Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines

— Tibet is burning —
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Participation
La participation est ouverte aux membres statutaires des équipes CNRS, à leurs membres associés, aux doctorants et aux chercheurs non-affiliés.

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Self-Immolation: Ritual or Political Protest?

Edited by Katia Buffetrille and Françoise Robin

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This special issue of *Revue d'Eudes Tibétaines* is the result of an international conference entitled *Tibet is Burning. Self-Immolation: Ritual or Political Protest?* held on May 14 and 15 2012 at the Collège de France, in Paris.

This conference was made possible thanks to the financial and material support of four institutions: the École pratique des Hautes Études, the Collège de France, the Centre de recherche sur les civilisations de l'Asie orientale (CNRS/EPHE/Diderot/ Collège de France) and its director Annick Horiuchi; the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales and Manuelle Frank, vice-president of its Scientific Board. To all these we wish to express our gratitude. We thank also Choktsang Lungtok for the beautiful calligraphy he readily designed especially for the conference, as well as Eric Mélac for his help in the English translations, and the INALCO students who volunteered during the conference.

We are grateful to Tsherin Sherpa who kindly accepted that we use one of his paintings to illustrate these proceedings.

The publication of this issue has come about through the help of its editorial director Jean-Luc Achard, to whom we are indebted for his patient advices.

We wish also to express our deepest appreciation to the fine scholars whose excellent contributions appear in this special issue of *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines.*

Katia Buffetrille (EPHE) and
Françoise Robin (INALCO)

Preface

The idea that an international symposium on self-immolation in Tibet would be organised in Paris was far from the thoughts of the French Tibetological community at the beginning of 2011. However, pushed by events, with news of one immolation quickly followed by news of another at the beginning of 2012, we realised that an unprecedented shocking social phenomenon was taking place in the Land of snow. In spite of our years of fieldwork in Tibet, none of us had foreseen such a tragic development.

While Ronald Schwartz (1994: 22)[1] had written about the protests in Lhasa in the 1980s that their "novelty lies in extending the meaning of familiar cultural symbols and practices into (…) public opposition to Chinese rule," self-immolation in present-day Tibet cannot be linked to anything familiar. Indeed, self-immolation by fire was almost unheard of in the Tibetan world until 1998.

Heather Stoddard launched the idea of convening a roundtable on the subject as early as January 2012, a proposal that was supported immediately by Katia Buffetrille. It soon became obvious that an international seminar would be more productive. Later, Heather Stoddard, due to press of other engagements, had to withdraw from the organisation. Françoise Robin took over and co-organised this symposium with Katia Buffetrille.

While the organisation of the French international symposium was underway, Carole McGranahan and Ralph Litzinger edited online, in April, 2012, a special issue of *Cultural Anthropology* dedicated to this tragic and puzzling phenomenon.[2] This collection of 20 short essays (2-3 pages each) written by a group of Tibetologists, intellectuals and journalists asked, as Carole McGranahan phrased it, "how [to] write about self-

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1 Ronald D. Schwartz, *Circle of Protest. Political Ritual in the Tibetan Uprising*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

2 http://www.culanth.org/?q=node/526.

immolation—an act that is simultaneously politically charged, emotionally fraught, visually graphic, individually grounded, collectively felt—and what does one write? How do we intellectually make sense of these self-immolations, and how do we do so while writing in the moment, but writing from the outside?"[3] These essays presented a preliminary analysis of, and reflections on, self-immolation in the Tibetan world, from the Buddhist, anthropological, sociological, political, historical, artistic and economic angles.

Inspired by Ronald Schwartz's work, which describes the 1989 protests as "rituals [that are] a way of solving problems in the form of drama and symbols",[4] we decided to entitle the conference "Tibet is Burning. Self-Immolation: Ritual or Political Protest?" We went ahead with the organisation of the conference fully aware of the fact that we lacked (and still do) the benefit of hindsight. Emile Durkheim's assertion in *Le Suicide* that "we can explain only by comparing"[5] stimulated us to open up the conference to scholars whose studies are focused on a variety of areas—either on regions in which Buddhism prevails or had prevailed, or on other religious traditions within which self-immolations have occurred. Like the editors of *Cultural Anthropology*, we estimated that the presence of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, specialists in literature and art could help shed a particular light on these actions.

We are pleased to present here the papers as they were given at this international conference, with the exception of those of Robert Barnett and Tsering Shakya who decided to write more substantial articles.

The first batch of papers comes from the Tibetan studies community. Katia Buffetrille presents a chronology of self-immolations in Tibet since 1998, and also looks into previous recorded instances of this action, highlighting some of the reactions the phenomenon has set off. Moreover, she raises many questions which still need to be answered, among them the problem of writing on a subject whose history is still unfolding

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3 *Ibid.*

4 R. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, 20.

5 "On n'explique qu'en comparant," Émile Durkheim, *Le suicide. Étude de sociologie*. 1897. http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/Durkheim_emile/suicide/suicide.html.

(95 self-immolations in Tibet proper have occurred at the time this introduction is being written, December 14 2012). Tsering Shakya takes up the ethnonationalistic aspect of the subject and notes the "civilisational preservation" aspect that is at stake in the self-immolations, emphasising the need to resort to the historical dimension to explain the phenomenon. Robert Barnett distances himself from the "outside instigation" or "policy-response" causes that have been put forward to explain the self-immolations by most commentators, and suggests also the influence of Chinese popular culture on self-immolators. In an article based on Tibetan biographies and other historical sources as well as on fieldwork, Daniel Berounský sheds light on the flourishing past of Ngawa kingdom and adds an historical dimension of our knowledge of Kīrti monastery and the larger county to which it belongs. This foray into history is crucial, as Ngawa county is the place where the highest number of self-immolations have occurred to date.

With Fabienne Jagou and Elliot Sperling we turn to the Chinese side: the former offers an overview of the Chinese government's reaction to the self-immolations, raising the question of whether it shows any adaptation to these unprecedented events, or if it conforms to the well-known political ritual of repression used in the 1980s Tibetan protests. As for Elliot Sperling, he chooses to focus on debates on social networks among Han and Tibetan intellectuals and rights advocates, most prominently Woeser, the well-known blogger, poet, and dissident and her husband, the Chinese writer Wang Lixiong.

The three last contributions by Tibetologists deal with Tibetan bloggers' and social media reactions to self-immolations: Chung Tsering provides a brief summary (in Tibetan and in English) of online articles on self-immolation written in Tibetan by exiles. He shows how the debates are lively, rich and numerous, due to contradictory opinions and also to the interest expressed by exile bloggers. Noyontsang Lhamokyab looks into poems and songs about self-immolations that have appeared in social media in exile in 2011 and 2012, going from praise to prayers, most of them expressing solidarity with the immolators. Françoise Robin takes up a similar topic, but in Tibet proper, where coded poems have surfaced on websites. She

studies the images and questions the role and potency of these works.

With the historian Michel Vovelle, a transition to the non-Tibetan world is provided. He surveys the relationship between death and fire in the West from Ancient Greece to the present. He underlines how this relationship has evolved along with society itself and how one single phenomenon came to be interpreted differently along time.

After this opening to history, we turn to a sociological analysis of self-immolations in the world between 1963 and 2012 provided by Michael Biggs. This global perspective allows him to assert that generally this pattern of self-killing is more prevalent in Indic than Semitic societies. He remarks that the current wave of self-immolations in Tibet has reached unprecedented heights in terms of demography, when compared to other communities.

The issue of whether the Tibetan self-immolations could have been inspired by the gesture of the young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi was raised time and again. Analysts generally agree that his desperate act in a marketplace in December 2010 triggered the Arab spring and they wondered if Tibetans entertained a similar hope for Tibet. We thus invited three specialists on social and religious movements in the Muslim world.

Dominique Avon reminds us that, although suicide is forbidden in Islamic society, the interpretations given by imams in the case of recent immolations vary from condemnation to silent approval. He emphasises that the prevalent resort to self-immolation in today's Muslim societies is a symptom of secularisation. As for Olivier Grojean, who deals with the PKK, he suggests that self-immolation practices have varied throughout time, with shifting contexts, modes, and actors. They have helped the PKK in building a system which highly values commitment and readiness to die. He notes also the increase of self-immolations at the time when the PKK was undergoing difficulties. Turning towards Iran and the Arab world, Farhad Khosrokhavar agrees with Dominique Avon about immolations being a symptom of secularisation. Moreover, he underlines that, until the Arab spring, self-killing was associated with martyrdom in the name of Islam, with two exceptions: the Kurds who used it as a political weapon and women in general who

committed self-immolation under social pressure. With the Arab spring, though, self-immolation has become a male practice aimed at denouncing repressive power holders, with no religious dimension attached to it.

The three last contributions deal more specifically with self-immolation in other parts of Asia. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine focuses on the Hindu world, and shows how self-immolation, as a means of self-sacrifice, both emerges from the practice of sacrifice in Hinduism and disrupts it, linking the political to the religious. With François Macé, we enter the Japanese world where self-immolations were attested, although not encouraged. The phenomenon disappeared at the end of the 16th century leaving room for another: *seppuku*, commonly called *harakiri,* which took several forms. Lastly, James A. Benn insists on the multiplicity of interpretations that can be ascribed to self-immolation in medieval China. Such a tradition was attested since at least the 4th century; Chinese believers would utilise it in striving to import from India the path of the bodhisattva, emulating the *Lotus Sūtra*. He also shows how self-immolation was accepted as part of the Buddhist path and how immolators, far from being estranged from the world, were active participants in it.

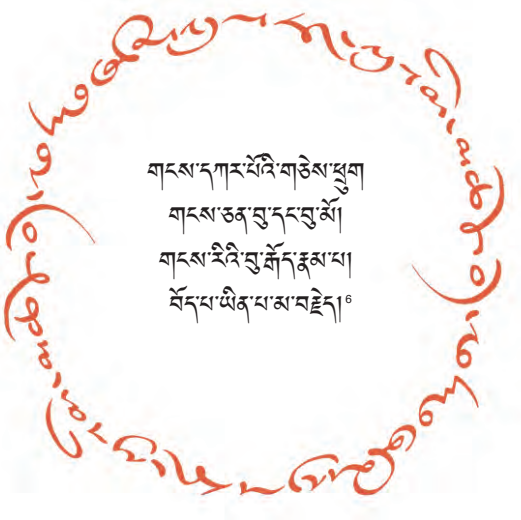
Readers might wonder why this collection does not contain a paper dealing with Vietnam where in 1963 the shocking, internationally publicised immolations of Thích Quảng Đ ức and other monks led to the fall of Ngô Đình Diệm's government. We had indeed planned to include the contribution of Nguyen The Anh but, unfortunately, personal circumstances prevented him from sending it in time for publication.

These papers all combine to show that self-immolations in a variety of cultural and religious contexts cannot be brushed aside simply as actions perpetuated by depressed individuals. Rather, they have to be interpreted in a network of meanings and values belonging to the society in which they take place. Some further similarities can be underlined: self-immolations are radical, they are spectacular, they often serve as a protest against power, and they ignore religious prohibitions against them.

In the more specific case of the Land of snow where Tibetans have become overwhelmingly disempowered, we suggest that

the self-immolators manifest a full and final mastery over their bodies, by ultimately offering them for the sake of their collective identity, giving new meaning to the "political lives of dead bodies," an expression aptly coined by Katherine Verderi.

Katia Buffetrille
and Françoise Robin



6 "Beloved children of the white snow / Sons and daughters of the land of the snows /Great sons of the snow-mountains / Do not forget that you are Tibetan!" Last written words by Sangay Dolma, who self-immolated on November 26 2012 (Translated by Lama Jabb).