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Chinese Policy Towards Tibet versus Tibetan Expectations for Tibet: A Divergence Marked by Self-Immolations

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The title of the seminar *Tibet is burning: Ritual or Political Protest?* could be rephrased for the purpose of the present article 'political ritual or political protest?' At first glance, it looks quite difficult to include the Chinese government reactions or opinions on these Tibetan self-immolations through this questioning because it is a question centered on Tibetans. However, we will see that the official Chinese opinions justify qualifying the Tibetan self-immolations as 'political protest.'

Now, if we wonder whether the Tibetan self-immolations are a 'political ritual' or not, again, this question can be answered from the point of view of the Tibetans and the Tibetan culture. However, this question should also be asked from another point of view and could be reversed: could we consider the Chinese official reactions to be part of a 'Chinese political ritual' (see below for a definition of this expression) in a sense that any kind of Tibetan demonstration, at least since 1987 (the year of the first demonstration in Lhasa) is answered by identical official Chinese reactions? If yes, we should also analyse whether this 'Chinese political ritual' has met with some alteration since the late 1980s, because of a new international context, a new Inner China political fight and a new Tibetan government in exile.

'Political protest'

'Political protest' is expressed by the act of self-immolation and by the accompanying claims of the Tibetans who burnt themselves to death. From exile groups, we know that most individuals carrying out the act of self-immolation have asked for freedom for Tibet and for the return of the Dalai Lama.¹ Newspapers added that the pro-

¹ As Tenzin Dorjee, director of the New York-based Students for a Free Tibet, told

testers requested an end to government interference with their religion.²

Meanwhile, the Chinese press does not give any information about the demands expressed by the Tibetans, but only characterise these acts of self-immolation as a threat to the national unity and to the country stability, unity and stability that must be preserved at all cost. The Chinese press adds that, to maintain national unity and stability, the Chinese government has tightened security measures. A huge number of military forces are deployed within the sensitive areas, that is to say the areas where self-immolations already occurred.³ Officials are ordered to regard maintaining stability as the most important political task and they must be on guard. According to a Tibetan called Luosang Jiangcun, member of the Standing committee of the Chinese Communist Party in Tibet, "Those who do not fulfill their responsibility and fail to prevent incidents from happening will be removed from office instantly."⁴ We know that the head of the Chinese Communist Party in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) has sacked four officials on grounds of "endangering stability" in the region. According to the *Tibet Daily* newspaper, they were dismissed for leaving their posts in the Chamdo region during the Lunar New Year.⁵

These reinforced security measures are not only intended to control the lay society but they imply also the control of the Buddhist monasteries and, as a matter of fact, the clergy. Indeed, most of the self-immolators are monks or nuns and one of their claims is in favour of more religious freedom.⁶ The underlying idea behind the control over monastic population is "to push forward the patriotic and legal education among monks and nuns."⁷ After the Chinese

AFP on January 12 2012, <https://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/news/sfts-executive-director-quoted-by-afp>.

² *The New Yorker*, April 4 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evan-osnos/2012/04/the-view-from-china-tibetan-self-immolations.html>.

³ *The Himalayan Times*, February 5 2012, <http://www.thehimalayantimes.com/fullNews.php?headline=1+Tibetan+killed%26sbquo%3B+2+injured+in+self+immolation+in+western+China&NewsID=319279>.

⁴ *The Guardian*, January 31 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/31/china-tightens-security-tibetan-monasteries>; see also *Tibet Sun*, February 6 2012, <http://www.tibetsun.com/archive/2012/02/06/china-stresses-need-to-keep-tibet-stable/>.

Deccan Chronicle, January 31 2012, <http://www.deccanchronicle.com/channels/world/asia/china-tightens-controls-over-temples-monasteries-tibet-570>.

⁵ *Truthdive*, February 10 2012 <http://truthdive.com/2012/02/10/China-sacks-four-officials-in-Tibet-for-endangering-stability.html>.

⁶ *The Indian Express*, January 31 2012, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/china-tightens-controls-over-temples-monasteries-in-tibet/906045/0>.

⁷ *English People's Daily Online*, February 29 2012, <http://english.peopledaily.com>.

takeover, Democratic Management Committees were established in every monastery in Tibet since 1962. They were run by monks elected by their own community—under close governmental supervision, but with only indirect involvement of officials. From now on, an unelected “Management Committee” (*zhusi danwei*) will be established in every monastery. These new “Management Committees” (which could involve up to 30 lay officials posted in every monastery) will run the monasteries and will have authority over the previous “Democratic Management Committees.”

But many other forms of reforms aiming at a greater control of Buddhist communities are being implemented. For example, in eastern Tibetan areas outside the TAR, reports indicate that instead of establishing new committees, the old Democratic Management Committees will be retained as the leading body in each monastery, but that they are expected to include an outside official as the deputy director of each committee.⁸ In Qinghai, each township-level monastery is to be placed under a “Masses Supervision and Appraisal Committee” that will supervise, monitor, and report to the government on the management and religious practices in local monasteries.

The rationale for the new system is explained in official documents as “enhancing social management”⁹ in temples. This is seen as developing an underlying objective established in 1994 which aimed at “adapt[ing] Tibetan Buddhism to socialism.”¹⁰ The new theory argues that since monks are members of society just like any other citizens, their institutions should be run by social forces, meaning party and government organisations. As a result, in the new system, besides the party cadres stationed within monasteries, numerous local government offices at each level will have day-to-day responsibility for directly managing different aspects of Tibetan monastic life.¹¹

And finally, the Chinese government will invest large amount of money for the construction of roads leading to monasteries.¹² By allowing a better and faster access to the monasteries, this measure will ensure a stricter control of the monastic population.

cn/90882/7699616.html.

⁸ See note 9 below.

⁹ *Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization*, March 16 2012. In November 2011, the authorities began establishing the “Management Committees” in the 1,787 monasteries that are allowed to operate in the TAR. See <http://www.unpo.org/article/14038>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *People Daily Online*, April 8 2012. See <http://english.people.com.cn/90882/7780259.html>.

Because of the official Chinese physical or visible reactions such as tightened security measures, management reform of the monasteries and so on, not to mention cutting phone and internet lines, and the imposed block-out,¹³ the immolations of Tibetans can indeed be considered as 'political protest.' However, these reactions do not mean that the Chinese authorities have realized the drawbacks of their policy in Tibetan areas, nor that they have the will to change or to improve it. Suffice to say that they have tried to discredit the self-immolators. The official media wrote that they were "people with very bad reputation and criminal records"¹⁴ and blamed them as terrorists.¹⁵ They also charged the Dalai Lama, overseas activist groups or unspecified "separatist forces" of bearing responsibility of these self-immolations.¹⁶ However, some Chinese Communist Party members from the base and from Tibetan areas also admitted that these immolations could be considered as 'economic protest' and that youth unemployment was probably also to blame.¹⁷ Top Chinese officials cannot accept this rationale as they consider that they have lifted Tibetans out of poverty and servitude,¹⁸ and that huge ongoing investment into Tibetan-inhabited areas has greatly raised the Tibetans' standard of living in China.¹⁹ Two obvious possible factors leading to self-immolation that are never suggested in China, though, are the ethnic and cultural dimensions.²⁰ Being a Tibetan in China is far from easy and it has become even less so since 2008. But identity discomfort and the cultural despair are never mentioned in the China-approved commentaries, either because of insensitivity and indifference, or for fear of raising troublesome and deeply-ingrained issues.

¹³ *Rue89*, first published in *Global Voices*, February 1 2012, <http://www.rue89.com/2012/02/01/le-tibet-est-en-feu-mais-ou-sont-les-intellectuels-chinois-228993>; see also *The Himalayan Times*, February 5 2012, <http://www.thehimalayantimes.com/fullNews.php?headline=1+Tibetan+killed%26sbquo%3B+2+injured+in+self+immolation+in+western+China&NewsID=319279>.

¹⁴ *The Guardian*, March 7 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/07/tibet-selfimmolations-monks-aba-china?INTCMP=SRCH>.

¹⁵ *The Himalayan Times*, February 5 2012, *ibid.*; see also *The Guardian*, March 7 2012, *ibid.*

¹⁶ *Indian Express*, February 7 2012, www.indianexpress.com/news/...violence-in-tibet.../909158/; *Asia Times*, March 17 2012, www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/NC17Df02.html.

¹⁷ *Reuter*, February 6 2012, quoting *The China Daily*, <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE8150BR20120206>. See Robert Barnett's article in this issue for details.

¹⁸ *The Washington Post*, February 5 2012, <http://www.intellasia.net/report-says-3-more-people-set-themselves-on-fire-in-china-to-protest-its-tibet-policies-186300>.

¹⁹ *AFP*, January 12 2012. <http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/news/sfts-executive-director-quoted-by-afp>.

²⁰ On which see Tsering Shakya and Robert Barnett's articles in this issue.

As a matter of fact, these Tibetan political protests led the Chinese government to perform the political ritual that followed every Tibetan demonstration since 1987, which consists in denying any flaw in its Tibet-related policy and in reinforcing the administrative, political and military control on Tibet.

However, in the current international context, with everybody watching the images and films of the self-immolations, and given the huge publicity made to them by the Tibetan government-in-exile, despite the Chinese block-out, have the Chinese top officials adopted new positions besides the traditional (or usual) ones? Have the Chinese top officials' views changed in the context of the forthcoming shift in the Chinese government? Finally, has the Chinese political ritual changed?

The religious aspects of the Chinese reactions are not totally new. First, scholars from the China Tibetology Center (*Zhongguo Zangxue yanjiu zhongxin*) placed themselves as the guarantors of "traditional Buddhism" and expressed the opinion that immolations were contrary to the Buddhist principles according to which life is precious.²¹ They added that self-immolation directly violated the Buddhist rule prohibiting killing and especially killing oneself.²² This position is not new: we know that for the recognition of the 11th Panchen Lama, for example, the top Chinese Party officials considered themselves to be the keepers of the true tradition that lead to the enthronement of high Tibetan Buddhist masters.

Another instance of reaching out to religious leaders could be seen when Wen Jiabao, current Prime Minister, met with the China-appointed Panchen Lama and urged him to play a bigger role in maintaining national unity and ethnic harmony, according to a statement posted on the central government's website.²³ He also asked the Panchen Lama to "lead the Buddhist lamas and followers in loving the country, abiding by laws and abiding by Buddhist commandments," the official Xinhua news agency reported.²⁴ However, despite the recommendation of Wen Jiabao to the Panchen Lama, the latter has not expressed any opinion so far. On the contrary, it seems that the Panchen Lama has been asked not to speak about

²¹ *New York Times*, January 10 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/world/asia/3-monks-deaths-show-rise-of-self-immolation-among-tibetans.html?_r=1.

²² *Global Times*, February 15 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/695934/Officials-deny-self-immolation-reports.aspx>.

²³ *Washington Post*, February 10 2012, <http://www.uyghurnews.com/tibetan/Read.asp?TibetNews=china-premier-meets-govt-installed-tibetan-cleric&ItemID=RT-2132012309342712849151>.

²⁴ *The Hindu*, February 11 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article2879897.ece>; *People's Daily*, March 6 2012, <http://english.people.com.cn/90785/7748720.html>.

politics, from what could be seen at the Third Buddhist Forum that took place in Hong Kong on April 26 2012. Thus, it would be possible for Chinese leaders to help him to hold the role of the 'true' leader of Tibetan Buddhism, that is to say as the one who speaks only of Buddhist doctrine and who does not speak of politics at all, in contrast with the Dalai Lama.

However, the only real innovation since 1987 within the Chinese reactions is that, for the first time, a top Chinese official expressed a feeling that resembles sympathy or compassion towards the Tibetans who burnt themselves. Wen Jiabao, current Prime Minister and probably next vice-president of the People's Republic of China, said he was "deeply distressed" by the self-immolations. But going back to the Chinese political ritual, he also stressed that the Chinese government was "opposed to such radical moves that disturb and undermine social harmony."²⁵

Striking also in these official Chinese responses to the Tibetan self-immolations is the number and variety of Chinese officials who expressed an opinion: they range from top leaders, like Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (see above), or the vice-president Xi Jinping, and the vice-foreign minister Zhang Zhijun, to provincial officials from Sichuan province and down to Chinese and Tibetan officials from the Tibet Autonomous Region. The old guard within the Chinese government did not intervene. But, except for the few words of compassion, all of them expressed identical opinions, all the same as in the past. Wen Jiabao is nowadays the voice of the Chinese government within China while Xi Jinping expresses official Chinese opinions outside of China proper.²⁶ Both, however, belong to the new generation of officials and members of the Communist Party. Both were disciples of Hu Yaobang (d. 1989) whose mentor was Deng Xiaoping. Wen Jiabao, Xi Jinping, but also Hu Jintao, the current president, and Li Keqiang, vice-prime minister, follow the principles of Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang. They are in favor of an increasingly market-oriented economy and more liberal social environment while the old guard still demands absolute political control.

Could we expect that this new guard, which could be relatively liberal compared to the old guard and which will hold most power in its hands in November 2012, will follow Hu Yaobang's stance? As is known, he was the initiator of a more liberal policy, such as the end of the communes and more religious and cultural freedom in TAR after his visit there in 1980. Nothing is certain as this policy conduct-

²⁵ *Asia Times*, March 17 2012, www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/NC17Df02.html.

²⁶ *Express India*, February 16 2012, <http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/China-asks-US-to-honour-its-commitment-on-Tibet/912837/>.

ed to a revival of Tibetan nationalism. Indeed, except his one statement expressing distress, Wen Jiabao has always voiced the old guard's opinions: in March 2008, he blamed the supporters of the Dalai Lama for violence in Tibet; he refused to negotiate with the Dalai Lama unless he "gives up all separatist activities." He said it again in March 2009. Besides, it is certain that the old guard is watching how these new Communist leaders will manage the current Tibetan crisis. It is also sure that the actions of the new guard will be decisive for the forthcoming election of the top leader within the Chinese government, in the last quarter of 2012.

And, finally, we do not know if the emerging Chinese civil society might take the lead for a new kind of relationship between China and Tibet.²⁷

On the other side, it is obvious that the Tibetan government in exile has changed its policy because of the self-immolations movement and because of the lack of results from negotiations held with the Chinese authorities (the last contact dated January 2010). The two Tibetan representatives in the Sino-Tibetan 'dialogue' have resigned, while the Dalai Lama and Lobsang Sangay, the newly elected Prime Minister in exile, do not try to prevent, nor do they condemn, the immolations.²⁸ Moreover, they accuse openly the Chinese government policy to be at the origins of these demonstrations of powerlessness. They did not ask exiled Tibetans to keep quiet during the visits of the Chinese vice-president, Xi Jinping while he was abroad (i.e. on February 14 2012, when he was in the US), in contrast with previous occurrences when the Dalai Lama and, more precisely, Samdhong Rinpoche (former Tibetan Prime Minister in exile) had requested Tibetan exiles not to demonstrate during Chinese top leaders visits in the West or in India, in the (always shattered) hope that negotiations with Chinese authorities could resume on a constructive basis. Moreover, five Tibetans self-immolated in exile. We still don't know what will be the result of the hardening of position of Tibetans in exile and what will be the answer of the Chinese government.



²⁷ On this topic, see Elliot Sperling's contribution in this issue.

²⁸ See Katia Buffetrille's contribution in this issue.

