be rational, decisions and choices must be taken through a cognitive process that analyzes available information and “maximizes expected utility” (Colman). Within terrorist studies, deterrence theory, according to Amitai Etzioni, defines rationality as “as a dichotomous variable; an actor is either rational or irrational. It hence derives from the observations that if actors do not act in an irrational way, they are rational. They respond to incentives and disincentives, adapt their strategies to changed facts, are cunning, and so on.” (Etzioni 432). A growing number of scholars share this view of suicide terrorists as rational agents (Sprinzak 2000; Moghadam 2005; Bloom 2005; Pedahzur 2005).

Terrorism, according to Martha Crenshaw, is the result of “a strategic choice based on instrumental reasoning;” it is understood as “a calculated course of action, chosen from a range of alternatives according to a ranked set of values,” and therefore should be analyzed as a form of “political violence designed to affect the attitudes of specific audiences whose reactions determine political outcomes” (Crenshaw *Decisions* 29). Probably the most compelling evidence claiming that suicide terrorism is a rational act of politically motivated violence is Robert Pape’s empirical data based on every suicide terrorist attack that occurred between 1980 through 2003 around the world, for a total of 315 attacks (Pape *Win* 3). Pape shows not only that there is little or no correspondence between Islamic or religious fundamentalism and suicide terrorism, but also that all these attacks

share a common interest in using suicide acts strategically for specific nationalistic goals “to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland” (Pape *Win* 4).

In his massive study of suicide terrorism, Robert Pape provides convincing evidence about some of the most compelling factors contributing to the surge of this form of political violence since 1980. Pape notes several factors that contribute to explaining the rise of this form of terrorism including the fact that suicide attacks make political sense for terrorist organizations, thrive when there is massive society support, and proliferate where there is a readily available supply of attackers:

suicide terrorism aims at political coercion. The vast majority of suicide terrorist attacks are not isolated or random acts by individual fanatics, but rather occur in clusters as part of a larger campaign by an organized group to achieve a specific political goal. Moreover, the main goals of suicide terrorist groups are profoundly of this world. Suicide terrorists campaigns are primarily nationalistic, not religious, nor are they particularly Islamic. (Pape *Win* 21)

This matter-of-fact definition offers the opportunity to rationalize terrorism as a form of political violence instead of dismissing it as a form of irrational religious fanaticism or actions by psychologically challenged people. Interestingly, some of the very same criteria Pape provides to explain the logic of suicide terrorism also applies to Tibetan self-immolations.

It is no coincidence that mass self-immolations in Tibet began in 2009 in the wake of the much anticipated protests against the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games including a series of violent riots that swept through Tibetan areas of Northwestern China the same year. According to mostly journalistic accounts of the events and the granular information received

by Tibetan exiles in India, at the origins of the riots were scuffles between groups of peaceful Tibetan demonstrators who marched along the streets of Lhasa to remember the annual Tibetan Uprising Day and local security forces who attempted to disperse the crowd. The reaction was brutal and momentous with young Tibetans attacking Han Chinese bystanders and setting Han Chinese-owned shops on fire, sometimes with the shop keepers inside. Several casualties were reported, with different numbers in Chinese, exiled Tibetan, and Western media sources. But the general assessment was that there were approximately eighteen Han civilian deaths in Lhasa. News of the riots traveled rapidly via telecommunication across Tibetan regions, and soon similar demonstrations erupted in various towns in Eastern Tibetan regions of Qinghai and Sichuan amounting to a total of around 150 street protests, many of which were violent but without known or reported casualties (Barnett, *Realities*).

Other elements of Pape's definition of suicide terrorism also apply to the case of self-immolation. Both draw on the largely effective coercive power of suicide attacks, even if, in the case of self-immolations, these are moral ones. They both aim to garner mass support from the society the perpetrators allegedly protect, and the motives behind both types of political suicide are typically seen (at least from the perspective of the terrorists) as altruistic (Pape *Dying* 21-23). Additionally, suicide terrorism and self-immolation typically arise in areas where there is a perceived sense of foreign occupation and territorial control from alien or unwelcomed governments. Just as terrorist organizations tend not to be criminal groups with mundane and selfish objectives or religious extremist cults motivated by apocalyptic goals, likewise self-immolators are not acting with criminal objectives or religious fanaticism as their primary catalysts.⁶ Instead, there is evidence that numerous terrorist groups command

⁶ An exception is probably the Aum Shinrikyo quasi-Buddhist religious cult led by Shoko Asahara, who conducted terrorist attacks against the Japanese people using serine gas in the subways of Tokyo in March 1995.

substantive social backing by virtue of their interests in liberating their fellow nationals from perceived oppression and occupation. According to Pape, unlike “egoistic suicide” that according to Durkheim’s classic study is typically understood as triggered by personal psychological trauma, both suicide terrorists and self-immolators are commonly motivated by altruistic intent, as demonstrated by their often high social integration and the respect for community values they uphold (Durkheim *Suicide*; Pape *Dying* 23).

Just like most suicide attackers, Tibetan suicide activists take upon themselves the task of doing something memorable, remarkable, and heroic; they engage in radical actions to forward their society’s concerns. In the case of Tibetan self-immolators, what seems to be intolerable is both China’s *de jure* political control of the territory Tibetans claim as their homeland and its complete control over the fate of Tibetans’ culture, religion and language. While a number of self-immolators did call for Tibetan independence in the notes they left behind or in words they yelled before succumbing to the flames, other issues held higher importance including devotion to the Dalai Lama, encouraging bravery and inciting Tibetans to resist oppression, and upholding Tibetan identity (Woeser *Immolations* 24). A common feature of the angst and frustration voiced by self-immolators is their sense of exclusion from active participation in managing their territory, culture, and society.

If self-immolators are terrorists as the PRC has claimed, then they are not insane, but rather are rational actors. Nevertheless, they differ significantly from terrorists. For one thing Tibetan self-immolators operate on an individual strategic level rather than an organizational one. Unlike terrorists who tend to be part of a group or organization and thus operate in structured hierarchical systems, despite what the Chinese media claim, Tibetans immolators do not represent any organization or coordinated group. Rather they appear to be leaderless, non-state actors who take

upon themselves the task of promoting change to the existing social and political order. They act to make a statement and to communicate the high level of despair in their society.

Although some overlap in the categories of terrorism and self-immolation does exist, it would be very hard to apply to Tibetan self-immolation the one feature that, according to Schmid, is distinctive of all political terrorist attacks: the engagement in violence against “civilians, non-combatants or other innocent and defenseless persons who bear no direct responsibility for the conflict that gave rise to acts of terrorism” (Schmid *Definitional* 394). On the contrary, Tibetan self-immolators at worst generate shock in Tibetan bystanders and anger and frustration in Chinese authorities. Additionally, unlike modern suicide terrorists, self-immolators are independent actors who do not use threat as a precursor to their actions (Biggs *Dying* 175). Therefore, although we can term self-immolation a type of politically motivated violence aimed at putting pressure on a government, responding to certain political demands, attracting the attention and sympathy of an audience, and influencing public opinion about the self-immolator’s cause, it is a form of political violence that does not physically harm any other person beyond the immolators themselves, does not infringe on personal and property rights, and does not menace government organs and international organizations. Another difference is that unlike suicide terrorism, where in many instances violence pays off, self-immolations tend to conjure mainly demonstrative intent rather than catalyze any major political change (Pape *Win* 13).

For these reasons, I believe the label “terrorist” is not and should not be indiscriminately applied to both cases. Rather, what really seems to be at issue is the use of this label as a political weapon by the Chinese government. However, from a socio-political perspective, the value of terrorism studies lies in the potential to illuminate the immolations. “Ter-

rorism” is a term that lacks definitional consensus, involves the emergence of contingent factors, and aims at producing distinctive effects, making its uses complicated and often abused (Sinai 2008; Schmid 2004; Jenkins *Study*). Both suicide terrorists and suicide activists such as self-immolators share the specific intent of dying for a cause. The difference lies in that “the end of an action is not defined merely by its ending: the end of suicide is killing oneself; the end of suicide bombing is killing oneself and others at the same time” (Asad 41).

Another fundamental difference, however, is exactly the ending or rather the “performative action” of the ending (John Whalen-Bridge 2015). While suicide bombers die practically instantly in the deflagration of the devastating explosive vests they wear or vehicles they drive, self-immolators choose a dramatically slow ritual destruction of the enflamed body as a form of protest. In this sense, although both sacrifices aim at communication, by choosing a painful means of death, self-immolators significantly amplify the communicative impact of their gesture not by the “quantitative” element of their success (the number of damage and casualties), but rather its “qualitative” aspect (killing no other but themselves in an excruciatingly painful way) (Biggs *Sacrifice*). Therefore, I contend that self-immolation is a “currency of dissent” or “currency of protest” aimed at mobilization rather than retribution or punishment through violent confrontation with a perceived enemy, as is the aim of terrorism. In other words, unlike suicide terrorists who aim at destroying other lives including their own, by killing themselves Tibetan suicide activists aim at asserting *presence*, rather than enforcing *absence*. The Tibetan self-immolation movement embraces suicidal violent means to reclaim territorial, religious, and cultural rights for the people of Tibet, but it does so short of the involvement of other people’s death. Suicide notes left behind by a handful of Tibetan suicide activists manifest the intent to bring attention to their rights to live and “be present” in the lands of Tibet in accordance to her traditions, and resist what a vast number of Tibetans

consider arbitrary impositions by the Chinese government. As such, auto-cremations cannot be generalized or universalized, but need to be analyzed in the cultural conditions they emerge, the historical contexts that produce them, and the debates and ideas that justify them (Abeysekara 4-5; Shakya 21).

Religious and Political Martyrdom

As we have briefly seen above, in the case of the recent events of self-immolation of both Buddhist monastics and laity in various Tibetan regions in China, the justification of their perceived altruism is sanctioned (even if just rhetorically) in at least some religious scriptures rather than being officially supported by a religious or political organization. Despite the lack of official support by Tibetan authorities, those who sacrifice their lives for the welfare of their community are memorialized by their compatriots both in Tibet and in the Diaspora as heroes and martyrs. The function of the “hero” in a community or a nation is to reinforce a sense of identity and to promote self-knowledge in a society. Heroes are a society’s psychological investment, to put it in Michael Ignatieff’s words, because heroes are the defendants of a nation’s identity (*Warrior* 184). The figure of the martyr, as Rona Fields notes, has the potential to become “particularly useful to maintain national identity, especially in a crisis situation” (Fields xxii). The scriptural ideologies link the spontaneous, altruistic, and compassionate offering of one’s body part or even one’s own life to the protection of the Buddha, his teachings, and to some extent the Buddhist community (Benn *Burning* 65; Cabezón). In the case of contemporary monastics and laity, the Dalai Lama seems to be the predominant object of their ultimate sacrifice given that most of the notes left behind by those who immolated themselves ask for the return of the religious leader to Tibet (Cabezón; Shakya 36). Therefore, as two types of martyr, terrorists

and suicide activists belong to the same conceptual family, considering that both groups aim at political change and act with strong nationalistic intent.

In the popular horrific imagery generated among present-day Tibetans, especially in the community in exile outside China, the self-immolators are honored as *pawó* (Tib. *dpa'bo*), a word that can be translated as “brave” but also “hero” and “martyr” (Shakya 21). As martyrs, they are “witnesses” to their faith and to their commitment to the noble cause they are dying for. By becoming martyrs, they render their act of self-sacrifice sacred, as the Latin etymology of the word *sacrificium* (*sacer*, or “sacred,” and *facio*, or “to do/to make”) suggests (Juergensmeyer 2001: 170). Theologically, just like the martyrs of the Christian tradition who inherit and imitate Christ in their *imitatio Christi* both in life and in death as a sacrifice for mankind (Recla 2014: 473), Tibetan suicide actors may also be modeling their actions on the examples of buddhas and bodhisattvas. To this we would add that since martyrdom is an extreme gesture of death for the wellbeing of others, this altruistic intention is magnified by self-immolators’ refusal to cause collateral damage by killing bystanders, and by their choice to become both the sacrificial victim and the symbol of the battle they are fighting. That these self-immolators are becoming symbolic of an enduring battle for a noble cause can be demonstrated by the increasing display of graphic pictures and portraits of each self-immolator among Tibetan communities in exile. Additionally, Tupten Ngodrup, who died in a protest in Delhi in 1998 and was the first Tibetan to commit self-immolation for the Tibetan cause, is remembered today with a bust erected along the sacred circumambulation track or *lingkhor* around the residence of the current Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India.

The term *pawó* thus is used to evoke the sacredness or the reverence attributed to the fallen compatriots who offered their lives in honor

of the Tibetan struggle for autonomy and dignity. In this sense, it is comparable to the commemoration of fallen soldiers and mass terrorism victims, which contribute to the fabric of a nation's history. The "Tibetan national martyr memorial" (*chol gsum bod kyi rgyal gces dpa' bo dpa' mo'i rjes dran rdo ring*) erected in MacLeod Ganj reflects the intensity of the Tibetan sense of themselves as an oppressed people at the same time as it marks their pride, communicating to the world the suffering of the Tibetan people and at the same time the universal value of human dignity, patriotism, and nationalism. The numerous Tibetan obituaries and essays about each Tibetan who has died by auto-cremation disseminated among Tibetan exiles on the Internet and in print emphasize the selfless character of the immolator's act and the virtues of their self-imposed mission to communicate the anguish they witness. As one of the immolators, Tenzin Puntsok reportedly wrote: "it's impossible to keep living while waiting" (Woesser 28). These words speak of resignation and discouragement, and a lack of faith in the Chinese government's interest in doing something to respond to the Tibetans' requests.

Media, Communication, and the Violence of Nonviolence

Beyond the theological and political models for the enactment of self-sacrifice, a related and worrying question that we may also ask is to what extent is self-immolation imitative? And to what extent do contemporary forms of media and communication enhance the potential for self-immolation to become a more widespread form of protest? Self-immolators in Tibet act in response to their own circumstances by employing models now reproduced in various parts of the globe in combination with ideas and memories inherited from the past and circulated today in entertainment, the news media, and oral narratives.

With regard to entertainment I witnessed one possible influence myself in 1997 and 1998 when I was a student in Beijing and Lhasa. In 1997, while living in Beijing I went to watch *Red River Valley* (*Honghegu*, 1997) by director Feng Xiaoning, which at that time was a much-publicized big budget production in China. The plot focused on the Tibetan resistance to defend Lhasa from British invading troops led by Lt. Col. Francis E. Younghusband in 1904. The movie portrays Tibetans and Han Chinese uniting forces against the common foreign enemy. Much can be said about this and other Chinese productions on Tibet; Jenny Daccache and Brandon Valeriano effectively describe the political content in the movie (Daccache 126-128). The movie capitalizes, not without propagandistic intent, on the heroic and exoticized figure of a fiery Tibetan nomad, Kelsang, who fights the imperialist aggression of the West with simple weapons. In a final epic scene, Kelsang chooses death to avoid capture by lighting a pool of gasoline around himself, thereby immolating his body after detonating a massive deflagration. Interestingly, just a few scenes earlier in the film another self-immolation occurs when a Tibetan woman, the daughter of the local Tibetan governor, manages to grab a cannon shell and drop it to the ground as she is captured by British soldiers, thus becoming a sort of suicide bomber.

Robert Barnett has identified the final climactic scene of *Red River Valley* in which Kelsang immolates himself as a political suicide. He points out in the 1990s this movie was part of a Chinese propaganda campaign that introduced the movie to young school children, thereby presenting them with their first image of a self-immolation on the big screen (Barnett *Political* 61-62). This message of patriotism and heroism is pervasive in Chinese cinema as a result of national propaganda accentuating centuries of unjust and imperialist foreign aggression and exploitation. Anyone who has spent significant time in China has surely noticed the obsession of movie and television series productions with China's recent history of

revolution, patriotism, and rebellion, especially China's battle against foreign invaders during the opium wars, the Chinese resistance against Japan's invasion, Mao Zedong's rise and heroic revolutionary triumphs, and the Communists' victory over Nationalists.

The cinematic inspirations toward patriotism that Tibetans view on the wide screen do not originate in China only. In 1998 as a foreign student at Tibet University in Lhasa, I enjoyed many movie nights at the Penthok Guest House with friends and classmates, including some Tibetans. A movie that the owners frequently screened that was popular in pirated copies (some with Chinese subtitles) across the city was *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson 1995). Starring Mel Gibson, the movie narrates the gestures of the proud and heroic Scottish warrior William Wallace, who in the 13th century led many of his compatriots in wars for independence against the British occupiers. In the final scene of the movie, similar to the Tibetan herdsman Kelsang in *Red River Valley*, the main character in *Braveheart* dies a violent death. This time, however, the hero dies a martyr's death under the brutal torture of the aggressors in a public display of violence while dispelling his last vital exhalation screaming the word "freedom." I remember reflecting on what kind of impact that message and those images might have on young Tibetans. It is impossible to know with certainty how these images, stories, and dramatic displays of resistance and protest affect Tibetan audiences. But state-driven messages and everyday forms of expression, including cinematic narratives, could be even more significant for some Tibetans than Buddhist scriptural messages.

In terms of news media, Michael Biggs has persuasively observed that Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation had a profound impact all over the world as it combined both a religious component and a modern technology component. The former is represented by the composure of a Buddhist monk offering his life for a cause, while the latter refers to the vide-

ography and photography that diffused his image and its message of protest across the world. Since Thich Quang Duc's gesture represents the modern use of self-immolation not as an act to achieve transcendent goals but as an act of political protest, it is often cited as the beginning of this form of modern political protest (Biggs *Dying* 174). His action became emblematic of the struggle against injustice and war. It reverberated in numerous similar actions in Asian, African, and European countries including South Korea, Czechoslovakia, Tunisia, Algeria, Poland, Lithuania, as well as the US (Rivera 115-128).

However, beyond the example set by the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc's documented self-immolation in Saigon in 1963, in the present age of hyper-information and fast communication technology, exasperated protesters are also being influenced by more recent prosocial actions. On December 18, 2010, in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated and died in protest of police corruption and ill treatment, thereby triggering a chain-reaction of demonstrations and protests across the many Middle-Eastern countries that came to be known as the Arab Spring. The Vietnamese and the Tunisian self-immolations are examples of historical events that represent the use of altruistic sacrifice moved by personal frustration that triggered a more direct response to cases of injustice. In the Tibetan case this sense of frustration relates to perceived territorial occupation, colonial oppression, repressive control, socio-economic injustice, and racial discrimination (Rivera 23-36; Benn *Burning*; Crenshaw *Causes* 283). All these cases share an intent that transcends self-inflicted death as suicide, and instead reflects a deliberate expression of social anguish and individual political resolve.

As quoted earlier in this essay, Schmid and de Graaf state that "Without communication there can be no terrorism." Can the same can

be said of self-immolations in Tibet? As Charlene Makley observes, Tibetans' self-immolations as protest are a new genre of communication that has appropriated "an increasingly ritualized form of mass media in the context of severe state repression" (Makley 454). In this last section of the essay, I would like to address the issue of communication and the role that the "body" plays in the practice of self-immolation, not in the form of "dead" bodies Charlene Makley conceptualizes, but in its "posthuman" form as a disposable body. As Hamid Dabashi suggests in his *Corpus Anarchicum*, the posthuman body "defies the politics of power by denying it its singular site of violence by a violence that ends all violence to it" (Dabashi 6). Thus, the necropolitics of Tibetan bodies is for me an opportunity to look at self-immolations as both violent acts of political intent, and forms of communication aimed at turning the victims' bodies into "strong message generators" (Schmid and de Graaf 16). In other words, I see these acts of self-immolation as a way for emotionally involved individuals who realize their inability to solve social issues with ordinary civil means. They therefore perform their ultimate sacrifice constrained by the Buddhist morals of not harming others at the same time as they create further violence, suffering, and chaos.

The modern relationship between violence and communication was established with the first images of the Vietnamese monks' self-immolation forced upon world-wide audiences in the early 1960s by new forms of technology, especially televised videos. In the past half-century, the progress in communication and digital technology has created the opportunity for anyone to transmit any type of information from virtually anywhere at any time. Since the outbreak of self-immolations, monks in Kirti monastery in India have painstakingly taken upon themselves the task of collecting details of each immolation episode by cell-phone, texts, e-mail, and WeChat calls directly from Tibetan areas of China (BBC *Human Torches*). Despite the dangers of being caught communicating about this sensitive topic, and despite the Chinese government's attempts to jam

communication with the outside world from Tibetan areas, Tibetans continue to smuggle out photos of these events, videos, and statements for release online and in international news.

The relationship between violence and communication is relevant to the understanding of the place of self-immolations in the contemporary Tibetans' struggle for self-determination and socio-political power. Self-immolations convey the despair many Tibetans feel. They speak for the need to reclaim Tibetans' sense of cultural identity, equal treatment with Han Chinese in terms of employment and educational opportunities, and solutions for poverty and socio-economic divide in China (ICT *Storm* 45-46). Self-immolating suicide activists do not seem to call for new objectives, but rather continue a struggle begun in the 1950s. What has changed is the new power of communication in the contemporary context. In particular, new ways of circulating video images have revolutionized communication. Terrorists can rely on television and media not just as "information machines" but also as "identification machines," from which the consumer can immediately access data about the event that allows them to witness it, and observe places and geographical environments, noises and sounds, voices and actions (Schmid and de Graaf 54). The choice of self-immolation as a means to perform political action, the fact that most events have been immortalized in photos and videos, typically transmitted via text, e-mail, and in many cases uploaded on *YouTube*, and the deliberate choice of open or public locations for the immolation emphasize the "communicative" aspect of self-immolation and serve to transform the victim's body itself into a "message generator" for immediate consumption. In this sense, it is impossible to discount the fact that Tibetans acknowledge the power that their tragic actions can have to change or influence behavior, opinion, and choices in their targeted audiences. As consumers of the telecommunication industry, digital technology, and the Internet themselves, and considering the widespread availability of information about the events that have transformed the Middle-East in

the past five years since the revolution that became known as the Arab Spring, Tibetans understand the communicative possibilities these mediums allow. Failing to recognize the performance of self-immolation as communication would be to negate Tibetans' agency, their freedom as moral agents. Therefore, I would argue that by deliberately engaging in the violent act of self-immolation, Tibetans are claiming the otherwise unclaimable nationhood they aspire to, thus situating their violent actions not in the domestic context of ethnic conflict in China, but in the much broader global context of international politics. As Charlotte Heath-Kelly argues in her study on political violence, violence can be understood as a "productive experience" that "can take us some way down the path of understanding the function of pain, death, and injury for international politics" (Heath-Kelly 2). Viewing self-immolation as productive experience enables us to understand this act not as a passive act of grievance and frustration indicating Tibetans' inability to give voice to their concerns. Rather, it is an active discursive program that contributes to the rewriting of political subjectivity and political landscapes of Tibetans in China.

The violence of Tibetan nonviolent self-immolations, therefore, demands recognition and denounces nationalistic oppression. Although not aiming at inflicting lethal violence on anyone other than themselves, self-immolators do consider the impact of their sacrifice on society as their actions are "attempts to purchase public recognition" (Juergensmyer 232). Tibetans themselves point out that any attempt of public political dissent and demonstration, written or verbal, individual or communal, is typically quickly cracked down in China by security forces and local authorities with severe legal repercussions (Kessel NYT 2005). It seems that among other forms of suicidal protests, self-immolation is the last resort without turning to terrorism that for reasons of impact, sensationalism, and emotional engagement has the potential to

leave the most immediate and effective communicative impression on the audience.

As such, the 2008 riots in Tibet as well as the subsequent self-immolations share similarities with numerous parallel events in other parts of the world including the US urban riots in 1960s and in the 2010s against police brutality, social neglect, and racial discrimination, riots in the French *banlieues* in the Paris region, nationalist violence in the Basque region of Spain, Kurdish independence seekers in Turkey, Corsica separatism in France, and Tamil Tiger fighters in Sri Lanka. All these instances of political violence share the common feature that the dominant state failed to recognize and fully acknowledge the minority group's nationalistic demands (Schwarzmental 7).

If it is true that much of the world believes Buddhism to be a universal religion of peace, tolerance, and nonviolence, it is also true, however, that not many are familiar with the ambivalence of both canonical and non-canonical Buddhist stances on violence and even killing. This ambivalence is well represented in the views of the Dalai Lama, even though he is much better known for his strongly pacifist stance. He clarifies,

I want to make it clear, however, that although I am deeply opposed to war, I am not advocating appeasement. It is often necessary to take a strong stand to counter unjust aggression (*Reality*).

Following Mahāyāna Buddhist ideology, the Dalai Lama suggests that unless the motivation behind an aggressive behavior is malevolent, aggression toward an opponent might provide a positive moral retribution:

Ultimately, it is important to examine our own motivation and that of our opponent. There are many kinds of violence and nonviolence, but we cannot distinguish them through

external factors alone. If our motivation is negative, the action it produces is, in the deepest sense, violent, even though it may appear to be deceptively gentle. Conversely, if our motivation is sincere and positive but the circumstances require harsh behaviour, essentially we are practising nonviolence. No matter what the case may be, I feel that a compassionate concern for the well-being of others - not simply for oneself - is the sole justification for the use of force. (*Relevant*)

When asked to comment directly on news announcing the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the Al Qaeda leader in Abbottabad, Pakistan in 2011, the Dalai Lama stated that while compassion and forgiveness are fundamental human attitudes, it is also important to keep in mind that “Forgiveness doesn't mean forget what happened. . . . If something is serious and it is necessary to take counter-measures, you have to take counter-measures” (Landsberg).

On the specific question of self-immolators, the Dalai Lama addresses motivation as a central criterion to judge the results of those actions.

Actually, suicide is basically (a) type of violence but then question of good or bad actually depend on the motivation and goal. I think (as) goal is concern, these (self-immolators) people (are) not drunk, (do) not (have) family problem, this (self-immolation) is for Buddha dharma, for Tibetan National interest but then I think the ultimate factor is their individual motivation. (Phayul)

It is interesting in this last statement to recognize the Dalai Lama's admission of the violent nature of self-immolations, as well as his view of the morality of those actions in dependence upon the subjective intent of the

perpetrators. As a result, references to self-immolation do appear in Buddhist scripture. It is not clear if any of the self-immolators or suicide activists committed some type of transgression according to Buddhist ethical laws by committing themselves to the lethal flames of political protest. What is clear, however, is that those who died in the endeavor are now engraved in the memorial stone of Tibetans' national memory.

Concluding Remarks

Tibetan suicide activists have chosen a controversial form of sacrifice that has created debate and conflicting opinions within Tibetan and international communities. Buddhist canonical and non-canonical literature lends precedence to self-immolation as an ultimate act of compassion and generosity. It is seen as an opportunity to perfect one's realization of selflessness (*anatman*) in the true spirit of a bodhisattva. José Cabezón writes that according to Mahāyāna ideology "giving up one's life for the welfare of others is not only permissible but actually necessary" and that when all criteria are met, including purity of intention, absence of negative emotions, and clear purpose, offering up one's life "is an act of great moral courage" (Cabezón 2). While this may be ideally and theoretically true for senior Buddhist monks who offer their lives after decades of practice, can we say the same of the very young and likely inexperienced monks and lay teenagers who also sacrificed themselves? The well-known modern model of monastic self-immolation, Thich Quang Duc, was a senior revered master when he killed himself, and so were many other Buddhist monastics who punctuated Vietnamese history with their politically-charged sacrifice before and after him (Taylor 177-78). Among the contemporary Tibetan self-immolators there were young people in their thirties, twenties, and even younger. Many were monastics, but the majority

were not. This leaves the aspect of Buddhist doctrinal coherence among the Tibetan self-immolators unclear.

In its modern form of radical protest and suicide activism for political purposes, self-immolation has also been used to impact a range of prosocial causes in a number of Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist societies from China to Vietnam and Tibet. Self-immolations in Tibet exemplify this double referent to both religious and political influences, as evident in the statements left behind by a number of suicide activists. Some located the genesis of their violent act in examples from the Buddha's previous lives and other exemplary models narrated in Buddhist scriptures. Others seemed more concerned with secular and practical issues pertaining to preserving Tibetan culture and language. As mentioned above, in both cases, however, Tibetan self-immolation is a politicized maneuver that expresses discontent, frustration, and hopelessness through the spectacle of dying an intentionally violent and public death. The use of specific techniques pertaining to Buddhist devotional and doctrinal culture—auto-cremation as a sacrificial donation for a pro-social and altruistic cause—also speaks for a change in the way the present generation of Tibetans understands its role in Tibetan history. Therefore, this essay understands self-immolation not as primarily religiously-motivated but as a form of political violence aimed at producing change and calling attention to Tibetans' despair.

One of the aims of this essay is to consider Tibetan Buddhism-inspired self-immolation alongside other forms of political violence, particularly terrorism, to shed light on the causes and conditions for the momentum that self-immolation has gained as a violent strategy of protest in recent years in Tibet in order to consider the ways in which this momentum can be abated. As an endeavor of last resort, political self-immolation shares with terrorism the aim to stir public opinion, stimulate social and political reactions, generate chaos and shock but also national unity

among the Tibetan audience, and catalyze effective responses through contemporary forms of communication. Self-immolations and terrorist attacks are both communicative tools. Like most terrorists and suicide attackers, Tibetan suicide activists seem to be rational, strategic, and strongly committed to a cause. Unlike terrorist suicide attackers, however, self-immolators are non-hostile, they do not aim at harming bystanders, they seem to lack any form of coordinating organization or leadership, and they do not seem to aim at intentionally damaging or destroying public property. Self-immolation is a form of “irregular violence” committed by non-state and non-organized actors. It is “violence as communication,” or “propaganda by the deed,” committed by leaderless individuals who seek to represent and mobilize the masses in the face of perceived state injustice and social inequality. In this sense, this form of political violence in China may be seen as a liberation movement that puts the bond of religion hand in hand with the bond of nationalism and, to a certain extent, ethno-territorialism.

Regarding Buddhism-sanctioned violence, no matter what motivations Buddhist scriptures legitimize and no matter for religious or nationalistic purposes, violence even when performed in a religious and ritual context is still violence. Violence has been part of Buddhism, and religion in general, for a long time. If we include in the definition of violence the sacrifice of one’s own life, as this study does, then Buddhist scriptures and their authors want us to believe that the Buddha—through the exemplary gestures of offering his precious life as in an act of extreme generosity—sanctioned violence and self-immolation as a bodhisattvic practice. This might be the reason why the current Dalai Lama, Tibetans in general, and the large community of Tibet supporters are caught between two lines of thought—one ancient and traditional, exemplified by canonical and non-canonical scriptures that offer a picture of the moral choice devotees face regarding the virtuosity of bodhisattvic self-immolation, and a

contemporary view influenced by modern and increasingly global approaches that tends to regard self-immolation as harmful suicide.

The sacrifice of Thich Quang Duc and those of a number of other monastics who followed his example accelerated the demise of the then Prime Minister Diệm in Vietnam, thus helping to achieve their political goal (Faure 103-104). Mohamed Bouazizi's death after his auto-cremation triggered a revolution in Tunisia which soon spread across the Maghreb and Middle East, becoming what is known as the Arab Spring. Beyond its doctrinal and ritual referents in Buddhist Asia, self-immolation is a global phenomenon as evidenced by the Vietnamese, Tunisian, Algerians, Romanians, and Indians who have chosen to burn themselves to death in protest. These instances of self-immolation signal the modern rise of individual acts of protest as a growing currency of discontent against perceived humiliation and lack of dignity.

The accusations made by the Chinese government-backed media in the past few years against Tibetan self-immolators as terrorists and the recent promulgation of new anti-terrorist laws raise concerns about the ways the Chinese government faces dissent. It also shows how the rhetoric of terrorism, in addition to that about extremism and separatism, may be serving as a pretext for more stringent policies and zero-tolerance against anti-government protests. The Chinese government should reconsider their rationale in labelling self-immolations as acts of terrorism perpetrated by mentally ill people. The implications for the study of suicide terrorists and to some extent self-immolators of looking at them as "rational actors" are significant. If suicide terrorism or self-sacrifice were to be declared the action of insane, irrational, or psychotic groups of individuals, deterring solutions would hardly be available. Providing solutions to the problem of terrorism would then involve greater involvement of health care and psychiatric specialists, leaving little focus on prevention and improvement (Bakker 115). Counterterrorist and national security strategies

could benefit, instead, from cooperative efforts that combine traditional investigative methods with assistance from the fields of sociology and psychology. This would likely promote solutions that would improve human security in countries with high level of grievances and socio-political contestation persist. Only by understanding the rationale behind these forms of violence and thus finding plausible and effective corrective measures will it be possible to prevent the rise of a new generation of suicide terrorists, or in the case of Tibet a new generation of self-immolators (Pape Win).

The Tibetan case is one of many around the world that suggests a wide-spread crisis among minorities and the disenfranchised who feel unable to make their voices heard and frustrated by not being in charge of their lives in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world from which they feel forcefully excluded. The solution to their tragic choice of dying for their cause, be it inspired by Buddhist examples, nationalist fervor, or by Chinese movie productions, should not be to demonize their actions or put labels of terrorism on them, but rather to give them further opportunities for more concrete autonomy. Rather than compromising the integrity of China, this approach would likely solidify China's deserved status as an important global actor.

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