



## THE SOCIOPOLITICAL LIVES OF DEAD BODIES: Tibetan Self-Immolation Protest as Mass Media

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He could be sleeping. Or meditating as he waits in the car for the driver to return. His body sits upright against the seat back, shirtless and in sporty shorts, his hands loosely in his lap, his knees casually splayed. But as the camera silently moves closer to trace the contours of his body, the only sound coming from the filmer's own shaky hands, we realize that he is lovingly draped in a soft blanket, and his mottled, blackened, and peeling skin disrupts the banality of the scene. The brief and grainy footage of the twenty-year-old Tibetan Buddhist monk Phuntshok, hastily recorded by his friend on a cellphone and emailed to Tibetans abroad, in fact captures the young monk's last breaths after he self-immolated on a main street in Ngaba (in Chinese, Aba) County town, in China's northwestern Sichuan Province. According to a variety of competing sources, on March 16, 2011, the third anniversary of deadly protests in the town, Phuntshok set himself on fire to protest Chinese policies in Tibetan regions. Police extinguished the flames and monks from his home monastery, the Geluk-sect Kirti Gonpa, drove Phuntshok back to the monastery and later to the county hospital, where he died at 3 a.m. that morning.

Since then, Phuntshok has taken on new social and political life, as his body, image, persona and purported words have circulated through various regions and media. For example, two days after his death, his corpse was cremated in a large Buddhist ceremony presided over by Kirti monks and attended by hundreds of



Figure 1. Map of Tibetan regions in China and location of Kirti monastery. Map by Atelier Golok.

Tibetans from throughout the county. That event was then itself filmed and the footage secretly circulated abroad. As an unprecedented spate of Tibetan self-immolation-by-fire protests unfolded during the following four years (as of June 2015, a total of 141 in the People's Republic of China [PRC], 7 abroad), Phuntsok took on a newly emblematic status as the first Tibetan immolator to die in the PRC.<sup>1</sup> Photos of him, both as a smiling young monk and as a corpse in silent repose, were featured prominently in foreign and Tibetan exile media, in memorials, and on protest posters. And his image and story ended up as key plot devices in major documentary films competing to narrate the events and their causes, one from [China Central Television \(CCTV\) \(2012\)](#), the other from the Voice of America ([Ensor 2013](#)).

Just as in other forms of self-immolation protest elsewhere, this spectacle of voluntary maiming and death has raised painful questions for observers about the politics and ethics of witnessing, reporting, and analyzing such events from afar. This perhaps holds especially true in the case of Tibet. With the Chinese Communist takeover of the 1950s, and the rise of the Dalai Lama in the 1980s as an international spokesman for an ideally modern Buddhism grounded in rational contemplation and universal compassion, many Westerners have come to



2002; McGranahan 2010). And prominent groups of Tibetans and their supporters continue to call for independence in spite of the stance of the Tibetan government in exile. Yet observers in and outside China still expressed shock at the display of young lay and monastic Tibetans' violence in the Lhasa riots in March 2008. In China, CCTV played endless loops of surveillance footage showing rioters destroying government buildings and shops owned by Han Chinese and Hui Muslims. They also caught on camera for the first time a few attacks on Han and Hui bystanders.<sup>2</sup> When the first self-immolation protests began among young monks from Kirti monastery a year later, Tibetan and non-Tibetan observers alike again expressed shock and moral disorientation. Unlike in Chinese forms of Buddhism, Tibetan self-immolation was almost unprecedented (Benn 2007, 2012), and since the late 1990s, a number of high-ranking Tibetan lamas have publicly lamented it as violating the Buddhist emphasis on the sanctity of life.

The series of self-immolations among Tibetans since 2009 has thus evoked for many observers in and out of the PRC what Talal Asad (2007, 68), citing Stanley Cavell, referred to as "horror": the profound sense of the "precariousness of human identity" that accompanies the destabilization of grounding categories of existence. More specifically, Tibetans' self-immolation protests have called into question the (modern, liberal) nature of Buddhism and the role of the Dalai Lama, the very sociomoral grounds of Tibetan ethnic and nationalist identity, protest, governance, and claims to forms of sovereignty in recent decades. Indeed horror, in Asad's (2007, 68–76, cf. Sontag 2003) reading of Cavell, is not the same as terror or fear, which, he says, refer to responses usually directed at an object. Horror instead connotes an objectless state of being, a nonreflexive sense of extreme disorientation—but also of *awe and fascination*, even reverence, bound up with the aesthetics (porn?) of killing, the graphic dissolution of human bodies in mass-mediated representations. In the "spiral transgressions" (Mbembe 2003, 16) evoked and imitated in circulating images of Tibetans' self-immolations, observers are drawn into problematic complicities. Hence commentators across the political spectrum have invoked associations of Buddhism with nonviolence and universal compassion to ask whether the immolations are sinful, violent suicides or altruistic, nonviolent sacrifices. Accusations and counteraccusations fly, especially between Chinese state and Tibetan exile media, about the ethical implications of reporting these events: Does reporting on the self-immolations in fact encourage the destructive or wasteful violence of youthful mimicry? Or does it amplify the constructive protest of selfless martyrs on behalf of oppressed Tibetans?

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For me, this new anguish over Tibetans' recourse to self-immolation protest recalls the moral dilemmas about the role of the anthropologist that I encountered living in a Tibetan town in Qinghai Province during the military crackdown on Tibetan protests in 2008. In this article, I look to the calls of the anthropologists Veena Das, Emily Martin, Didier Fassin, and others to reject witnesses' fetishization of the event in favor of an ethnography of violence that moves with events as people (including the ethnographer) reframe them over time and in their everyday lives. I thus avoid debates that assume the intrinsic morality, meanings, or efficacies of self-immolation as protest. Instead, I draw on linguistic anthropological methods to take a performative approach, one that accounts for the always unresolved yet politically and socially constitutive meaning and efficacy of dead bodies.

Here I take inspiration from the anthropologist Katherine Verdery's (1999, 26, 33) analysis of "the political lives of dead bodies" in postsocialist Russia. For her, dead bodies are key sites for rethinking politics not as a series of technical and rational decisions or strategies among state citizens (liberal or not), but as a cultural politics of meaning, authority, and value-making that implicates whole worlds of contested spaces and times. She urges us to consider the semiotic and pragmatic specificities of dead bodies as both material objects and as signs or symbols in specific situations. As quintessentially liminal others positioned between the living and the dead, human corpses, she argues, embody an "ineluctable self-referentiality" (Verdery 1999, 32) that encourages analogies with the bodies and biographies of living people, linking them via notions like soil, bone, kinship, and ancestry to broader histories or futures, as well as to sovereign landscapes of belonging. This perspective then challenges us to think beyond Western individualist notions of secular agency or scientific notions of death as biological cessation to understand the wide variety of ways in which dead bodies (as both objects *and* persons) enter into social and political lives vis-à-vis the living.

Verdery's approach nicely gels with the concerns of more recent anthropologists and political theorists who have been expanding on the work of such thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben to rethink the nature of the modern nation-state through the figure of death. These theorists counter often-commonsense claims that modern states are rational administrative orders extending across both discretely bounded territories and biologically optimized populations (e.g., biopolitics), the protection of which

justifies the monopoly of violence in policing and war (Foucault 1990; Das and Poole 2004; Asad 2007). Instead, in Achille Mbembe's (2003) analysis, the creation of the state's Other as a permanent enemy to be killed, and the consequent management and disposition of dead (and disappeared) bodies under state auspices, illustrates the "necropolitics" at the heart of contemporary governance. Mbembe (2003, 13) explicitly opposes this politics to mainstream political theorists' notions of liberal democracies based in the collective agreements of self-aware, autonomous citizens. Necropolitics play out instead in contested claims to often-uncanny, even sacralized forms of authority over the very nature and shape of mortality as a precondition for any state-sponsored freedoms. This approach would then help us get at what Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004, 6) referred to as "the secret life of the state" behind the official rhetoric of centralized bureaucratic rationality and the rule of law—that modern sovereignty is not the consequence of absolute mastery (of self or of citizenry), but a precariously open dialogue that draws all citizens into intensely ambivalent sociopolitical and aesthetic relations with the dead (Yurchak 2008).

From this angle, the active and unresolved meaning and agency of the dead emerge as key to understanding the rise of Tibetan self-immolations in China and their roles in Sino-Tibetan relations. Indeed, escalating contests over the fate of immolators' bodies crucially structure the events through time (Barnett 2012, 45). In the struggles over positioning, disposing of, and speaking for bodies, we find the dead framed as inert, silent objects, but also as active and changeful subjects—they speak, gesture, haunt, yearn, suffer, and demand. Here, I expand on Verdery and Mbembe to explore the performative roles of dead and dying bodies as interlocutors in specific forms of communication. As Verdery (1999, 29) puts it, when their messages have public stakes, seemingly silent corpses can evoke competing claims to words they said or thought in (or after) life. But this is not just a question of the sources and meanings of protesters' words. The durable presence and recognizability of *non-verbal* signs, including the material qualities of bodies, environments, and the various media that reframe and circulate them, are crucially at issue. In fact, forms of self-immolation protest, as efforts to amplify messages in and through dying, pose grave challenges to the individualist notions of intentioned speech that ground liberal presumptions about the possibilities for redemptive political agency.

Thus the (verbally) silent body of the immolator often calls forth a high-stakes "forensic reading of motive" (Asad 2007, 44), in which opponents scrutinize and circulate media representations of dead bodies to search for and claim indi-

vidual protesters' rationales in the face of such seemingly transgressive acts. For example, as [Robert Barnett \(2012, 43\)](#) puts it, the apparently individual nature of Tibetan self-immolation protests, in contrast to the morally and politically fraught *mass* unrest of 2008, encouraged observers to interpret immolations as "rational responses to a specific cause." In practice, however, what dead bodies say and do, and what relationships they enter into, can shift over time, beyond the intent of both living protesters and their postmortem interlocutors. Here I argue that taking Tibetans' self-immolation-by-fire protests as themselves a new and particularly fraught genre of communication can help us grasp some of their semiotic and pragmatic specificity, as well as the particular stakes of their circulation by others. That is, I take them to be an increasingly ritualized form of *mass media* in the context of severe state repression.

Yet the implications of such an approach are ethically complex. A linguistic anthropological take on meaning and efficacy, not as the outcome of fixed symbolic systems but as an ongoing and embodied interpretive politics, challenges easy assumptions about the immediate accessibility of motives and affects (our own and others'). Yet as [William Mazzarella \(2009, 291\)](#) has pointed out, global media consumers are increasingly addressed as members of (competing) affective publics who supposedly know—and sympathize with—pleasure and pain when they see it. In an age of "humanitarian reason," protesters must walk a fine line between performances of affect and rationality, soliciting the attention and mimetic affect of sympathetic spectators who would in turn render their messages credible across contexts ([Fassin 2011, 203](#)). In practice, though, recourse to affect in public performance is not an opening for unmediated empathy, but a hazardous process of what [Mazzarella \(2009, 303\)](#), citing Michael Warner, calls "constitutive mediation": we can only recognize ourselves (and our publics) through the ongoing circulation of media forms, but the efficacy of those subjects as ideal types depends on their seeming to exist previously as fixed positions.

These inherently intersubjective dynamics would move us away from taking Tibetan immolators (living or dead) as singular voices and entail instead a consideration of the mediated *addressivity* of their performances ([Bakhtin 1981](#); [Lempert 2012](#); [Lempert and Silverstein 2012](#)). By that I mean the specific ways in which messages reach for the uncertain futures of others' responses, evoking ideal types of persons and places as attempts to reconstitute both selves and their larger publics. Importantly, these dynamics (and their risks) play out as performers must manage multiple modalities of signs in recognizable ways. Here, the concept of genre is useful. It refers to conventional assemblages of the formal features of

performance events, including participant roles for speakers and addressees, as well as specific aesthetic sensibilities for linking verbal and nonverbal signs (Bakhtin 1981; Bauman 2001). A notion of genre would in turn help us get at the ways in which protesters' political agency relies on their capacity to mimetically invoke familiar frameworks of interpretive practice for their interlocutors—there is no guarantee of that recognition, no certainty that verbal and nonverbal signs will necessarily align in the same ways over time. Horror in this light is less a universal state of being than a specific experience of the sudden loss of genre.

This perspective helps distinguish specifically Tibetan self-immolation-by-fire from other forms of self-immolation protest, and it implicates the broader, now transregional ethical politics of violent versus nonviolent resistance in which Buddhism plays a central role. In such forms of protest, dead bodies speak to a shifting “pragmatics of modernity” (Lempert 2012, 11) in which political subjectivity is vitally at stake. From this angle, the body of the suicide bomber, in its instantaneous dissolution, is supposed to communicate primarily in acting as a weapon targeting others. Meanwhile, the slowly declining body and speech of the hunger striker evoke a threatened near-future death that both addresses key authorities and dramatizes their neglect. By contrast, recent Tibetan self-immolators use flames to frame and amplify the body *as itself* a primary medium—the moral claim is that the embodied message, not harm to others, is the goal (and the gift) worth dying for. The timing indeed allows for limited speech, but especially key gestures, while the flames signify not the threat of death but its certainty within a few minutes.

Crucially, as *mass* media under state repression, self-immolation-by-fire entails or calls for a recorded spectacle that can create an enduringly communicative body for larger publics. Immolators, it would seem, demand that we look, address us as voyeurs; we are obligated somehow to give them ongoing life. But in the intensifying global marketplace of attention, immolators risk being reproduced as yet another figure of the “political grotesque” (Lempert and Silverstein 2012, 7). That is, the camera and the various audiences it promises are ever-present interlocutors, thereby never just recording the events but, in an inherently complicit process of mimesis and reframing, helping to *constitute and generate* them over time in potentially unexpected ways. From this angle, we can begin to appreciate that Tibetans' recourse to self-immolation as mass media is a tragically dialogic process, a spiral transgression—it is called forth by intensifying state-sponsored repression and dispossession, on the one hand, and by foreign and PRC state media spectacles, on the other. As such, the bodies of Tibetan immolators speak

to a highly discomfiting, indeed horrifying, necropolitics at the heart of Sino-Tibetan relations, the power and efficacy of violence and untimely death in the face of competing claims to Buddhist compassion or state-led humanitarianism.

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China's Olympic year (2007–2008) made clear the post-Mao dilemma facing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders who presided over an increasingly fractious populace. State leaders responded to widespread Tibetan unrest that spring with, on the one hand, mass media campaigns touting the lofty, even sacralized humanist ideals of state-led development and progress and, on the other, the less-touted, offstage use of old-style siege warfare in the form of de facto martial law out west (Makley 2014). As several observers have pointed out, the 2008 unrest and the rapid military response were enabled by the earlier extension of anti-Dalai Lama policies to eastern Tibetan regions (e.g., the Sino-Tibetan frontier zone in the western provinces outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region), the increasing militarization of those regions, and the opportunistic use of Sino-Tibetan tensions by local officials (Barnett 2012; Smith 2010).

In that context, the silence that descended on the region indicated not just the repression of individuals' voices but also Tibetan residents' horrified sense of disorientation, fragmentation, and immobility—the sudden loss of familiar genres of practice that for many had seemed to (re)vivify the region as Tibetan in the early post-Mao years. As patrolling squadrons of armed SWAT teams enforced curfews that spring, my cellphone went silent and Tibetan friends and neighbors retreated indoors. The one afternoon that a female friend, a low-level official in town, dared to visit me in my apartment, she told me everyone she knew was “extremely upset and confused.” Describing her anguish at witnessing monks and lay friends being brutally arrested after demonstrations, she said that her “heart hurt” (*sems khu gi*). Then, lowering her voice to a whisper, she lamented that this was the worst state repression she had ever experienced: “This is a bad year, a very bad year,” she concluded.

In Tibetan communities, where persons and bodies are often experienced as precariously open to the polluting influence of human and nonhuman others, as well as to the capricious or unknown forces of karma, misfortune, and luck, death can pertain not only to human individuals but also to the collectivities and nonhuman beings to which they are inextricably linked. In effect, the 2008 crack-down and, importantly, the specter of the disappeared bodies of protesters killed or detained by security forces (rumors of which circulated in anguished whispers

throughout the Tibetan community where I lived), extended the state of siege from its previously quasi-hidden status (the occasional unwise dissident) to the everyday lives of all.<sup>3</sup> Tibetans in those eastern regions had not seen such a military crackdown since 1958. In ways similar to what Das (2007) found in post-Partition India, this process threatened to tear apart the delicate sociomoral fabric of Tibetans' lives, rewoven after the largely unacknowledged mass trauma of the Maoist years (1950s–1970s) in those regions.

That is, state efforts to erase the deaths of protesters in 2008 in fact helped unleash the specter of the Maoist dead, raising again moral questions about painful complicities that haunted all Tibetan elders and their kin, especially those who had politically or economically benefited from Chinese state intervention. I found that many of my Tibetan friends experienced this sudden loss of context as horror and grief in the face of a kind of social death, the deeply polluting return of the untimely and unnurtured dead: “You know they shot and killed many monks in Lhasa,” said a village man, repeating the oft-cited rumors. He and his wife had just been telling me of their son’s arrest earlier that spring, and then of the brutal beatings and arrests of monk demonstrators in town. “But you won’t see their bodies, or their crying families, on TV! Now they’re cracking down on us Tibetans again, and we have no recourse!”

In Tibetan Buddhist communities, the deceased remain precariously social persons, embarked on potentially terrifying journeys of transmigration to future lives. Funeral practices, presided over by Buddhist monks in a time-sensitive process (forty-nine days after death), work to both purify the deceased of karmic sins and usher their consciousnesses away from their current bodies and houses, thereby purifying those left behind as well. Crucially, in contrast to the horrifying asocial life of the misfortunate, untimely dead (who risk falling into low rebirths or returning as zombies or pathetic hungry ghosts), Buddhist funeral rites model the good, *chosen* death and transmigration of an enlightened lama, who leaves his body as a final gift to hungry demons or animals. Indeed, it is the charismatic lama’s supposed conquest of death that grounds his capacity for “compassionate violence” in tantric rituals (Mills 2003; Dalton 2011; Lempert 2012), his ability to both purify persons and places and enhance their vitality through the ritualized taming or sacrificial killing of demons (figured nonetheless as their liberation). Thus unlike in state-mandated Maoist funerals, for Tibetans, cremation in particular marks not mere biological cessation but a purified offering traditionally reserved for bodies vacated by high lamas.

Hence the turn, in the spring and summer of 2008 throughout Tibetan regions of the PRC, to grassroots mass mourning practices (avoiding celebrations in favor of monastic offerings, mass prayer assemblies with thousands of lay attendees). Those practices in turn elevated and politicized the role of Buddhist monks and lamas as *death specialists* above all. In the context of widespread laments about the loss of authentic monks and lamas since the Maoist years, such a role represented for many Tibetans a significant boost to the status of the monastic community.

Furthermore, the massive natural disasters of the Sichuan earthquake in the spring of 2008 (an estimated 90,000 dead or missing) and, in the spring of 2010, the earthquake in the largely Tibetan region of Yushu in Qinghai Province (at least 3,000 killed, more than 12,000 injured), unleashed competing theodicies as residents and netizens alike read those disasters as signs of inauspicious rule or, by contrast, touted PRC state leaders' and military troops' humanitarian response. In Yushu, hundreds of Tibetan monks in fact acted as the first responders to the earthquake, and local monasteries doubled as morgues. In the days after the quake, monks held mass cremation ceremonies for thousands of Tibetan dead, assembling on the hills above the flames to chant prayers accompanied by grieving laity from throughout the prefecture. Footage and images of those events, circulated via social media and cellphones among Tibetans in and outside the PRC, stood in stunning contrast to the state media coverage of nationally mandated mourning there a few days later, in which monks, now ordered to leave the quake site, rarely appeared.

Elsewhere, I have argued that those events in Yushu, just two years after the crackdown on Tibetan unrest, marked the first time since the CCP takeover that Tibetan collective grief had been so graphically and publicly displayed (Makley 2014). Here, I note that they also set the stage for *scaling up* the ritual genre of Buddhist cremation, transforming it into a mass practice nurturing (and sacralizing) the ordinary untimely dead (vs. just high lamas). In this light, we would have to see Tibetan monks' and lamas' turn to self-immolation-by-fire after 2009 not as a radical departure, but as a tragic extension and intensification of the political lives of dead bodies in those regions.

Tapey and Phuntshok, the first monk immolators in 2009 and 2011 in Ngaba, were protesting in part the erasure of violence and death there in 2008, when at least ten Tibetan monk and lay demonstrators were shot to death by security forces after protesting the detention of monks a few days earlier (Smith 2010). And Phuntshok, the first to die, staged his immolation on March 16, three years



Figure 3. Monks preside over the mass cremation and prayers for those who died in the Yushu earthquake, April 20, 2010. Photo from *People's Daily Online*, April 27, 2010. <http://en.people.cn/6964930.html>, accessed April 30, 2010.

to the day after those 2008 protesters had reportedly been killed. Not coincidentally, the 2008 killings in Ngaba were infamously documented with graphic photos of bullet-ridden corpses laid out in Kirti monastery that were sent to foreign media—in the ongoing propaganda war between Chinese state officials and the Tibetan government in exile, Western media observers have long held the position of superaddressees, the all-important, supposedly neutral third-party witness (Barnett 2010; Fassin 2011). In a similar fashion, as the crackdown intensified throughout the plateau and all public gatherings were banned, self-immolation emerged as a new genre of protest in a mass-mediated process that serially reframes and scales up the specter of untimely Tibetan death, from particular regions fragmented by the 2008 siege to a pan-Tibetan politics of mourning now encompassing the entire diaspora.

From this perspective, then, no single immolation can be understood as an isolated act; each one's meanings and efficacies, and the agencies of immolators, is reframed and contested over time. Foreign and Tibetan exile media, partly in response to PRC state media silence, have played constitutive roles in this process by enumerating and serializing all immolations in elaborate lists, time lines, and maps. Not unlike the medieval Chinese Buddhist biographies of exemplary self-

immolating monks discussed by James Benn (2007, 2012), such media, in concert with memorial services and protests abroad, work to unite and entextualize the immolators in an unfolding story of Tibetan heroism, despite their actual heterogeneity. Meanwhile, subsequent immolators in the PRC and the rites and protests that accompany them have been increasingly shaped by the templates of previous events, such that immolators and mourners return to sites of previous immolations and funeral grounds, or choose dates commemorating others.

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This context then helps explain why escalating contests over the disposition and display of dead bodies have proven central in Sino-Tibetan politics, since 2008 especially. Indeed, by late 2012, new central directives explicitly criminalized self-immolation-related acts, in effect codifying (extrajudicially) local disciplinary practices already widely in use, such as banning mourning practices or public support for deceased or missing immolators and their families (TCHRD 2013).



Figure 4. “Concerning the Thirteen Criminal Behaviors that Have the Quality of Tibetan Separatism.” Poster in a Tibetan primary school listing new regulations criminalizing self-immolation protest and any support for protesters or their families, including Buddhist funerals. Qinghai Province, summer 2013. Photo by Charlene Makley.

Returning to Phuntshok, then, we can better grasp in this light the unresolved nature of his persona and agency, as well as of some of the messages attributed to him. As for all such protesters in the PRC, the implications of his life and death are exceedingly complex; in this short space I could never do him justice. Indeed, it would be impossible to recover the real Phuntshok from afar and under the extreme limitations of the PRC state media blackout in those regions. Here, I want to consider only a few main aspects of the ways he was taken up and interpreted by competing media as a way to underscore the stakes of untimely death in Tibetan regions.

The sociopolitical life of Phuntshok after his self-immolation is particularly fraught because, as the first Tibetan immolator in the PRC to die (though not immediately), his protest led to the first major, highly public, and ritualized contests over the disposition and display of his body, contests that would set a template for many to come. Further, in the already tense region of Ngaba, Phuntshok's immolation triggered further mass demonstrations in town and yet another siege, as troops were rapidly deployed, Kirti monastery blockaded, monk friends and Phuntshok's family investigated, and monks subjected to raids and what the state called "legal education." That in turn generated the spiral transgression of further self-immolations, such that Ngaba became the center of waves of such protests spreading to other Tibetan regions (as of 2015, 45 of a total 141 occurred in the larger Ngaba Prefecture).

Such an extreme state of siege, in which state narratives dominate all public speech, sheds light on the semiotic and pragmatic specificities of Phuntshok's (and Tapey's before him) recourse to flaming bodies as mass media. Phuntshok surely wanted to communicate something publicly—by which embodied signs in the absence of access to authorized words? In such contexts, which deaths are *not* shown and how might such public, hypervisible deaths by contrast come to speak of the invisible ones (Das 2007)? Crucially complicating matters was that no photos or film of Phuntshok's actual protest surfaced, only a couple photos of him alive and well (apparently sent to Tibetan exile groups *before* his self-immolation) and short videos and a few photos of his dying and dead body just after. Further, unlike other subsequent immolators, Phuntshok used no written texts or signs during his protest and left no written or recorded last words.<sup>4</sup>

The subsequent contests over his body and messages revolved around competing yet mutually constituting claims about the nature of sovereign agency (absolutely individual or problematically social) and cremation (the voluntary offering of a Buddhist transmigrator or the biological extinction of a citizen). Self-

immolation-by-fire, after all, does not necessarily resolve the status of the protester's body. What happens if the flames are thwarted? And the remains of the deceased must still be managed, which often involves a *second* cremation, either under Buddhist or secular state auspices. Ultimately, opponents' responses to these dilemmas also constituted efforts to create opposing affective publics. That is, they sought to define and fix the relevant communicative genre to which the immolations belong, and thereby to delineate the nature and political agencies of the subjects they addressed.

In the case of Phuntshok, these issues proved particularly important because Tapey two years earlier had lived; his self-immolation had been thwarted by police, and he ended up recovering in the hospital. He appears scarred but alive and speaking in the 2012 CCTV documentary (produced for foreign audiences in English), in which the narrator claims that Tapey had been "saved" by quick-thinking Tibetan police and Chinese doctors.<sup>5</sup> The terrible dilemma for witnesses and commentators, felt so strongly in Buddhist communities especially and handily exploited by state media appropriating the terms of global humanitarian discourse, is that no one can be seen to explicitly desire the death of another. Indeed, in many of the immolation events, Tibetan bystanders also tried hard to put out the flames, in several instances burning themselves doing so.

Thus, as many observers have pointed out, much of the media among Tibetans (both in and outside the PRC) and their foreign supporters has focused on the absolutely sovereign, individual agency of immolators as *speakers* above all, a Tibetan version of the liberal political subject. The youth and monastic context of the initial immolators like Phuntshok aided in this, since monks and nuns ideally renounce worldly social relations to embark more fully on an individual path to enlightenment.<sup>6</sup> The Buddhist focus on the importance of individual (mental) intention over the specifics of a particular act (including violence) is also important in these arguments (Cabezón 2013). Thus, for example, Phuntshok *did* speak after his death. Monk friends reported to foreign media a few cryptic spoken lines they attributed to Phuntshok that suggest he planned and anticipated his death as a form of mass media, addressed to an audience far beyond the PRC: "I can't go on bearing the pain in my heart, I'll show the people of the world a sign on March 16, 2011." Here then, the reported speech act retroactively entextualizes the nonverbal signs of the immolation, framing it as addressed to a universalized, international public.

But to understand the ways in which self-immolation-by-fire emerged as a performance genre over time, we also need to pay attention to the semiotic and

pragmatic specificity of flames as a Tibetan Buddhist icon and ritual implement, on the one hand, and as an intersubjective aesthetics of bodily pain and suffering, on the other. Indeed, Western and Chinese observers, more than they sometimes imagine, can be mere bystanders to the closer dialogue (mediated by the figure of the Dalai Lama) between Tibetans in the PRC and those in the diaspora. As James Benn, Françoise Robin, and others have argued, in those circles, Buddhist idioms supportive of self-immolation as an individual act do not frame it as suicide, or in Chinese terms, *zisha* (literally, self-murder), a concept that implies an external sovereign judge of a crime. In the contemporary PRC, that term entails a modern biopolitical state, one charged with the sovereign right and humanitarian duty to enhance and protect the biological lives of its citizens (Foucault 1990).

By contrast, Tibetan immolators and netizens increasingly took up Buddhist notions of the gift and the lama's or bodhisattva's enlightened conquest of death to interpret self-immolation in terms of the ritual genre of an altruistic offering or sacrifice (in Tibetan, *mchod pa*, 'bul ba). For example, as more monks self-immolated in the months after Phuntshok's act, the exiled Tibetan singer Tashi Tsering posted a song-prayer online that begins with Phuntshok's image behind burning butter lamps. "Our heroes and heroines," he mournfully sings, "by upholding Tibetans' heartfelt pride, offered lamps of their precious bodies." And several months later, Sobha Rinpoche, the forty-two-year-old Buddhist lama who self-immolated by fire in Qinghai Province, took up the notion of sacrifice in his famous audio testament: "I am giving away my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness." In this sense, immolators' bodies came to metonymically stand for both butter lamps (*mar me*), iconic of the purifying force/light of the Buddha dharma offered to sentient beings, and for enlightenment itself: theirs is an act of auto-cremation, the heroic chosen death of the lama as bodhisattva. In this, as Benn (2012, 211) argues, Tibetan immolators and their diasporic interlocutors took up centuries-old Mahayana Buddhist notions of offering that figured bodily sacrifice not as a form of self-harm or asceticism but as a positive or performative gift of therapeutic or apotropaic protection against misfortune and disaster.

But the gift of auto-cremation also entails an aesthetics of bodily pain specific to flaming skin. The morality and heroism of the act for a wide variety of observers of the Tibetan immolations lay in the supposedly self-evident courage and bodily self-control to communicate while burning; witnesses are supposed to both lean in and recoil in horror by imagining the sensation on their own skin. Here, the array of nonverbal signs suggesting universal sensory experience allows for a

bridging of Western and Tibetan publics: the rational liberal subject meets the affective spectator. For example, after warning viewers of the disturbing images to come, the narrator at the beginning of the Voice of America 2013 documentary states unequivocally that self-immolation is “one of the most terrifying and painful ways to die.”

Such observers imply a relationship between word and deed that strongly resonates with a long tradition among Tibetans of taking blood-oaths before battles (Barnett 2012). That is, the perceived pain and certain death associated with immolation by fire supposedly seals the absolute sincerity of the message (Mazzarella 2015). In the climate of post-Mao disillusionment with public speech amid widespread anger at dissimulation and corruption (including that of venal Buddhist lamas) under state repression in the PRC, flaming bodies are supposed to stand apart as individual testaments to the truth. As the exiled Tibetan commentator Dhundup Gyalpo (2011) put it, emphasizing righteous speech above all: “To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. There is nothing more painful than burning oneself. To say something while experiencing this kind of pain is to say it with the utmost of courage, frankness, determination and sincerity.” Immolators’ main goal, he goes on to say, is not to die, but to express that individual “will and determination.”

This aesthetics of voluntary pain and verbal determination in fact links Tibetans to other self-immolators in the PRC,<sup>7</sup> but supportive commentary about Tibetan auto-cremators joins the pain of burning to the sovereign agency of a bodhisattva as a type of heroic nationalist subject.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in a 2011 poem called “Mourning,” which initiated a spate of such commentary among Tibetans in the PRC (Robin 2012; Dechen Pemba 2012), the well-known Tibetan blogger Sangdhor transposes a monk’s prayerful sermon into slow-motion fire: “The flaming mouth moves. The flaming hand flourishes. The flaming chest lights up. And flaming prayer beads, one by one, scatter on the ground.” In the process, the agency of ordinary young monastics and lay immolators, along with that of their purported addressees as kinds of publics, comes to be scaled up and specified. Hence many subsequent immolators in their last words styled themselves, like lamas, as Buddhist models and teachers, framing their performances in the traditional genre of moral teachings (*legs bshad*) offered to all Tibetans: “To ensure the Dalai Lama’s return to Tibet,” urged Rikyo in 2012, a thirty-three-year-old laywoman immolator who left a short, partially misspelled handwritten note: “Practice Tibetan customs purely. Don’t cause conflict among your relatives. Speak Tibetan. Don’t steal. Don’t fight.” Thus, as the series of immolations

unfolded, their most important superaddressee was not the Chinese state, Western media, or even Tibetans in exile, but an emerging public of Tibetan mourners in the PRC. The main road in Ngaba County town where Tapey and Phuntshok first self-immolated, for example, came to be called “Heroes’ Road” (*dpa’ bo’i lam*) by Tibetan residents. Later, whole counties where spates of immolations had occurred were called “Heroes’ Counties.”

As an intensified form of necropolitics, then, Tibetans’ auto-cremations were not a singular media genre, but a meta-genre of performance that incorporated aspects of multiple media forms addressing multiple potential publics. That in turn allowed for a variety of (mis)interpretations. For example, as [Michael Biggs \(2012, 146\)](#) points out, unlike the older Vietnamese Buddhist monks who self-immolated in quiet meditation in the 1960s, most of the Tibetan immolators have been very young, and many of them flailed their limbs and even screamed while burning. Yet over time, many observers in and outside the PRC began to assess immolators’ bodies in terms of the seemingly superhuman self-control they displayed while burning, counting the multiple steps they took (as in the RFA article headline “burning monk walks 300 steps” [[Ponnudurai 2012](#)]), or extolling their ability to hold their hands in prayer ([Woeser 2014](#)). Some of the most circulated images are those of immolators who stood (or seem to stand) perfectly still (as in the video of the nun Palden Choetso, who stands in flame as a young laywoman throws an offering scarf toward her—the clip is the logo for the Voice of America documentary) ([Sangster 2012](#)).

Finally, as the series of auto-cremations unfolded, flames were taken to literally frame and cordon off the sovereign nationalist subject as state security forces organized to thwart and save immolators. In many cases, both eyewitnesses and commentators spoke of how powerful and virulent the flames were, which kept any would-be rescuers at bay—like the flaming prayer beads in Sangdhor’s poem above, the flames act uncannily to extend the superhuman agency of the immolator. Indeed, many immolators went to great lengths to keep their bodies from state forces, even wrapping themselves in barbed wire to avoid being grabbed and extinguished. Not surprisingly, stylized flames are now key framing devices for heroic personas portrayed in Tibetan exile posters and memorials, as well as in Tibetan dissident poetry and music online ([Robin 2012](#); [Sangster 2012](#)). An image of Phuntshok, for example, alive and smiling and surrounded by stylized flames on a poster at a Tibetan exile protest captions him as Phuntshok, hero for Tibetan independence (*rang btsan dpa’ bo phun tshogs*).



Figure 5. Recirculating and voicing Phuntshok abroad. Dharamsala, 2011. Photo by Lhaksam, <http://lhaksam.com/did-you-see-any-difference-after-self-immolation-our-communities-became-more-active-than-before/>, accessed February 1, 2012.

But as one of the very first immolators, Phuntshok presented particular problems for assessing his agency and messages. The array of competing and unclear evidence around his protest in fact raised the moral specter of the social and intersubjective nature of self-immolation in claims about violence and sovereign authority. That is, we would have to see the performance of lone immolation protests like Tapey's and Phuntshok's as an initial response to ongoing state crackdowns on mass gatherings in those regions. And both immolators and later Tibetan dissident and exile media had to counter pervasive Chinese state media claims, backed by local investigations and arrests of protest supporters, about a conspiracy masterminded by the "Dalai Clique" to manipulate innocent Tibetans in the PRC. In those state narratives, which found new precedents in the rhetoric of recent policies designed to combat "evil cults" (in Chinese, *xiejiao*; quintessentially, the Falun Gong), Tibetan protesters' messages were not their own, but those of a cunning separatist society based in exile and led by the duplicitous Dalai Lama. The relevant genre here was supposedly terrorist manipulation, an ultimatum delivered via murder.

Yet from the perspective I develop here, we would have to take all the immolation events and their evolving meanings and efficacies as in fact inherently

social. Indeed, after Phuntshok's protest, immolators increasingly turned to collective performances. Many immolated in pairs or as trios (some doing so after taking vows to be "sworn brothers"), including Phuntshok's own young monk cousin, who self-immolated with another young monk just six months later. And most immolations called forth new mass gatherings both at the event and after. But more fundamentally, all immolators are ensconced in networks of kin, monastic and school peers, and friends who grieve the loss acutely, or come under state scrutiny as potential supporters. That reality would seem to belie the Tibetan exile commentator [Dhundup Gyalpo's \(2011\)](#) unequivocal statement that, unlike even boycott protests that impose economic harm on others, "self-immolation . . . exacts no apparent cost on anyone but the individual." A young Tibetan man in Qinghai Province, interviewed by an American reporter for CBS News in 2012, offers one kind of response: "Many Tibetans in exile have never been to [my hometown]. They don't understand what is going on with us. Every time someone self-immolates, they put them in the news, or they call them heroes and patriots, shout in the sky and make inspirational speeches in a way that encourages more people to immolate. They don't think of the family they may have left behind in Tibet and the real pain we are going through" ([van Sant 2012](#)).

The particularly ambiguous nature of Phuntshok's self-immolation set the stage for high-stakes battles over immolators' bodies. Arguably, in those uncertain times, before orienting genres of practice had emerged for such events, security forces and eyewitnesses alike did not know how to respond. Self-immolation by fire in those regions in fact collapsed the Janus faces of the biopolitical state in one event—military response to open protest and humanitarian response to injured citizens. Some witnesses and later commentators claimed that security forces in fact beat Phuntsok after they had extinguished the flames, spurring monks to intervene and take his body. The immediate protests then followed the template set down in 2008: gatherings of monks and lay people ended in police beatings and arrests, in this case reportedly resulting in the further deaths of two lay Tibetans beaten by police. Yet the only footage that has surfaced, aired in both the CCTV documentary and the opposing documentary by Voice of America, shows security forces using extinguishers to put out the flames.

For their part, local authorities and then CCTV and other state media made Phuntshok's case emblematic of all self-immolations, not as a suicide protest or sacrifice, but ultimately as intentional homicides, the crimes of others to be adjudicated by the biopolitical state. The 2012 CCTV documentary in fact begins



Figure 6. Photo of Phuntshok after his self-immolation, used in the beginning of the Chinese Central Television documentary, “Facts about Self-Immolations in Tibetan Areas of Ngapa.” Screenshot of YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ID1hI528-hA>, accessed July 1, 2015.

with a still photo of Phuntshok, covered with extinguisher dust, lying alone and isolated in the street after his immolation. The bystanders, frozen in place by the medium of the photo, seem to impassively keep their distance. He is thus framed there as a radically decontextualized, innocent victim, a silent naif in need of only the state’s humanitarian care. As that kind of figure, Phuntshok is supposed to enable the documentary’s efforts to recruit viewers to literally “see” like the humanitarian state (Scott 1999), thereby turning the lens away from the constitutive role of legal and extrajudicial state violence and onto other (immoral) camera users. In fact, the filmmakers highlight the camera lens with the digital device of the dubbed sound of a shutter click and a simulated shutter closing over stills of Phuntshok’s body. That simulated lens is supposed to stand not for the disciplinary eye of the state, however, but for the manipulative media of Tibetan collaborators.

There is a deeply troubling truth to the state media narratives about the fundamentally social nature of self-immolation emblemized in Phuntshok’s case—evidence suggests he did plan it with several young monk friends (one of whom was supposed to self-immolate with him, but stopped after swallowing gasoline), and another friend sent the photos of him alive to Tibetans in exile before his protest, which were then taken up and circulated widely in oppositional

media abroad, as well as at subsequent prayer rituals for him presided over by the Dalai Lama. But before his burned body became the object of contestation, Phuntshok and his monk friends were arguably most interested in decontextualizing his body and persona for different reasons than those of the CCTV filmmakers. To oppose state rhetoric of manipulation after Tapey's failed immolation, I would say, they sought first and foremost to "stage choice" (Lempert 2012), providing photos of a living Phuntshok posed alone, in one, smiling and actively engaging the viewer, in the other, looking off camera in silent introspection—that living, self-determined persona is supposed to span the event.

Ultimately, the CCTV documentary cannot erase the disciplinary eye of the state. It relies in fact on surveillance media installed on buildings throughout Ngaba town in the aftermath of the 2008 protests. As the film's footage of subsequent immolations in those streets attests, many protests are performed for those cameras, drawing immolators to those spaces. And as it builds its case against Tibetan collaborators, the film highlights the state media technology used to surveil and investigate (filmed prison interrogations, street footage, police photos), all the while attempting to keep the disciplinary state offstage by focusing on brokenhearted relatives, as well as kindly Tibetan policemen and Chinese doctors in the hospital attempting to save Phuntshok (from others). Indeed, no mention is made of any of Phuntshok's own utterances. Instead, other people are recruited to stand in for Phuntshok and speak for and about him, including Tapey himself (scarred and regretful), Phuntshok's father (he was naive and easily misled), and the monk friend who was too afraid to go through with it ("I wasn't serious, no normal person would have been"). In that context, visual signs threaten to fall out of alignment with the voice-over narration that attempts to recruit Western viewers as humanitarian spectators: the photo of Phuntshok's isolated, charred body can come across not as an innocent to be embraced but as the emblematically "bare life" of the criminal (Agamben 1998).

Returning to the video footage of Phuntshok that opened this article, this perspective then illuminates the stakes of its competing uses in PRC state and foreign media. As the CCTV documentary claims, it was filmed by a monk friend and sent to Tibetan exiles via social media a few days later. The CCTV documentary thus uses it, soundless except for the narrator's voice-over, to highlight and exploit the terrible fact of a bystander taking the time to film a gravely wounded and dying person instead of tending to his injuries. The subsequent contests over Phuntshok's body therefore hinged on the timing of his access to the hospital, figured as a site of biopolitical succor. In the legal cases brought

against the monks who took his body back to the monastery (they were en route when the video was recorded), they are charged with intentional homicide *because* they delayed taking him to the hospital.

Yet as monks later reportedly pointed out to foreign media, Chinese hospitals make for particularly dangerous sites for protesters, in that Tibetan protesters are routinely beaten and tortured in prisons rather than taken to hospitals (Smith 2010), and doctors will often not accept wounded protesters without the knowledge and permission of security officials. The fear of state violence perhaps explains the forensic impulse of the Tibetan monk who filmed Phuntshok after his immolation—perhaps the camera traces his body in part to show the red welts from the alleged police beatings. That is indeed how the 2013 Voice of America documentary uses the footage, this time to a sound track of tragic cello music. That film edits it in under the voice-over narration, timing the close-up of apparent wounds on Phuntshok's cheek with the claim that security forces beat him: "He died soon after of his injuries." Here, we are also to see Phuntshok as a biopolitical subject, only from a competing source of humanitarian (and technological) authority. Both videos in fact attempt to address and create an international humanitarian public, but for CCTV, Phuntshok is the mouthpiece of a corrupt society, while for the Voice of America, he is a sovereign, liberal protester.

Questions inevitably remain. Were the monks attempting to save Phuntshok's life or safeguard his sacrifice (by allowing him to die)? Which injuries, in fact, killed him? His monk protectors did ultimately take Phuntshok to the hospital, where he died in the wee hours of that morning. But the hospital was also the key place where the status of Phuntshok's body as object or subject was radically in question. His body was not turned over to his anxiously awaiting family throughout the following day, reportedly because local authorities, fearful of its potential for a sociopolitical life beyond death, would not release it until a certain visiting superior official had left town (Kalsang Rinchen 2011).

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To conclude, in this article I have drawn on anthropologists rethinking governance, state violence, and subjectivity to argue for a performative approach to understanding Tibetan self-immolation as a new and deeply contested genre of mass media. I cannot write this from a safely objective position. Instead, grasping the sociopolitical lives of dead bodies in the PRC requires all observers to acknowledge their implication in the inherently intersubjective (and thus changing) meaning and efficacy of untimely death under state repression. In this light,

Tibetan immolators like Phuntshok are neither lone, completely self-sovereign individuals (autonomous protesters) nor inert objects (manipulated victims or dead remains). Instead, in a necropolitics particular to Sino-Tibetan relations set in motion by state violence, immolators are shifting sociopolitical subjects whose messages and agencies extend and scale up far beyond their deaths.

Indeed, the spiraling transgressions of military crackdowns and Tibetan protest beginning in 2008 have generated new (and renewed) forms of pan-Tibetan publics in and outside the PRC, tightening social media networks among Tibetans and foregrounding again the divine prowess and transcendent life of the Dalai Lama. That is arguably the social world and space-time in which Phuntshok took on new life in flames. Witnesses and reporters later said that while burning he had shouted, “may His Holiness the Dalai Lama live for 10,000 years!” In this, his protest came across as indeed a sacrifice, a mass-mediated message via death in exchange for the life of the Buddhist sovereign. As such, his death and subsequent Buddhist cremation worked to apotheosize Phuntshok as himself a bodhisattva, a heroic conqueror of death. In the video of him in the car, he sits motionless, back straight, his face composed and seemingly devoid of affect, uncannily resembling the seated Sakyamuni Buddha triumphing over the armies of the death demon Mara. And his cremation ceremony, the first such Tibetan mass cremation since the Yushu earthquake a year earlier, seemed to take anxious security officials by surprise. But in Ngaba, Phuntshok’s lone funeral pyre, burning before a large *thanka* (mural) depicting Buddhas and the mantra Om Mani Padme Hum, now put a monk-bodhisattva in the place of the ordinary untimely dead. As the monk assembly chanted the texts to clear his way, and crying laity chanted prayers for the Dalai Lama’s protection, the ceremony worked to complete what Phuntshok’s auto-cremation had promised.

The apotheosis of Phuntshok helped make Buddhist cremation-as-enlightenment the most important orienting meta-genre for Tibetan self-immolation practice, as well as its most relevant public, Tibetan mourners in the PRC: “Facing unimaginable pain to voice support for all suffering people,” asserts the Tibetan dissident [Woeser \(2014, 29\)](#), blogging from Beijing, “while at the same time maintaining one’s sense of dignity within a dehumanizing political environment, a Nirvana-like self-sublimation is attained through the act of self-immolation.” Indeed, in contrast to the propensity of both Chinese state media and many Western and Tibetan exile observers to reproduce and circulate abroad graphic images of immolators’ charred and burning bodies, bereft and isolated in public spaces, over time Tibetan eyewitnesses and mourners in the PRC seemed to be

more interested in producing and circulating portraits of the corpses shrouded in scarves, crowned by photos of the Dalai Lama, and enthroned on altars, as themselves objects of worship.

As Woesser's comment above suggests, the specific nexus of liberal, humanitarian, and Buddhist notions of political subjectivity in Tibetan self-immolation practice allows protesters and commentators to pivot among multiple superaddressees, but therein also lies the danger of a tragically constitutive form of mass mediation.<sup>9</sup> That is, as inherently non-neutral witnesses, we have to carefully consider our own intoxicating horror for the "necroaesthetics" (Yurchak 2008) of Tibetan self-immolations, and thereby our own potential roles in helping to generate them. In Sino-Tibetan necropolitics, Chinese state violence and transnational media spectacle together call forth newly transcendent Buddhas, whose divine agency can come to the aid of competing political projects. But in taking them up abroad, we could well lose sight of the specific nature and stakes of the grief of Tibetan communities in the PRC.

#### ABSTRACT

*Drawing on fieldwork between 2007–2013 in Amdo Tibetan regions in northwestern China, this article considers the unprecedented spate of self-immolation-by-fire protests among Tibetans in light of the military crackdown on Tibetan unrest beginning in 2008. The author takes a performative approach to Tibetan self-immolation protest as a new and deeply contested genre of mass media in the context of severe state repression. The author argues that such an approach accounts for the always unresolved yet socially and politically constitutive meaning and efficacy of dead bodies in a necropolitics particular to modern Sino-Tibetan relations. [China; Tibet; Buddhism; state violence; protest; death; media; spectacle; performativity; affect; liberalism; necropolitics; humanitarianism]*

#### NOTES

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1. Historically, *immolation* meant any act of sacrificing a living being. I thus use the term *self-immolation* as a general term and specify when it is by fire. Since the phrase *suicide protest* does not necessarily address protesters' own notions of personhood and death, I use it only sparingly.
2. A total of twenty-two were reported killed in the 2008 Lhasa unrest, eighteen of whom were Han Chinese, many trapped in burning buildings ([International Campaign for Tibet 2008](#); [Barnett 2009](#); [Smith 2010](#); [Human Rights Watch 2010](#)). The vast majority of Tibetan protests that year, however, were peaceful.
3. State media never acknowledged security forces' use of deadly force against Tibetan protesters during the 2008 unrest. Foreign observers counted at least 140 Tibetans dead, and Tibetans I knew there were convinced that hundreds, even thousands of Tibetans had been killed and secretly disposed of. See [Human Rights Watch 2010](#).
4. By fall 2014, at least forty-nine immolators had left written, verbal, or recorded last words. Those, along with shouted slogans and placards held by immolators, have been the object of intense scrutiny in foreign and dissident media ([Woeser 2012, 2014](#); [Wang 2012](#); [Barnett 2012](#)).
5. The Tibetan blogger [Woeser \(2014\)](#), in her recent book on the immolations, states that Tapey's whereabouts since his appearance in the documentary are unknown.
6. As the wave of immolations unfolded, however, the majority of immolators were young lay people.
7. Forms of self-immolation protest in general, and self-immolation-by-fire in particular, have been on the rise in the PRC in recent decades ([Biggs 2012](#)).
8. Yet it has not been entirely clear what that entailed about claims for an independent Tibetan state. Tibetans in the PRC and throughout the diaspora are not necessarily united on that point.
9. In recent years, several high lamas (not the Dalai Lama) and prominent Tibetan intellectuals (including [Woeser](#)) have publicly called on Tibetans to stop self-immolating, to no avail.

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