Asian Ethnicity, 2013
Vol. 14, No. 3, 376–380, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2013.784509

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

REFLECTION

Ethnic, sectarian, or localized grievances? On Wang Lixiong's analysis of Tibetan self-immolation

Yan Sun*

Department of Political Science, CUNY Queens College, City University of New York, Queens, NY 11367, USA

Since its first occurrence in 2009, the total number of Tibetan self-immolations had reached 97 by the end of 2012, with an additional 10 or so in the first three months of 2013. However, our understanding of this shocking act remains limited. Why did those Tibetans resort to such an extreme form of protest? What were their motives? What were their grievances? What objectives did they intend to achieve? Wang Lixiong, a dissident Chinese scholar-writer and respected authority on Tibetan affairs, attempts to answer these questions by analyzing the last words of more than two dozen self-immolators who had left final notes.[1] His data are derived from information collected by his Tibetan wife, Woeser, who is also a dissident writer. Below I will introduce Wang's major findings and evaluate them in the light of two competing perspectives.

First and foremost, Wang Lixiong's data refute three commonly held assumptions about the Tibetan self-immolators. One assumption, popular among Tibetan exiles and even claimed by exile leaders, is that self-immolation arises out of Tibetans' desperation at their unbearable state of being. In Wang's data, 19% of the self-immolators (five people) expressed such sentiments, a significant but relatively low percentage among the seven motives he categorizes. The second assumption, common among Tibetan exiles as well as Chinese analysts, is that self-immolation is aimed at drawing international attention to the Tibetan issue. However, in Wang's sample, just 4% (one person) expressed this view, which was by far the lowest percentage among his seven categorized motives. Moreover, this sole person was an online writer, namely a rare intellectual among the Tibetan self-immolators in China. By contrast, Wang reports, the two self-immolators outside China, i.e. from the Tibetan exile community, repeatedly called for international attention in their last words. Here Wang sees an important divergence between the Tibetans in exile and those at home: the former group seeks international support as a matter of its main political strategy, while the latter group does not rest its hope on the international community. The third assumption, common among Tibetan exiles, is that the self-immolators sought the political goal of Tibetan independence. In Wang's data, 19% (five people) articulated this objective in direct or indirect ways, again a relatively low percentage among his seven categories of motives.

What did the self-immolators seek to express then? The top three motives from Wang's sample include 'self-immolation as an action' (14 people or 54%), 'offering oneself to the Dalai Lama' (10 people or 38%), and 'expression of courage and responsibility' (9 people or 35%). In Wang's analysis, the use of suicide 'as an action' conveys

*Email: ysun_cuny@yahoo.com

the self-immolators' wish to achieve some intended goals. This was attested by the concentration of such actions in just two months of 2012: March, a month with four memorial days for Tibetans and November, the month of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) 18th Congress. In particular, one lama's last words – 'unable to sit around and wait in vain' – offered a key to understanding self-immolation as an 'action,' because those words convey a sense of not knowing what else to do. The second major motive, 'offering oneself to the Dalai Lama,' is viewed by Wang as an act of religious sacrifice as well as implicit political protest. Incomprehensible to the non-religious, Wang sees this spirit of religious sacrifice as common among Tibetans, constituting a spiritual source of motivation for self-immolators. In light of Chinese authorities' constant pressure on monks and lamas to denounce the Dalai Lama and to keep distance from the exile community, 'offering oneself to the Dalai Lama' indeed embodies a highly meaningful form of political protest. However, Wang disagrees with Tibetan exiles that wishing for the Dalai Lama's return is equivalent to calling for Tibetan independence. Likewise, the third major motive, the 'expression of courage and responsibility,' conveys a valuable Tibetan spirit in Wang's view. It epitomizes the sense of Tibetan heroism and dignity, an extreme form of defiance in the face of an increasingly repressive atmosphere.

In addition, five people or 19% in Wang's data made political demands in their last words. These range from 'let the Dalai Lama return' and 'release the 11th Penchan Lama' to 'freedom for Tibet' and 'language freedom'. The ultimate message of self-immolation, Wang writes, is that Tibetans inside China have finally realized that the solution to the Tibetan issue depends on them, rather than on the exiles or the international community's pressure on China. For Wang, the Tibetan exiles have resorted to seeking international support as its main political strategy but have already exhausted it to the fullest extent. Given the stakes that western countries have in stable economic relations with China, it is no longer plausible to expect them to exert meaningful pressure on China, not that their pressure was ever useful. In this context, self-immolation emerges as an alternative strategy of not knowing what else to do, while also representing an awakening among Tibetans at home.

Wang's profiling is useful for understanding the stated motives of the individuals who set themselves on fire. Those individual motives, in so far as they differ from the usual rhetoric of Tibetan exiles, do undermine the Chinese state's core claim that the self-immolations were externally incited and thus illegitimate. The differentiation of the self-immolators' religious yearning (return of the Dalai Lama) from the political goal of independence further undermines the Chinese state's conflation of the religious and the political, lending legitimacy to the powerful expression of Tibetan religious and cultural identity through self-immolation. Indeed the overall explanation that emerges from Wang's analysis is the maturing of Tibetan ethno-nationalism at home, rendering home-grown Tibetans finally ready to take their destiny into their own hands.

However, Wang's point falls somewhat flat because he fails to answer a critical question: How representative are those self-immolators of the general Tibetan mood? In this regard, it is instructive to bring in two alternative explanations to highlight the limitations of Wang's analysis.

Tsering Shakya, a noted Tibetan scholar at University of British Columbia who left Tibet during the Cultural Revolution, argues that neither ethno-nationalism nor socio-economic disparities suffice to explain Tibetan mobilization in recent years. In particular, neither factor can account for the specific localities and religious sect of the incidents of self-immolation. Since the first self-immolation in 2009, the majority of its occurrences have been in or linked to the Ngawa region of western Sichuan and more specifically, the

Kīrti monastery. They have also taken place primarily among monasteries of the Gelugpa sect, which have been most involved in protests.[2] That is, self-immolation has been largely limited to western Sichuan and the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, rather than a widespread phenomenon across all Tibetan regions and religious sects. In other words, there is a locational factor and a sectarian factor in the surge of recent self-immolations.

Shakya attributes the locational factor to the greater religious freedom enjoyed by eastern Tibetan regions (Kham and Amdo). Until their conflict with the government over the selection of the Panchen Lama, monasteries here had been allowed to grow or to interact with exiled lamas without much restriction. Before the mid-1990s, 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 monasteries, including the chief lama of the Kīrti monastery, now the main site of self-immolations, who had been in exile in India since 1959 (Kīrti Rinpoche later served as a member of the exile government and as minister for religious affairs between April 1997 and March 1999). Monks and lamas here also enjoyed relative freedom to travel to India and study in exile monasteries, as reflected in the increasing percentage of China-born monks in Tibetan monasteries in India. In the exile branch of the Kīrti monastery in Dharmasala, 127 of its 150 monks are from Ngawa and just one is a Tibetan born in India. These monks naturally have close ties with their counterparts in Ngawa.[3] In addition, the more relaxed policies in Qinghai, Gansu, Yunnan, and Sichuan helped to shift the production of Tibetan cultural identity to the areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region and created a vibrant new fashioning of shared Tibetan culture, through such mediums as popular music, publications, and the new social media.[4]

Shakya attributes the sectarian factor to the deep tensions between the Gelugpa sect and the Chinese state. Because of the varying ideological foundation of Tibetan sects, the effects of the state's control over monasteries are felt differently. Unlike the less structured sects, the Gelugpa is hierarchical and focused more on monastic tradition, hence it is easier for the state to exert control over it. Gelugpa monasteries felt particular challenges from this control because of their historic role as the leading, established sect. The Kīrti monastery has not only been among the largest religious institutions in Tibetan regions but also the important center of political power in Ngawa. When the Chinese government urged the monks to endorse its chosen candidate as the new Panchen Lama, the Gelugpa monasteries had no option to dodge the issue like the non-Gelugpa sects and, thus, they faced a challenge to the heart of their sect. The sense of grievances and rage felt within the Gelugpa monasteries is thus more intimate and immediate. It reflects an acute sense of the loss of Gelugpa hegemony. The passing away of the older generation of lamas, combined with the state's pressure on lamas and monks to denounce the Dalai Lama or to distance themselves from religious communities in India, created protracted tensions for the Gelugpa monasteries.[5]

Like many western critics, Shakya faults the state's western development programs for exacerbating local conflict. Greater integration with the rest of China through 'transportation links' and increased state presence through developmental projects, he argues, have presented a threat to the local way of life, identity, and culture. In particular, the sedentarization of Tibetan nomads, 'in the guise of providing environmental protection for the Tibetan grasslands', has brought a host of socioeconomic problems, leaving Tibetans to view nomad resettlement as infringement of their traditional rights and undue government intervention. Shakya cites as support Andrew Fischer's recent analysis, which notes a correlation between the geographic spread of the Tibetan protests, incidents of self-immolation, and the program of resettlement.[6] Although none of the self-

immolators have come from these settlements, the geopolitical correlation is seen as the undoubted effect of social transformation on the level of apprehension among people in the area.[7] Significantly, Shakya concedes that although Tibetan grievances are based on ethno-nationalistic claims of a homeland, the Tibetan self-identification as *bod rigs* or 'Tibetan nationality' is rather recent and created by the Chinese authority itself. The CCP's classification of the people across the Tibetan plateau as a single *borig* provided fixity to 'Tibetanness', homogenizing it typologically. This fixity has now come to form the basis of contemporary Tibetan ethno-nationalism and concept of territoriality.[8]

A second competing view I find relevant to present here is from a Tibetan scholar at the China Tibetology Center in Beijing.[9] A native of the Kham area, he worked in a local office that received and resettled Tibetan exiles during the 1980s. While agreeing with Wang Lixiong's overall assessment of the self-immolators' motives, this Khampa scholar points out a critical neglect in Wang's analysis: the socioeconomic background of the self-immolators. The bulk of those who set themselves on fire, he notes, were the poorest, least educated, and lowest of the young monks in the monastic hierarchy. The implication is that this was a group vulnerable to manipulation. In response to my inquiry about this claim, Wang Lixiong confirmed that the majority of the dead were indeed young Tibetans: of the 92 self-immolators whose biographical data were available to him, 31% were under 19 years of age, 45% were between 20 and 30, 8% were between 30 and 40, 8% were between 40 and 50, and 5% were above 50 (email correspondence, 19 December 2012). This means that over two-thirds or 76% of the 92 self-immolators was below the age of 30, indeed an overwhelmingly young group. Wang also confirmed that all of the laymen who committed self-immolation had only attended the middle school, while the clergy among the dead received traditional monastic education. But Wang denies the inference that some self-immolators may have been motivated by monetary rewards for their families, citing one case where the extremely poor family of a self-immolator donated their son's reward money to a local school (email correspondence, 19 December 2012).

Like Shakya, the Khampa scholar highlights the localized nature of self-immolation. He notes that self-immolators had come from just four of the over 3600 monasteries in Tibetan regions. Unlike Shakya's emphasis on the sectarian roots of Gelugpa grievances, however, he has a class-based view of Gelugpa discontent: he sees it as the aching of the former monastic aristocracy for the return of the old political order. Some religious elites in Ngawa and Garze, he reports, have taken advantage of China's reopened negotiations with the exiles to spread word of their imminent return. Local commoners, fearing retribution in the event of a regime change, try to protect themselves by answering the call for non-cooperation with Beijing. In fact even the acts of self-immolation were often encouraged and assisted by some higher-level monks. 'Why do we not see the senior monks set themselves on fire? Why do we not see the Dalai Lama dissuade those poor youths from religious sacrifice?' he asks. The 'heroic acts' of the lowly monks are always videotaped, he says, and rescue is not allowed so as to achieve extreme shock effects on the local public and the outside world. There were even instances, he asserts, where 'the old tribal practice of lot drawing was used to pick potential self-immolators'. Decades earlier, the poor young monks would have been the natural allies of the CCP in Mao's social revolution, but now they have become the easy tools and allies of elites longing for the return of the repressive old order. I have no way of verifying the Khampa scholar's claims, but the social class view is certainly interesting and even plausible.

As for geographic dynamics, the Khampa scholar faults not increased state intervention but rather weakened state capacity in affected regions. Self-immolation has occurred mainly in northern Kham and southern Amdo, or 'three counties and seven villages'

(*sanxianqixiang*) at the junction of Sichuan, Qinghai, and Gansu provinces. These areas were traditionally 'anarchic' and plagued by intertribal strife, and their unruliness had incurred harsh suppression from the Muslim warlord Ma Bufang during the Republican era. In the post-Mao reform era, a relative neglect of those border regions has left them impoverished and marginalized – especially compared with the prosperous and well-integrated Tibetan regions of Yunnan, where no protest or self-immolation has occurred. It is precisely a weakening of the state, he argues, that has allowed 'old reactionary forces' to resurge and 'kidnap the will of the local majority'. Renewed attention to development and trade in these regions, he argues, has led to a contention of divergent interests among the locals, developers, and the state. But he sees such conflicts as an inevitable part of the developmental process rather than ethnicized battles to be politicized (email correspondence, 29 September 2011 and 25 December 2012).

Compared with the two competing explanations I outlined above, Wang Lixiong's analysis suffers from an oblivion to the larger geopolitical dynamics of self-immolation, the micro-level dynamics among individual self-immolators and the impact of the developmental upheaval. This lapse undercuts the pan-Tibetan theme essential to Wang's argument. These critiques are by no means intended to make light of his findings. After all, the mere occurrence of so many self-immolations says much about the failure of CCP's policy in the post-Mao era.

Notes

1. Wang, "Why do Tibetans Resort to Self-immolation?"
2. Shakya, "The Changing Language of Protest in Tibet," 24, 33–34.
3. Ibid., 29, 34, 36.
4. Ibid., 27.
5. Ibid., 28–29.
6. Fischer, "Politico-Religious Protest in Eastern Tibet".
7. Shakya,"The Changing Language of Protest in Tibet," 31–32.
8. Ibid., 24.
9. He wishes to be only identified as a "Khampa scholar" because he does not want his private views to be taken as the official line. The discussions here are based on conversations and email correspondence with him in 2011 and 2012.

Notes on contributor

Dr. Yan Sun is a Professor of Political Science, City University of New York at Queens College and the Graduate Center. She received her BA from Nanjing University, her MA from School of Foreign Affairs, and her PhD from the Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of *The Chinese Reassessment of Socialism* (Princeton University Press 1995) and *Corruption and Market in Contemporary China* (Cornell University Press 2004). She has published several articles for the *New York Times' Room for Debate Forum* and is completing a book on ethnic politics in contemporary China.

Author's postal address: Department of Political Science, Queens College, Queens, NY 11367, USA

References

Fischer, M. "The Geopolitics of Politico-Religious Protest in Eastern Tibet." *Hot Spot Forum*, *Cultural Anthropology Online*, Accessed April 9, 2012. http://www.culanth.org/?q=node/530.

Shakya, T. "Self-Immolation, the Changing Language of Protest in Tibet." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 25, Décembre (2012): 19–39.

Wang, L. "Burning Last Words: Why do Tibetans Resort to Self-immolation?" Accessed December. 18, 2012. http://woeser.middle-way.net/2012/12/blog-post_18.html.