Self-Immolation:
the Changing Language of Protest in Tibet

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The unprecedented spurt of self-immolations in Tibet since 2009, mostly by monks, now[1] numbering over 45 and including incidents even in the Tibetan capital Lhasa, has led to a wide variety of reactions. The Tibetans have valorised these acts as an ultimate form of heroic resistance to Chinese rule, referring to the immolators as "heroes" *(pawo)*, while the Chinese state has viewed self-immolation as the actions of unstable people instigated by "the Dalai clique."[2] For the Tibetans, the act is a demonstration of the repressive nature of Chinese rule; for the Chinese government, these actions are not individual acts of protest, but part of a carefully orchestrated plan to heighten Tibetan agitation, engineered by the exile government in Dharamsala, India. The horrific images and videos which have been circulated of these events on the web have accrued visual currency to them and have galvanised the Tibetan diaspora community, giving them a particular political force and significance, even though self-immolation as a form of political and social protest is neither new nor confined to a particular ethnic group, region or religion—burning one's body has long been part of the modern repertoire of the politics of protest and has been used by different individuals and groups. In the 1990s middle-class Iranian women set themselves on fire in protest against the treatment of women under the Islamic regime, most notably the case of Dr Homa Darabi, who burned herself in Tajrish Square, shouting "Death to oppression! Long Live Liberty!"[3]

In 2001 there were 1584 acts of self-immolation carried out in protests of various kinds in India,[4] while in recent years mass protests in

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[1] This article was completed on August 5 2012.
[2] http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-05/16/c_131591351.htm.
[3] Martha Shelley, "A Sacrificial Light: Self-Immolation in Tajrish Square, Tehran," *On the Issue,* Fall 1994, http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1994fall/tehran.php.
See also Farad Khosrokhavar's article in this issue.
[4] See Marie Lecomte's article in this issue.

the Arab world have been accompanied by acts of self-immolation, the most moving story being that of the death of Mohamed Bouazizi, said to have been the catalyst of the Tunisian uprising.[5] Since the overthrow of Ben Ali's regime, however, a further 107 people have tried to set themselves on fire as protest against corruption and the lack of jobs.[6] In China also, acts of self-immolation as protest are not a new phenomenon: in January 2001 five people burned themselves in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, allegedly, according to the Chinese government, to protest the banning of the Falun Dafa group.[7] Other cases there are not uncommon: on March 17 2012, China Daily reported that a 28 year old woman named Chen had set herself on fire in Guangzhou; in 2008, a woman named Tang Fuzhen died of self-immolation in Sichuan protesting against the demolition of her garment factory;[8] that same year, in Xintai, Hebei province, a 91-year-old man and his son in his 60s burned themselves to death in protest against the forcible demolition of their home.[9] Such reports of self-immolations by individuals often involve property owners or renters who self-immolate to protest forced demolitions and the expropriation of land.[10]

Although acts of self-immolation are not unknown in Tibetan Buddhism, the historical memory of such practices had more or less faded from Tibetan memory, being only recorded in ancient texts.[11] The current spate of self-immolation that is taking place, aimed at protest rather than devotion, is thus a new development in forms of Tibetan protests. The first self-immolation of this kind by a Tibetan occurred in India in April 1998, when a former Tibetan soldier in the Indian army named Thupten Ngodrup set himself alight in Delhi. Thupten Ngodrup's death was immediately hailed among exiles as a

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[5]   See Dominique Avon's article in this issue.

[6]   BBC, January 12 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16526462.

[7]   The Falun Dafa group deny the people who carried out the action are members of the group and argue the act was staged by the Chinese government to turn Chinese's public opinion against the group. My point here is not to argue who carried out the action, but merely to show public awareness. The news of Tiananmen Square incident was widely reported in Chinese television news.

[8]   *China Daily*, December 16 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2010-12/16/content_11710621.htm.

[9]   *China Daily*, April 27 2010, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-04/27/content_9777585.htm.

[10] *China Daily*, July 1 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2011-07/01/content_12813471.htm.

[11] For historical account of self-immolation in Tibet, see "Bod kyi lo rgyus thog byung ba'i rang sreg gi gnas tshul khag gnyis gleng ba," *Tibet Times*, July 26 2012, http://tibettimes.net/news.php?id=6220. See also Warner Cameron David, "The Blazing Horror of Now," *Hot Spot Forum, Cultural Anthropology Online*, April 11 2012, http://culanth.org/?q=node/527 and Katia Buffetrille's article in this issue.

heroic act and in all exile Tibetan publications his name has since been prefixed with the title *pawo* (hero). His action is still honoured by Tibetan diaspora community, and a prominent exile group, the Tibetan Youth Congress, erected a bust of Ngodrup in Dharamsala, giving it the title *Chol sum pawo doring* ("The Martyr's Pillar of the Three Provinces [of Tibet]"). The Tibetan community in North America holds an annual basketball tournament in his honour, a song dedicated to him has been written by the popular singer Techung, and his death has now become ritualised and a part of the political memory of the Tibetan diaspora.[12]

It is a ritualisation of this sort that helps to frame death by self-immolation and turn it into martyrdom.[13] Nevertheless, the question why the Tibetans have now adopted self-immolation as the language of protest is complex and cannot be understood in terms of individual motives or by simply studying the social backgrounds of the individuals. As we have seen, self-immolation as an act of disavowal has no specific markers of gender, ethnicity or region, but has become a global phenomenon. It cannot be explained in generalised thesis; instead, we must seek localised explanations.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China and the extension of its rule on the Tibetan plateau, the relationship between the Chinese state and the Tibetan people has been characterised as one of confrontation. The Communist-led Chinese state has been the most successful of all regimes in consolidating state power over the Tibetan plateau, for previously the Qing or the Republican regimes had achieved differing degrees of control and authority over Tibetan areas in Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai and Yunnan, with only a limited degree of state penetration into everyday lives, leaving the local Tibetans there to maintain a high degree of self-governance. The establishment of the PRC and the Communist regime completely shifted governance in those areas to centralised administration, resulting in the loss of local autonomy. The CCP's underlying minority policies remained based on what it calls "regional autonomy," and there is some degree of preferential treatment involved, such as minority groups being exempt from the one-child policy and enjoying easier

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12 Not all Tibetans subscribe to the idea of self-immolation as a heroic act. There is a debate raging on Tibetan internet forum and blogosphere and some oppose the portrayal of self-immolation as heroic act, for an English language blog post see: mountainphoenixovertibet.blogspot.ca/2012/05/rising-from-ashes.html. See also Chung Tsering's and Noyontsang Lhamokyab's contributions in this issue.

13 For articles on Thupten Ngodrup, see Jamyang Norbu, "Remembering Thupten Ngodup," http://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2008/05/12/remembering-thupten-ngodup/ and Patrick French, "My Friend Ngodup," *Outlook*, May 18 1998.

requirements for admission to colleges. But administration of these areas by the PRC has never recovered from the initial cutting down of local governance: it remains paradoxical, with a constitutional and legal system that enshrines autonomy as the declared system of management for minorities while, in practice, its promise of self-governance is seen as a cosmetic, residual component of early CCP efforts to win over minority populations.[14]

The Sources of Tibetan Protest

Since the liberalisation of the early 1980s and particularly the period of rapid economic transition that has followed, China has faced a massive increase in social protests, causing a general fear of social instability among the CCP leadership. While social unrest in China is generally seen as a mark of economic transition, protests generally reflect both grievances and rights-based claims and are often attributed to the lack of legal remedy for public grievances and to the state's labelling of protesters as 'trouble makers.' Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li have described the prevalent form of protest in China today as "rightful resistance," whereby protesters seek to restore rights conferred on them by the state and perceived as having been denied to them by local officials.[15] Borrowing from an earlier work by S. Tarrow, K. O'Brien and L. Li argue that "rightful resistance" is episodic rather than sustained, "local rather than national."[16] Similarly, C.K. Lee in *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* termed labour protests in China as "cellular," being both localised and without national or regional organisation.

The protests by the Tibetans and Uyghurs in China present very different patterns both in terms of ideology and the objectives of the protestors. Both these conflicts share the hallmarks of an ethno-nationalistic movement, with their main source of mobilisation and organisation centred on shared ethnicity and territory rather than on questions of particular rights or grievances. In scholarly literature, ethnic unrest is explained in terms of group deprivation and disparity of socio-economic development. Ted Gurr, in his *Minorities at Risk: the Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflict,* a comprehensive survey of ethnic conflict around the world, finds direct correlation between

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[14] Xia Chunli, "To Be The Masters of Their Own Affairs: Minorities' Representation and Regional Ethnic Autonomy in the People's Republic of China," *Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law* 1, 2007, pp. 24-46.

[15] Kevin J. O'Brien, Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[16] *Ibid.,* p. 4.

levels of deprivation and ethnic conflicts.[17] The political scientist Ben Hillman, writing about the 2008 protests in Tibet, attributed their underlying tension to uneven development and stressed the high level of illiteracy and under-qualification among Tibetans, preventing them from competing in the open market.[18] If we examine any social indices—health, life expectancy, literacy or education—it is clear that Tibetans lag behind the average in China in every respect and that there is enormous variation in economic development between the Tibetan areas and other Chinese provinces.

However, the argument that economic and social disparity is the source of the conflict fails to take into account the protracted and historical nature of ethnic conflict. The Tibetans' resistance to Chinese state penetration into what they see as their homeland has a long history, and the Tibetans revolts in the 1950s could not in any way have been a result of Tibetan perceptions that they needed to redress an imbalance in socio-economic development. Similarly, the protests in the mid-1980s, which were confined to the central Tibetan area (the Tibet Autonomous Region), did not suggest that economic disparity was an issue, nor that the protesters were acting because of the influx of Chinese migrants into their area. Uneven development is thus not sufficient to explain the ethno-nationalistic nature of Tibetan protests politics of the ethno-nationalistic kind tends to stress "primordial" linkages and to refer to perceived aggression inflicted on the group, with the aggrieved community articulating its concerns in terms of culture and territory and speaking to its community as a means of mobilisation rather than addressing specific grievances or economic inequities. Ethno-nationalist unrest thus tends to challenge the fundamental structure and legitimacy of the state, with demands that are often taken outside the authorised channels set up by the state for dealing with contentious claims. The Tibetan protesters act as if "the state and its laws are typically inaccessible, arbitrary and alien".[19] Tsering Topgyal has argued that the cause of the protests in Tibet reflects an "identity insecurity" among Tibetans,[20] in response to the rapid pace of economic transition and the movement of migrants into their areas, both being perceived as strategies of assimilation, although there is no overt instance of such a strategy being carried out by the state. The underlying perception remains that Tibetan culture,

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[17] Ted Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: the Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflict*. Arlington: Institute of Peace Press, 1993.

[18] *Japan Focus*, http://www.japanfocus.org/-Ben-Hillman/2773.

[19] James C. Scott, "Everyday Forms Resistance," in Forrest D. Colburn (ed.) *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1989, p. 28.

[20] Tsering Topgyal, "Insecurity Dilemma and the Tibetan Uprising in 2008," *Journal of Contemporary China* 20:69, 2011, p. 185.

and thus the essence of the traditional homeland, is being eroded by the changing social environment and economy that are being fostered in Tibetan regions.

Anthony Smith writes of the "ethnoscape" as the main source of ethno-nationalism, whereby territories are memorialised and historicised. He argues that "the core of ethnoscape formation is the development of historical memories associated with landscapes and territories."[21] The Tibetans in Amdo (mainly in Qinghai) and Kham (mainly in western Sichuan) view their territory as the sacred homeland and natural domain of the local. In these eastern Tibetan areas, the reform period brought revitalisation of the local identity and the reconstitution of scarred sites, with this revival of religion and traditional practices heightening local identity. However, revival is not a simple resurrection of the past, but one that involves the reimagining and memorialisation of territory as a sacred homeland. This often brings differing perception of the territory: the state, when it appropriates territory in the name of modernisation and development, only sees the land in terms of productive utility, quite different from the local view of the territory as a homeland.

It is beyond the scope of this short paper to go into details of the formation of Tibetan identity—my point here is to characterise the Tibetan protests as differing from rights-based protests that are prevalent in China today and also to show that disparity in socioeconomic development cannot fully explain protests by the Tibetans. The roots of Tibetan grievances are based on ethno-nationalistic claims of a homeland and on opposition to the legitimacy of the current authority. But here the question of authority is not confined solely in the domain of politics, but encompasses the larger field of religion and cultural practices. This is particularly significant in Tibet because of the complex issue of religious authority. It is accompanied by another significant issue, which in fact is new: a change in Tibetan practices of self-identification, namely the creation of the idea of a single Tibetan group, termed in Tibetan *bod rigs* or "Tibetan nationality." To some degree the creation of a single Tibetan group owes much to the nationality policies and ethnic categorisation system introduced by the Communists. Before 1950, there was no single Tibetan group with this name, because local identity was the primary marker of group identity. During the Republican period, there was an attempt to create a local Khampa identity in the eastern and southeastern part of the Tibetan plateau by the Guomindang-

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[21]   Anthony D. Smith, "Sacred territories and national conflict", *Israel Affairs*, 5:4, 2007, p. 16.

educated elite, who sought to create a "Kham for Khampas"[22] movement, and in the census conducted by the Guomindang at that time in the Sichuan areas of Kham, the Tibetans were classified as "Khampa."[23] When the Communist scholar-cadres arrived, they categorised the people of the Tibetan plateau as a single *borig* and provided fixity to "Tibetanness," homogenising it typologically. This is not to say that there was no foundation for a single Tibetan group—the people of Kham and Amdo had shared with the central Tibetans (Utsang) a common history, mythology, religion, language-type and a strong sense of territoriality, and this has now come to form the basis of contemporary Tibetan ethno-nationalism.

The differences in the terminology of ethnicity are instructive. Inside Tibet—that is, within China—the use of the term *borig* is standard, in conformity with the Chinese official practice, analogous to the Communists idea of a *minzu* or nationality, now called by them an "ethnic group." This term *(borig)* has been appropriated by ordinary people to mean "the Tibetans." In the Tibetan diaspora, the idea of a homogenous Tibetan community or people based on shared language, history and religion has become a powerful normative self-image, and for them, the word *bopa* (Tibetan), without a category term indicating "ethnic group" or "nationality," is used to refer to Tibetans. Nevertheless, for different reasons and because of different practices, there is a convergence in the idea of "Tibetanness" developed through state construction within China and the idea that has been fashioned in the Tibetan diaspora.

Spatial transformation of Protest

The protest that spread swiftly across the Tibetan plateau in 2008 was remarkable for its geographical scale.[24] If one plots the places where the protests occurred on a map, it will show the cultural and linguistic spread of the Tibetan population. The conformity between a cultural map and the range of protest is not so surprising, however, given that in the late 1950s too, the Tibetan rebellion against China at its peak had shown a similar geographic spread. Another new feature of

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[22] See Wenbin Peng, "Frontier Process, Provincial Politics and Movements for Khampa Autonomy during the Republican Period," in Lawrence Epstein (ed.), *Khams pa Histories: Visions of People, Place and Authority. PIATS 2000: Tibetan Studies.* Proceedings of the Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Leiden 2000. Leiden and Boston: E. J. Brill, 2002, pp. 57-84.

[23] In Chinese as *kangzu.*

[24] Robert Barnett, "The Tibet Protests of Spring 2008: Conflict between the Nation and the State," *China Perspectives*, 2009, 3, pp. 6-23.

recent protest is the shift in the hub of protest from central Tibet to the areas along the traditional Sino-Tibetan frontier. In the mid- and late-1980s, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was the main theatre of confrontation between the Tibetans and the Chinese state, and during that period, the Tibetan areas in the Sino-Tibetan frontier regions remained stable, with no major disturbances. The state too recognised the then stable nature of the eastern regions (Kham and Amdo) and exempted them from security measures that were implemented in the TAR. The liberal policies enjoyed by the Tibetans in Qinghai and Amdo included relatively lax policy towards travel that meant that people from these regions not only could visit Lhasa for trade and pilgrimage but also could journey on to India and Nepal. There is no clear statistical data on the number of people from Kham and Amdo who travelled to India relative to those from the TAR but it is generally recognised that from the mid-1990s onwards, the greater number of Tibetans coming to India both for short trips and for permanent refuge were people from Kham and Amdo, even though this involved them in far longer journeys than those from the TAR. This is particularly the case with monks, as shown by a study of Tibetans in India which found that in the monasteries in Mungod, Bylakuppe, and Hunsur (the three major Tibetans monastic settlements in South India), respectively 60.3%, 45% and 98% of the monks were born in Tibet,[25] and it is probable that the vast majority of the Tibetan-born monks in India originate from the eastern areas. This flow of people has been accompanied by flows of ideas and contacts, with these monks maintaining close links with their home regions, frequent movement between monasteries in India and Tibet, and the active exchange of ideas and information.

The relatively relaxed minority policies in Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan reflect the provincial system of administration and the governance structure of China. Between 1987 and 1997 the TAR, seen as the main theatre of Tibetan opposition, was viewed by the central government and the regional authorities as a source of instability, leading to severe security measures and less tolerance of dissent. The high degree of self-governance legally promised to the region remained moot, and in practice the TAR enjoyed lesser freedom than other areas because it was seen as a trouble spot and in need of a high degree of vigilance. At the same time, and for the same reasons, central government subsidies to the TAR mushroomed, with 91% of the TAR's annual budget made up of funding from Beijing, leading to

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[25]   Shushum Bhatia, Dranyi Tsegyal & Derrick Rowley, "A social and demographic study of Tibetan refugees in India," *Social Science & Medicine*, 54:3, 2001, p. 419.

chronic dependency in the local economy.[26] This was a result of the decision to reserve policy development and overall strategy in Tibet for Beijing and its high-level central planning teams. This practice has been in place since 1980 when the first Tibet Work Forum was convened in the Chinese capital by Hu Yaobang, and was reflected in the decision after the 2008 protests in Tibet to convene the 5th Tibet Work Forum in Beijing shortly afterwards.

Between 1984 and 2008, the policies devised by the Tibet Work Forum were only applicable to the TAR; policies in other Tibetan areas remained the concern of the various provincial authorities. The resulting differences in policy can be seen in policies toward cultural development in these different areas. Thus the publication of Tibetan-language books and music videos is thriving in Xining and Chengdu, whilst in TAR there is little independent production. In terms of Tibetan-language websites or independent online forums specifically designed for the Tibetans, there are none originating from TAR, partly because it has been easier to obtain permissions for Tibetans in Qinghai, Sichuan, or other eastern areas, compared to the TAR. The relatively relaxed policies in Qinghai, Gansu, Yunnan and Sichuan shifted the production of Tibetan cultural identity to the areas outside the TAR and created a vibrant new fashioning of shared Tibetan culture. To some degree it brought about a much more democratic production of Tibetan ideas and images that in many ways resembled the traditional localised flourishing of religious practice in the past. This was particularly evident in the production of popular music, publications, and in the uses of the new social media.

Policies concerning religion were also more relaxed in these eastern areas. This led to the re-emergence of monasteries as the centres of Tibetan community life. In the TAR only the largest and historically more important monasteries were allowed to re-open, and the number of monks in these institutions was severely restricted. Official Chinese sources say that there are across the larger Tibetan area some 3,500 monasteries and 140,000 monks and nuns, representing some 2.8% of the population, or a much higher figure if we break it down by gender and age group. The official figures indicated that half of the monasteries and two thirds of the monks and nuns are in the eastern Tibetan areas.[27]

In the early 1990s a number of events and policy changes took place, which brought the wider Tibetans areas into a situation of in-

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[26]   Andrew M. Fischer, *The Revenge of Fiscal Maoism in China's Tibet*, Working Paper 547. The Hague: International Institute of Social Studies, University Institute of the Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2012, p. 6. Downloadable from http://repub.eur.nl/res/pub/32995/.

[27]   http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-05/16/c_131591351.htm.

creasing conflict. The death of the 10th Panchen Lama in 1989 and subsequent developments regarding his succession created a sharp conflict between the Tibetan Buddhist community and the Chinese government, with the latter selecting its own 11th Panchen Lama in a ceremony convened in the Jokhang temple in Lhasa in December 1995, six months after the Dalai Lama had announced his own choice of the Panchen Lama.[28] The contention over this issue created an unbridgeable chasm between the religious community and the Chinese government. The Buddhists in Tibet refused to back the child appointed by the Chinese government and the attempts by officials to induce or force the monks to accept the official candidate were rebuffed by the monks and the Tibetan public. Even Tashilhunpo, the traditional home monastery of the Panchen Lamas, refused to accept the boy selected by the government. For the Chinese government the refusal of monasteries and monks to endorse him was "anti-patriotic" and a clear demonstration of the monks' support of the Dalai Lama, and they followed the campaign to force the monasteries and monks to endorse the official candidate with a new campaign of forced patriotic education. The monasteries and monks found themselves placed in an awkward situation, between the demands of faith on the one hand and the needs of state to display its power and authority on the other.

The death of the 10th Panchen Lama created a vacuum in religious leadership within Tibet. It was already becoming problematic with the deaths of the older generation of influential and respected lamas, who were immensely respected by both the lay and religious communities, and who exercised considerable moral and religious authority, particularly in the Amdo region. Alak Tseten Zhabdrung,[29] of Tak monastery, had passed away in 1985; another important Gelukpa Lama in Amdo, Shardong Rinpoche, passed away in 2002;[30] and 2004 saw the death of the charismatic Nyingmapa lama, Khenpo Jikme Phuntsok,[31] who had been instrumental in the revival of Buddhism in Kham-Amdo and who had enjoyed immense popularity. Shortly be-

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[28] On this subject, see Fabienne Jagou, "The Use of the Ritual Drawing of Lots for the Selection of the 11th Panchen Lama," in K. Buffetrille (ed.) *Revisiting Rituals in a Changing Tibetan World*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012, pp. 43-68.

[29] Nicole Willock, "Rekindling Ashes of the Dharma and the Formation of Modern Tibetan Studies: The Busy Life of Alak Tseten Zhabdrung," *Latse Library Newsletter*, 6, 2009-2010, pp: 2-26.

[30] Full Name Shardong Lobsang Shedrub Gyatso. See http://tb.tibet.cn/2010rw/zjxz/201205/t20120513_1741848.htm.

[31] David Germano, "Re-membering the Dismembered Body of Tibet. Contemporary Tibetan Visionary Movements in the People's Republic of China," in M. C. Goldstein & M. T. Kapstein (eds.), *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, pp. 53-94.

fore his death, the Chinese authorities forcefully disbanded the institute he had founded, which had become one of the major centres of Buddhist revival in eastern Tibet.

The deaths of the lamas of the older generation combined with the growing pressure on the lamas and monks to denounce the Dalai Lama or to distance themselves from religious communities in India, creating protracted tension. The older lamas had been through the Cultural Revolution and were cautious, seeing to some degree a possibility of being able to revive Buddhism in their homeland. They therefore shied away from any overt political challenges to the government and instead concentrated on rebuilding their monasteries. Before the mid-1990s, the Chinese authorities had allowed exiled lamas from India to return to visit their homeland, and many of the senior lamas who had fled to India in 1959 came back to visit or give teachings, and to assist in the reconstruction of the monasteries, including the chief lama of Kīrti monastery, now the main site of self-immolations, who had been in exile in India since 1959; he was allowed to visit his monastery in the late 1980s. But by the late 1990s the growing, uneasy relationship between the government and the seniormost Tibetan lamas had become evident with the flight to America of Arjia Rinpoche,[32] a leading figure at Kumbum monastery in Amdo, in 1998, and the flight of the Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, to India in January 2000. Arjia Rinpoche had been designated to become Vice President of the Chinese Buddhist Association and the Karmapa had also been directly patronised by the Chinese government, including highly publicised audiences with the Chinese president. Their flight is evidence of the increasing difficulties in the relationship between the Chinese government and religious leaders in Tibet.

The monks' refusal to accept the Chinese government's choice of the 11th Panchen Lama and also the growing size of monasteries and of the monastic population presented a challenge to the Chinese authorities. Restrictions began to be imposed on lamas from India travelling to Tibet, and, coupled with the deaths of many senior lamas, this fuelled a concern amongst the religious community regarding the ability to transmit Buddhist teachings and thus to ensure their legitimacy and authority. The Chinese government, clearly aware of the influence of lamas in Tibetan society, devised various strategies to co-opt them into impressive positions, such as membership of the "Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference" (CPPCC), an

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[32] See his autobiography: Arjia Rinpoche, *Surviving the Dragon, A Tibetan Lama's Account of 40 Years under Chinese Rule*. New York: Rodale, 2010. The full name of Arjia Rinpoche is Lobsang Thupten Jikme Gyatso.

unelected advisory body. But lamas, also known as *trulku*s or reincarnated lamas, who accept senior positions from the state tend to be viewed by the public as self-aggrandising or contaminated, and the official religious organisations tend to be elite and generally out of touch with ordinary monks and nuns. A recent satirical poem posted on a Tibetan language internet forum gives a sense of popular opinion about *trulku*s, as high lamas are called in Tibetan, who have accepted positions in the state system:

> The CPPCC is filled with *trulku*s
> Speeches from the United Front bureau are filled with the voices of
>   *trulku*s
> The Nationalities Religious Affairs Office is filled with the minds of
>   *trulku*s
> The skill of *trulku*s is to occupy the political throne.[33]

The derisory perception of lamas co-opted by the government helps explain their lack of ability to retain influence over the monasteries and monks or to contain monks' opposition to the state. This absence of a religious authority recognised by the community as legitimate and authoritative has led the monks and the public to look for legitimate sources of religious authority in India. This is particularly true of the Gelukpa order of Tibetan Buddhism, where the problem the Chinese government faces in terms of religious management is the fact that all the head or high lamas of Tibetan Buddhism are now residing outside Tibet.

The tension over the Panchen Lama issue coincided with another major shift in Chinese policy towards the Tibetan areas. In 1999 the government launched the "Open Up the West" program (Ch. *Xibu da kaifa*), aimed at accelerating development in China's impoverished interior regions. The stated aim was to redress uneven development between the coastal regions and the interior provinces. One of the implications of the new direction was noted by David Goodman: "there was now to be a higher degree of state intervention in econom-

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[33]   The verse is written by Dawa Dorje. According to news report he was arrested by Chinese security personnel at Lhasa Gonggar Airport after he participated in a cultural conference in Chengdu. Previous publications by Dawa Dorje include the book Lam (Road), which discusses democracy, freedom and human rights. As far as we know, Dawa Dorje is a graduate in Tibetan language from Tibet University and at the time of arrest, he was working as a researcher in the office of the county prosecutor in Nyenrong, Nagchu Prefecture, TAR. *See* http://highpeakspureearth.com/2012/satirical-poem-treaty-on-man-by-detained -tibetan-writer-dawa-dorje/.

ic development than had so far characterised the reform era."[34] The Tibetan areas after the reform period had seen a revival of traditional patterns of economy, based mainly on subsistence farming and herding, with the household responsibility system. Production based on household responsibility was highly popular and many saw this as a return to a traditional mode of existence with a high degree of autonomy.

The government's grand development strategies were couched in terms of the alleviation of poverty and the improvement of a region's productivity. But the nation and state building element of the program was evident. Zhu Rongji in his report to the National People's Congress in March 2000 stated that "Open Up the West" was a means for the "strengthening of national unity, safeguarding of social stability, and consolidation of border defense."[35] In the opening up of the West, key projects were designed to provide infrastructure and particularly transportation links that would strengthen state and nation building. The new policies meant a higher level of state intrusion both in terms of economic development in the guise of infrastructural construction and also in terms of social and cultural intervention. The relationship of this project to nation-building and the integration of the minority groups was spelt out in a lengthy article by Li Dezhu, Minister of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, which was published in the ideological journal of the CCP, *Qiushi (Seeking Truth)*, in 2000.[36] "If these disparities are allowed to exist in the long term," Li wrote of the gaps between East and West in China, between Han and other nationalities, "they will certainly affect national unity and harm social stability." It was envisioned that greater economic and geographical integration would foster "unity" and build what Li Dezhu called the "coagulability" of nationalities. Economic disparity and the ethnic divide were problematic to the state, which saw these divisions as accentuating the differences between mainstream China and the Tibetan areas in particular.[37]

Whatever might have been the stated goal, the implication and resultant impact as perceived by the populace in the Tibetan areas were very different. For the Tibetans the new, aggressive development program was viewed with suspicion; they saw the policy as an attempt to further integrate and open up the Tibetans areas. The opening up of the West was also accompanied by new strategies for deal-

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[34] David Goodman, "The Campaign to "Open Up the West:" National, Provincial-level and Local perspectives," *The China Quarterly* 178, 2004, pp. 317-334.

[35] http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/sgxx/sggg/sstx/2000/t35055.htm.

[36] Li Dezhu, "Large-scale Development of Western China and China's Nationality Problems," *Qiushi*, June 1 2000, in FBIS, June 15 2000.

[37] Li Dezhu, *ibid.*

ing with Tibetan herders in the guise of providing environmental protection for the Tibetan grasslands. This related to a prolonged debate amongst scientists and cadres about the problem of grassland degradation, with the cadres arguing that increases in herd size and new herding practices were causing the large-scale degradation of the grassland and leading to environmental damage. One of the government's solutions was the sedentarisation of Tibetan nomads and the forced reduction of herd size. In Qinghai, the head of the resettlement program, Zhang Huangyuan, reported that 64,006 families (270,000 individuals) had been moved into settlements since 2009.[38] Official reports say that these resettlement programs have proven to be successful in terms of economic opportunity, but so far there have been no studies of their long-term effects. The experience of such programs in the past has shown that resettlement does bring lower infant mortality rate and increase life expectancy, but that it brings a host of social problems such as lack of employment and increasing social division. Whatever the merits of the program, the Tibetans view the sedentarisation as an infringement of their traditional rights and do not welcome government intervention, and Andrew Fischer has noted a correlation between the geographic spread of the Tibetan protests, including incidents of self-immolation, and the program of resettlement.[39] Although so far none of those who have set themselves on fire have come from these settlements, this does demonstrate the undoubted effect of social transformation on the level of apprehension among people in the area.

The three situations I have mentioned—the conflict over the selection of the Panchen Lama, the loss of community leadership or authoritative voice, and the greater state intervention in the Tibetan regions—created a situation that exacerbated local conflict. The fear and apprehension of greater integration and the increasing state presence demonstrated by developmental projects were viewed as a threat to local identity and culture. This general assumption is widely shared by the ordinary public as well as by the emergent younger generation among the educated youth. The response to these perceived threats has heightened Tibetan ethno-nationalism. At one level this was reflected in the development of vibrant public discourse on the status of Tibetan culture and identity, most notably the attempt to engender what is termed *mirig kyi lagya* (i.e. "pride in one's

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[38] "More nomadic herders to settle down in NW China province," English.news.cn, March 23 2012, see http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-03/27/c_131492625.htm.

[39] Andrew Fischer, "The Geopolitics of Politico-Religious Protest in Eastern Tibet," *Hot Spot Forum, Cultural Anthropology Online*, April 11 2012, http://www.culanth.org/?q=node/530.

nationality"). This is most visible in popular culture, particularly in song and music, and in attempts to restore the use of Tibetan language. Almost all lyrics to popular songs that emerged from Kham and Amdo were littered with calls for the unity of the Tibetan people, the celebration of Tibetan cultural identity, and admiration for the land. These songs were easily and widely disseminated through new, popular forms of social media.

Self-immolation

Since 2009, there have been over 45 cases of self-immolation in Tibet, with the majority taking place in the Ngawa region. The largest number of people who set themselves on fire have come from Kīrti monastery, with 16 of them being young monks from this monastery and 26 others being people from the surrounding area. The two confirmed cases of self-immolation in Lhasa were by Tibetans from the same area who had moved to Lhasa for work, and other cases have also had some form of association with Kīrti monastery or its locality. Almost all those who set themselves alight could be termed as religious figures in that they were monks and nuns or were related to monks and nuns. This overwhelming association with a particular monastery or region raises questions about the conditions, influences and pressures within that locality.[40] To a large degree, the self-immolations are largely taking place in what is the traditional southern Amdo area within Sichuan region, and although they are now spreading to other Tibetan areas, without knowing the local conditions and influences that are at play in Ngawa, it is difficult to speak of the precipitating causes of these protests.

As we have seen, the larger politics of China's minority policies and particularly the state's attempts to bring the minority areas into a new market economy had led to greater state intervention and extensive intrusion by China's new market economy into the traditional subsistence system, along with major changes in religious leadership and authority among Tibetans. This had put the Chinese state in a problematic and contradictory position. The state had been willing to tolerate and, to some degree, had turned a blind eye to the re-emergence of religion as the epicentre of Tibetan lives. Since the reform era, there had been a successful revival of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, despite the protests of Tibetans abroad about the lack of freedom of religion in their homeland. Until the conflict over the selection of the Panchen Lama, most monasteries at least in eastern Tibet

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[40]   See Daniel Berounský's contribution to the present issue.

had been relatively free and had been allowed to grow without much restriction, and government restrictions on the number of monks at each monastery had been openly flouted, with no serious attempt up to that time by the government to enforce them. Monasteries in Kham and Amdo had enjoyed other privileges too, such as the relative ease with which monks and lamas from abroad were able to get permission to visit, and with which those from inside Tibet were allowed to travel to India, as reflected in the decreasing percentage of Indian-born monks in monasteries in India—in the exile branch of Kīrti monastery in Dharmasala, India, for example, of 150 monks, 127 are from Ngawa and only one is a Tibetan born in India; the others are from the Tibetan-speaking peoples in the Himalayas.[41] These monks naturally have close family ties with their counterparts in Ngawa.

After the Chinese government's failure to gain acquiescence for the government's choice of the new Panchen Lama in 1995, the authorities began to restrict the travel of Tibetan monks to India, since they viewed this as evidence of the continuing influence of the Dalai Lama and of the close links that had been formed between monasteries in Tibet and those established in India. The government also began to restrict access to monasteries in Tibet for high lamas visiting from India or abroad and, in order to limit the influence of lamas based in India, it initiated the "patriotic education" drive in monasteries. The drive focuses on the dissemination of information about China's constitution and laws relating to religion, often requiring monks to sign a pledge supporting the CCP and dissociating themselves from the Dalai Lama. Patriotic education and the general surveillance of monasteries was intensified in the aftermath of the 2008 Tibetan revolt, where the monasteries became the focal point of the protests, particularly in the cases of Kīrti monastery[42] in Ngawa and Labrang in Gansu.

Of the 45 cases of self-immolation reported until August 5 2012, 34 are monks or nuns, reflecting the framing among Tibetans of monks as the guardians of tradition and as moral leaders. The active involvement of religious figures in protest is an indication that the monks have indeed taken on the onerous task of acting as the defenders of Tibetan tradition. However, this assumption cannot fully explain the nature of mobilisation nor the local conditions where the incidents are occurring, for these incidents are specific to certain localities, not only in terms of place, but also in terms of religious sects. The self-immolations have taken place primarily among monasteries

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[41] Personal communication with a monk at Kīrti monastery in Dharamsala, June 2012.
[42] The full name of Kīrti monastery is Ganden Lekshe Ling. It was founded in 1870 by the Eighth Kīrti Lobsang Trinley Konchok Tenpa Gyatso.

of the Gelukpa school, and it is those that have most been involved in protests. Why has this particular school been more active? Does it indicate the Chinese state practices a policy of divide and rule amongst different Tibetan Buddhist sects? In fact, the Chinese state does not show any particular bias in its treatment of different sects and attempts to maintain equal distance towards them, with various religious control mechanisms applied equally among the different religions and sects. However, because of the varying ideological foundation of the sects, the effects of state control are felt differently. The Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism is less hierarchical and less focused on monastic tradition, whereas the Gelukpa is hierarchical and focused more on monastic tradition and training, hence it is easier to exert control over it. Another reason is historical: Kīrti and Labrang monasteries have not only been among the largest religious institutions in Tibet, but also have been important centres of political power.[43] The northern part of the Amdo region, in present day Gansu, were under the control of Labrang,[44] and the southern part, although it was ruled by the kings of Ngawa, was under the influence of Kīrti monastery. For historical reasons, whatever the details or virtues of this legacy, it reflects an acute sense of the loss of Geluk hegemony.

Geluk monasteries also faced particular challenges from the state because of their historic role as the leading, established sect. Thus, when the Chinese government attempted to force the monks to endorse its chosen candidate as the new Panchen Lama, the non-Geluk monasteries were easily able to evade the government demands by claiming that the issue was not their concern, since the Panchen Lama belongs to the Geluk tradition. The Geluk monasteries had no such option and faced a challenge to the heart of their sect. The sense of grievances and rage felt within the Geluk monasteries is thus more intimate and immediate. At this stage, we simply do not know the influences and pressures that have been present within Kīrti monastery, the particular factors that have fuelled a sense of rage within it. For the Chinese authorities, it is not an accident that this monastery has become the centre of protest and it has not gone unnoticed. Zhu Weiqun, Vice-Minister of the United Front department of the CCP in an interview with Xinhua pointed out that Kīrti Rinpoche, the head lama of the monastery, based in Dharamsala since 1959, had "served as the 'security minister' of the 'Tibetan government-in-exile' for a long time." Zhu went on to say, "His ministry is widely known for

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[43] See Daniel Berounský's article in this issue.
[44] On the role played by Labrang monastery in Amdo region, see Paul Kocot Nietupski, *Labrang Monastery. A Tibetan Buddhist Community on the Inner Asian Borderland, 1709-1958*. Lanham: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011.

organising bloodshed, sabotage and penetration." [45] While Zhu Weiqun is wrong that Kīrti Rinpoche served as the "security minister," he has indeed been a member of the exile government and served as minister for religious affairs between April 1997 and March 1999. The Chinese authorities have not provided any evidence of instigation of protests in Tibet by Kīrti Rinpoche or by Dharamsala beyond point-ing to his role in the exile government and his campaigning speeches while travelling abroad, but the links between the monastery and the posts held by its exiled lama will have fuelled strong suspicions of outside involvement in unrest.

The Tibetans have framed the recent wave of self-immolations not only as acts of sacrifice but as acts with religious meaning, as in the tradition of offering one's body for the benefit of others. A number of testimonies left by the people who have burned themselves show that they were motivated by the wish to preserve Tibetan religion and culture and to ensure the return of the Dalai Lama. In these testimo-nies, the protesters do not articulate their grievances in terms of par-ticular policies but in terms of what we could call 'civilisational preservation.'[46] The testimonies speak to co-nationals and rather than directly appealing to authorities or calling on them to rescind a par-ticular policy, they present Tibetan culture and identity as being on the verge of being destroyed by the modernist state project. Such po-sitioning is typical of ethno-nationalistic claims, which see the preservation of identity and territory as the core of the struggle and in which perceived threats to this identity serve as motivating and mobilising points.

The influences and pressures on monks within Kīrti monastery are hard to gauge. Tapey, the first young monk to set himself on fire within Tibet, in February 2009, is one of the few to have survived. In May 2012 a Chinese TV documentary broadcast an interview with him in which he said that he had not participated in the 2008 protests and that this had led others to mock him, and so setting himself on fire had in part been intended to counter the ridicule.[47] Whether or not this was the major factor, it indicates some of the influences and pressures that are operating at the micro-level within the monastery. The localised nature of the self-immolations both in terms of space and action can also be explained by the relational nature of mobilisa-tion in general. All forms of protest are 'relational,' in that the pro-

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[45]   "Investigations show political motive behind self-immolations in Tibetan-populated regions," http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-03/07/c_131452109.htm

[46]   See Robert Barnett's article in this issue.

[47]   CCTV Broadcast, May 7 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5rHgm5LyCY&feature=youtu.be.

cesses of learning and mobilisation take place at the level of kinship, residence, religion and workplace. Thus protests in China often operate at the neighbourhood level, and involve a collective of residents from within that neighbourhood. In the Tibetans areas, it is the monasteries that act like a work unit or neighbourhood. Given that they stand in opposition to state ideology, and that the religious community increasingly seeks for its sources of authority and legitimacy outside the parameters of the state, let alone the CCP, conflicts emanating from institutions coupled with Tibetan ethno-nationalism provide a likely template for further tension.

Once the initial self-immolation had occurred within Tibet, the act was imitated and others followed. As we have seen, self-immolation is a part of the global repertoire of protest, and images of the act are circulated and easily shared through social media, gaining currency and value amongst co-nationals. Whatever the local influences might have been, in the absence of legal avenues to voice their demands, the monks see self-immolation as the only alternative. However, as the demands of the protesters are couched in the all-encompassing language of ethno-nationalism, a position on which the Chinese state cannot compromise, the Tibetans are labelled as "terrorists" by the state and their demands are seen as separatist rather than as motivated by policy grievances. As the demands of the Tibetans challenge the legitimacy of the state, thus placing them in the 'forbidden' zone of contention and distinguishing them from the relatively tolerated protests widespread in China—so the gulf between them and the state is irreconcilable, especially given the current high tide of Chinese nationalism. This means that the conflict will continue to fluctuate between phases of repression and local resistance.

Like all states faced with separatist demands, the government adopts two strategies: increased surveillance to control the local population and pumping money into the affected area to induce co-operation and compliance. These policies are problematic, as the increased economic development does not induce greater acceptance and the greater surveillance in the form of restrictions on movement and controlling cultural production has the effect of arousing a greater sense of Tibetan victimisation. The authorities have already put in place greater restrictions on people travelling and moving between Tibetan areas, with hundreds of Tibetans from Sichuan and Qinghai expelled from Lhasa and rapidly increasing restrictions on eastern Tibetans travelling into the TAR while there is little control on ethnic Chinese migrants into the same area. This approach applies even to body and luggage inspections at airports within China: since 2008 Tibetan travellers have to pass through additional searches or, at Lhasa airport, through a special, designated check. Such policies are

typical of a wide range of actions by the Chinese state, contributing to it being increasingly viewed by Tibetans as discriminatory, aggravating an existing sense of marginalisation, and leading to continued acts of self-immolation to be seen as a demonstration of collective disaffection and rage at their conditions.

GLOSSARY

Transcription	Transliteration	Tibetan
Alak Tseten Zhabdrung	A lags Tshe tan zhab drung	ཨ་ལགས་ཚེ་ཏན་ཞབས་དྲུང་།
Amdo	A mdo	ཨ་མདོ།
Arjia Rinpoche	A kyā rin po che	ཨ་སྐྱ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ།
Bopa	*bod pa*	བོད་པ།
borig	*bod rigs*	བོད་རིགས།
Chol sum pawo doring	*Chol gsum dpa' bo rdo ring*	ཆོལ་གསུམ་དཔའ་བོ་རྡོ་རིང་།
Ganden Lekshe Ling	Dga' ldan legs bshad gling	དགའ་ལྡན་ལེགས་བཤད་གླིང་།
Geluk	*dge lugs*	དགེ་ལུགས།
Pawo	*dpa' bo*	དཔའ་བོ།
Karmapa	Karma pa	ཀརྨ་པ།
Karma Kagyu	Karma bka' brgyud	ཀརྨ་བཀའ་བརྒྱུད།
Kham	Khams	ཁམས།
Khampa	Khams pa	ཁམས་པ།
Khenpo Jikme Phuntsog	Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs	མཁན་པོ་འཇིགས་མེད་ཕུན་ཚོགས།
Kīrti	Kīrti	ཀིརྟི།
Kumbum	Sku 'bum	སྐུ་འབུམ།
Lobsang Trinley Konchok Tenpa Gyatso	Blo bzang 'phrin las dkon mchog bstan pa rgya mtsho	བློ་བཟང་འཕྲིན་ལས་དཀོན་མཆོག་བསྟན་པ་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

Lobsang Thupten Jikme Gyatso	Blo bzang Thub bstan 'jigs med rgya mtsho	བློ་བཟང་ཐུབ་བསྟན་འཇིགས་མེད་རྒྱ་མཚོ།
mirig kyi lagya	*mi rigs kyi la rgya*	མི་རིགས་ཀྱི་ལ་རྒྱ།
Nagchu	*Nag chu*	ནག་ཆུ།
Nyenrong	*Gnyan rong*	གཉན་རོང་།
Nyingmapa	rnying ma pa	རྙིང་མ་པ།
Tak	Stag	སྟག
Tashilhunpo	Bkra shis lhun po	བཀྲ་ཤིས་ལྷུན་པོ།
Tapey	Bkra bhe	བཀྲ་བྷེ།
Shardong Lobsang Shedrub Gyatso	Shar gdong blo bzang bshad sgrub rgya mtsho	ཤར་གདོང་བློ་བཟང་བཤད་སྒྲུབ་རྒྱ་མཚོ།
Techung	Bkras chung	བཀྲས་ཆུང་།
Trulku	*sprul sku*	སྤྲུལ་སྐུ།
Thupten Ngo-drup	Thub bstan dngos grub	ཐུབ་བསྟན་དངོས་གྲུབ།

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