

Fire, Flames and Ashes. How Tibetan Poets Talk about Self-Immolations without Talking about Them

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Since its inception in 2005, Tibetan websites from within Tibet and, later, blogs, became a working tool with which to evaluate how the fraction of young Tibetans endowed with cultural capital represent social and ethnic crisis and react to it. This instance of “infrapolitics of the powerless”¹ became especially obvious in 2008, when a large-scale revolt started spreading in Lhasa and the Tibetan plateau for the first time in 20 years: poetry published online for days on revealed the lay Tibetan elite discourse about these dramatic events unfolding on the Tibetan plateau. But the identity of arrested protesters, or even the place where protests were taking place, were not dealt with by these bloggers. Those who did pass on images or information paid a high price, ranging from 5 to 15 years jail sentence,² suspected of “disclosing state secrets.” If factual information was not possible, what did these bloggers talk about instead? They resorted to metaphors to express their angst: tempests and hurricanes were raging, strong winds, gales, black and red storms were blowing on the plateau, lakes and rivers froze under harsh climatic conditions, darkness enveloped the earth, wolves were howling, threatening harmless and defenseless sheep. As was obvious to all, those parallels with the mineral and animal kingdoms symbolized the gloom, despair, and helplessness felt by bloggers as armed forces swarmed on the Tibetan plateau. Resorting to similes was nothing new for Tibetans: thanks to their long-established and rich literature, Tibetan writers and poetry lovers were fully equipped to produce such works, and readers deciphered them easily. Centuries ago, Ti-

¹ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990, xiii.

² A state employee, Rikdzin Wangmo, received a 5-year jail sentence, the famous singer Jamyangkyi was arrested and interrogated for one month and partly owed her release to international collective action. Upon her liberation, not fearing reprisals, she published the account of her days in jail. This was later translated into English and published under the title *A Sequence of Tortures: A Diary of Interrogations* (Dharamsala: Tibetan Women Association, n.d.). Konchok Tsepel, administrator of a popular literature website, was sentenced to 15 years in jail.

betan literati had classified *ngonjo rikpa*, which can be translated as 'lexicology' or 'science of similes,' as one of the 5 'lesser sciences' that an accomplished cleric was supposed to master: virtuosity in the art of metaphors, similes and parallels, was deemed significant enough to be part of the scholarly curriculum. Apart from being a tool testifying intellectual distinction, it enabled writers to cleverly hide their criticisms and sarcasms towards spiritual or worldly opponents, even in pre-1950s Tibet. Today's poets, among whom one finds not only clerics, but a high proportion of high school students and university graduates, have perpetuated this tradition, but opacity and double-entendre have now become basic tools for political survival in the public arena. On the vibrant blogosphere, Tibetan writers have become "experts at metaphors," to use an expression applied to Jaan Kross, the most influential Estonian writer of the 20th century.³

This imperative of self-preservation explains why the Tibetan blogosphere in China seems on the surface to have remained silent on the topic of self-immolation. Quests for "auto-cremation"⁴ on search engines in Tibetan, whatever the expression may be originally,⁵ yield little results. But fire, torch, embers, cinders, flames, butter lamps, dust, have made a forceful appearance in Tibetan poems since October 2011.

The first poem that alluded to immolations, as far as I can tell, came only with the wave of October 2011 immolations which also attracted the world's attention: the first was "Mourning" (Tib. *Mya ngan zhu ba*) by the famous and charismatic Sangdor (b. 1976?),⁶ on October 10. Two days later "Flames are flying" (*Mye lce 'phur gyin 'dug*) by Durphak⁷ was posted online; "Lost lives" (*Bor song ba'i tshe srog*) by Dremila appeared on October 15—it had apparently been written on the October 12.⁸ A fourth poem, entitled "Fire has burnt again" (*Yang me sgron song*) by Domepa,⁹ appeared on that same day. This coincided with 3 immolations: one on October 3 and two on Oc-

³ Jacob Antoine, « Jaan Kross, L'art de dénoncer les absurdités de l'Histoire par l'écriture », *Le Courrier des pays de l'Est*, 1066(2), 2008, pp. 89-91.

⁴ This term is used by J. Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007. It encapsulates two elements which the word 'immolation' does not include: the fact that immolators act upon themselves, and that they use fire to perpetuate their act.

⁵ See Katia Buffetrille's and Chung Tsering's contributions in this issue for a list of terms.

⁶ http://www.sangdhor.com/blog_c.asp?id=4907&a=sangdhor. Sangdor is the only poet whose year of birth can be specified in this article, as I have no information regarding the others.

⁷ http://www.sangdhor.com/blog_c.asp?id=4951&a=maliysia.

⁸ http://www.sangdhor.com/blog_c.asp?id=4983&a=1988021.

⁹ http://www.sangdhor.com/blog_c.asp?id=5049&a=09758533066.

tober 7. One last poem in this 'October series' was posted by someone called Tsetan Dorje, apparently a young monk from the Drigung school of Tibetan Buddhism. It is entitled "Don't say auto-cremation is violence" (*Rang lus mer bsregs 'tshé ba ma gsungs shig*). This poem was censored and is still irretrievable. The first 4 poems were posted on the same website, *Sangdhor*, which is run by the poet Sangdor,¹⁰ who had launched himself the movement with his own poem, "Mourning." Unsurprisingly, this website was closed not long after the publication of these 4 poems, possibly because Sangdor's own poem was translated into English and attracted the censors' attention, or because the posting of 4 poems, obviously mourning the self-immolators' death, might have been considered too much for the censors.

One had to wait until the auto-cremation of a reincarnated lama, Lama Sobha, on 8 January 2012, to see the second wave of poems: it began with "Flames propagate from my homeland, Darlak" (*Pha yul dar lag nas me lce mched thal*) by Yepeng (?),¹¹ a rather active younger blogger. The poem bore as a subtitle "An incident that happened at 5 in the morning of January 8 2012,"¹² which leaves little doubt as to the event referred to. He published another poem 7 days later entitled "I was able to shout a war cry at the burning ground" (*Me 'bar sa nas ki 'bod thub thal*), but this poem was censored and it has not been restored yet, like the rest of the poetic production of this author. When looking for it on the internet, the following formula appears: "You will be able to read this post only after the web administrator has checked it" (*zin tho 'di do dam pas zhib bsher byas rjes da gzod lta klog byed thub*). The day after the auto-cremation, the blogger Shokjang entered the stage. He is famous among Tibetan youth for having been detained for several months in 2010 after writing openly critical comments of the 2008 Chinese state handling of events in Tibet. According to its title "Written for Lhamkog and his 'A way a butter-lamp burns'" (*Lham kog gis mchod me sbar stangs shig la bris pa*), the poem seems to be a rejoinder to a poem by another active poet on the Tibetan blogosphere, Lhamkog, although I could not find it. Shokjang's poem is subtitled "On the way butter lamps burn" (*Mchod me sbar tshul*).¹³

The fact that the person who had immolated in early January was a *trulku* (reincarnated lama) may partly explain why it resonated so strongly with Tibetan bloggers, but another reason might be the rela-

¹⁰ When mentioning him as a person, I do not follow the spelling chosen by Sangdor for his website (*Sangdhor*).

¹¹ <http://blog.amdotibet.cn/yepeng/archives/47198.aspx>.

¹² 2012 1 5 zhogs pa'i dus tshod lnga steng byung ba'i don rkyen cig.

¹³ http://www.sangdhor.com/blog_c.asp?id=5728&a=3.

tive geographical proximity of the location of this immolation with many bloggers: Lama Sobha was from Golok, an area pertaining to the Qinghai province, where many bloggers came from, so they might have been able to connect more easily with him than with other self-immolators, who hailed from different regions. Some might have even known him, which was unlikely to be the case of younger, ordinary monks or ex-monks from faraway Ngawa or Kardze.

The third series of poems was posted online between February 10 and 20 2012. It coincided with another wave of auto-cremations in February (8, 9, 11, 13, 17 and 19). One poem by someone called Jampel Dorje was entitled "Offering to the demise of a stranger" (*Rgyus med kyi mi zhig gi 'chi 'pho la phul ba*) and obviously referred to a self-immolator, though it is hard to identify precisely who.¹⁴ The simultaneous advent of Tibetan New Year was the occasion of a number of poems, two of which referred obliquely to self-immolations: "A versified poem for 2012" (*2012 lo'i tshigs bcad cig*) by Droktruk¹⁵ and "Celebrate New Year like this" (*Lo gsar 'di ltar gtong*) by a blogger calling himself Gongdeba.¹⁶ Although devoid of clear hints to self-immolations, the poem ends with a call to celebrate New Year by lighting a butter lamp in remembrance of the "heroes," for the clear light of ultimate truth, and for aspirations to hope.¹⁷ This reference to heroes, to ultimate truth and hope can be interpreted as allusions to the self-immolators of the past Tibetan year.

Between March and June 2012, in spite of 3 new self-immolations having been recorded, hardly any poem referring to them was posted from within Tibet. The crystal clear "Master, the end of my shawl is burning" (*Ston pa/Nga'i gzan sne me ru 'bar song*) on March 15 followed the much-commented self-immolation of Jamyang Palden, at Rongwo monastery, in March 14. But its author, Lunyon, is an active monk blogger in exile. The poem was censored within 24 hours of its posting online in Tibet.¹⁸ But surprisingly the website altogether was not closed down, although this was a tense period for Tibetans. Two more poems may be ascribable to the self-immolations: "Tibet" (*Bod*) by Lungbu,¹⁹ on March 30 and "Butter lamp, the pillar of my mind"

¹⁴ http://www.tibetcm.com/html/list_22/201202204153.html.

¹⁵ http://www.tibetcm.com/html/list_25/201202204152.html. This poet has a blog: <http://blog.amdo.tibet.cn/benbajia/index.aspx>.

¹⁶ <http://blog.nbyzwhzx.com/space.php?uid=496&do=blog&id=1080>. The name is not given in Tibetan, only in Roman letters.

¹⁷ *dpa' bo yi rjes dran la mchod me spar / bden mtha yi 'od gsal la mchod me spar / re ba yi smon 'dun la mchod me spar / mchod me yi 'od ngogs su lo gsar gtong* /<http://blog.nbyzwhzx.com/space.php?uid=496&do=blog&id=1080>.

¹⁸ http://www.sangdhor.com/blog_c.asp?id=5962&a=1000.

¹⁹ <http://www.gdqpzhx.com/bo/html/literature/201203301730.html>.

(*Mchod me/Nga'i sems kyi rdo ring*), by Dhi Kalsang on April 3.²⁰ But they are so allusive, at least to my understanding, that linking them with immolations could be an over interpretation.

Let's now turn to the poems themselves. I will first look into how they manage to create powerful imagery, and then how they refer to the tragic events that triggered them.

Anthropomorphisation of fire is a literary strategy adopted by several authors. In this instance, it is not a mere rhetoric and literary device, as at some point during the cremation process, the body is fire and fire is the body. In Sangdor's "Mourning," the fire's mouth is moving (*'gul*), the fire's hands are drilling (*gsor*), the fire's chest is showing itself (*ston*). Fire, that is, the self-immolator, then turns into a rosary of fire whose beads fall one by one onto the ground. It then turns into smoke (*du ba*), also anthropomorphised, which gazes into the monastery's roof and every monk's cell.

In the poem "Flames are flying," fire and flames are also animated with life: flames are described as biting humble humans and turbulent dogs, possibly an allusion to Tibetans and Chinese respectively, and smoke is described as licking them.

Another literary tactic consists in establishing parallels with objects and shapes without ever naming the basis of the parallel. The title of Shokjang's poem ("The way a butter lamp burns") subscribes to the often found simile between the body in flame and the butter lamp, but includes other powerful and eloquent similarities: an armor of copper (to defend Tibet?), then a sharp hammer (to strike enemies?), and finally a big bronze bell (to summon Tibetans?). The poem ends with the narrator hearing: "Wake up from your slumber!" a call coming from what has not been and will not be named, but which is obviously the burning body of the self-cremating person.

The poem "Fire is raging again" also relies on strong visual imagery, this time describing crudely the body in flame in its last moment: the flesh and bones, quivering in pain, are struggling to make their very last steps before collapsing. The poem ends with the description of smoke, settling down on the ground, while the last atom of flame is absorbed in the space between the ground and the sky. These last atoms of the charred body are also the focus of another poem: in the final scene of "Offering to the demise of a stranger," "people nearby" are described as gathering atoms or specks of dust in the coat of its owner, obviously the person who has just self-immolated. Images of charred bodies carefully wrapped in coats immediately come to

²⁰ http://www.sangdhor.com/blog_c.asp?id=6142&a=1988021.

mind, underscoring the respect, care and attention that the self-immolator received from people surrounding him, for his heroic act.

Another poem chooses other senses than the visual: it mentions sounds like the cracking of a match, with "a sharper sound than that of monastery bells in the wind." Obviously this refers to the cracking of bones burning. It also refers crudely to the scorching smell (*gzhob dri*) of a charred body and describes it as dissolving at a crossroads. Shokjang's poem also frames it within a given location: "The blue smoke that swirls from the ashes of your bones, left behind as leftovers, this blue smoke is like a rope tied up between mountains." Contrary to other poems, it gives agency to the self-immolator: "You did not fly a kite, you did not throw stones... You flew your own dust everywhere, as if competing with eagles."

Hints to the background or to the motives of the self-immolators can be found in some poems: Sangdor's "Mourning" poem begins with "Because living felt more hopeless than dying" and it ends with the classical "storm and wind" metaphor, which usually refers to Chinese troops and here can be interpreted as the armed forces swarming on the place as soon as the immolations occurred, as we know happened in most if not all cases. In "Fire is raging again," the image of someone handcuffed and trapped in a cobweb is obviously a reference to Tibetans "caught" helplessly in China polity. The poem "Flames spread in my hometown Darlak," apart from its clear subtitle that reads almost like a newspaper heading ("An accident that occurred at 5AM"), also mentions the way in which the lama committed auto-cremation, although by way of allusion more than directly: "In this quiet environment / A *mani* chanter woke up / He left after having tasted / A mouthful of something close to alcohol."²¹ This is in obvious reference to the attested fact that the lama drank kerosene before setting himself on fire, as a way to ensure that he would die for sure.

Other poems, on the whole, are silent about the motives: is it because they are so obvious to readers that they need no explanation, or because too many details would jeopardise their publishing? "Lost lives" by Dremila stands out: rather than resorting to vivid imagery and "fugitive impressions through an artistic medium that best conserves their emotional impact",²² it asks whether one or two fires (lit. "heaps of fire," *me dpung*) will be able to make "Tibetans break the wrecked chair they are sitting on" (rotten China?), "enable them to use their thin pen" (exerting right to self-expression?), or "make use

²¹ *lhang 'jags kyi khor yug nas / ma ni bzlo mkhan cig sad te / a rag lta bu'i bzzi kha can cig gi / ro myong nas bud song zig /*

²² Sarah Kendzior, "Poetry of witness: Uzbek identity and the response to Andijon," *Central Asian Survey*, 26(3), September 2007, p. 331.

of their worn out name card" (restoring Tibetan eroded identity?). It asks whether the bonfires will enable Tibetans "to be the masters of their crooked dogs' legs" (walk on their feet?), to give up their worn out voice (to dare to shout?), to make them give their violent behavior (stop feuding?), and ends with the question: will we be able to strive for perfect action? This is the only poem I have read that questions the benefit of self-immolations: "will these bonfires be able to make up for the leaders that we have lost and the history books that remain?"

Conclusion

Tibetan society today is still highly literary, but is also highly censored, as there is no forum for public discussion of contentious topics, especially those related to ethnicity and the eroding Tibetan cultural identity. The one way out of this "dialectic of disguise and surveillance"²³ is a clever use of literature, the one kind of authorized public activity. Published texts do contradict the official state narrative and, in our case, far from condemning self-immolators as "terrorists," "outcasts," "criminals," and "mentally ill people," they speak of them with respect and empathy.

But one can question doubly the efficiency of this "use of literature:" first, it addresses only Tibetans as almost no Han Chinese can read Tibetan. In this case, it is tantamount to "preaching to the choir." The use of literature resides more here in collective mourning, mutual solace and a reinforcement of an injured Tibetan identity. Secondly, given the necessary self-censorship that Tibetans deploy, these venues cannot act as a medium to develop an "independent exchange of ideas—the very thing that most threatens a state dependent on suppression and censorship."²⁴ We are thus long distance from a fully articulated blogosphere where Tibetan netizens would directly vie with state officials and state narrative. Still, one may come occasionally across glimpses of discussion and debates: the poem "Don't say auto-cremation is violence" mentioned above seems to take position in favour of auto-cremation and to defend it as compatible with the non-violent approach put forward by the Dalai-Lama in the Tibetan struggle for freedom. An online Tibetan encyclopedia from Qinghai shows a question asked on November 11 2011 by someone called Gyaltan: he would like website users to share their feelings and opinions about the self-cremation of a Tibetan on No-

²³ James Scott, *op. cit.* p. 4.

²⁴ Sarah Kendzior, "Poetry of witness," *op. cit.*, p. 332.

vember 11 in Swayambunath (Nepal). It only elicited one reply that tentatively suggests that this person did it “for the sake of religion.”²⁵ Incidentally, no self-immolation was reported as having taken place in Nepal in November. More significantly, one social commentator argued, two days after the first immolation in March 2011, that “taking one’s own life is proof of a great courage.”²⁶ The website on which it was published has been a regular target of censorship and has been closed down for two months. In April 2012 came a second commentary to self-immolations: someone wrote a short piece called “Stopping courage” (*Spobs pa ‘gog byed*)²⁷ asking what kind of courage it was to abandon one’s own life, which is as precious as gold, rather than facing “spite, bullying, belittling, jail and beating” which affects hundreds of thousands of beings. This is an obvious reference to what the writer perceives as the doomed fate of Tibetans currently living under China. Last, Naktsang Nulo, a retired lawyer from Amdo famous for publishing his uncompromising and unauthorised autobiography in 2005, mentioned the self-immolations twice in an openly sad online lament about the current and overall Tibetan situation, “A sadness that will never clear up.”²⁸ He links these desperate acts to other instances of protest like street demonstrations, and states clearly that these numerous immolations “are done with the higher objective of [benefitting] one’s nationality” and indicate “hope [of being heard] and protest towards the authorities in power.”

But these web pages are the exception rather than the rule. So far, writers, bloggers and intellectuals, who are the “socially concerned”²⁹ fringe of the Tibetan society endowed with cultural capital, have had to restrict their use of internet and poetry online as a mere “release [of pent-up] resentment.”³⁰ But, contrary to “scar literature” which was officially allowed in the late 1970s in China as a catharsis to evacuate the trauma of the Cultural Revolution in the present case, the trauma keeps deepening without much hope for an end to it.

²⁵ ask.bodyig.org/?question/view/2497.html.

²⁶ <http://www.rdro1.net/node/252> The topic of courage (*snying stobs*) and strength (*stobs*) is gaining currency on the Tibetan blogosphere.

²⁷ www.tibetcm.com/html/list_03/201204264386.html.

²⁸ <http://www.bodrigs.com/literature/prose/2012-05-27/384.html>.

²⁹ Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 314.

³⁰ Link, *Uses of Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

GLOSSARY

Transcription	Transliteration	Tibetan
Dhi Kalsang	Dhi Skal bzang	འཇི་སྐལ་བཟང་།
Domepa	Mdo med pa	མདོ་མེད་པ།
Dremila	'Dre mi la	འདྲེ་མི་ལ།
Drigung	'Bri gung	འབྲི་གུང་།
Droktruk	'Brog phrug	འབྲོག་ཕུག་།
Durphak	Dur 'phag	དུར་འཕག་།
Golok	Mgo log	མགོ་ལོག་།
Gyaltan	Rgyal bstan	རྒྱལ་བསྐྱའ་།
Jampel Dorje	'Jam dpal rdo rje	འཇམ་དཔལ་རྗེ་།
Jamyang Paldan	'Jam dbyangs dpal ldan	འཇམ་དབྱངས་དཔལ་ལྷན་།
Jamyangkyi	'Jam dbyangs skyid	འཇམ་དབྱངས་སྐྱིད་།
Kardze	Dkar mdzes	དཀར་མཛེས།
Konchok Tsepel	Dkon mchog tshe 'phel	དཀོན་མཚོག་ཚེ་འཕེལ།
Lama Sobha	Bla ma Bsod bha	བླ་མ་བསོད་བླ།
Lungbu	Rlung bu	རླུང་བུ།
Lunyon	Klu smyon	ལུ་སྟོན།
Naktsang Nulo	Nags tshang nus blo	ནགས་ཚང་ལུས་བློ།
Ngawa	Rnga ba	ར་བ།
<i>ngonjo rikpa</i>	<i>mngon brjod rig pa</i>	མདོན་བརྗོད་རིག་པ།
Rikdzin Wangmo	Rig 'dzin dbang mo	རིག་འཛིན་དབང་མོ།
Rongwo	Rong bo	རོང་བོ།
Sangdor	Seng rdor	སེང་རྗེ།
Shokjang	Zhogs ljang	ཞོགས་ལྷང་།
<i>trulku</i>	<i>sprul sku</i>	སྐུལ་སྐུ།
Tsetan Dorje	Tshe brtan rdo rje	ཚེ་བརྟན་རྗེ་།



