

## Conversations and Debates: Chinese and Tibetan Engagement with the Broader Discussion of Self-Immolation in Tibet

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**I**n a previous, short look at the phenomenon of self-immolation in Tibet<sup>1</sup> I began by contrasting the early reactions of Tibetans in exile to the first instances of self-immolation with those of Chinese who posted online. Setting out the early exile interpretations of self-immolation as stemming from despair and hopelessness, I ascribed that interpretation to the circumstances of exile where there is, as I put it, a “structural dependency built into exile life, which often encourages pathos-based appeals to the consciences of benefactors.” I also noted how that explanation largely disappeared following the online posting of an essay (by Christophe Besuchet)<sup>2</sup> refuting the basis of such an analysis, at least insofar as there were extant statements or similar indications of how self-immolation was understood by those who were committing the act, a limited body of evidence, to be sure.

I then turned to Chinese reactions. Not official Chinese reactions (though these too are worth exploring),<sup>3</sup> but those posted online, an activity that remains ongoing. I should stress that when the question is asked as to what ‘Chinese’ think of events in Tibet, or of Tibet in general, one must appreciate the fact that the vast majority of people in the People’s Republic of China do not think about Tibet very much, if at all. In times of strife in Tibet they may reflect on Tibet somewhat, but most such thinking is usually related, uncritically, in some way to the official position (e.g., the idea that Tibetans are ungrateful for the liberation China has given them). I say this in order

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<sup>1</sup> “On the Question of Why and to What End,” *Hot Spot Forum, Cultural Anthropology Online*, April 11 2012, <http://culanth.org/?q=node/532>.

<sup>2</sup> See the article by Christophe Besuchet, “Beacons of resistance, not desperate acts,” *Rangzen Alliance*, January 28 2012, <http://www.rangzen.net/2012/01/28/beacons-of-resistance-not-desperate-acts>. See also <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=30767&t=1>.

<sup>3</sup> See Fabienne Jagou in this issue for official reactions.

to underscore that whatever I might say about 'Chinese' perceptions of self-immolation in Tibet: they are the perceptions of a small number of people and I would not extrapolate from them a common Chinese attitude towards Tibet and towards self-immolation in Tibet. Indeed, the ideas expressed in the Chinese media and even more recently by a Chinese Christian activist that the self-immolations by Tibetans are similar to the self-immolation acts in earlier years by followers of Falun Gong (which is considered a 'cult' in China) are no doubt more typical of 'Chinese' thinking on the issue than much of what I will quote below.<sup>4</sup> But one must always be cognizant, as I have said, that Tibet is not a constant topic in China.

The reaction of several dissident Chinese intellectuals was certainly not like that of the Christian activist just mentioned, Song Xinkuan. There was some sympathy with the plight of Tibetans. But the tactic of self-immolation was a shock. A sense of this comes in the reaction of Zeng Jinyan, well known recently for her prominent role in helping Chen Guangcheng be heard by the outside world. In a twitter exchange with the Tibetan blogger Tsering Woesser in October 2011, she wrote:

Tibetans who commit self-immolation are fairly lacking in sense. Any self-immolation can only illustrate the self-immolator's clinging to a fantasy of the authorities' ultimate goodwill. And it just proves that the authorities couldn't care less about their cries. Every life lost is to be deplored. I hope the Dalai Lama will wisely advise the mass of monks to refrain from any further self-immolation.<sup>5</sup>

And Woesser's response:

No one regrets the loss of life in self-immolation more than Tibetans. But I truly resent the assessment that 'Tibetans who commit self-immolation are fairly lacking in sense'.<sup>6</sup> [n.b. This is a theme that one starts to notice, the tension between shock and sadness at the act and admiration for the person committing it.]

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://woesser.middle-way.net/2012/05/blog-post.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Zengjinyan. "藏人自焚相当不明智，任何自焚都只能说明自焚者对当局心存最后的善意幻想，而又恰恰证实了当局对其呼声根本不在乎，痛惜逝去的每一个生命，愿达赖喇嘛加持智慧给众僧，避免自焚再发生。" October 20 2011, 8:25 a.m. tweet, <http://twitter.com/zengjinyan/statuses/127042860494237696>.

<sup>6</sup> 唯色 (Tsering Woesser). "没有人比藏人更痛惜自焚中逝去的生命。但对“藏人自焚相当不明智”的评价甚为反感。" October 20 2011, 9:34 a.m. tweet, <http://twitter.com/degewa/statuses/127060010109894656>.

And again, Zeng Jinyan:

Woesser's heart is gentle and merciful. But in a society bereft of hope a single suicide (for whatever reason) can become something contagious through media reports, spreading so that its imitative influence on more people in similar straits ('the support effect') becomes wide-reaching. In order to avoid greater loss of life we should reflect on guidance in disseminating news of self-immolation.<sup>7</sup>

And finally Woesser:

Excuse me. Whatever my heart is like, that's not at issue in this discussion. Your comments here are seemingly reasonable. What I resent is what is in the previous message, which betrays a feeling of some sort of superiority and infallibility. How can you know that Tibetans who commit self-immolation cling to fantasies about the authorities? How can you know that Tibetans who commit self-immolation have no wisdom, no sense? With astonishment, I read in that message something similar to what one gets from the authorities. What I'm pointing out is your approach to Tibetans who commit self-immolation...<sup>8</sup>

Regarding your tweet, I'd like to ask, how many media reports 'disseminate news of self-immolation?' Do China's media report it? Foreign media report it but can Tibetans inside (especially in Ngawa, which is tightly sealed off) know about it? How can there be 'guidance in disseminating news of self-immolation?' I'll thank you not to stand on some high stage and evaluate things without understanding the situation in Tibetan areas.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Zengjinyan. "唯色拉内心柔软慈悲，可在一个绝望的社会，个体自杀（不管何因）通过媒体报道会产生传染、流行以致更多类似处境的人模仿（“维特效应”）的影响更为深远，为了不让更多的生命逝去，我们应反思传播自焚信息时的导向。” October 20 2011, 7:29 p.m. tweet, <https://twitter.com/zengjinyan/status/127209823275188226>.

<sup>8</sup> 唯色 (Tsering Woesser). “抱歉，我的内心如何，不在这个讨论之内。你这段留言说得貌似有理。而我反感的是上一个留言中，所流露的某种自以为是的优越感，如何知道自焚藏人对当局是心存幻想呢？如何认为自焚藏人就无智慧、不明智呢？我从那个留言，惊讶地看到的是与当局的某种相似，我指的是对待自焚藏人。” October 20 2011, 7:38 p.m. tweet, <https://twitter.com/degewa/status/127212039423787008>.

<sup>9</sup> 唯色 (Tsering Woesser). “就你这条推而言，我想问，有多少媒体报道、“传播自焚信息”？中国媒体有报道吗？境外媒体报道了，境内藏人（尤其是被严密封锁的阿坝地区）会知道吗？怎么就有了“传播自焚信息的导向”？不了解藏地的实情，还

This exchange fairly reasonably encapsulates two distinct positions. The interesting thing about the Chinese position as represented here, a moderate and sympathetic position, I might add, is its frame of reference. It essentially reads into the acts of self-immolation the question of state authority and dissent as those issues would manifest themselves in tactics adopted by Chinese dissidents and it very much misses the point. It assumes that the self-immolators are trying to soften the otherwise hard hearts of those in the bureaucracy.

And this attitude was largely deflected by Wang Lixiong in an essay that he wrote on the subject in January. He opted to describe the acts of self-immolators as successful, noting that

Whether they have had a clear awareness of what they were doing, their cumulative effect has been to inspire courage among a people... Courage is a precious resource, especially for the party that is in a materially weaker position. Courage often turns into the key by which the weak come to defeat the strong. Self-immolation requires the highest degree of courage... From the standpoint of inspiring courage among the people I consider them to have succeeded.<sup>10</sup>

There is more to what Wang Lixiong said: there is an important element in his argument concerning what to do next and this is introduced in the same essay. I will turn to that presently, but first I would like to note that his remarks about courage and inspiration were particularly relevant to what was going on in the thinking of a number of Tibetans. I mention this because more than a few commentators were portraying the self-immolators as somehow dysfunctional, whether as a result of suffering under repressive rule or due to some other reason (n.b. the arguments about a level of despair and hopelessness due to which they were driven to commit self-immolation).<sup>11</sup> Wang Lixiong's description is one of courageous people. Thus, another comment from a Tibetan commenting on Woesser's blog in late December is pertinent.

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是勿要站在某个制高点上评价为谢。” October 20 2011, 7:43 p.m. tweet, <http://twitter.com/degewa/statuses/127213484004999168>.

<sup>10</sup> “Wang Lixiong: Chulen zifen, hai neng zuon shenma?” 王力雄：除了自焚，还能做什么 January 14 2012, [http://woesser.middle-way.net/2012/01/blog-post\\_14.html](http://woesser.middle-way.net/2012/01/blog-post_14.html): 但无论他们有无明确意识，他们综合产生的作用，在于鼓舞了一个民族的勇气... 勇气是一种宝贵资源，尤其对实体资源处下风的一方，勇气往往成为以弱胜强的关键。自焚需要最大的勇气... 从鼓舞民族勇气的角度，我认为至此已达成。

<sup>11</sup> See Besuchet, *op. cit.*

Self-immolation, self-immolation. It is easy to say it; it is a shock to hear it. And committing the act is harder than scaling the heavens. But 13 heroes and heroines inside Tibet have done it. Might I ask if we, who scream when we scrape our hands even slightly, would have the guts to sacrifice our lives for the cause of freedom? I don't know about anyone else, but as for me, with my lack of courage, I can't even dare to think about it. Really, this generation wouldn't dare to set their own bodies ablaze. I agonise over my own uselessness. I feel ashamed. But I rejoice at having a clear mind. The names, backgrounds, and deeds of a total of 13 Tibetans who have committed self-immolation—from 24-year-old Tapey from Kirti Monastery in Ngawa, who did so on February 27 2009, to 46-year-old Tenzin Phuntsok from the Karma district of Chamdo, who did so on December 1 2011—are recorded in my diary and deeply engraved in my mind. And as I want to always hold their memories dear, I light butter lamps, recite mantras... Yes, when I think of the heroes and heroines who have committed self-immolation I am ashamed of my inherent weakness, cowardice and uselessness.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, the most salient characteristic of the act of self-immolation for many Tibetans has been the perceived heroic or courageous nature of the act itself. In other words, it was not something aimed at external actors, as Zeng Jinyan and others had assumed. On this point Wang Lixiong was very much reflecting the sentiments of many Tibetans. But, as I said, this was not the whole of his argument. A significant part of it followed from what he considered to be the success of self-immolation. He stated that it was now time to move beyond the act: it had achieved its noble purpose; it had catalyzed the spirit and imagination of Tibetans.

Wang Lixiong called for a campaign for the realization of village autonomy for Tibetan areas along the lines of what had come out of the struggle in the Guangdong village of Wukan. There, a democratic

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<sup>12</sup> “Qing jizhu meiyige zifen de jingnei tongbao... ..” 请记住每一个自焚的境内同胞 ... ..December 29 2011 [http://woeser.middle-way.net/2011/12/blog-post\\_29.html](http://woeser.middle-way.net/2011/12/blog-post_29.html): 自焚、自焚，说着容易、听着震惊，可做起来比登天还难，但我们境内的13位男女英雄们却做到了，试问手稍微刮破却大声喊痛的我们有这个胆量为自由事业献出生命吗？我不知道别人，但我这个胆小鬼想都不敢想。真的，这辈子都不敢点燃自己的身体，我为自己的无用感到揪心，感到惭愧。不过，庆幸的是，我有一个清晰的头脑，从2009年2月27日24岁的阿坝格尔登寺僧人扎白到2011年12月1日46岁的昌都嘎玛区丹增平措共计13位自焚藏人的名字、背景和事迹一一记在我的日记本里，也深深地刻在我的脑海里，因为我要时刻缅怀他们，为他们供油灯、念心咒... 是的，一想到自焚英雄们，我为自己天生的懦弱、胆怯和无用感到惭愧...



immolation, leaving behind several orphaned children, though the thinking behind the appeal was forming well before then. Woesser's call was co-signed by Arjia Rinpoche in the United States, formerly the abbot of Kumbum Monastery in Amdo, and the Amdo poet Gabde. Woesser called for signers, and indeed several hundred from all around the world signed, including a good number of non-Tibetans. The petition reflected Wang Lixiong's studied respect for those who had committed self-immolation. While it sought to preserve Tibetan lives for the sake of the struggle for Tibet it did not repeat any of the language that had appeared in a few places—notably outside Tibet—about self-immolation being non-Buddhist, language and argumentation that have also been used by the authorities.

Such language, in fact, seems to have never gained much currency. As an essay on the website, *Khabdha* put it “Giving one's body as an offering lamp is not to avoid suffering through self-clinging; it is so that the Tibetan nation can reverse its suffering.”<sup>16</sup>

It must be noted, however, that there has not been an end to self-immolation. Indeed, the debates over self-immolation continue, obviously, and the recent circulation of the CCTV polemical film on self-immolation in Tibet, in obvious response to international awareness and concern over the issue, is provoking a new round of thinking and commentary. In early May, when only a small clip from that film was circulating over the internet, many people were amazed to find that Tapey, generally reckoned as the first Tibetan to have committed self-immolation inside Tibet in 2009 was alive. And so Woesser (who had been vocal in seeing that he was not forgotten by those in exile who spoke out on the issue), wrote

Three years ago, in an essay in memory of Tabey I wrote “This is possibly the first use of the method of self-immolation by Tibetans in Tibet to demonstrate resolution. Tabey must be remembered forever in Tibetan history; he's like the exile monk Thupten Ngodrup who committed self-immolation in 1998, in the midst of a hunger strike in Delhi, India. The difference is that Tabey was fired at on the spot by Chinese military and police. After March, 2008, military and police filled county seats and monasteries; advancing on Tabey as he burned they fired.” [Here the quote ends and Woesser contin-

<sup>16</sup> Mi pham tshangs thig, “Sku srog me mchod kyi rin thang cha tshang zhig sus bshad thub yod dam,” *Kha brda*, February 16 2012, <http://www.khabdha.org/?p=25505>: “རང་ལུས་མཚོན་མེར་སྲུང་བ་ནི་རང་གཅེས་འཛིན་གྱིས་རང་སྲུང་མ་ཐེག་ནས་མ་རེད། བོད་མི་རིགས་གིས་སྲུང་བ་སྲུང་སློབ་ཆེད་དུ་རང་སྲོག་སློབ་བཏང་བ་རེད།”

ues.] Now, today, I want to read this passage out loud again and, moreover, to pray for him, to pay homage to him. I want, moreover, to pray for the other Tibetans who have committed self-immolation and who may yet be alive, to pay homage to them.<sup>17</sup>

Writing on Twitter, she also underlined the attitude of not disparaging or denigrating those who had committed self-immolation:

On Facebook I saw a bit of the misleading CCTV film on self-immolation meant for foreign propaganda. It's no more than this year's recycling of the old tactics used to smear and demonize Falun Gong. It's useless. Even if it has Tibetans who have survived self-immolation and the relatives of Tibetans who have committed self-immolation speaking out, it will be to no avail. Those who have committed self-immolation are heroes of the Tibetan nation...<sup>18</sup>

I will stop at this point and ask how we may interpret the sample of reactions that I have mentioned in the course of this discussion. The sentiments are clear, but obviously I would be loath to accord them much finality. By that, I mean that contingent events can bring about studied reconsiderations or different directions. Indeed, I suspect that we may see a further coalescence around the 'heroic' image of self-immolators. But nothing is certain. We have already seen that the CCTV film has precipitated a reaction. It is, in spite of the fact that it is intended for external propaganda, an internal provocation and reactions to it are starting to appear. Certainly a very recent strong reassertion of the idea that Tibetans who have committed self-immolation are heroes follows from this outwardly slick but transparently skewed film. It remains for us to see how its introduction

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<sup>17</sup> "Cong CCTV waixuanpian zhong kandao zifen hou de Zhabai" 从CCTV外宣片中看到自焚后的扎白 May 9 2011, [http://woeser.middle-way.net/2012/05/cctv\\_09.html](http://woeser.middle-way.net/2012/05/cctv_09.html): 三年前, 我曾在纪念扎白的文章中写过: "这可能是境内藏人第一次以自焚的方式来表明心志。西藏的历史必须铭记扎白, 就像铭记1998年, 在印度德里举行的绝食抗议中国的活动中, 点火自焚的流亡僧人图丹欧珠。不同的是, 扎白当场遭到中共军警的枪击。从2008年3月之后就布满县城和寺院的军警, 朝着燃烧的扎白射出了子弹。" 今天, 此刻, 我仍然要念诵这段文字, 并为扎白祈祷, 向扎白顶礼! 并为其他可能还活着的自焚藏人祈祷, 向他们顶礼。

<sup>18</sup> 唯色 (Tsering Woesser). "脸书上看到CCTV那部歪说藏人自焚外宣片的一些片断, 不外乎是当年污名化、妖魔化法轮功的手法故伎重演。没有用的。即便是让幸存的自焚藏人或自焚藏人的亲属表态, 也无济于事。自焚者是藏民族的英雄..." May 8 2012, 12:09 a.m. tweet, <https://twitter.com/degewa/status/199757902989369344>.

into an internal debate at this moment in time might affect sentiments and actions in the long term.

### GLOSSARY

Transcription	Transliteration	Tibetan
Arjia	A kyā	ཨ་རྒྱ།
Amdo	A mdo	ཨ་མདོ།
Chamdo	Chab mdo	ཆབ་མདོ།
Gabde	Dga' bde	དགའ་བདེ།
Karma	Karma (?)	ཀུམ་ལ། (?)
Khabdha	Kha brda	ཁ་བར།
Kīrti	Kīrti	རྒྱ་རྒྱ།
Kumbum	Sku 'bum	སྐུ་འབུམ།
Ngawa	Rnga ba	རྩ་བ།
Tapey	Bkra bhe	བཀ་བླེ།
Tenzin Phuntsok	Bstan 'dzin phun tshogs	བསྐྱེན་འཛིན་ཕུན་ཚོགས།
Tsering Woesser	Tshe ring 'od zer	ཚེ་རིང་འོད་ཟེང་།
Thupten Ngodrup	Thub bstan dngos grub	ཐུབ་བསྐྱེན་དངོས་གྲུབ།



