

STORM IN THE GRASSLANDS

Self-immolations in Tibet and Chinese policy



A report by the International Campaign for Tibet
Washington, DC | Amsterdam | Berlin | London | Brussels
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CAMPAIGN
FOR TIBET

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Mourning

A poem by Tibetan blogger, Sengdor, published online in October, 2011

*The sadness of living is more painful than death/[...]
Look at the smoke rising
from the monastery's golden roof
Look at the doors of each monk's cell
In every moment
After a storm bursts on one grassland
Another storm bursts on the other grassland
Following the direction of the wind
Dark shadows move accordingly*

"To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance."
Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, in a letter to Dr Martin Luther King, 1965

Cover details

'Self-immolation' – a painting by Tashi Norbu, Tibetan artist based in Amsterdam, by kind permission of the artist. The work expresses the dual hope that the self-immolators' sacrifice will lead to their religious realization of ultimate reality, through burning away ignorance, and also 'burn away' the conventional reality of oppression.

A Tibetan pilgrim with flowers. Troops are visible as Tibetan pilgrims gather at the Jokhang temple in Lhasa in September, 2012. At the Jokhang temple, one of Tibet's holiest sites, Tibetan pilgrims face intense security, with a constant presence of troops and airport-style scanners now in operation. (Image: ICT).

Acknowledgements

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Note on geographical terms

Tibet was traditionally comprised of three main areas: Amdo (northeastern Tibet), Kham (eastern Tibet) and U-Tsang (central and western Tibet). The Tibet Autonomous Region was set up by the Chinese government in 1965 and covers the area of Tibet west of the Driчу or Yangtze River, including part of Kham. The rest of Amdo and Kham have been incorporated into Chinese provinces, and where Tibetan communities were said to have ‘compact inhabitancy’ in these provinces they were designated Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties. As a result most of Qinghai and parts of Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces are acknowledged by the Chinese government to be ‘Tibetan.’ ICT uses the term ‘Tibet’ to refer to all Tibetan areas currently under the jurisdiction of the People’s Republic of China.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From February 2009, more than 90 Tibetans have self-immolated in Tibet, including a 19-year old female student, a widowed mother of four, and the grandfather of an important reincarnate lama.¹ There was an escalation in self-immolations in Tibet during and after the Chinese Communist Party Congress – a once-in-a-decade leadership transition - with 15 Tibetans setting fire to themselves between November 7 (the eve of the meeting) to November 20 (2012). The self-immolations are now occurring with increasing frequency and there has been a broader geographical spread, with clusters of self-immolations in particular areas such as Rebkong in Qinghai, Labrang in Gansu and Ngaba in Sichuan.

This constitutes one of the biggest waves of self-immolation as political protest globally in the past 60 years.

While the self-immolations are deeply controversial, the overwhelming response from Tibetans to the individuals who self-immolate is one of respect and compassion and the authorities' attempts to turn people against them has been a resounding failure. Thousands of Tibetans have gathered to pray and pay their respects for those who have self-immolated, and peaceful protests involving Tibetans from all sectors of society have often followed the self-immolations. The responses by Tibetans across Tibet to the self-immolations indicate both the significance of the actions as statements, and the developing and resolute sense of Tibetan solidarity and unity across Tibetan areas. A Tibetan described the impact of the self-immolations among Tibetans in Tibet as being "beyond measure".

While the Chinese government has sought to underplay the self-immolations, they expose a crisis in the Beijing leadership's Tibet policy. The self-immolations are a dramatic and visible counter to the claims of the Chinese Communist Party to be improving Tibetans' lives and they are a direct challenge to the Party's legitimacy in Tibet. Although the Chinese government has sought to blame the Dalai Lama and 'outside forces' for the self-immolations, It is acknowledged by the international community as well as a number of scholars and netizens in China that these dramatic developments in Tibet reflect significant failures in policy that must be addressed.

While the crackdown in Tibet has intensified in both scope and tactics since 2008, and more recently in areas where self-immolations have occurred, an alternate narrative of cultural resilience is taking shape in Tibet as Tibetans take increasingly bold steps to defend the core values of their culture.

Tibetans who have left testimonies or notes behind to be found after their self-immolation have in general not called for other Tibetans to carry out these acts. Mostly their communication has been addressed to fellow Tibetans, as opposed to the Chinese authorities or the international community, and calling for life-affirming actions of protecting Tibetan cultural identity and connecting to each other as a way of determining their own destiny. In many cases the self-immolations have led to a deepening of community feeling.

In November 2012, at the time of the Party Congress, thousands of Tibetans gathered to hold peaceful protests and vigils in the Tibetan area of Amdo, with all sectors of society – students, farmers, monks, nomads, teachers, children – involved in making reasonable and measured demands for change.

This report documents the following developments:

- The Chinese government has responded to the self-immolations by intensifying the military buildup in Tibet and strengthening the very policies and approaches that are the root cause of the acts, such as aggressive campaigns against loyalty to the Dalai Lama. The feared erosion of their authority also leads to retributive actions against families, relatives, or monasteries associated with those who have self-immolated, which creates a vicious spiral in which more people are prepared to self-immolate because of the oppressive conditions. Progressive Chinese scholars and lawyers have criticised the ‘stability maintenance’ (weiwen) approach ² - associated with a dramatic expansion of powers of China’s policing and military apparatus, and based on crushing dissent to one-Party rule - across the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a fundamental failure in policy. In Chinese political language, ‘stability’ is a coded reference to the need to prevent any form of ‘social disorder’. In Tibetan areas of the PRC, ‘stability maintenance’ has effectively been carried out on a war footing.
- The CCP continues to prioritise infrastructure construction and resource exploitation as key elements of its strategic objectives in Tibet, casting Tibetan support for the Dalai Lama and protection of Tibetan national identity as obstacles to its elaborate ambitions to re-shape the Tibetan plateau for its own purposes and ensure the domination of the Party. Changes in Chinese laws and regulations have decreased protection of Tibetan language, culture and dramatically eroded space for expression of Tibetan identity.
- There appears to be a direct correlation between the self-immolations and an intensified campaign against the Dalai Lama in Tibet together with the aggressive expansion of legal measures tightening state control over Tibetan religion and culture. This has been particularly evident following the imposition of increasingly restrictive measures in the eastern Tibetan areas of Amdo and Kham, where most of the self-immolations have occurred.

From 1994 onwards, the Chinese authorities launched a particularly aggressive campaign against the Dalai Lama, including prohibitions on the display of Dalai Lama photographs and requirements for monks and nuns to denounce the Dalai Lama. While the policies were first implemented in the Tibet Autonomous Region, they have gradually been imposed in the eastern areas of the Tibetan plateau, where previously there was more space and scope for Tibetans to express themselves and practice their religion in comparison with the TAR. Many Tibetans who have self-immolated have sought to underline the religious context of their acts. Some have died with their hands clasped in prayer, while many of those who have self-immolated have done so beside a stupa (reliquary building), monastery or nunnery.

Since 2008, the Chinese authorities have moved from instilling an oppressive environment in monasteries, nunneries and lay society to one that can be more accurately characterised as totalitarian - an approach in which the state recognizes no limits to its authority, imposes a climate of fear, and strives to regulate every aspect of public and private life. This report documents how the Chinese government has adopted a strategy of actively establishing Party presence in rural areas as the answer to 'instability'. This has led to a more pervasive and systematic approach to 'patriotic education' and a dramatic increase in work teams and Party cadres in rural areas of Tibet. In this new 'war against secessionist sabotage'³, the Chinese government seeks to replace loyalty to the Dalai Lama in Tibetan hearts and minds with allegiance to the Chinese Party-state, and in doing so, to "obliterate memory"⁴ and undermine Tibetan national identity at its roots.

The Chinese authorities have sought to seal off Tibet and impose an information blackout. Penalties for even low-level information sharing are among the worst in the world, and almost any expression of Tibetan identity can be branded as 'criminal' or 'splittist'.

There is a deepening sense of separation among Tibetans in Tibet from the Dalai Lama due to both the increased dangers of expressing loyalty to the exiled leader, and the lack of any formal connection between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese authorities in the absence of the official dialogue process. The last round of dialogue between the Dalai Lama's envoys and the authorities in Beijing took place in January, 2010, the longest period of time without a formal meeting since dialogue between the two sides resumed in 2002.

While individual reasons for the self-immolations are ultimately unknowable, virtually all of the Tibetans who have set fire to themselves in Tibet have communicated a wish for the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet and for freedom.⁵ A Tibetan mother of two who set fire to herself a day after the Chinese Party Congress left a note calling for the new Chinese Party Secretary Xi Jinping to meet the Dalai Lama.

This report includes details about the lives of 58 Tibetans who have set fire to themselves, including translated copies of notes they left behind or details of their last words to friends and family.

Prospects for genuine regional autonomy in Tibetan areas have continued to worsen as some influential officials connected to Tibet policy push for a scaling back of ethnic autonomy and preferential policies towards Tibetans and other 'ethnic' groups. The policy debate in China has featured hardline statements against the protection of Tibetan language. Concern for the survival of the Tibetan language has been expressed by a number of Tibetans who have self-immolated.

A fundamentally new approach is warranted in Tibet. The Chinese government needs to take immediate steps to address the current emergency in Tibetan areas. Governments in the international community should coordinate their efforts with other like-minded countries and explicitly call upon the Chinese government to address the policies in Tibet threatening Tibetan culture, religion and identity that are at the root cause of the current crisis. The international community should also prevail upon the Chinese leadership to end the excessive military buildup and limit the dominance of the security apparatus, factors that have intensified the dangers in Tibet, increasing the risk of more self-immolations. The Chinese government must acknowledge the importance of the Dalai Lama to the Tibetan people and his critical role in Tibet's future, and engage in a broader and more substantive dialogue with Tibetan representatives as a matter of urgency. The international community should re-evaluate its approach on Tibet as an issue tied to Asian and global security, of increasing geopolitical significance.

The self-immolations in Tibet and Chinese policy

"We are not terrorists, we are Buddhists, so we are not going to harm any other people"

Unidentified monk in Ngaba, speaking in a clandestine interview with Sky Television News, report dated March 6, 2012 ⁶

"Through self-immolation, the Tibetans are symbolically saying that because of the Chinese repression and the Dalai Lama's exile, they are as alive as a dead body waiting to be cremated. Thus, in setting their bodies on fire they are in reality cremating themselves — and also mocking their tormentors who, unable to establish supremacy over the hearts and minds of Tibetans, forever seek to control their bodies."

Ajaz Ashraf, The Daily Times, Pakistan, Friday, November 9, 2012 ⁷

"Father, yet, please do not be disheartened by this/ No happiness exists in your homeland yet your teachings are in our heart as never before/ We have children retaining the father's trace and reciting the father's teaching from the heart/ learning father's tongue and speaking pure father's tongue"

Lyrics from 'Father,' sung by popular Khampa singer Dekyi Tsering. ⁸

Early in the afternoon of February 27, 2009, a Tibetan monk in his twenties called Tapey walked out of his monastery alone to a nearby crossroads, doused himself in kerosene, and set himself on fire. Hours earlier, officials had announced that monks at Kirti monastery in Ngaba would not be allowed to observe Monlam, a traditional monastic prayer festival that is held after Tibetan New Year. Tibetan sources believe this was a factor in Tapey's decision to set himself on fire. ⁹

Since that first iconic image ¹⁰ of Tapey walking in the middle of the road in Ngaba near a parked bus, flames billowing from his maroon robes, 77 more Tibetans have self-immolated in Tibet, including a 19-year old female student, a young mother of two, and the grandfather of an important reincarnate lama in Labrang. ¹¹

While the earlier self-immolations were carried out by monks, former monks and nuns, laypeople have dominated more recent self-immolations. Forty-one of the 65 self-immolations that have occurred in 2012, up until November 21, were laypeople, including Tibetans from different sectors of society, such as students, farmers and nomads, with 19 carried out by monks. ¹² There has been a dramatic increase in frequency of the self-immolations, with 16 carried out in a three-week period from November 4, 2012, including five on November 7, 2012, the day before the Party Congress opened in Beijing. ¹³

Although the majority of the earlier self-immolations were carried out by monks at Kirti in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba), they have spread across Tibet, with the first two self-immolations in Lhasa, the historical and cultural capital, in May 2012.¹⁴ There have been clusters of self-immolations in specific areas, such as Ngaba, Labrang (Chinese: Xiahe), Gansu, and most recently in Rebkong, Qinghai (all in the Tibetan area of Amdo).

Most of the Tibetans who have self-immolated have been in their twenties – 37 of them, with most of those in their early to mid-twenties, and 22 in their late teens. The youngest was 14. A far smaller proportion of the total 61 are older – with seven in their thirties, five in their forties, three in their fifties and one in his sixties.¹⁵ Poignantly, the oldest of the Tibetans to self-immolate so far, Dhondup – who died after he set himself on fire at Labrang monastery on October 22, 2012 – was of the belief that younger Tibetans should protect their lives. Before his death, according to friends, he had frequently expressed the view that if Tibetans need to self-immolate, then it should be the older generation who does so, not the young.¹⁶

Given the number, time-frame and specific locality of the self-immolations, analysts believe that this constitutes one of the biggest waves of self-immolation as political protest globally in the past 60 years, eclipsing the number of self-immolation protests by Vietnamese monks, those associated with the Vietnam War and the pro-democracy movement in South Korea. Oxford University sociologist Michael Biggs, who studies politically-driven suicides, said: “In scale, this is one of the biggest waves of self-immolation in the last six decades, particularly that it’s in one small area of China and in one small ethnic group, definitely, in terms of the intensity compared to the population, it seems to be much greater.”¹⁷

The self-immolations are a serious development for Tibetans in Tibet, and also for the Chinese leadership. They have raised the stakes in Tibet, both in terms of increased global attention, and in the context of a year of unprecedented generational change in the leadership, culminating with the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party, held on November 8.¹⁸ Seven out of the nine current Standing Committee members reached retirement age in this transition, and Xi Jinping took over from Hu Jintao as the CCP’s top leader.¹⁹

Tibetans had feared that there would be more self-immolations at the time of the Party Congress, indicating an intention by Tibetans to make a strong statement to the incoming leadership. These fears were realized when there were five self-immolations in Tibet on the day before the Party Congress opened – the highest number in one day since the self-immolations began. This pattern of intensity continued, and at the time of going to press had increased still further in frequency.

The self-immolations during the Party Congress were followed by spontaneous gatherings of thousands of Tibetans in the eastern Tibetan area of Amdo, specifically in Rebkong (Chinese: Tongren), Qinghai, to mark the deaths of the Tibetans who had set themselves on fire and in peaceful protest and vigils. All sectors of society – students, farmers, monks, nomads, teachers, children – came together to make reasonable and measured demands for change.²⁰ The next day, the second day of the Party Congress in Beijing, students at Qinghai Nationalities University held a vigil in solidarity with the self-immolators.²¹ On the same day, thousands of schoolchildren and students marched peacefully through Rebkong in Amdo, gathering later to chant long life prayers for the Dalai Lama.²²

While all of the motivations of individual Tibetans who self-immolate are ultimately unknowable, the clearest message from almost every Tibetan to set themselves on fire is for the Dalai Lama to be allowed to return to Tibet.²³ As Tibetan nomad and former monk Jinpa Gyatso set himself ablaze in Rebkong (Amdo) on November 8, 2012, the first day of the Party Congress, he could be heard calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet. Tsewang Norbu, a monk from Nyitso monastery in Tawu, drank petrol before immolating himself and calling for freedom and the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet.²⁴

A bold Tibetan cadre in Rebkong underlined the reasons why Tibetans self-immolated to a group of visiting officials after several self-immolations in the area at the time of the Party Congress. When visiting officials condemned the self-immolations, the Tibetan replied that while he could not speak for others, he felt that the reason for the self-immolations is that people are not allowed to have the Dalai Lama's photograph, they are not allowed to pray for the Dalai Lama, and the Chinese government does not allow the Dalai Lama to return home. The local official also mentioned that the Panchen Lama is still in Chinese custody (referring to the 11th Panchen Lama, who disappeared in 1995 after he was recognized by the Dalai Lama). The same official also said that there was no freedom for Tibetans and this was another reason for the self-immolations. "Local people said that he was very brave to tell the truth, and they were very moved," a Tibetan source told ICT.²⁵

Chagmo Kyi, a 26 year old Tibetan mother of two who self-immolated and died in Rebkong two days after the new CCP leadership was announced, was also precise and specific. Letters she had left written in both Chinese and Tibetan before her self-immolation expressed her wish for equality of all nationalities and called on the new Chinese leader Xi Jinping to meet with the Dalai Lama. She had written the word "peace" on the letter sheet.²⁶

On the opening day of the Party Congress on November 8, 2012, several security guards inside the Great Hall of the People held fire extinguishers, while outside on Tiananmen Square firefighters stood to attention with fire extinguishers at their feet.

Commentators wrote in the international media that the self-burnings tarnished the Party's attempts to present an image of a stable power transition. Some Chinese netizens also helped spread the news about the self-immolations and express their concerns through social media, despite intense internet censorship in the buildup to, and during, the Party Congress.²⁷

When reporters raised the issue of the self-immolations, delegates to the 18th Party Congress blamed the Dalai Lama, or sought to avoid the question. "Can I not answer that?" one asked nervously, the New York Times reported.²⁸ Other delegates held firm to the claim that Tibetan people are all 'happy,' but still acknowledging serious restrictions and surveillance in the region. Lobsang Gyaltsen, the vice-chairman of the local government in Tibet, appeared to cast doubt upon his own claim of contentment in Tibet when he made the first reference to a massive surveillance operation in Tibet following the self-immolations. Lobsang Gyaltsen said: "We do not want to see such incidents [as the self-immolations]. We do not want anyone to spoil Tibet as a happy region. For locals, we are checking IDs and for visitors we have checkpoints and security checks on travel. We also have a grid management system, so if any immolation happens in a certain block, we can launch an emergency rescue within two minutes."²⁹

Rather than seeking to address the causes of the self-immolations, the emphasis by the authorities is – literally – on fire-fighting. With no trace of irony, in an article entitled "Firemen in Monk's Robes," the official news agency Xinhua announced a new 18-man fire team at a monastery in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Prefecture in Sichuan. "They are responsible for regular safety checks, patrols and teaching other monks about firefighting," the fire brigade chief, Liao Jun, told Xinhua. "But most important of all, they are expected to give first aid in emergencies." The article did not mention the self-immolations in Tibet, which began in Ngaba, an area with a dense concentration of monasteries that remains under tight lockdown.³⁰

Policy failure in Tibet has not been officially acknowledged by the CCP authorities, who have sought to characterize the self-immolations as imitative, criminal, or misguided acts of "terrorism-in-disguise" and have blamed Nobel Peace Prize laureate the Dalai Lama. During the Party Congress in Beijing in November 2012, Tibetan delegate Lobsang Gyaltsen went so far as to say: "It is actually an act of murder to entice somebody to commit suicide... The Dalai Lama group is sacrificing other people's lives to achieve their evil goals."³¹

In the week of the Party Congress, the Dalai Lama expressed his frustration about the lack of investigation into the causes of the self-immolations by the Chinese government. "The Chinese government should investigate the cause (of the incidents). China does not look into it seriously and tries to end (the incidents) only by criticising me," the Dalai Lama told reporters in Okinawa, Japan, on November 12, 2012.³²

Despite this standard official line, as the scale of the tragedy has increased, the state media narrative appeared less authoritative on the matter than usual, and it took more than three years from the first self-immolation in Tibet for the authorities to issue their most elaborate response in the form of a video.³³ This appeared to expose a level of uncertainty and anxiety in how to handle the self-immolations, in particular when compared to the aggressive handling of, most notably, the self-immolation of apparent Falun Gong practitioners in Tiananmen Square in 2001, which led to a mass campaign by the authorities to eliminate the practice and its practitioners. While in this case the state media succeeded in whipping up widespread revulsion against Falun Gong, in Tibet the overwhelming response to the self-immolations has been one of respect, and the authorities' attempts to turn people against the self-immolators has been a resounding failure.

There is an increasing sense of urgency among Tibetans about resolving the crisis in Tibet because of the Dalai Lama's age. He will be 80 in July, 2015, which is regarded as an important age by Tibetans. "Tibetans see it as a moment in someone's lifetime when they step back a little from the world; it can mark a conclusion to active engagement and the beginning of an inner preparation for the ending of one's life," a Tibetan in exile from Amdo told ICT.

The self-immolations and a new political moment in Tibet

“Self immolation should not be understood as utilitarianism, it is belief, but at the same time there is no intellectual barrier that a self-immolator cannot cross. Any explanation of self-immolation is pallid, except for self-immolation itself.”

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei via Twitter on March 8, 2012 ³⁴

“Self-immolation is a reclamation of sovereignty over one’s own self within a state of siege. Biological life is taken in an assertion of a political life. It is this possibility that is terrifying to the state in its quest to stabilize territorial sovereignty.”

Emily T Yeh, March, 2012 ³⁵

The word ‘self-immolation’ literally means ‘self-sacrifice,’ deriving from the Latin ‘molare,’ meaning to make a sacrifice of grain. A Tibetan lama, Lama Sobha, who set fire to himself on January 8, 2012, referred to this meaning in his final testimony, found after his death as a tape cassette wrapped in his robes. It said: “I am giving away my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering, and to lead them – each of whom has been our mother in the past and yet has been led by ignorance to commit immoral acts – to the Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite light. My offering of light is for all living beings, even as insignificant as lice and nits, to dispel their pain and to guide them to the state of enlightenment. I offer this sacrifice as a token of long-life offering to our root guru His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all other spiritual teachers and lamas.” ³⁶

The term ‘self-immolation’ has now become synonymous with burning oneself by fire since the self-immolation of Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc in 1963.

Research on self-immolation indicates that unlike those who volunteer for suicide attacks, individuals who self-immolate have not generally sought to encourage others to do the same. Jan Palach, who set himself alight in 1969 to protest against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, said from his hospital bed: “My act has fulfilled its purpose, but let nobody else do it.”

Similarly, Tibetans who have left testimonies or notes behind to be found after their self-immolation have in general not called for other Tibetans to carry out these acts. Mostly their communication has been addressed to fellow Tibetans, as opposed to the Chinese authorities or the international community, and calling for life-affirming actions of protecting Tibetan cultural identity and connecting to each other as a way of determining their own destiny. The young Kirti monk Phuntsog, who self-immolated on March 16, 2011, told fellow monks while he was dying: “My last message for the six million Tibetans is to unite, like malas [prayer beads] on a string, linking every Tibetan. Tibetan people should work together for the cause as much as they can.” ³⁷

Referring to the messages left behind by Tibetans who self-immolate, journalist Ajaz Ashraf observed: "In their English rendering, these testimonials are remarkable for the absence of fear of death in them, their willingness to undergo searing pain, and their expression of anguish at the repression of their people." ³⁸

In many cases, the self-immolations have led to open expressions of community solidarity. After 43-year old farmer Sonam Thargye self-immolated on March 17, 2012, a group of Tibetans in his local area of Rebkong (Chinese: Tongren), Qinghai, decided that his death should bring them together. There had been various disputes over pastures and land, but local Tibetans decided to resolve these, and relationships within the community improved.

Many Tibetans have travelled from remote areas to visit families of Tibetans who have self-immolated, offering prayers, solidarity and practical support including food and money. In some cases, Tibetans have pledged to dedicate themselves still further to protecting Tibetan values and heritage. After the self-immolation of 18-year old male Nangdrol on February 19, 2012, in Dzamthang, Amdo, Kirti monks in exile reported that more than a thousand Tibetans came individually to the Nangdrol family house, "and pledged before a photo of the Dalai Lama and of the deceased martyr never to engage in theft, feuding or cheating within the community." ³⁹

Gyaltzen, a Tibetan who lives in exile in India and who is related to a Tibetan who set fire to himself and died in January 14, 2012, said: "Right after the self-immolation of my cousin, people of all ages came to my village and helped the victim in such a manner that everyone seemed to belong to our 'family.' All the conflicts which once divided the people blurred away. Even if there was hatred and separation among the Tibetans earlier, everyone acted and felt like brothers and sisters, living and working together. Even my mother, who is in her fifties, started learning Tibetan language."

Protection of the Tibetan language, the bedrock of Tibetan culture and religion, has been a particular focus of the self-immolators in both Amdo and Kham. A harrowing video online shows some of the last words of Ngawang Norphel, who self-immolated together with Tenzin Khedup on June 20, 2012, in Tridu (Chinese: Chengduo) county, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai. The video depicts 22-year old Ngawang Norphel after his self-immolation lying on his side in Zilkar monastery with his disfigured face and head visible. Clearly in agonizing pain, Ngawang Norphel begins to talk about his concerns, with the Tibetan language mentioned first: "My people have no freedom of language. Everybody is mixing Tibetan and Chinese. Be that as it may, take my wealth. I don't need them. What has happened to my Land of Snow? What has happened to my Land of Snow? [This is] for the sake of Tibet. We are in the Land of Snow. If we don't have our freedom, cultural traditions and language, it would be extremely embarrassing for us. We must therefore learn them. Every nationality needs freedom, language and tradition. Without language, what would be our nationality? [Should we then] call ourselves Chinese or Tibetan?" ⁴⁰

Many Tibetans who have called for freedom either as they set themselves ablaze or in final statements have often used the Tibetan word *rangwang*, meaning “freedom.” Others have used the Tibetan term *rangzen*, which refers more specifically to independence.⁴¹

The self-immolations take on a particular significance in part because they are happening in the context of a profoundly religious culture, in which Buddhist beliefs are integral to Tibetan identity, and in which actions and motivations in this life have an impact on future lives. The self-immolations raise difficult questions. Buddhism is against suicide. But there is a precedent in Buddhism for offering one’s body as a form of sacrifice for the benefit of others.⁴²

Many Tibetans who have self-immolated have sought to underline the religious context of their acts. Some have died with their hands clasped in prayer. Many of those who have self-immolated have chosen to do so beside a stupa (reliquary building), monastery or nunnery. Dhondup, a respected elder in his community, died after self-immolating at the side of a temple near the entrance to Labrang monastery,⁴³ while Dolkar Tso set fire to herself by a white stupa at Tsoe Gaden Choeling monastery.⁴⁴

In Tibetan culture, when a person dies the body has to be left undisturbed while special prayers and ceremonies are held for the transference of the person’s consciousness on the path to a beneficial rebirth. This is one of the reasons why in a number of cases, Tibetans at the scene of a self-immolation have risked their lives in attempts to protect the body of the person who has set fire to themselves, and to take them to a place of safety – either a monastery or the person’s home – where traditional rituals can be carried out. It compounds the agony for Tibetans when monks are blocked from praying for Tibetans who have died, as they have been in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) and other areas. In a remarkable set of images, armed paramilitary troops are seen converging upon the body of Dorje Rinchen, who self-immolated in Labrang on October 23, 2012, while local people try to protect him, wreathed in smoke from his burning body. Further images obtained from Labrang that day depict streams of monks and laypeople walking to his home to carry out the traditional rituals, after Chinese police failed to take away his body.⁴⁵

This is not to say that the self-immolations are not deeply controversial, with many Tibetans challenging them as a strategy for change in addition to expressing distress at the loss of life. The Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism and one of the most prominent Tibetan religious leaders, praised the bravery and “pure motivation” of those involved, saying that their acts “are a cry against the injustice and repression under which they live,” but urged them to protect their “precious lives.”

The Karmapa, who lives in India after escaping from Tibet in 2000 and who is the same generation as many of the young Tibetans who have self-immolated, went on to appeal to Tibetans to protect their lives: "Each report of self-immolation from Tibet has filled my heart with pain. Most of those who have died have been very young. They had a long future ahead of them, an opportunity to contribute in ways that they have now foregone. In Buddhist teaching life is precious. To achieve anything worthwhile we need to preserve our lives. We Tibetans are few in number, so every Tibetan life is of value to the cause of Tibet. Although the situation is difficult, we need to live long and stay strong without losing sight of our long term goals." ⁴⁶

The Tibetan writer Wooser posted an open letter to Tibetans on her blog on March 8, 2012, co-authored by Arjia Rinpoche, the former head of Kumbum monastery in Qinghai who defected into exile in 1998. "Tibetans must cherish life and live with resilience. Regardless of the magnitude of oppression, our life is important, and we have to cherish it," they said. "Staying alive allows us to gather the strength as drops of water to form a great ocean. It depends on thousands and more living Tibetans to pass on our nation's spirit and blood!" The letter also asks "monks, the elderly, intellectuals, officials, and the masses" to help prevent more self-immolations.

An anonymous blogger named 'Mindrug' wrote online in response to a poem called "Mourning" written for the self-immolators with the following comment: "I want to express my great respect to both the dead and living heroes. In the meantime, I want to say that the body, the base of the mind, should not be offered as a butter-lamp offering. If we were able to keep our language alive, protect the land of our father and house of our mother, the sky would turn into blue and the sun would rise from behind the clouds again."

The Dalai Lama has said that while he respects the courage of those who have set fire to themselves, he questions the wisdom of their actions, and fears that the self-immolations will cause an even more violent crackdown. In an interview with Reuters in August 2012, he said: "I will not give encouragement to these acts, these drastic actions, but it is understandable and indeed very, very sad. Now the Chinese government, they should investigate what are the real causes. They can easily blame me or some Tibetans but that won't help solve the problem." (Reuters, August 29, 2012.)

In an interview two months later, the Dalai Lama spoke about the complexity of responding to the self-immolations. He said that from a religious standpoint, it was "positive" if someone sacrificed their life with the motivation of doing so "for Buddha dharma, for the well-being of people." But "if these activities are carried with full anger and hatred then [it is] wrong, so difficult to judge." ⁴⁷

The Dalai Lama asserted during the same television interview that the Tibetan self-immolations are non-violent expressions on Chinese policies in Tibet, saying: “Whether right or wrong, [it is] difficult to judge, they are expressed in non-violent way regarding Chinese policy.”

The political leader of the Tibetans in exile, Sikyong Lobsang Sangay, and the Tibetan Parliament in exile (Kashag) have called upon Tibetans not to self-immolate, and to protect their lives, while stating that if China ended its repression in Tibet, the self-immolations would stop.⁴⁸

While profound differences exist about the self-immolations, the overwhelming response from Tibetans to the individuals who self-immolate is one of respect and compassion. The responses by Tibetans across Tibet to the self-immolations indicate both the significance of the actions to the Tibetan people, and the developing and resolute sense of Tibetan solidarity and unity across Tibetan areas.

Thousands of Tibetans gathered to pray at the cremation of Rikyo, a mother of three young children, who set fire to herself and died in Dzamthang, Ngaba (Chinese: Aba), on May 30, 2012. Tibetans continued to pray on the hillside throughout a heavy thunderstorm until the early hours of the morning.⁴⁹ Hundreds of Tibetans in Chentsa, Qinghai (Amdo), faced down armed troops in order to demand the body of Tamdin Thar, who self-immolated on June 15, 2012, and also to pray at his cremation. Images from Tibet depicted monks and laypeople converging upon the cremation despite an intimidating presence of armed troops and special forces who arrived in riot gear in a convoy of vehicles.⁵⁰ The images show Tamdin Thar’s body draped in khatags (Tibetan white and yellow blessing scarves).⁵¹ Local people even created a shrine with burning candles outside the People’s Armed Police base in Chentsa, Malho (Chinese: Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, where Tamdin Thar set himself on fire.⁵²

In Ngaba, where the military presence has been particularly intense and suppression brutal, laypeople camped out at the gates of Kirti monastery a month after the self-immolation of Phuntsog on March 16, 2011, when news spread that monks were going to be taken away. Despite their peaceful, non-confrontational presence, troops set dogs upon them and beat them so severely that two elderly Tibetans died.

Namkho, a Tibetan from the Amdo area of eastern Tibet who now lives in exile, was in Ngaba town on the day that young monk Phuntsog set himself on fire on March 16, 2011. Namkho told ICT about this moment, on the anniversary of the March 16 uprising in 2008, when at least 18 Tibetans had been killed after protesting against Chinese rule:

“At around 3.30 in the afternoon, I was having a cup of tea in a cafe when I got a call from a friend. He told me that there was a problem and I should go home immediately. I left the cafe but I couldn’t get home. There were too many armed police and every road was blocked. Then I heard that a monk had self-immolated. A 20-year old monk called Phuntsog had drunk kerosene, walked out of his monastery, Kirti, and set himself on fire.

“I heard later that Phuntsog had prepared for his action after prayers. He folded his robes and left them neatly in his room in such a way that clearly expressed he was not going to return for a while. While I do not know exactly what went on in Phuntsog’s mind when he set fire to himself, I think I can understand something of his anguish, his feelings. Us Tibetans have no recourse to express ourselves. This is why Tibetans are taking this step. Every Tibetan in Ngaba – across Tibet – feels very deeply about the oppressive Chinese policies, and every Tibetan wants to do something to protect their cultural and religious identity. We are also waiting – hoping – for His Holiness to come home.”

Namkho went to Phuntsog’s cremation, and he took the risk of filming it, despite the certain knowledge that he would severely punished if he had been caught. He continued:

“It seemed to me that Phuntsog’s cremation became a focus for Tibetan people’s grief and sense of loss, as well as an expression of their solidarity and strength as Tibetans.

“I filmed as around 500 Tibetans converged on the hillside, monks and laypeople. They bore khatags, Tibetan white blessing scarves. The noise of their chanting the mantra dedicated to His Holiness rang in my ears. There were mothers carrying children, there were old men walking with a stick. People were crying, they were sharing their sorrow. It was as if there was nothing else for them to do. It felt as though my heart was breaking. Ever since then, I have not been the same person.

“To me, the response of the Tibetan people to the self-immolations tells us something significant. It tells us about a particular moment in Tibet, a moment when ordinary people are coming together to protect what is most precious to them. There may be unbearable oppression, but as one young Tibetan said to me, ‘Who can say with any certainty that there is no hope?’”

Self-immolation as a form of protest is a dramatic and powerful statement, but it does not involve the death of others. Despite facing oppression, dispossession, and policies that undermine Tibetan religion, culture and livelihoods over the past half-century, in the main, Tibetans have not turned to violence.

This is due to the Dalai Lama's influence, and also to the philosophies embedded in Tibetan Buddhist culture. The self-immolations can arguably be characterized as a rejection of terrorism in accordance with core values of their cultural identity.

Oxford scholar Dr Michael Biggs defines self-immolation as an "extreme form of protest" carried out "for a collective cause," saying that: "Unlike a suicidal attack, an act of self-immolation is not intended to cause physical harm to anyone else or to inflict material damage." ⁵³

A Tibetan from the eastern Tibetan area of Amdo who is now in exile in Europe said: "The Tibetans who are self-immolating are not picking up a gun or a knife and attacking Chinese. They are very deliberately giving the message that they are doing this to themselves." Another Tibetan from Amdo observed that at a major festival he attended in the Machu (Chinese: Maqu) area of Gansu, Tibetan nomads and herdsmen were demonstrably not carrying weapons such as guns or knives, which traditionally they would wear about their person at such an event. The Tibetan said: "It is because they want to underline the new solidarity among Tibetans, to stress that they know His Holiness' message of non-violence."

Chinese commentator Hu Ping said in a video commentary recorded for Human Rights in China: "Self-immolation is not a product of hopelessness. If a person really feels there is no hope at all or is infatuated with a cult and believes that suicide is the way to reach heaven, this person would use a simpler, easier and less painful way to commit suicide but self-immolation is an extremely harrowing and painful act and must be performed in public. It thus demonstrates the actors' strong resolve to convey a message and to let people understand his or her situation in order to have an impact on public opinion so, many self immolations embody a powerful intense meaning of non-violent resistance." ⁵⁴

At the same time, the fact that Tibetans are prepared to carry out this horrifying act has raised fears among many Tibetans for the future struggle inside Tibet. Some Tibetans who have travelled widely across Tibet have described hearing discussions among some young Tibetans about whether to undertake violent action or sabotage of infrastructure at some point. "The time to save lives is now," wrote a group of young educated Tibetans from eastern Tibet, in a letter published in this report. "Until our generation, our religion has come from Tibet, has thrived in our land, giving a strong sense of moral values, of compassion. We are the first generation who has no access to that. We are frightened for a generation growing up without that. We need His Holiness to teach us forgiveness. If something happened to His Holiness and he was not able to go back home and we were not able to see him then we cannot tell you what will happen. We fear for that very deeply. We fear violence will happen and that it will be worse than has ever been known in Tibet."

An alternate narrative of cultural resilience is taking shape in Tibet as Tibetans take increasingly bold steps to defend the core values of their culture. Tibetan responses to the self-immolations can be seen in a context of a developing political consciousness among Tibetans from all sectors of society since protests swept across the plateau from March, 2008 onwards. The Tibetan writer Tagyal, who uses the penname Shogdung (meaning 'morning conch') documented this development in the foremost piece of literature to emerge from the 2008 protest movement in the form of a book that was banned as soon as it was published.

Tagyal was imprisoned for six months as a result of the publication in March, 2010, of "The Division of Heaven and Earth: on the Peaceful Revolution of the Earth Rat Year," in which he writes: "[At] the start of the 21st century, a large-scale peaceful revolution, not just in Lhasa but in all three provinces⁵⁵ of Tibet, calling out for freedom and equality, carried forward with complete determination and sincerity may be difficult to see as a newly awakened awareness of individual rights, but is a sure sign of the attainment of a consciousness of nationality, culture and territory. That revolution starting from the 10 March anniversary in Lhasa was like a stone thrown into a pond, sending ripples out in all directions, with all kinds of manifestations from the monasteries to the towns, among both men and women, from Tö Ngari in the west to Mé Doekham in the east, from the highland pastures to the valley pathways, like stars twinkling in the sky or flowers blooming from the earth."⁵⁶

Characterised by some Tibetans in exile as a 'tsampa revolution' – referring to the Tibetan roasted barley staple as a symbol of Tibetan identity that transcends sect and regionalism⁵⁷ – a younger generation of Tibetans is developing new strategies and new modes of expression to counter censorship and political repression. Artists create work that employs Tibetan motifs in unconventional ways; rap and hip-hop songs make metaphorical allusions to the Dalai Lama or the Karmapa in exile, and virtual and real 'pure language' communities are created to protect the Tibetan language.⁵⁸

The *Lhakar* movement is a homegrown, Tibetan self-reliance movement that started in the aftermath of the 2008 uprising. While it started quietly and in a non-confrontational manner in Tibet, exiles in the Tibetan diaspora have taken up a 'Lhakar pledge' to protect their Tibetan identity. Every Wednesday – considered the Dalai Lama's 'soul day' – Tibetans make a special effort to wear traditional clothes, speak Tibetan, eat in Tibetan restaurants and buy from Tibetan-owned businesses. They channel their spirit of resistance into social, cultural and economic activities that are self-constructive (promoting Tibetan language, culture and identity) and non-cooperative (refusing to support Chinese institutions and businesses). (See <http://lhakar.org/>).

The Tibetan writer Woesser, who is under almost constant surveillance living in Beijing with her Chinese husband Wang Lixiong, believes: “Our ‘fight’ [today] does not signify as it did for Mao something bloodstained and violent, an armed revolution, a class struggle. Non-violence is also a struggle, a greater and more enduring fight! For each individual, this fight starts with oneself, in the present moment, in each particular detail of living. Let us begin identifying ourselves as Tibetans, for this is our duty: any effort of daily life, however small, is still a kind of struggle.”

It is all the more remarkable that despite their knowledge of the consequences of individual actions, those Tibetans who attempted to protect monks at Kirti, who faced down armed troops to peacefully pray for Tibetans they had never met who self-immolated, and those writers and bloggers who dare to ‘speak truth to power’ are still prepared to act.

Scholar and expert in non-violent revolution Gene Sharp, author of the guide to toppling autocrats, “From Dictatorship to Democracy,” believes that this capability to experience fear and act despite of it is critical in creating conditions for political change. While warning that one can never under-estimate the violence authoritarian regimes are prepared to employ in order to quell resistance, Dr Sharp cites Gandhi talking about the importance of “casting off fear.” Addressing an audience in London in January, 2012, Dr Sharp said: “This is something Gandhi was always saying, and I thought it is really [...] kind of extreme; I’m not sure he’s quite right, maybe you can only control fear. But [now] in Syria and in country after country people are saying, I’m not afraid anymore, people [being] interviewed [by broadcast media] are saying, use my name, I’m not afraid anymore. This audacity is something tyrants cannot tolerate. [...] That is why they have political police and torturers to make people frightened.”⁵⁹

Just as Beijing seeks to enforce a police state across Tibet, Tibetans are broadening the definition of what it means to be Tibetan and daring to challenge the official state narrative. In doing so, they present a more complex challenge to the Chinese Communist Party leadership than before.

In the words of the Amdowa singers from the popular hip-hop collective Yudrug in a track called “New Generation”: “As I said what I wanted to say, I didn’t turn into a mute/ Our story has not ended here, it’s just the beginning.”⁶⁰

China's 'stability maintenance' policies and securitization in Tibet

"The system is decaying and the system is evolving," [Yang Jisheng] said. 'It is decaying while it is evolving. It is not clear which side might come out on top."

Richard McGregor, citing Yang Jisheng, author of "Tombstone," a major work documenting the famine in China from 1958 ⁶¹

"It's pretty much common knowledge in all walks of life, from intellectuals to politicians, that the 'stability maintenance' policy is the policy of failure. Surveys of millions of petitioners have shown that their discontent is directed mostly at the police, the prosecution service, and the courts. To try to cure instability with its main cause is really quite ridiculous."

U.S. based China analyst Li Hongkuan ⁶²

"He only knows how to scheme, but does not know how to pacify"

Open letter by Tibetan cadre Luo Feng, criticising 'stability maintenance' policies in Ngaba, Sichuan. This particular reference is to the head of administration at Kirti monastery ⁶³

Amidst wrenching change in China as well as Tibet, and in order to assert the Party's dominance and control at the time of a leadership transition, the Beijing authorities have stepped up their attempts to crush dissent against one-Party rule and expand their attack on civil society. Justice Minister Wu Aiyong told officials from across China in July that they should make 'maintaining stability' their top priority as the Communist Party geared up for the 18th Party Congress in November 2012. ⁶⁴

The Party's 'stability maintenance' policy (*weiwen*) is a dramatic and costly expansion of the powers of China's military and policing personnel that is increasingly regarded as a flawed tool of CCP control. ⁶⁵ According to official statistics, domestic security spending in the PRC in 2012 increased by 11.5 per cent to 702 billion yuan (US \$106 billion) – exceeding the national defense budget for a second consecutive year. ⁶⁶

At the same time, across China, public opinion is being shaped outside Communist Party propaganda, with wide-spread use of the internet and micro-blogging, and the number of 'mass' incidents (demonstrations, riots, or unauthorized public meetings) reached 180,000 in 2011, compared with 87,000 five years before. ⁶⁷ State Counselor Niu Wenyan said that there were an average of 500 'mass incidents' every day in 2011, and the number has shown no sign of abating. ⁶⁸

A report by the European Council on Foreign Relations in June, 2012, concluded: "China's complex 'stability maintenance machine' is made up of different ministries and administrative bodies – but the system seems incapable of dealing with China's underlying social problems."

Tsinghua University sociologist Sun Liping argues that the 'stability maintenance' regime has "hijacked the reform agenda and thrown China's political, social and economic life into a state of 'abnormality'." ⁶⁹ Civil rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang told Reuters that 'stability maintenance' is "a national policy that has overridden all boundaries and rules." ⁷⁰

One of the key questions facing the new leadership following the 18th Party Congress is whether they will rein in the security apparatus and challenge the concept of 'stability maintenance,' a prerequisite of any opening to compromise or confidence-building measures in China and in Tibet. In the buildup to the Party Congress on November 8, 2012, some commentators speculated whether incoming leader Xi Jinping would assert authority over an internal security regime that has been growing out of control. Citing various security officials and analysts, China-based journalist John Garnaut wrote that downgrading the status of the internal security apparatus would be "perhaps the most important" initiative in the coming Congress, according to Huang Jing, an expert on Chinese politics at the National University of Singapore. "The leader who controls the gun will not be allowed to sit in the supreme decision-making organ," he said. "It is the same logic as removing the People's Liberation Army from the Politburo Standing Committee in the 1990s." ⁷¹

This analysis was borne out when it became clear that the domestic security tsar, in charge of the powerful Politics and Law Committee (PLC) overseeing all legal enforcement authorities including the police and judiciary, was not assigned a seat on the Politburo Standing Committee, signalling an intention to limit the political clout of the role. Former incumbent Zhou Yongkang, who is retiring, was previously the Party Secretary of Sichuan province (1999-2002), presiding over the sentencing to death (commuted to a life sentence) of well-known and respected Tibetan lama, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche. Zhou had gained a reputation for his hardline approach against dissent and Tibetan culture. ⁷² Zhou's deputy Meng Jianzhu was confirmed as the new Secretary of the committee on November 19, 2012. Meng Jianzhu sits on the Central Committee Politburo, but is not on the top seven-member Politburo Standing Committee. ⁷³

Those who study the weiwen system believe that it is unlikely China's security state will be reined in. Guo Xuezhi, a professor at Guilford College in North Carolina and author of the book "China's Security State," said: "Xi and the Standing Committee will want to make weiwen decisions themselves instead of having one person [like Zhou] control it. The new leaders' No 1 criterion for success will still be maintaining stability." ⁷⁴

Securitisation in Tibet: a ‘war against secessionist sabotage’

“Laws and police power are actually less effective than religion in creating social stability, because they only act as a negative deterrent and operate through the principle of punishment. They do not produce or promote goodness in society. China currently has millions of policemen and national guards, not to mention all kinds of joint forces for national security and neighborhood protection. But crime rates continue to rise, and the annual budget for fighting crime keeps increasing as well. If police power and laws are the only way to achieve security, then what check is there on police and government actions in turn? With limited resources, how can they look after an area as vast as Tibet? The restraints provided by religion and morality are necessary alongside physical policing. It is a mistake to treat religion as the enemy. China is making such a mistake.”

Wang Lixiong, in his essay “The End of Tibetan Buddhism” ⁷⁵

In Tibet, the intensification of state control has taken the form of a violent crackdown since protests swept across the plateau in 2008. Since the self-immolations began, the authorities have gone so far as to characterise their approach in Tibetan areas as a “war against secessionist sabotage.” ⁷⁶

Jia Qinglin, chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and a key figure in Tibet policy, outlined the hardline policies in the buildup to the Party Congress in Beijing when he said that: “The country is in a key period of fighting against the Dalai Lama group.” ⁷⁷

Since March 2008, the Chinese government has engaged in a systematic attempt to block news of the arrests, torture, disappearances and killings that have taken place across Tibet. The dangers faced by Tibetans who seek to describe the situation on the ground or simply express their views to the outside world are significant, which is linked to the widespread availability of the internet and other means of communication and the challenges that poses to China’s aspirations for domestic and international message control.

The towns of Serthar (Chinese: Seda) and Draggo (Chinese: Luhuo) in Sichuan, sites of demonstrations and suppression following the self-immolations in late January 2012, had their internet connections severed.

The Chinese state media acknowledged this, stating that Internet connections and mobile phone networks were cut for 50km surrounding the protest areas. Text messaging and internet access were disrupted in other areas of Sichuan and the TAR, and a number of Tibetan language blog sites hosted in China went offline in early February without explanation. ⁷⁸

In Tibetan areas of the PRC, 'stability maintenance' has therefore been carried out on a war footing. In Ngaba (Chinese: Aba), Sichuan, where the current wave of self-immolations began, analysis of official statistics found that between 2002 and 2006, public security spending per capita in Aba, where ethnic Tibetans constitute 52 percent of the population, was three times the average in the non-Tibetan areas, including the provincial capital. Since 2006, per capita government spending on security in Aba county alone has been 4.5 times as high as spending in non-Tibetan areas of Sichuan. And the rate of increase on security spending there is almost twice that in non-Tibetan areas of the province. This dramatic increase in security spending was despite the fact that there had been no reported incidents of significant unrest until 2008.

A Human Rights Watch report analysing these statistics concluded: "These findings suggest that the increase in government spending on security has contributed to provocative policing techniques such as monastery blockades and the mass detentions of monks that have repeatedly contributed to local discontent and unrest. The increased security measures appear to have been a major factor in the escalation of tensions that have led to several protests in which monks tried to set themselves on fire to bring attention to the situation in Aba." ⁷⁹

Woeser, the Tibetan writer based in Beijing, said in March: "There is basically military rule right now," she said. "It heightened the pressure, and if it continues, there will be more self-immolations to come." ⁸⁰

In other areas too, official policy has proved deeply counter-productive. In Rebkong (Chinese: Tongren), Qinghai, two self-immolations on November 12, 2012 directly followed a visit by officials to the area condemning earlier acts and warning Tibetans not to keep photographs of the Dalai Lama. ⁸¹ Twenty-three year old Tamdrin Tso, who self-immolated a few days before on November 7, 2012 in Rebkong, left a letter behind to her father, saying: "Father, being a Tibetan is so difficult. We can't even say our prayer to Dalai Lama's portrait. We have no freedom at all." ⁸²

In February 2012, TAR Party Secretary Chen Quangguo warned that "irresponsible officials ... found guilty of dereliction of duty in maintaining stability" ⁸³ shall be removed from the posts, or worse – a warning to all officials and cadres that they must enforce the hardline Party line, and that there is no space for moderate or measured handling of the situation.

Regional and local officials also know that raising the stakes of the struggle by committing to improve *weiwen* is a way of obtaining increased resources from the central authorities.

In Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Prefecture, Communist Party Secretary Shi Jun was rewarded by Beijing for presiding over the systematic and violent oppression since Tapey's self-immolation in February, 2009 with a major promotion to the Director General of Public Security for Sichuan Province.

In a bold and outspoken open letter criticizing Shi Jun's leadership, which has been published online in English, a Tibetan cadre called Luo Feng wrote the following about the situation in Ngaba, where the wave of self-immolations began: "There is a saying among the people: the practice of one guard every three paces and a sentry post every five paces is just like Iraq, the practice of more members of the [monastic management] working team than the number of monks is like the Cultural Revolution, and the practice of having the common people live under the gun is like Libya."⁸⁴

In his letter, Luo Feng attributes the "greatest damage" by the leadership in Ngaba as that done to Tibetan culture, writing that: "All those who wear Tibetan costume cannot enter the gate of Ngaba Party Committee or Ngaba People's Government. All those who speak Tibetan have become an object of suspicion. In [Shi Jun's] view, Tibetan costumes should only appear on stage or in dramas, otherwise, those who wear them are disloyal. [...] The result is that the stability, unity, harmony and development of minority regions has not been achieved." Luo Feng argues that this approach is consolidated by the appointment of officials who have no knowledge of circumstances in Tibetan areas, who emphasise the 'stability maintenance' policies, and are ignorant about Tibetan religion and language. He singles out as an example Liu Feng, the head of the Administration Department of Kirti Monastery who "only knows how to scheme, but does not know how to pacify."⁸⁵

Warnings from within of 'a social governance tragedy'

While the Chinese authorities have sought to blame the Dalai Lama and 'outside forces' for the self-immolations and unrest, in China, intellectuals, netizens, bloggers and even some officials believe that these incidents reveal deeper failures in policy.

Well-known Chinese writer and scholar Wang Lixiong, who is married to Woesser, wrote in a bold petition to the National People's Congress on March 8, 2012: "Recently, self-immolations in Tibet have been unceasingly increasing, with the tendency of spreading quickly; violent incidents have occurred in Xinjiang one after another, and the situation there is grave.

In residential areas where Tibetans and Uighurs live, many military policemen are on duty, and there are a great number of fortifications as well. The scene is just like a war. Even in Inner Mongolia where it used to be relatively tranquil, protests also occurred last year. All these are sufficient to show there are serious problems concerning current nationality policies. The National People's Congress should launch an investigation into the real situation of the nationality areas, and should also self-criticize and rectify nationality policies." ⁸⁶

Wang Lixiong's approach is backed by a number of governments including the United States, the European Union, Germany and the UK. On October 24, 2012, a U.S. State Department spokesperson told journalists: "We have consistently expressed our concern about the violence in the Tibetan areas, about the continuing pattern of self-immolations, heightened tensions, and Tibet in general. And we continue to both publicly and privately urge the Chinese Government at all levels to address the underlying policies in Tibet that have created these tensions and that threaten the cultural heritage of the region." ⁸⁷

The Chinese government's ethnic policy is laid out in a framework of laws and institutions characterised by the authorities as seeking to protect the autonomy of each of the 56 recognised ethnic groups (minzu), including Tibetans. Details on the legal equality of each minzu is enshrined in the Constitution of the PRC, Article 4, with the Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy outlining specific provisions to protect and promote the cultural, economic and political development of each minority group. These include a series of controversial legal, education, employment, and family planning preferential benefits.

But the CCP prioritises fast-track economic development and political dominance above cultural protection of the ethnic groups, and changes in Chinese laws and regulations over the past decade have tended to decrease the protection of the Tibetan language and culture, particularly since the implementation of the Western Development Strategy in 1999-2000 – an ambitious campaign to intensify development of the western regions of the PRC, including Tibet. ⁸⁸

Communist Party control always supersedes the practice of regional ethnic autonomy in Tibetan areas of the PRC – the Party's interests come first. It is also eroded by the large numbers of Chinese settling in Tibetan areas, marginalising the Tibetan population still further.

This means that the level of autonomy that Chinese laws and regulations provide to local Tibetan autonomous governments to protect their language, culture and religion, and to manage policy implementation on issues such as economic development and the environment, is negligible. In the current political climate, it is becoming even more tenuous.

In the context of an intense debate in policy and scholarly circles in China on possible reforms of ethnic policies in the PRC, some influential officials and academics are now advocating a further scaling back of ethnic autonomy and preferential policies towards Tibetans and other 'ethnic' groups.⁸⁹

Early in 2012 Zhu Weiqun, who has been associated with Tibet policy as a United Work Front Department official engaged in the formal dialogue with the Dalai Lama's representatives, made several recommendations that would undermine the status of Tibetans and their culture still further. Referring to "serious problems in the Party's ethnic and religious work," he recommended removing ethnic status from identification cards, a freeze on new areas being recognised as 'autonomous,' and universal adoption of Mandarin and ethnically mixed schooling.⁹⁰ The latter implies a downgrading of Tibetan language, an issue that is passionately felt by Tibetans. It led to major protests by students in Amdo in 2010,⁹¹ and a number of Tibetans who have self-immolated have cited the necessity for protecting the Tibetan language as the bedrock of their culture and identity.

Jamyang Palden, who self-immolated in Rebkong on March 14, 2012, called for protection of the Tibetan language as he set himself ablaze, while Lama Sobha, who died after his self-immolation in January, 2012, said in a tape he left behind: "The elders should carry out spiritual practice as well as maintain and protect Tibetan language and culture by using all your resources and by involving your body, speech and mind."⁹²

Influential academics Ma Rong and Hu Angang have been among the most strident voices in arguing against policies protecting ethnic status, and in favor of an 'inclusive,' shared national identity.⁹³ But experts and scholars who convened for a symposium on ethnic policies in Beijing in February 2012 expressed strong opposition to the proposals raised by Zhu Weiqun and others.⁹⁴ While not directly naming Zhu or others from the "so-called 'second generation ethnic policy' group," the scholars said in a paper that: "Problems can and will arise if a society lacks tolerance of cultural diversity." They went on to cite the "deficiency in trust in minority people in mainstream society" and "the vicious expansion of power awareness among public officials" as factors in promoting the loss of a sense of cultural justice among people.

The more than 40 scholars from several different Party organisations including the National People's Congress and the United Front Work Department, who convened for a symposium of the Chinese Association of Ethnic Theory Research, concluded: "The delusion in the split of minority groups and their instability held by a handful of scholars from mainstream society is in fact a sign of rampant Han chauvinism and weakening of the rule of law. The blind spot in knowledge, the erroneous zone in education, and the deficiency in mutual trust, which can be seen everywhere across the ethnic spectrum in today's China, are turning gradually into a social governance tragedy."⁹⁵

An insecure response and mixed messages: the Chinese media response to the self-immolations and the death of Phuntsog

“Wherever there is oppression, there is resistance. Countries want independence, nations want liberation and the people want revolution – this has become the irresistible trend of history. All nations, big or small, should be equal: big nations should not bully the small and strong nations should not bully the weak. China will never be a superpower and it opposes hegemony and power politics of any kind. The Chinese side stated that it firmly supports the struggles of all the oppressed people and nations for freedom and liberation and that the people of all countries have the right to choose their social systems according their own wishes and the right to safeguard the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of their own countries and oppose foreign aggression, interference, control and subversion.”

Mao Zedong, in 1972 communiqué to Richard Nixon ⁹⁶

The Chinese authorities have variously sought to portray the Tibetans who self-immolate as misguided, psychologically unstable, and guilty of ‘copycat’ actions. A number of officials, known for their hardline approach, have directly blamed the Dalai Lama. Zhu Weiqun, a United Front Work Department official who was involved in the dialogue process with the Dalai Lama’s envoys, said: “The Dalai Lama wants to turn Tibetan Buddhism into a religion of suiciders and self-immolators in order to serve his own political purpose; this is the fundamental reason that these incidents occurred.” ⁹⁷

The Chinese state media issued statements reporting many of the self-immolations as they happened from March 2011 onwards, often relatively quickly. A factor in the decision of the authorities to release their own representation of these incidents could be linked to the rise in use of social media within the PRC and the knowledge that news of self-immolations can spread quickly via these channels.

But it was not until May 2012 – more than a year after Phuntsog’s self-immolation in March, 2011, and three years after the first in Tibet in 2009 – that the Chinese state media produced the most elaborate response in the form of a video broadcast in both Chinese and English (with some variations between the two) on Chinese Central Television (CCTV), China’s predominant state television broadcaster. The preparation time accorded to the documentary, and a series of articles published a month later which gave more human details about those who had self-immolated, could be evidence of individuals within a bureaucratic system struggling for an adequate and coherent response on the self-immolations. ⁹⁸

Although CCTV told Associated Press that the documentary had been aired in several different languages, once the documentary became the subject of international attention, a representative of the TV channel backtracked, saying they were not sure where, when or if it aired.⁹⁹

The Tibetan writer Woesser, who lives in Beijing, wrote in a blogpost in June 2012 that CCTV had not broadcast the documentary to audiences in China, and was not available on Chinese internet TV either, although it was uploaded onto YouTube (which is mostly blocked in China). Woesser also reported that as far as she was aware, the documentary could not be found on various Chinese video websites. Woesser concluded that this is a program specially made for foreign audiences, with even the Chinese version mainly directed at “overseas Chinese.”¹⁰⁰ A Tibetan from Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) who is now living in exile in Switzerland told ICT that Tibetans he spoke to in his home area were not aware of the documentary, despite its detailed focus on the self-immolations in Ngaba. He was told that it had been broadcast at about 3 am, when few were watching television.

Woesser gives her view on why the authorities decided to only broadcast the documentary abroad and not to people within China, saying: “The Chinese government has had to offer an explanation to the world that is favourable to itself and keeps its own face, which becomes evident from the name of this fact-distorting documentary. [...]” She continues: “Is it only to prevent Han Chinese, the majority of all Chinese people, from learning any more about the current situation in Tibet and taking the risk that they start doubting the claims by the authorities that ‘Today, Tibetans are experiencing development and happiness as never before in history’? This is probably one reason, but the more important reason is that they are afraid of provoking the several millions of Tibetans living in Tibet and with them also the much-feared Uyghurs and Mongolians.”¹⁰¹

The apparent focus on a foreign rather than a domestic audience of this state media documentary differs to the saturation coverage dedicated to eliminating the Falun Gong movement after five followers of the movement by the Chinese state media set themselves on fire in Tiananmen Square in January 2001. Falun Gong is a spiritual movement based on the healing tradition, and is banned by the government. The Chinese authorities depicted the deaths as cultic suicide rather than acts of political protest, with one People’s Daily headline reading “Nirvana means slaughter.” They showed graphic images of one of the group, a 12-year old girl, on fire. State television interviewed two of the survivors who had been thwarted in their bid to self-immolate, with one of them cited by Xinhua as saying: “Falun Gong is indeed an evil cult and it led me to this.” (Xinhua, April 7, 2002). Although the exiled leadership of Falun Gong, based in the U.S., denied a connection with the acts, the gloves were off, and the Chinese authorities used what had become a genuine public outrage to launch a major crackdown against it, seeking to eliminate the practice through torture, mass disappearances to military hospitals and re-education.

They even characterised deaths in custody after torture as suicide due to Falun Gong's damaging effects.

The dissemination of the state media broadcast on the self-immolations is in clear contrast with the saturation coverage of the March 14 protests and riots in Lhasa in 2008. When CCTV made a documentary called "Records of the Lhasa Riots" in 2008, footage of the incidents on March 14, 2008, was broadcast over and over again on primetime television in China, and was made into a DVD. In this footage, the deaths of Chinese shop workers were broadcast repeatedly on Chinese national television, with little or no mention of the Tibetan shop workers who died in the same fires – and of course no mention of Tibetans killed when Chinese troops opened fire, or afterwards following torture.¹⁰²

Leading Tibetan historian and scholar Tsering Shakya notes that when much larger riots broke out in Wengan, Guizhou and inland China, even Chinese bloggers wondered why the protestors in Lhasa had been demonized on national television as criminals, while in Wengan the local leadership was sacked, an investigation team sent to review local policies, and news of the incident scarcely reported in the official media at all.¹⁰³

This different response in handling the issue of the self-immolations and the unrest of 2008 appears to indicate some ambiguity in conveying the official line. This is underlined in two commentaries by Xinhua, the Chinese official news agency, which can no longer be found on any PRC website. These commentaries, published in June, 2012, gave an unusual amount of human detail about individuals who had set fire to themselves. Giving such personal details has the effect of encouraging sympathy for the self-immolators, not the government. The articles appear to indicate some respect for those Tibetans who survived self-immolation and who have not capitulated, in comparison to the usual Party line of conspiracy and copycat action.

Jamyang Palden from Rongwo monastery in Rebkong (Chinese: Tongren), Qinghai, who initially survived self-immolation on March 14, 2012 but later died is one of the named self-immolators in the Xinhua 'Insight' article on June 22, 2012.¹⁰⁴ The article details how a semi-quarantined ward has been created at the monastery after Jamyang Palden refused to leave. A doctor is cited as saying: "Every day, we persuade him to go to hospital for surgery, but he is firm in opposing the idea," Rinchencog said. 'I don't want to go anywhere. Here is the best as I consult the Divine,' she quoted Palden as saying. Despite that, he repeatedly said, 'Thank you for treating me,' she said."

A specific mention is also made of Tapey's religious practice and belief in the article, in contrast to other coverage undermining the Buddhist faith of Tibetans who self-immolate.

Referring to the first monk to self-immolate in Tibet (in February 2009), nurses tell Xinhua: “With Tibetan incense, prayer beads and Buddhism sutras laid on his bedside table, Tapey normally spent no less than an hour participating in Buddhist services in both the morning and evening.”

The Xinhua article cites Zhang Zekui, director of the Intensive Care Unit of the People’s Hospital of Aba (Tibetan: Ngaba), Sichuan, saying: “I remember an aging father was devastated by his son’s self-immolation. The father kissed the forehead and burnt hands of his son, tears pouring down his face. He kept murmuring Kazhuo, Kazhuo (Tibetan word for thanks) and prayed for auspiciousness.” (Xinhua, June 22, 2012).

A twisted narrative: state media documentary on self-immolations

The state media documentary entitled “The Dalai clique and the self-immolation incident” weaves together previously unseen footage of a number of self-immolations together with clips of the Dalai Lama speaking in exile at religious teachings, or the exile government’s Prime Minister Sikyong Lobsang Sangay, in order to discredit the self-immolations and impute blame on ‘separatists’ in exile. It sets the bar particularly low when it interviews a prostitute who says she was hired by two former Kirti monks the night before they set themselves on fire.

The Chinese authorities used the same device of external blame-casting following the March, 2008 protests and riots. After decades of spending vast resources and efforts at development and maintenance of ‘stability,’ taking responsibility for the unrest would, from the Party’s perspective, be tantamount to acknowledging failure of China’s Tibet policy.

Leading Chinese writer Wang Lixiong writes: “China’s Tibet policy was co-designed and executed by so many different institutions and agencies that admitting failure in this instance is tantamount to announcing the collective failure of all the [...] institutions and ‘anti-separatist’ agencies [that run Tibet policy]. [...] So anti-separatist bureaucrats around China must organize themselves into a power bloc, acting in concert and helping bureaucrats in Tibet to shake off responsibility for this policy failure. The most convenient way to exonerate oneself in this case is to interpret the burden of failure as resulting from the carefully planned and organized efforts at sedition and separatism of the Dalai clique.” ¹⁰⁵

The state media documentary covers incidents involving 13 Tibetans who set themselves on fire, including detailed accounts of the cases of Tapey (February 2009) and Phuntsog (March 16, 2011). It includes video footage and images that are made public for the first time which, as Tibetan writer Woesser points out, “display the great courage of the Tibetan self-immolators.” ¹⁰⁶

The official documentary shows previously-unseen footage of Tapey's self-immolation in February 2009, and an interview with him in hospital. The footage shows him engulfed in flames, walking unsteadily forward, as several police officers approach him from behind. One man, probably plain clothes police, rushes forward and discharges a fire extinguisher over Tapey at close range. With the flames extinguished, Tapey then runs a few steps away. It is at this point that the video footage cuts away without showing what happened next.

The state media has strongly denied reports received by ICT that Tapey was shot by police.¹⁰⁷ But a still photo of what happened after the flames around Tapey's body were extinguished that emerged through unofficial channels appears to confirm reports that officers opened fire after the flames were extinguished, while Tapey was attempting to run. The still photo shows Tapey lying on the ground in his charred robes surrounded by police, with at least three officers holding drawn firearms – the officer closest to the camera appears to be inspecting his firearm which invites speculation he had just fired at least one round.¹⁰⁸

Kirti monks in exile said that further information on Tapey received in January 2012 was that "They are not allowing the bullet wounds on his arms and legs to heal, but repeatedly re-opening them in the name of medical treatment."¹⁰⁹ The same sources said that when Tapey was taken to hospital in Barkham after his self-immolation, the first thing he said to his mother was: "I am not the son you wanted to see. I should have died that day, but I didn't manage it."

The official documentary shows Tapey in hospital, wearing monks' robes, with his head, neck, arms and legs heavily scarred, sitting under a pink quilt emblazoned with the word 'Love.' It is notable that in the video, despite the pressure he must have been under to express his regret, he simply talks about his physical condition, saying that most parts of his body have physically healed and he can write slowly with one of his hands.¹¹⁰

Another monk who self-immolated and is depicted in the video gives a similar succinct message to camera, omitting any mention of regret and manipulation by "external forces." Eighteen-year old Kirti monk Lobsang Kelsang (named in the video as Skalring), who set fire to himself on September 26, 2011, is filmed in his hospital bed saying: "I have no words but thanks – doctors have given me another life, they all treat me well."

The self-immolation of Phuntsog and its aftermath

The official documentary particularly focuses in on the case of 20-year old Kirti monk Phuntsog, who set fire to himself in Ngaba town on March 16, 2011 – the three-year anniversary of a violent crackdown of protests in 2008 which led to the deaths of 18 Tibetans, according to Tibetans from Ngaba. Phuntsog had been known to his teachers at the monastery as a hard-working, down-to-earth student; they advised other students to emulate him because of his thoughtful approach. One of his closest childhood friends told ICT that Phuntsog always took great pride in both his studies and in his physical fitness and stamina. “He liked to show the muscles in his arms and demonstrate his strength,” the monk, in his twenties, said. “He was serious and worked hard, but he had a good sense of fun too.”¹¹¹

Phuntsog’s self-immolation had an electrifying impact on Tibetans in Ngaba. It was to prove significant as a catalyst for an outpouring of emotion and demonstration of solidarity among Tibetans in the area.

Consistent with the actions of other Tibetan self-immolators, Phuntsog does not seem to have talked to anyone about what he was going to do before setting himself on fire, despite allegations that he did in the state media video.

On March 16, 2011, the anniversary of the crackdown and killings of Tibetans in 2008, Ngaba was tense and quiet. According to a Tibetan who was in Ngaba that day, uniformed armed police were keeping a low profile, while there were numerous plain clothed special forces in the streets. Tibetan shops and restaurants were closed in solidarity with the anniversary. Hardly any monks could be seen in the streets, as they knew they would be subject to possible beatings by police.

According to information pieced together later by his friends, Phuntsog then took some kerosene from a motorbike and drank it. He walked out of the monastery and set himself on fire, and he began to run towards the street where Tapey self-immolated, which has been known since then by Tibetans as Heroes Street. While ablaze, he managed to shout, calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet, and for freedom and independence (rangzen) for Tibet. One report cited by the Kirti monks in exile said that Phuntsog shouted: “May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live for 10,000 years!” He fell to the ground twice, and picked himself up both times, attempting to run again.

Within minutes, given the intense presence of Chinese paramilitary in the town, security personnel extinguished the flames and were seen beating Phuntsog, according to reports from Kirti monks in exile, who spoke to eyewitnesses.

The state media broadcast states that Phuntsog died because Tibetans refused to take him to a hospital for treatment. The truth is of course more complex.

The first instincts of some of those who witnessed the self-immolation and subsequent beating were to get Phuntsog away from the paramilitary police and back to the monastery. Kirti monks in exile Kanyag Tsering and Lobsang Yeshe said: "When Phuntsog was taken back to the monastery, there was little hope of his surviving, but as he was not yet dead, there was still a chance. Without government permission, they knew the hospital would not take him."

Tibetans have good reason to fear taking injured individuals involved in political protest to hospital. At times of political unrest or individual actions of dissent, clinics and hospitals in Tibetan areas are known to refuse treatment to those injured or wounded, which happened in Lhasa in March, 2008. Sometimes, injured protestors can be detained instead of given medical attention at hospitals. A Tibetan in Lhasa in March, 2008, said: "On the second day of the protests, even Tibetans who had bruises were treated as suspects and detained. So Tibetans who were injured had no choice but to wait for death."¹¹² In such situations, individuals with medical knowledge have provided some emergency first aid for the wounded, where possible, but it is generally not regarded as safe to go to government-run hospitals for those who have participated in political protests, have self-immolated, or even those who have witnessed protests without participating.

Clandestinely-shot footage released after the event and broadcast by Voice of America Tibetan Service showed a scarred and burnt Phuntsog in the front seat of a car before he was taken back to Kirti.¹¹³ The young monk was in agonizing pain and had been taken to someone's house.

At first Phuntsog could not speak, but then he said in a weak voice that he felt thirsty and felt as if he was burning inside. He took a sip of water but gasped in pain, saying that drinking water made it worse, as if his insides were boiling.¹¹⁴ He told those around him that there was nothing anyone could do as he was burning inside, and that he expected death to come soon. He added that because of the Dalai Lama's blessing he was ready for death. He said: "If I cannot see my parents and my brothers before I die then they should not worry or suffer, I wish my family to be happy with what I was able to do. My last message for the six million Tibetans is to unite, like malas [prayer beads] on a string, linking every Tibetan. Tibetan people should work together for the cause as much as they can."

Phuntsog recited many prayers to the Dalai Lama, asking to be able to die soon, as he was ready for death.

"When we hear that a Tibetan in Tibet has self-immolated, we pray that they will die, as they have already prepared for death, and if they survive, they will undergo even more suffering," a Tibetan exile in Dharamsala told ICT. In the meantime, monk officials from Kirti were negotiating with the Chinese authorities to admit Phuntsog to hospital.

According to the same sources, protests then broke out against the Chinese authorities involving hundreds of monks and laypeople. After an attempted peaceful march from the monastery, police broke up the protests, detaining an unknown number of monks and beating Tibetans involved.

Early on the evening of March 16, 2011, a large group of Kirti monks marched to the main entrance of the monastery to demand the release of those arrested that day, according to Kirti monks in exile in Dharamsala, India. They were met at the gates by a large group of laypeople who pleaded with them not to endanger themselves by going any further, and the head of Kirti's Democratic Management Committee also intervened, asking local officials to release detained monks in order to defuse the tension. The Kirti monks then withdrew inside the monastic compound and began to recite prayers and light butter-lamps, saying that they would not move until those detained were released. Late that night, seven monks were released and driven back to the monastery, and the monastery officials called upon the protesting monks to withdraw, which they did. One of the released monks, Tashi, had a serious head wound from being struck with a steel club.

Some Tibetans detained on that day were not released until later. Among the laypeople detained on March 16, 2011 was a young woman called Tsering Kyi, mother of two young daughters. Tsering Kyi's husband is a well-known editor and writer, Kesang Jinpa, who was detained on July 19, 2010, and is serving a three-year prison sentence.¹¹⁵ Tsering Kyi – whose children were left on their own when she was taken by police – was beaten severely in detention, her hair was cut off, and she was released two days later.¹¹⁶

It was the beginning of an intense lockdown at Kirti and Ngaba, when Tibetans had already been under almost unbearable pressure from the level of securitisation in the area.

Phuntsog died in hospital at around 3 am on March 17, 2011 around ten hours after his self-immolation.

The Chinese state media reported his death on March 17, giving his age as 16, implying immaturity, and also saying that he had epilepsy, as if to infer he was not in full control of his actions.¹¹⁷ The report not only gave misleading information about Phuntsog's identity, but also claimed: "Shortly after he set himself on fire, a policeman on patrol found him, put out the flames and rushed him to a nearby hospital [...] But a group of monks from the Kirti Monastery forcibly took him out of the hospital later in the afternoon and hid him inside the monastery, regardless of his injuries."

This official announcement presaged the arrests that were to follow and the sentencing of three Tibetans for ‘intentional homicide.’

Kirti monks rushed through arrangements for a cremation on March 19, 2011 at a specific site around 2-3 kilometers from Kirti monastery. Usually, mainly monks would gather to offer prayers for the cremation of a monk, with some lay family and friends in a separate area. But in the case of Phuntsog, the cremation became a focus of a shared grief and solidarity, as well as an assertion of Tibetan religious identity.

Footage of the cremation shows a line of monks passing a long white blessing scarf (khatag) ceremonially towards the cremation site, as laypeople ascend the hillside to offer prayers. The footage shows the body being ritually dissected as monks drum and offer prayers, and then being cremated as monks and laypeople chant mantras associated with the Dalai Lama.¹¹⁸

The gathering of Tibetan monks and laypeople at the cremation was all the more remarkable given the intense crackdown that had followed both Phuntsog’s self-immolation and the protests afterwards.

Cultural Revolution strategies employed at Kirti

The day after Phuntsog’s self-immolation, the military presence in Ngaba was intensified, with increased numbers of troops arriving in the town. March 20, 2011, the day after Phuntsog’s cremation, was also the day of the election of Tibetans in exile, when tens of thousands of exile Tibetans across the world voted for a new political leader in exile and Parliament. According to the Kirti monks in exile, monastery officials and community leaders were told to ensure that no fire-crackers were burst or incense offerings made; traditional acts to celebrate a significant occasion or anniversary by Tibetans. Even so, according to Kirti monks in exile, many people in Ngaba cleaned their houses and arranged shrine offerings of water bowls and butter lamps, while making prayers for the election of a new exiled political leader and Parliament in exile to be of real benefit to Tibetan people.

On March 20, 2011 officials arrived at Kirti monastery and announced that any monk who needed to leave should first take a letter of guarantee from his class tutor, one from the relevant ‘discipline monk’ (Gekoe) and one from government officials who were now stationed at Kirti. Monks were not allowed to leave the monastery without these three documents. Officials also began an intensive patriotic education campaign called ‘Love the nation, love religion.’

During the day, work team members went to monastic cells aggressively asking questions about monks’ beliefs while at night, armed soldiers and police with dogs patrolled the monastery, beating up some monks.

In early April 2011, the Chinese authorities began to build a barbed wire fence on the north side of the monastery, a huge complex with concentric boundary walls. As monks were not allowed to go out and buy food, for some time they had to rely upon local laypeople to donate butter, tsampa (roasted barley flour) and other staples.

Kirti, one of the most ancient and important religious and cultural institutions in Tibet, was effectively under military blockade. Given the importance of Tibetan monasteries as centers of learning with a strong connection to the community, dedicated to the protection of core values of Tibetan Buddhist culture, this is the equivalent of an armed occupation by troops of a great university in the West such as Harvard or Oxford.

The situation at Kirti escalated further when word got around that monks from the age of 18-40 would be taken away from the monastery under the pretext of giving them 're-education' or 'legal education.' An equivalent term used by the authorities when taking monks away from their monastery for re-education in a detention facility is to 'go for study.' As with the other once-powerful monasteries and centers of Tibetan culture Sera, Ganden and Drepung in Lhasa, the authorities have used the pretext of taking monks away 'for study' or 'legal education' as a means to reduce and control the monastic population at Kirti.¹¹⁹ Since 2008, the monastic population of Drepung, Sera and Ganden has dramatically decreased, following the expulsion of monks from Kham and Amdo, who were often not allowed to return to the monasteries after 'legal education.'¹²⁰

When local people gathered at the gates of Kirti on April 12, 2011, it is likely that they were responding to intimations of this danger – in addition to their desire to protect individuals – when they risked their lives in confronting armed troops seeking to remove hundreds of monks.

Local people did succeed in preventing troops taking away any Kirti monks when at first they stood their ground, not allowing armed troops to approach the inner part of the monastery compound – even when dogs were set upon the crowds. Later that day, local people were joined by monks, who attempted to leave the monastery, but were prevented from doing so by police.

The armed presence at the monastery continued and tensions deepened. On April 20, 2011, several hundred officials from nearby counties gathered at Kirti to conduct 'patriotic education.'

In scenes reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, when monks gave answers that the officials did not approve of, the monks were severely beaten.

There were many further detentions, and those released from custody were traumatized and often injured after torture. Exiled Kirti monks reported that some of those released are incapable of looking after themselves and some “pass out from the pain several times a day.” The torture included being tied to powerful electric heaters, beaten, and being tied to metal pillars and beaten with electric shock-batons.

Local Tibetan laypeople, particularly older Tibetans, continued to gather outside Kirti every day in an attempt to protect the monks, while monks inside Kirti continued to be subject to intense ‘patriotic education’ and detentions.

From about 4 pm (Beijing time) on April 21, 2011, telephone lines were cut, and the doors of the cells of monks who had been detained were sealed or marked with notices forbidding anyone to go near the rooms.

An hour later five large military trucks with concealed registration plates pulled up at the monastery. Paramilitary police raided Kirti and took away more than 300 monks. As the monks were being driven away in large trucks, the group of laypeople – mainly in their fifties or older – who had been standing vigil at the monastery gate were beaten “mercilessly” by police according to the Kirti monks in exile. “People had their arms and legs broken, one old woman had her leg broken in three places, and cloth was stuffed in their mouths to stifle their screams,” said Kirti monk in exile Kanyag Tsering.

Two people died after the beatings, and were named later as Dongko (male) of upper Tawa, aged 60, and 65-year old Sherkyi (female). Dongko was from the Trinken Chukle pastoral division of Tawa Gongma in Ngaba county. He was 60 years old, and leaves a wife, Trangme, a son named Tsultrim and a daughter named Trinle Tso. Sherkyi was from the Rako Tsang house in Naktsangma, Cha Township, Ngaba County.

A notice was issued that day by provincial public security authorities stating that foreigners had been banned from entering various Tibetan areas of southwest Sichuan (northern Kham and southern Amdo) including the Tibetan area of Kardze and counties in neighboring Ngaba Prefecture. “Foreigners already in the aforementioned areas are to be urged to leave,” the notice dated April 21, 2011 said, copies of which were placed on the websites of some Chinese travel agencies, according to Reuters.¹²¹ No explanation was given for the ban.

One of the most distressing elements of the crackdown for local people and monks alike was that Kirti monks were not able to preside over traditional death rites for those in the community who had passed – a key element of the strong links that exist between the monastic and lay community.

Kirti monks in exile Kanyag Tsering and Lobsang Yeshe wrote at the time: “Now the bodies of the deceased are just being placed in the regular spot in front of the Kirti assembly hall and dedicatory offerings made to the monastery before they are carried off to the cemetery. For bereaved relatives to bring the corpses of their loved ones to the monastery, the place that offers relief and spiritual guidance in their moment of grief, and to have to leave without the monks being able to recite four words of prayer for them is an additional agony on top of their mourning, and they have to head off to the cemetery choked with unbearable misery. Those who can afford it take their loved ones to other monasteries to request prayers.”

After the violent scenes in which monks were taken away from the monastery, which would later attract international criticism from the US government, UN mechanisms and others,¹²² the Ngaba authorities sought to conceal evidence of the crackdown. From April 23, 2011, onwards, armed troops sought to give the appearance that they had withdrawn from Kirti by hiding in trucks in the vicinity of the monastery. Cameras and recording devices were installed in monks’ cells, meaning that every conversation could be heard, and monks became more isolated from the outside world out of fear of speaking to others. Monks in exile even reported that police in Ngaba were dressing up as monks and local people in order to put on a “show of normality; the dismantling of temporary military accommodation and tents in the vicinity is part of the same performance.”

A month after Phuntsog’s self-immolation, the Chinese government was asserting publicly that the situation was “normal” and “harmonious,” a situation that was refuted by information from the area and footage released in the same week by Voice of America’s Tibetan service.¹²³

The Chinese authorities had signaled their intention to take harsh measures in apportioning blame to individual Tibetans for Phuntsog’s death. In August, 2011, Phuntsog’s uncle, Kirti monk Losang Tsonдру, and two other Kirti monks were imprisoned for between 10 and 13 years for the “intentional homicide” of Phuntsog. There is no evidence that the three monks had any involvement in Phuntsog’s solitary act of self-immolation or subsequent death, other than possibly seeking to protect him from further harm before he died in hospital.

Phuntsog’s uncle Losang Tsonдру (named in the state media as Drongдру), who was detained on April 12, 2011 was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment on August 29, 2011, by Barkham (Chinese: Ma’erkang) County People’s Court in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Prefecture in Sichuan Province. Kirti monk Losang Tenzin, age 22, was sentenced to 13 years imprisonment, and a Kirti monk also called Losang Tenzin (also known as Nak Ten) was sentenced to 10 years in prison by the same court on August 30, 2011.

All three sentences were reported in the Chinese state media, with Xinhua reporting on August 31, 2011 that the two monks sentenced on August 30 “plotted, instigated and assisted in the self-immolation of fellow monk Rigzin, causing his death.” (Xinhua, August 31, 2011.) The same article stated: “Drongdru was given the sentence because he hid the injured monk and prevented emergency treatment, causing delayed treatment and the subsequent death for his disciple and nephew, according to the verdict.”

A message from young Tibetans in eastern Tibet

The following message was conveyed to a Tibetan living in exile from a group of young, educated Tibetan students in eastern Tibet in July, 2012. Details of their identities are withheld. In the message, they express their deep fears for the future if the Dalai Lama does not return and explain their views on why the self-immolations are happening. In a separate communication, when a Tibetan living in exile urged friends living in Tibet not to even consider self-immolating, a Tibetan in Kham said forcefully: "Look at how we live under Chinese rule. We cannot speak freely or speak Tibetan, we lack education, we are physically and mentally sick, and some young people are not as spiritual as they used to be." When the exile Tibetan explained that they still should not take their own lives, the Tibetan replied: "It is easy for you to tell us not to die, but tell us why we should not. If we protest we are thrown into prison, where we are mistreated, get sick and die. We prefer to die for freedom at our own hands and on our own terms."

"We believe that the time is now to save people's lives. It is now.

"Our people here are not allowed to accept any Buddhist teachings. They cannot receive a religious education. We are so happy to watch His Holiness giving teachings, helping people all over the world. But today a foreign monk has a better chance of receiving the teachings of our land than we do. Only His Holiness can give us a spiritual education and also a sense of forgiveness about what has happened to us. People in Tibet are hungry for this.

"Until our generation, this religion has come from Tibet, has thrived in our land, giving a strong sense of moral values, of compassion. We are the first generation who have no access to that. We are frightened for a generation growing up without that. We need His Holiness to teach us forgiveness.

"We love His Holiness more than our parents. His Holiness is our mother and father and our leader. If something happened to His Holiness and he was not able to go back home and we were not able to see him then we cannot tell you what will happen. We fear for that very deeply. We fear violence will happen and that it will be worse than has ever been known in Tibet.

"We deal with China every day of our lives so we know how to deal with the Chinese authorities. We see how international governments deal with China and it shows us that they do not understand the capability of the Chinese leadership and how to make an impact on them.

"People in Tibet are ready to die. We understand that His Holiness does not want the self-immolations to happen. We know too that the Kalon Tripa does not want that. But people are dying because of their lives inside. We want to tell you now why the self-immolations are happening.

"Our language is under threat and we have no right to learn it, to study it.

"Tibetans are not allowed to express their cultural identity, even in simple ways sometimes like wearing our own clothing. His Holiness is not allowed to come home.

"Even if we study hard and are well educated, still we cannot find jobs after college due to competition from Chinese, who are better qualified, have Chinese as their first language, and who have more rights than Tibetans.

"We have no rights to express our feelings, through writing, through conversations, in public and in private.

"We have no freedom of movement. For instance even if your sister marries someone in the next village we can't travel there for the ceremony if we don't have the relevant papers, and often permission will simply not be given. We can't go on pilgrimage to Lhasa.

"We have no rights to practise our religion properly, to pray at our temples, to live according to our religion. It is not possible to obtain a complete religious education and our hearts are broken by the way that monks and nuns are treated.

"Our land, our precious environment, is being destroyed. There are Chinese mining projects everywhere, our grasslands are being degraded, nomads are no longer free to roam and continue their sustainable livelihoods. They are taking our plants, our Tibetan medicine, and making this into a commercial product.

"Because of what has happened to our land, many people do not have enough to eat. Their land has been taken away and compensation is not given or it is not enough for them to live.

"The army and troops have created such fear and are everywhere. We know that if we are in the wrong place at the wrong time, just on the street, not doing anything wrong, we can be targeted and taken to prison, and then we are no longer alive.

"That is the way we live, every day, every second. People are unable to bear these things but at the same time they understand that a solution will not come from outside. That is why the self-immolations are happening."

“The logic of despotism”: oppression, control and surveillance of Tibetan communities since 2008

“Had Tibetans been right to protest in 2008? Some think the protest incurred severe repression and even tougher policy reform, so that the little space that had previously been won rapidly diminished. But we think this outcome was not related to the protest. It just turned the lukewarm water used to boil the frog into boiling water.”

Tibetan writer Woesser, in “Checkpoint on the road to Lhasa” ¹²⁴

“Villagers don’t mind too much when we read or teach them the Party’s policy and how kind the Party is, because we have many programs, including singing, games, and competitions. But even so, when we ask them questions about Dalai, they always hesitate and seem uncertain about answering. When it comes to the stage of opposing the Dalai, most villagers find it very difficult and the meetings often become silent at this point. They even do not want to look at us.”

Official work-team member in Tibet

In January, 2012, around 7-8000 Tibetans from inside Tibet attended a major religious empowerment by the Dalai Lama, the Kalachakra, in Bodh Gaya, India. As the place where the Buddha was enlightened under the famous Bodhi tree in the main temple, Bodh Gaya is a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists worldwide, and a number of Chinese from mainland China also risked attendance at the ceremony. But Tibet’s pervasive climate of fear reached India, with Chinese agents operating on Indian soil gathering information about Tibetan pilgrims, and upon return to Tibet, hundreds of Tibetans were detained and held in ‘re-education’ camps.

The level of preparation involved in the process was significant. It involved monitoring individual Tibetans while they were in Bodh Gaya, creating facilities for their detention in Lhasa in military camps or converted schools, providing transportation to expel Tibetans to eastern Tibet after their arrival back in Lhasa, and an intensification of border security aimed at identifying Tibetans returning from the Kalachakra via Nepal. The detentions and subjection of Tibetans to intensive ‘patriotic education,’ which has not been seen before on this scale following a Dalai Lama teaching in India, indicated the authorities’ concerns about a spread in unrest and Tibetan solidarity following the series of self-immolations and protests in eastern Tibet. ¹²⁵ But they also indicated a deeply systematic implementation of the Party’s objectives in Tibetan areas since March 2008, emerging from what can be characterized as a “logic of despotism.” ¹²⁶

Since 2008, the Chinese authorities have moved from instilling an oppressive environment in monasteries, nunneries and civil society to one that can be more accurately termed as totalitarian – an approach in which the state recognizes no limits to its authority, imposes a climate of fear and terror, and strives to regulate every aspect of public and private life. “The Chinese Communist Party is itself an organization characterized by religious zeal,” writes Beijing-based writer Wang Lixiong. “Possessing the fundamentalist traits of extremism, fanaticism and exclusivity, it has to deny other belief systems completely.”¹²⁷

Before 2008, Chinese officials sought to project the notion that only a “handful” of Tibetans – mostly monks and nuns – caused unrest in Tibet, influenced by the Dalai Lama. But now there is a level of acknowledgement of the Dalai Lama’s influence. TAR governor Padma Thrinley (Baima Chiling) said in November, 2010, that “to say that the Dalai has no influence at all in Tibet is impossible... The Dalai Lama has some influence, for sure.”¹²⁸ Former TAR governor Jampa Phuntsog also acknowledged the influence of the Dalai Lama, saying that it must be prevented.¹²⁹ In response, political education has reached a new stage and has a deeper reach. In this new “war against secessionist sabotage,”¹³⁰ the Chinese government is literally seeking to replace loyalty to the Dalai Lama in Tibetan hearts and minds with allegiance to the Chinese Party-state, and in doing so, to “obliterate memory,” as Woenser writes, and undermine Tibetan national identity at its roots.

A former work team member interviewed by ICT said: “The Chinese authorities are looking carefully into what Tibetans are really thinking about their future, and what are the core motivations and reasons for political problems such as the March 14 riot, which was shocking evidence of being far from a ‘harmonious society.’ We have to write every detail of what villagers have been doing while we were in the village and get details of how many households in each village, the number of family members, their financial situation, the details of those villagers who have been involved in splittist activities and notes about the villagers’ reaction to ‘education.’” The same cadre said that the Chinese authorities have realized that without completely controlling Tibetans’ thinking and what he characterised as the “consciousness sphere,” the mission of achieving “long term political stability” in Tibet is impossible.

Immediately after the crackdown on March 14, 2008, the Chinese authorities accused the Dalai Lama of orchestrating the unrest in Tibet. They accompanied the accusation with a major campaign in the TAR to oppose the Dalai Lama, implemented at every level, from the top-down to the grass-roots.

The TAR authorities’ actions after 2008 must be viewed in the context of the CCP’s broader anxieties over Tibet. Tibet is not only regarded as a “core issue” of the PRC’s territorial sovereignty, but also as a matter of national security.¹³¹

In an illustration of the way in which the Party frames this concern, TAR Party Secretary Chen Guanguo asserted earlier this year that restrictions on communications and social media in Tibet are necessary in order to maintain “national security.” The impact of this approach by the bureaucracy running Tibet policy is compounded by the focus on achieving political ‘stability’ in the buildup to large-scale leadership changes in the Chinese Communist Party as well as the People’s Liberation Army to be approved at the 18th Party Congress from November 8, 2012.

The answer to ‘instability’? Strategies adopted by the CCP

The Chinese government has adopted a strategy of actively establishing Party presence in rural areas as the answer to ‘instability.’ This has led to a more pervasive and systematic approach to ‘patriotic education’ and a dramatic increase in work teams and Party cadres in rural areas of the TAR as well as well-resourced initiatives in the cultural and social sphere in Lhasa and other urban areas. These initiatives are sometimes described literally as “cultural replacement activities.” Images in the state media show Tibetans ploughing the fields in rural areas with red Party flags on their tractors. In one picture, Tibetans in traditional dress bear aloft an image of the Chinese leaders Mao, Deng Xiaopeng, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao together with butter sculptures. Butter sculptures, traditionally created in Tibetan monasteries as an act of devotion, would normally be carried together with thangkas (Tibetan religious paintings or wall-hangings).

While these measures are being enforced across all Tibetan areas, implementation is particularly acute in Lhasa and the Tibet Autonomous Region. The environment has been compared by many Tibetans to a “second Cultural Revolution.”

In Tibetan religious institutions, Chinese government or Communist Party officials are being stationed in monasteries permanently and, in some cases, officials will have the senior rank and pay of a deputy director of a provincial-level government department. This new policy, announced by TAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo in January 2012, was described by the official media as “critical for taking the initiative in the struggle against separatism,” and it aimed to “ensure that monks and nuns do not take part in activities of splitting up the motherland and disturbing social order.”¹³²

This new system is a major shift, requiring the installation of an unelected “Management Committee” to be installed in every monastery and to have authority over the previous structure of “Democratic Management Committees.” The new structure of Monastery Management Committees headed by Party cadres and government officials was initiated in November, 2011 and completed in February, 2012. TAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo told Party members on February 2, 2012, that “the broad ranks of cadres stationed in monasteries” should ensure that monks and nuns “become an important force in loving their country, loving their religion, observing regulations, abiding by laws, safeguarding stability, and building harmony.”¹³³

In addition, cadres were encouraged to befriend monks and nuns and gather information about them and their family members, while guiding them to be “patriotic and progressive.”¹³⁴

Another significant development in the Party’s attempt to enforce patriotism to the PRC and to eliminate loyalty to the Dalai Lama was the opening of the Tibetan Buddhism Theological Institute – the TAR’s “first high-level comprehensive school for Tibetan Buddhism.” Zhu Weiqun, Executive Deputy Head of the Communist Party United Front Work Department (UFWD), and Director of the Party’s General Office of the Central Coordinating Group for Tibet Affairs, said the new institution is necessary “to establish a normal order for Tibetan Buddhism, to conform with the development of our times, and to resist the Dalai clique’s religious infiltration.”

The Congressional-Executive Commission on China stated that: “Zhu’s reference to ‘our times’ apparently signifies Party intent to establish an updated ‘normal order’ that conforms to current Party and government objectives.” Zhu stated that “under the new situation” Tibetan Buddhism, among other things, should: “Make the correct historical choice; ‘Struggle against the Dalai clique; Safeguard the motherland’s reunification and ethnic unity; Accept the government’s management according to law; Remove the crude customs and habits that are not in line with social progress’; ‘Actively adapt to socialist society’; and ‘Maintain the correct direction of Tibetan Buddhism’s development.”¹³⁵

With the same objectives, but aimed at laypeople, the official media subsequently announced that more than 20,000 cadres and 5,000 work teams had been selected by the Chinese government to stay permanently in different neighborhoods in the Tibet Autonomous Region, with other cadres being sent into remote rural areas (Tibet Daily, March 11, 2012).

Deepening political education in the ‘consciousness sphere’

Hundreds of Tibetans returning home from the Kalachakra taught by the Dalai Lama in India in January, 2012, underwent an elaborate process of political education. They were held in detention centers, including one created in a school and another in an army camp in Lhasa. Some detention centers were close to the airport, and Tibetans who have Chinese passports and who returned from India by plane were taken there as soon as they arrived. Other Tibetans returning to India via different routes ‘disappeared’; the relative of a Tibetan from Amdo was detained after crossing the border into Tibet from Nepal after attending the Kalachakra. It was not until more than four weeks later that the relative heard that she was in detention near Lhasa.

Tibetans returning by land from Nepal through the border at Dram in the Tibet Autonomous Region were held at several check-points, where individuals and their luggage were searched thoroughly.

According to several reports, police took away objects such as prayer beads and pictures. A Tibetan from Amdo who was at the Kalachakra in India said: "Tibetans from Tibet at the Kalachakra were very aware of the dangers of taking pictures of the Dalai Lama home with them. There was a beautiful calendar of Bodh Gaya available there which so many Tibetans wanted to keep, but because it included photographs of the Dalai Lama they could not. The Chinese Buddhist devotees there faced the same problem. I saw some of them carefully cutting out pictures of the Dalai Lama on religious texts so that they could take the texts home with them."

Many of the Tibetans detained following their return from Bodh Gaya were charged daily fees of hundreds of yuan for their board during the 'legal education' process. Couples and families were separated while in detention, with some elderly people denied medication. One elderly female relative of a Tibetan in exile who was taken into custody had a heart condition, and fainted in custody while being kept in a separate area to her husband. A Tibetan from Lhasa who is now in exile said that the detentions "imposed unbearable psychological and financial pressure on families and communities."

A number of Tibetans from the eastern areas of Kham and Amdo returning from the Kalachakra via Lhasa were detained upon arrival. They were not allowed to go on pilgrimage to sacred sites within Lhasa including the Jokhang temple and to visit the Potala Palace (a traditional activity at Tibetan New Year), but returned by security and official personnel to their home areas.

The same Tibetan from Lhasa now in exile said: "They are not just detaining people who were being watched in Bodh Gaya, but also anyone who left for Nepal with a passport. Now it seems that the situation has been tightened still further in Lhasa, with people so scared of raids on their houses that they are burning items that may be regarded as suspicious and throwing things away."

Tibetans travelled from all over the TAR and Tibetan prefectures outside the TAR to attend the Kalachakra, leaving Tibet from September, 2011 onwards. The Kalachakra is an important religious empowerment and it is a rare opportunity for Tibetans that it is taught by the Dalai Lama in the place where the Buddha was enlightened. Many of those who travelled from Tibet were older Tibetans, who may have believed they would not have a similar opportunity in their lifetimes. According to Tibetan sources at the Kalachakra, more than 2500 of them were retired and receiving a pension from the Chinese government.

Most of the Tibetans who applied early enough did not experience difficulties obtaining Nepali visas from the Nepali consulate in Lhasa – this was the largest number of Tibetan pilgrims travelling to Nepal and India with Chinese passports in the last 30 years. The fact that the Tibetans were allowed to travel and then detained in such numbers on their return appears to indicate that the Chinese authorities were deliberately attempting to identify and then target people for patriotic education.

This position does not only emerge from the authorities' attempts to prevent news of the self-immolations spreading among Tibetans. It is also a result of the authorities' insecurities following the escalation of protests in March, 2008. March 10, 2008, was the 49th anniversary of the National Uprising in Tibet, and it became the beginning of an unprecedented wave of overwhelmingly peaceful protests that swept across Tibet to be met by a brutal crackdown, which continues today. The Chinese authorities have sought to represent the unrest as one "violent riot," referring solely to the events of March 14, 2008 in Lhasa.

On April 24, 2008, just over a month after the protests and riot in Lhasa on March 14, the Chairman of the TAR government and the then Deputy Party Secretary Jampa Phuntsog announced the launch of a mass patriotic education campaign in the TAR. The campaign focused on the grassroots in monasteries, nunneries, and the lay community. This elaborate political campaign, that is still ongoing, focuses upon two main groups: Party members of the "four ranks" (meaning those in the TAR government, prefectures, counties and townships) and ordinary Tibetans who are non-Party members.

A month after Jampa Phuntsog announced the mass campaign, in May, 2008, the official news media made an admission. It was reported that because of what had happened on March 14, 2008 – which has become known as the "3/14" incident – the "four ranks" of Party members had failed in their duties. On May 17, 2008, Xizang TV news reported the following: "There are 224,000 well paid Party members in the TAR. However there is evidence that 'four ranks' Party members in the region did not effectively monitor mass activities and thought, nor did they build a good relationship with the masses in order to protect and maintain public security."

This approach is consistent with the approach by higher-levels of the Party to blame lower-level officials and indicates the discomfort that must have been experienced as a result of the dramatic events by the then Party Secretary Zhang Qingli, known for his zealous approach against Tibetan culture and national identity, particularly in China's Olympic year.

Together with the re-education campaign, Zhang Qingli ordered the examination and review of individual Party members' records and background in the Party. This was a major undertaking. According to Tibet Daily on September 23, 2009, the re-organisation and examination was in order to re-build the foundation of reaching goal of "long-term political stability" in the TAR. Newly recruited Party members are "the only channel for the central Party organization" to know about what Tibetans are doing.

The Party authorities began to dramatically expand the number of cadres in Tibetan areas.

According to Tibet Daily newspaper on March 11, 2012, the TAR government has selected more than 20,000 cadres and established 5,451 work-teams to stay permanently in neighbourhood committees in the TAR, as well as more than 13,000 cadres into more than 1,500 work-teams who will permanently stay in TAR prefectures and counties.

The same researcher gives the example of Gyama township in Meldrogungkar county in Lhasa Municipality, which has 14 villages and 96 Party members. These 96 Party members have to report to the head of the Party in the township about what is going on in their villages, and this is then reported to the county Party Secretary, who then reports at a prefectural and regional level.

A village Party member in Shigatse prefecture, a Tibetan farmer in his fifties, told the same researcher: "My duty is to write a monthly report to Tri-pu. It has to say something about the villagers' political attitude and their response to the Party's generous support of development projects in the village. The most difficult thing for me is that I have to give names and details of individuals who are politically suspicious, and who should be the target in my village in order to maintain social stability. If there are any political incidents in my village, county leaders would come with police and I have to tell them who is involved. I also have to work closely with the [official government] work team as well. [These teams are comprised mostly of county-level officials]. If I tell the work team about any Tibetans who may be political suspect, that person will then be a target. So this is not a nice job. Some people are detained for a couple of months, and police have investigated their relationships with exile Tibetans. Also I have to make sure that people do not spread any rumours about Dalai [Lama]. There are no Chinese in my village. In 2009, we carried out house to house searches for Dalai photos in 2009, finding a number of them, and some books containing his speeches, all of which we confiscated. Some more photos were brought to us after we made an announcement that if any one kept these photos they would be punished. More recently, we Party members have been told to monitor individuals' daily activities – to see who is the most influenced by the Dalai, or who is dreaming of independence [Rangzen] and a return to the old Tibet. My responsibility is to make sure there is no chance of splittist activities in the village and to lead villagers in the right political direction."

Xizang TV news reported on July 18, 2009, that the training of a new generation of Party members at a grass roots level was essential. Xizang TV also stated that within a year, so by 2010, at least one 'well-trained' Party member for 150 citizens would be deployed in order to contribute information about "potential threats to maintaining social security in the region."

As part of this campaign, the TAR government tested a trial of “one Party member to make contact with five families” within communities in the Barkhor area of Lhasa. Tibet Daily reported that “The responsibility of one party member is to deliver party’s important messages to five families’ members on time, to make sure they understand Party policy, to help them and watch them and deeply understand the political thoughts and concepts which influence their lifestyle.” (Tibet Daily, May 26, 2009.)

The mass re-education in the TAR launched in April 2008 has the slogan of “Unity and stability is happiness. Separation [of nationalities] and unrest is disaster.” The monasteries are a permanent target for the mass re-education, and hundreds of monks have been expelled and arrested from the great three monasteries in Lhasa since April, 2008, leading to serious fears of their survival as religious institutions.

Under this slogan, the campaign involves requiring ordinary Tibetans to sing revolutionary songs, to give the right answers to questions about Tibet’s past, and to learn rules and regulations of the PRC, including criminal law. Tibetans are also required to oppose the “Dalai clique.”

A former work team member told the same Tibetan researcher: “Villagers don’t mind too much when we read out or teach them the Party’s policy and how kind the Party is, because we have many programs, including singing, games, and competitions. But even so, when we ask them questions about Dalai, they always hesitate and seem uncertain about answering. When it comes to the stage of opposing the Dalai, most villagers find it very difficult and the meetings often become silent at this point. They even do not want to look at us. Yes indeed, interestingly there are few villagers who would oppose Dalai publicly at a village meeting. All the documents that we are given by the government, which are meant to be read and distributed, are about ‘good party policy’ and ‘bad Dalai clique’.”

The influence of the Party on daily life; an experience of life with a work team

A Tibetan woman in her forties from a county in the TAR (details withheld) gave the following account of how a work team stayed at her house for two weeks.

“All of us in my area are farmers, and we live in a small village. One day a work team consisting of mostly Tibetan officials, but some Chinese, came to our village. Team members stayed in each household in the village. Three Tibetan men and a Chinese girl came to stay my house for two weeks. I had been told before by the leader a few days earlier at the village meeting that I had to provide them with a place to stay. If I had no spare room, they would put a tent in my courtyard, they said. We treated them as guests because we had been told to be nice to them otherwise we would have a problem, and we were not allowed to lock any doors in our house while they stayed. They spent all their time with us; we ate together, watched television together, went to work in the fields together, and went to bed at the same time. When we went to work or went shopping to the county town they came with us. For the first few days, we found this very difficult; we didn’t know what to do with them and had no idea what they wanted. Indeed it was strange of having people you had never met before at your house for 24 hours.

“On the first day of their arrival, the work team was introduced to my family members and we took them on a little tour of each room. They [the officials] said that they had come to my house to help my family, to understand our life, to introduce the Party’s policy for villagers so that they can tell the government how villagers need help in order to make their lives better.

“But later, it was not only about that. They asked many questions. They asked questions about our family background, from 1959 onwards, whether we have relatives and friends in India or outside Tibet, and whether we had any family members or relatives who were involved in the 14th March incident. They listened to our conversations and took notes. They went to all the rooms in our house and looked around; they seemed to be looking for any suspicious items such as books and photos of His Holiness. We did not have household numbers in our village, but the work team gave numbers to every house, and the Chinese girl drew a map of the village, and took lots of photographs both inside and outside the houses, and of our daily movements.

“Except for the Chinese girl, the Tibetan work team members were married with family. They seemed very bored and told me that they missed their families very much. Every weekend, two of them were allowed to go home for one night and one person stayed with us.

“They asked about what radio programs we listened to, and whether we knew about Radio Free Asia and Voice of America [broadcasts into Tibet in Tibetan language].

“One of my husband’s relatives from Lhasa went to India a few years ago and I sent him some money and possessions belonging to my Pala [father] after he passed away in 2006.

“I kept the receipt papers with my name on them, and this receipt has always been on display in my shrine room, in a small frame next to a Buddha statue made for my Pala. One day the work team saw it and they asked me questions about why I sent this money and objects to Dalai and why display a receipt with His Holiness’ name on it? I told them that all Tibetans, when a loved one dies, gives money and the person’s belongings to monks and the monastery, it is in our tradition. And sending the money and objects to His Holiness was because my father requested it before he died. I told them that the reason I displayed the receipt is that I believe he would have another reincarnation and I could tell him I did as he requested. Ever since then, the work-team wanted to know more about concepts of the role of His Holiness among my family members and in our village. But they never threatened me; they asked questions nicely and as normal conversation. They said: ‘How important is Dalai for you and your family and do you want him to pray when you die?’ One of them said that he would not take notes or report it to the authorities, but that he really wanted to know how important His Holiness is in our life. I told him that I believe His Holiness and that he is truly a Buddha, and that if you pray for him, you will be happy and kind. I admitted that I love and pray for His Holiness and I can’t ever remove my faith from my heart.

“The work team came back to my house a couple of times after they left to the next household. Now they have a file for my family record. In this file contains all detail of my family’s members with photos, number of shen fen zheng [Chinese citizenship ID], mobile phone numbers and details of what they heard and saw during their times with us. They even had my latest bank statement. The file was quite big in the end.

“These days the work team has an office in our village and seem permanent. They are always busy; for example they recruit new party members, give them training, organize Chinese flags to be hung on houses, distribute and read out updated party leader speeches, give rice and cooking oil to the poorest families and help to get money from government to build roads/ bridges and to improve infrastructure in the village.”

Self-immolations in Lhasa and their aftermath

“Nowadays, the naming and name-changing scheme is more aggressive than that during the Cultural Revolution. Instead of using names with ideological connotations, they simply started giving names of various places in China to the landmarks of Tibet. And what is their motive or goal? Is it to make the indigenous Tibetans feel the might of the empire through these unfamiliar names, and lose the memories and heritage of their native land in the course of becoming accustomed to them? Or is it to enable the ever greater number of migrants to live in the imagined empire that is made up of the names of their hometowns? Every name taken from a part of China is an attempt to further Sinify Tibet, to let Tibet gradually disappear into the signs of China. All said, this is entirely an act of colonialism. To have the original, existing geographical names that belong to you changed is a very terrifying thing. It is a conspiracy to obliterate memories, a pair of scissors that severs your connections to the past, a tragedy of overnight change beyond recognition.”

Woeser, “The New Face of Lhasa” ¹³⁸

On May 27, 2012, during the important religious anniversary of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and death, 25-year old Dargye and 19-year old Dorjee Tseten set themselves on fire in the Mandala Hotel overlooking the Jokhang temple, one of Tibet’s holiest sites, ¹³⁹ and ran out into the square.

Images posted online by the Tibetan writer Woeser depict Dargye walking across the square, covered in flames, as two men rush towards him carrying a blanket or coat. According to Woeser, the type of plaid shirt worn by one of the men rushing towards him is common to plainclothes police stationed in the center of Lhasa. Tseten Dorjee died at the scene while Dargye, who is pictured, died later. Two other images show a uniformed security officer spraying a fire extinguisher while another apparently hovers with a blanket amidst a cloud of dark smoke in the background emerging from the second self-immolation, not visible in the photograph. ¹⁴⁰

These were the first self-immolations in the historical and cultural capital of Tibet, Lhasa. It was already a city under tight military lockdown since 2008, and in particular since the self-immolations and unrest spread across eastern Tibet. With a terrible inevitability the authorities tightened the screws still further, targeting in particular Tibetans from the eastern areas of Tibet, where the two Tibetans who self-immolated were from. Dorjee Tseten, who died on the scene, was from Labrang in Gansu (Amdo). Dargye was from Ngaba (Chinese: Aba), Sichuan (also Amdo).

Tibetans known to have associated with the two Tibetans who self-immolated were in immediate danger. Nineteen-year old Dorje Tseten had left home after high school and had been renting a room in a house in Lhasa.

The entire household was detained soon after his self-immolation. After the self-immolations, Dorje Tseten's family in Bora were immediately subject to security restrictions, just as other families of Tibetan self-immolators have faced intimidation and pressure.

Following his self-immolation and death, Dorje Tseten was taken away immediately. Graphic photographs of his body blackened by fire appeared online. Dorje Tseten's family were deeply distressed at not being allowed to have his body back for carrying out traditional prayer ceremonies and death rituals. They did receive ashes from the Chinese government authorities, although it could not be ascertained whether they were Dorje Tseten's.

In the days following the self-immolations, an unknown number – with some sources saying hundreds – of Lhasa residents and pilgrims were detained and held in detention centers in and around Lhasa, with many Tibetans from areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region expelled from the city.

More than half of all Tibetans live outside the TAR in Tibetan areas of Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu, but many of them live or work in Lhasa and large numbers travel there frequently on pilgrimage, as it is the religious and cultural centre of Tibetan Buddhism.

The requirements for entering Lhasa and restrictions on movement had already been stringent – from March 1, 2012, the TAR authorities had required any ordinary citizen seeking to enter the TAR to show four different identity cards.

Those who were able to visit Lhasa reported the extent of the lockdown in the area, with one unidentified micro-blogger, @Majiamajia2012, saying that at checkpoints into Lhasa police even checked women's sanitary towels. The tweet, posted on March 27, 2012 in Chinese, is translated by ICT as: "Going into the TAR there was a checkpoint every 20km, where they even check the sanitary towels inside your underwear. Whenever you get somewhere, PSB report your registration [unclear], tourist: "MF, the military controlled areas are a pain in ass. A'holes. They even checked the M'effing sanitary towel in my effing underwear! How long since you've seen a woman, you M'effers? Bunch of a'holes. Lhasa's even worse with a PAP every three meters."

The new expulsions following the self-immolations extended to Tibetans who had valid business permits to live and work in Lhasa, and who have been running businesses there for years. According to Human Rights Watch, "Other post-2008 expulsion campaigns around sensitive dates have focused only on those without permits to stay in Lhasa. Those currently targeted include Tibetans with valid temporary residence permits (zanzhuzheng in Chinese; gnas sdod lag khyer in Tibetan) to stay in the city."¹⁴¹

The consequences were devastating for Tibetans from the eastern Tibetan areas of Kham and Amdo. A blogger called @hiroBuYaoAi wrote on June 12, 2012, that "Police patrols in Lhasa have been severe recently, people being detained in the streets, and every day people are being sent out on the train, of course most of them are Tibetans from the various prefectures and Tibetans from Sichuan and Qinghai." One source in Lhasa told Human Rights Watch that those being expelled "are given three to five days to pack and leave, after that they are taken by police car and forced to leave." Other reports describe people being escorted by police to the train station or the airport to ensure their departure from the region and other sources said that expulsions have led to families being separated and many businesses closed down. There are no bars on Chinese businesses or Chinese tourists or migrants entering Lhasa.

According to monks from Kirti monastery in exile, Tibetans without temporary registration enabling them to stay in Lhasa were also detained following the self-immolations in Lhasa. Kirti monks Lobsang Yeshe and Kanyag Tsering, both based in Dharamsala, India, said: "Even for those Lhasa residents from Kham and Amdo who have not been detained, there is a real danger that they will no longer be permitted to remain in Lhasa. After the 2008 uprising, monks from eastern provinces were expelled and now the three great monasteries near Lhasa are virtually empty." The monks also said that harassment of Lhasa citizens from the Ngaba area had begun immediately following Kirti monk Phuntsog's self-immolation in Ngaba in March, 2011.

In an account of her journey through police checkpoints and blockades to Lhasa in August, 2012, Wooser writes: "On the Qinghai-Tibet highway, more than 2000 kilometres long, apart from frequently missing the trains running on the neighbouring railway (and filled with tourists from all over China), we also saw plenty of young Chinese boys and girls riding bicycles towards Lhasa. They were carefree and eye-catching. With just one identity card they could travel through all of Tibet, despite the checkpoints everywhere. But Tibetans on the pilgrimage to Lhasa were no longer anywhere to be seen. Thinking back a few years, on this very road, hundreds of Tibetans from the borderlands would have been majestically kowtowing, with a snowstorm directly ahead. [...] Lhasa is the final destination of Buddhist pilgrimage. Tibetans who used kowtowing to express their piety once found solace here. Now they are shut out." ¹⁴²

Wooser added: "The 'stability maintenance' policy based on ethnicity is not new and has been operating across Tibet for years. Han Chinese are given preferential treatment, instilling in them a sense of superiority. But for Tibetans, on whom pressure continues to mount, and who have been deprived of almost all rights, this is not only a disguised policy of 'racial segregation' but also a catalyst for ethnic antagonism and separatism." ¹⁴³

A traveller's account: journey into a city under lockdown

"Despite Lhasa being bruised and broken, for centuries there still exist countless Bodhisattvas, countless outstanding sons and daughters deeply hidden in the centre of Lhasa just like the scriptures and mini-statues put into the stupas or statues relentlessly continuing to bestow upon us the blessing filled with tears. Lhasa people, who have lived there for generations, are still passing on the spirit of Lhasa in their own humble and unexaggerated way. With respect, I have encountered many elderly and middle-aged people who are hidden in the gracious and pleasant sounding Lhasa dialect. One old man has spared no pains to again and again take me through today's Lhasa, searching for past stories. This made me understand how much we have already lost, how much we are currently losing and what we should cherish. There are also young people from Lhasa who start to take action. For example, a video has been circulated on the Internet; the narration in the background is the poem titled 'Let Us All Speak Pure Tibetan,' recited with deep expressions using the Lhasa dialect."

Woeser, in an essay translated by High Peaks Pure Earth ¹⁴⁴

A visitor to Lhasa in June just before the shutdown of Tibet to tourists gave the following account of her experience as Lhasa was increasingly sealed off.

"As a recent traveler to Tibet in June 2012 I witnessed China's extreme response to the recent self-immolations by two former monks in Lhasa and the increased burnings in Amdo and other areas. The Tibetans are determined to continue to express their pain with the oppression in their lives. It has long been difficult for journalists to enter Tibet and witness the intimidation, detentions and arrests related to these actions. Since the middle of June foreign travellers are denied entry, existing permits have been cancelled on short notice. The Chinese authorities believe they can turn our eyes away from what has happened to Lhasa. At my first entry Wi-Fi was available and we were able to get a few of the accompanying pictures sent out. By our leaving nearby open Wi-Fi had become secured.

"What I witnessed... Lhasa is under lockdown. As of mid June all foreign groups have had their Tibet permits cancelled and no more are being issued.

"All entries to the Jokhang and the Barkhor are secured and all streets in the Jokhang area are under constant patrol. There is one secure entrance to Jokhang Square, bags are x-rayed, permits checked, Tibetan ID is checked and pilgrims without a Lhasa residency are detained to be sent back to their home province. A foreign group could not linger or delay but this was not true of the large number of Chinese tourists in the Square and shopping in the Barkhor.

“Throughout most of Lhasa city people are going about their business as usual. In early morning in the old city and surrounding the Jokhang the patrols are every 15 minutes and throughout the day it becomes almost every five minutes. There are five in a patrol, all with fire extinguishers strapped to their backs. Additional police and a fire truck and five large police vehicles stand ready at the entrance to Jokhang Square. There are additional checkpoints at every entrance to the Square and the Barkhor.

“As non-Tibetans nor Chinese we were accompanied by security when going through the Jokhang and Barkhor. Plainclothes Chinese security photographed us. We were denied entry as a group to the public Square in front of the Potala and could not be on the street in front of the Potala. Our scheduled time to enter the Potala was cancelled an hour after it was reported to us. No foreigners were allowed in but the large Chinese groups continued to receive access.

“We asked about doing the kora [circumambulation] around the Potala and were denied. Local pilgrims are allowed. In the evening in the Barkhor there were increased numbers of Tibetans performing prostrations and the right side was kept clear for them.

“More importantly is what is happening to the residents of Lhasa and to the Tibetan pilgrims who travel to Lhasa. Police and security are knocking loudly on residence doors in the middle of the night asking for residency ID. Public buses are stopped and Tibetans are being taken off the bus by the police. This is not happening to Chinese residents or Chinese tourists. This causes great pain and frustration to the Tibetan residents of Lhasa. Checkpoints on the roads into Lhasa are stopping travelers and pilgrims coming from outside Lhasa are being turned back.

“Chinese tourists are being told, as they travel to Tibet, to be very cautious around Tibetans as they are dangerous and may want to do them harm. They are told to not go out alone.

“Large groups of Chinese tourists continue to come in with an emphasis on shopping. We were told to notice that the numbers of ‘foreign’ tourists will remain high at the end of the year as these Chinese tourists will come under the category of ‘foreign.’ All trekkers are absent, travel message boards are devoid of requests to get together for adventures outside Lhasa. The Everest base camp in Tibet was closed at least a month previously. The rumor is that someone unfurled a Tibetan flag.

“We receive daily updates from Syria and Egypt of the oppressive and increasingly deadly conditions its citizenry are forced to endure because of a brutal authoritarian government. The Tibetans have long suffered the erosion of their freedoms and are desperate. The self immolations are meant as an act of non-violence but the Tibetan citizens of Lhasa are suffering even more because of Chinese authority’s extreme response. As one Tibetan said to me about the searching and detention of Tibetan citizens, and not the Chinese residents – ‘This is my place.’ He did not say ‘This is my home’ or ‘This is my country,’ he said ‘This is my place. This is where I am.’

“When will Tibetans feel safe and supported in their own place? Secure in where they are?”

‘Burning the Body’: self-immolations in a global and religious context

“Fire is the most dreaded of all forms of death. The sight of someone setting themselves on fire is simultaneously an assertion of intolerability and, frankly, of moral superiority. You say, ‘I would never have the guts to do that. It’s not that he’s trying to tell me something, but that he’s commanding me.’ This isn’t insanity. It’s a terrible act of reason.”

Timothy Dickinson, Washington DC-based scholar ¹⁴⁵

“Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shrivelling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning flesh...Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered even to think.”

David Halberstam, an American journalist, on witnessing the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc on June 11, 1963 ¹⁴⁶

In a global context, self-immolations have been regarded as catalysts to radical change, even revolutions. The self-immolation of Czech philosophy student Jan Palach after Soviet tanks rolled into Prague brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets. When Tunisian market trader Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight, his action sparked protests that led to the Arab Spring.

While the political, cultural and historical situation in Tibet is entirely different, the self-immolations in Tibet appear to convey a belief or hope among some that this act of horrific individual suffering can affect change in an apparently intractable political situation.

In the estimation of a scholar specialising in political suicides, there have been between 800 and 3,000 individual acts of self-immolation, including non-fatal attempts, in the four decades since 1963, when a Vietnamese monk poured kerosene over Thich Quang Duc in Saigon as a protest against the persecution of Buddhists by a dictatorship that favored a Catholic minority. ¹⁴⁷ Analysis of the data by the same scholar, Michael Biggs of Oxford University, reveals that self-immolation is more frequent in countries with Buddhist or Hindu religions, while other surveys concur that it is rare in high-income countries, but is reported more frequently in low- and middle-income countries, especially in Asia and Africa. ¹⁴⁸ According to Dr Biggs’ research, the self-immolations in Tibet do not concur with the research that shows it to be most frequent in countries with relatively democratic political systems.

The self-immolations in Tibet have been widely reported internationally compared to waves of self-immolation elsewhere in the world. In Tunisia, at least 107 fellow Tunisians set themselves on fire in the six months immediately after the death of Bouazizi, whose self-immolation had marked the beginning of the Arab Spring.¹⁴⁹ In 1990, there were around 200 self-immolations in India against affirmative action for lower-caste quotas. In early 2012, several Indians set themselves on fire in Andhra Pradesh, a large southern Indian state, demanding that a new state, Telangana, be formed within India.¹⁵⁰ Rates of self-immolation in Iran are among the highest in the world, with up to 71% of committed suicides conducted via self-immolation in some regions.¹⁵¹

Buddhism considers violence against oneself to be harmful to the future lives of an individual, but at the same time there are well-documented precedents in Buddhism of sacrificing one's own life for the benefit of others. Tibetan religious teachers also cite the importance of motivation in determining the repercussions on future lives.

Chinese charges that the Dalai Lama and exiled Buddhists are to blame for not stopping the self-immolations are groundless, says Chinese commentator Hu Ping. "In history, religious practitioners, be they Christians or Jews, have used suicide to protest oppression including self immolation. Similarly, though Buddhism opposes killing and suicide, it does not oppose dying for a just cause, or sacrificing oneself for one's faith or ideal," Hu Ping says in a video commentary for Human Rights in China.¹⁵² Hu Ping refers to a more contemporary Chinese example: in July 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, hundreds of Red Guards went to destroy the Buddhist Famen Temple in Xi'an as part of the "Destroy the Four Olds" political campaign. The abbot of the temple, the monk Liangqing, burned himself to death in front of the pagoda to protest. Thirty years later, his sacrifice was honored in a ceremony to bury his ashes at the temple.

Hu Ping continues in the same video: "So historically self immolation as a form of protest was not unheard of. These cases included Han Chinese, many of whom were deeply influenced by Confucious and Mencius, particularly during the end of the Ming dynasty and the beginning of the Qing. When they were forced to cut off their braids, many Hans felt that it was a violation of their culture and their traditional way of life and committed suicide in protest – some chose self immolation."

The practice of 'burning the body' or 'shaoshen' is well-established in Chinese Buddhism. Scholar James A. Benn writes: "At first glance, burning, branding, and other forms of what we might today call 'body modification' would appear to have little to do with Buddhism, a religion whose avowed focus is on the mind.

In fact, burning the body is one of the most obvious and commonplace features of Sinitic Buddhism, since all Chinese and Korean monks and nuns are burned at ordination, or at least were until recently. The scars of these burns are highly visible in the Chinese case, since it is the head that is burned.”

James Benn refers to two specific and influential texts from the Chinese Buddhist tradition that apparently justify “burning the body” as well as the burning of fingers, and burning at ordination.¹⁵³

In his letter to Martin Luther King following the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc, fellow monk and religious teacher Thich Nhat Hahn refers to the burning of the body during ordination and its connection: “During the ceremony of ordination, as practiced in the Mahayana tradition, the monk-candidate is required to burn one, or more, small spots on his body in taking the vow to observe the 250 rules of a bhikshu, to live the life of a monk, to attain enlightenment and to devote his life to the salvation of all beings. One can, of course, say these things while sitting in a comfortable armchair; but when the words are uttered while kneeling before the community of sangha and experiencing this kind of pain, they will express all the seriousness of one’s heart and mind, and carry much greater weight.”¹⁵⁴

The Mahayana Buddhist Lotus Sutra is generally accepted to be the main Buddhist text that refers to a ritualistic living cremation of the body. In the 23rd chapter, the Bodhisattva Medicine King demonstrates his insight into the selfless nature of his body by setting his body aflame, spreading the “light of the Dharma” for 1200 years, according to the text. Vietnamese Buddhist monk and religious teacher Thich Nhat Hanh said in a commentary: “The bodhisattva shined his light about him so that everyone could see as he could see, giving them the opportunity to see the deathless nature of the ultimate.”¹⁵⁵

The exiled head of Kirti monastery in Dharamsala, India, Kirti Rinpoche, gives context on the concept of self-sacrifice by citing the story of the Buddha offering his body to a hungry tigress. This was a Jataka (tale) in the Sutra of Golden Light involving a young prince who offers his body to an emaciated tigress who is too weak to feed her cubs. The prince takes his inspiration from the compassionate acts of bodhisattvas, and according to the story, resolves to discard his impermanent body for a changeless form due to spiritual attainment. When at first he offers his body to the tigress, she does not take it because she is too exhausted to move. But the Jataka describes how he slits his own throat to allow the tigress to feed upon him, conveying the determination needed to make an offering of the body. Before he does this, the prince stresses that his offering was not just for the animal but for all beings.

Chinese monk Daodu, who set fire to himself in a documented case of self-immolation in ancient China, was inspired by the Lotus Sutra, according to texts from the time analysed by James A. Benn.

In this case, from what can be established from medieval Chinese texts, an interesting dialogue took place between eminent monk Daodu and the emperor Liang Wudi, who proposed that Daodu should not burn himself alive, but wait until death, and have his dead body donated to sentient beings, animals and insects, to feed upon.

In an observation that resonates today, James Benn writes: “In a hierarchical and structured society like that of medieval China, there was little acknowledgement that people were free to do as they chose with their own lives, and monks who made offerings of their bodies always posed a potential danger to state control. Quite apart from the fact that the state could hardly be seen to condone or encourage suicide, there was the danger that a heroic monk could become the center of a cult that might threaten political stability or at least draw attention and support away from the emperor.”¹⁵⁶

James A. Benn refers to three Chinese terms are commonly encountered in sources on sacrificing the body as an apocryphal practice in Chinese Buddhism. These terms are as follows: *wangshen*, meaning ‘to lose or abandon the body’; *yishen*, meaning ‘to let go of, abandon, or be oblivious to the body’; and *sheshen* meaning ‘to relinquish or abandon the body.’

The word *shen* implies ‘self,’ or the ‘person as a whole,’ hence *shaoshen*, ‘burning the body’ and *zifen*, ‘self-burning.’¹⁵⁷

Tibetans call suicide *rang srog bcad* meaning ‘cutting one’s vitality,’ with *srog* indicating the ‘presence of life.’ Some Tibetans have used the term *rang lus mer bsregs*, meaning burning one’s own body, to convey self-immolation, turning from the presence of life to the physical frame *lus*. Burns, purposely inflicted and performed on the head or body with lighted incense sticks, are called *dmar mchod*, meaning literally ‘red offering.’¹⁵⁸

Censorship and micro-blogs

When used on microblogs today, sensitive words such as ‘self-immolation’ in Chinese are frequently picked up by the authorities and blocked. A screenshot captured by Dechen Pemba, editor of the Tibetan literary website High Peaks Pure Earth shows how a search on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo for ‘self-immolation’ (*zifén*), yielded no results “due to relevant laws.”¹⁵⁹

Dechen Pemba observed that the Tibetan terms used for self-immolation were initially not blocked, at least for some time, and Tibetans writing on Tibetan-language blogs were directly referring to self-immolations in their poetry and prose.

The literary website High Peaks Pure Earth translated into English two Tibetan poems written in October, 2011, the poem “Mourning” posted on the Tibetan language blog www.sangdhor.com on October 11, 2011, and “The Truth of Flames on the Thorny Path” posted on the Rangdrol site on October 25, 2011. Dechen writes: “Both poems evoke the imagery of fire and flames. “The Truth of Flames on the Thorny Path” is dedicated to detained Tibetan author Choepa Lugyal whose pen name ‘Me Che’ literally means ‘tongue of flames,’ but can also mean a small smoldering fire or amber.” By February 1, 2012, the Sangdhor and Rangdrol websites were both inaccessible.

While there has been much discussion on the self-immolations by Tibetan bloggers online, some Chinese intellectuals have been troubled by the lack of comment on progressive online forums in China about the self-immolations. “It’s the elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about,” prominent writer Wang Lixiong told Andrew Jacobs of the New York Times.¹⁶⁰

Andrew Jacobs points out that on among liberal online commentary through social media, discussing such issues as corrupt officials, forced evictions or dissidents, the topic of self-immolations in Tibet is rarely discussed. “The apathy is appalling,” said Zhang Boshu, a political philosopher who lost his job at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences three years ago for criticizing the government’s human rights record, was cited by the Times as saying.

Even so, some Chinese netizens have spread the news about the self-immolations in Tibet, and shared concerns, through both opaque and specific statements in social media. Human Rights in China translated a number of microblog posts at the time of the Party Congress in November, 2012, including the following, posted on November 13, 2012 by Jiang Tianyong (@jtyong): “Some say the world is numb and indifferent toward Tibetans’ self-immolation. I deeply agree. Especially Han Chinese, it seems as if it is not relevant to them, or they are intentionally avoiding the problem. Of course, I know there are many grand reasons. I do not want to say who is right or wrong between Han Chinese and Tibetans. I only hope that Han Chinese and other friends, alone or in groups of two or three, will visit.”¹⁶¹

Even a member of the “50-cent Party” – a phrase given in China to commentators who are said to be paid 50 cents for posting comments that advance the Communist Party line – told Chinese artist Ai Weiwei that he thought the government had “gone a bit over the top” against the Dalai Lama, “even while acknowledging that there “must be guidance throughout the country.”¹⁶²

Two poems from inside Tibet about the self-immolations

The first poem, below, 'Mourning,' was posted online by a Tibetan blogger named Sengdor in October, 2011, following the self-immolation of two Kirti monks on October 7. The post received over 1000 views and at least 40 comments. The following translation into English is by High Peaks Pure Earth.¹⁶³

Mourning

By Sengdor

*The sadness of living is more painful than death
Unbearable sorrow turned you all into glowing red skeletons*

*The mouth quivers with flames
The hands are pierced with flames
Flames burn in the breast
Rosary beads of fire scatter to the ground*

*Look at the smoke rising
from the monastery's golden roof
Look at the doors of each monk's cell*

*In every moment
After a storm bursts on one grassland
Another storm bursts on the other grassland
Following the direction of the wind
Dark shadows move accordingly*

Written on one night of October 2011

The Truth of Flames on the Thorny Path

The following poem was written by an anonymous Tibetan blogger and dedicated to the detained Tibetan writer Choepa Lugyal. The poem was posted online on October 25, 2011, but has since been taken offline, perhaps due to the reference to fire and flames, but also perhaps because of the political sensitivities over the detained writer. According to the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, Choepa Lugyal was arrested in Lanzhou, capital of Gansu province, on October 19, 2011. Choepa Lugyal's penname is Me Che, which literally means "tongue of flames" but can also mean a small smoldering fire or amber. The translation below into English is by High Peaks Pure Earth. ¹⁶⁴

*To Me Che who is ignored
 The surroundings are cold and shadowed by darkness
 The flame of truth is burning in the iron tent
 But the flame is so humble
 There are no windows in the tiny narrow house
 There is no scale to measure reality
 Although you have so much hope on the outside, beggar!
 No one can quench your thirst
 Therefore, the only way to solve your suffering of hunger and thirst
 Is to believe in non-foolish karma
 If you meditate on the karma of cause and effect, you will obtain realisation
 and never turn back
 Nonetheless, there are always tears in the eyes of the old mother; the beloved
 wife swallows the sorrow into her stomach and tenderly touches the hairs on
 the head of the little boy
 Do you see that?
 The wide lonely land
 The pure blue sky
 Standing at the crossroads
 I am drinking lunchtime tea
 But I can neither urinate nor defecate
 Thinking of going to see a doctor
 Dialectic poetry emerges in the mind...*



IMMOLATIONS

2012





Tapey

On February 27, 2009, Tapey, a Tibetan monk at Kirti monastery in Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan province, self-immolated on the main street in Ngaba county town. While still alight, Tapey shouted pro-Tibetan slogans while raising a home-made Tibetan flag that contained a photo of the Dalai Lama in the center. People's Armed Police stationed nearby shot Tapey before extinguishing the flames and taking him away. Tapey's current whereabouts and well being remain unknown.



Phuntsog

On the third anniversary of a brutal crackdown on peaceful protestors outside of Kirti monastery that led to police opening fire and killing at least 10 Tibetans, Phuntsog, a 20-year old Tibetan monk at Kirti, set fire to himself and shouted "May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live for 10,000 years!" After extinguishing the flames, police were seen beating Phuntsog before he died.



Tsewang Norbu

Tsewang Norbu died after drinking petrol and setting fire to himself on August 15, 2011. Norbu was a 29-year old monk from Nyitso monastery in Kardze TAP. In a rare instance of prompt reporting on such an incident, the Chinese state media confirmed the death of a Buddhist monk shortly afterwards, with Xinhua stating: "it was unclear why he had burnt himself," and that the local government had launched an investigation. Not long after the self-immolation, troops surrounded Nyitso monastery, an important historic center of Tibetan religious culture.



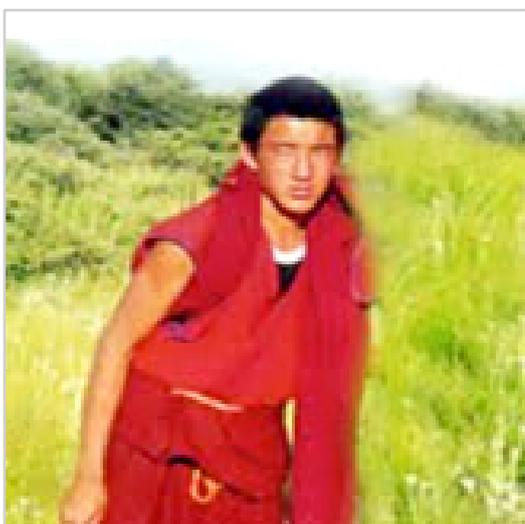
Lobsang Kunchok

Lobsang Kunchok, along with fellow Kirti monastery monk Lobsang Kelsang, self-immolated on September 26, 2011 in Ngaba county town, Ngaba TAP. Video of Lobsang Kunchok's protest can be seen at <http://youtu.be/IQ3zxCFYKp4>.



Lobsang Kelsang

Lobsang Kelsang, a monk from Kirti monastery believed to be 18-years old, held a self-immolation protest along with Lobsang Kunchok on September 26, 2011. Both young men set fire to themselves in Ngaba county town in Amdo, where Kirti monastery is located. Lobsang Kelsang and Lobsang Kunchok shouted "Long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama" during their protest, before police extinguished the flames and took them away.



Kelsang Wangchuk

The fifth monk from Kirti monastery to set himself on fire in protest, 17-year old Kelsang Wangchuk self-immolated on October 3, 2011 in Ngaba county town. Kelsang's current whereabouts and wellbeing remain unknown.



Kayang

Kayang, an 18-year old former monk from Kirti monastery, died after he self-immolated along with Choepel, another former Kirti monk, on October 7, 2011, four days after Kelsang Wangchuk set himself on fire in protest. Kayang's cousin, a Tibetan named Tashi, was one of the Tibetans killed in the Chinese government crackdown in Ngaba in 2008.



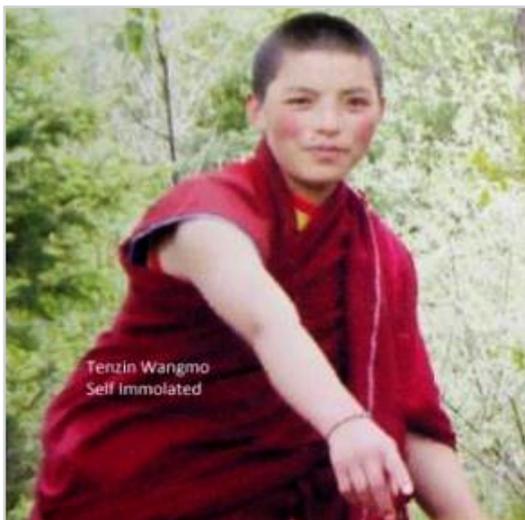
Choepel

Choepel set himself on fire in protest on October 7, 2011, along with a fellow former Kirti monk named Kayang. The young men clasped their hands together and set fire to themselves before security personnel extinguished the flames and transported them to the county's government-run hospital. Both Choepel, aged 19, and Kayang died as a result of their protest.



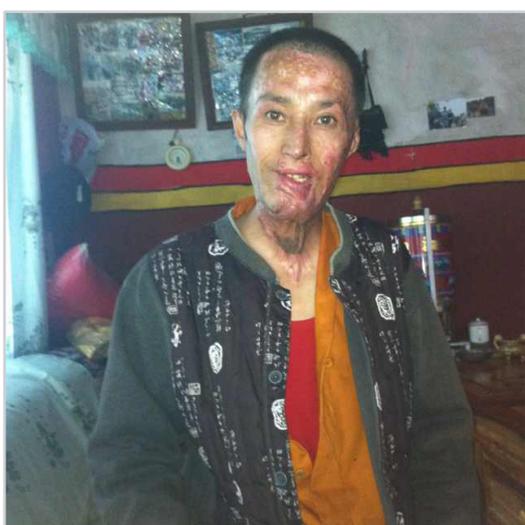
Norbu Damdrul

On October 15, 2011, along the main street of Ngaba county town now known as "Heroes Street," 19-year old Norbu Damdrul self-immolated while calling for the return of the Dalai Lama and shouting "We need freedom and independence for Tibet." Norbu's body was badly burned, but was still alive when police stationed on the street extinguished the flames and kicked Norbu before taking him away. It became known later that Norbu Damdrul died following his protest.



Tenzin Wangmo

Tenzin Wangmo, the first Tibetan nun to self-immolate, died on October 17, 2011 after setting fire to herself and calling for the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet and for religious freedom. The 20-year old nun from Mame Dechen Chokorling (also known as Mame nunnery) held her protest on the Sumdo bridge near the nunnery, just outside of Ngaba county town. Tenzin Wangmo's body was cremated on October 17, by order of the authorities.



Dawa Tsering

On October 25, 2011, Dawa Tsering set fire to himself at Kardze monastery in the Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan province. The 38-years old monk survived the protest and currently faces the physical and monetary challenges of recovery. According to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy, Dawa Tsering wishes to return to Kardze monastery to continue his studies, though his future remains uncertain.



Palden Choetso

Palden Choetso, formerly a nun at Ganden Jangchup Choeling nunnery in Tawu county, Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, died after self-immolating on November 3, 2011, little over a week following Dawa Tsering's self-immolation protest in Kardze. According to one source in exile, "After Palden Choetso's self-immolation the nuns took her to the nunnery, and she died soon afterwards. Nuns began to pray for her. The local authorities [then] locked down the area, closing a major road in Tawu, and deploying troops to the nunnery."



Tenzin Phuntsog

The first self-immolation in the Tibet Autonomous Region occurred on December 1, 2011, when Tenzin Phuntsog, a father of three in his forties, set fire to himself in Khamar township in Chamdo prefecture. A former monk at Karma monastery, Tenzin Phuntsog died at Chamdo Hospital on December 6, 2011.



Sonam Wangyal

Sonam Wangyal (also referred to as Lama Sobha), a respected religious figure in his local area, drank kerosene and set himself on fire on January 8, 2012 early in the morning in Darlag county, Golog (Chinese: Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai (the Tibetan area of Amdo), according to the Tibetan government in exile. His self-immolation was said to be linked to lack of religious freedoms in the area. Radio Free Asia reported that before he set himself ablaze, he climbed a local hill to burn incense and pray before distributing leaflets saying he would act "not for his personal glory but for Tibet and the happiness of Tibetans."



Losang Jamyang

On January 14, 2012 Losang Jamyang set fire to himself in Ngaba county town, calling for the long life of the Dalai Lama and for freedom in Tibet. Losang Jamyang is the twelfth Tibetan known to have died after self-immolating. Police kicked and beat Losang Jamyang before putting out the flames and taking him away. The date of his death remains unknown, however, with one of the most reliable reports suggesting that he may have survived until January 16.

Losang Jamyang was a leader in promoting the Tibetan language in his village, and as a result had faced pressure from the local authorities.



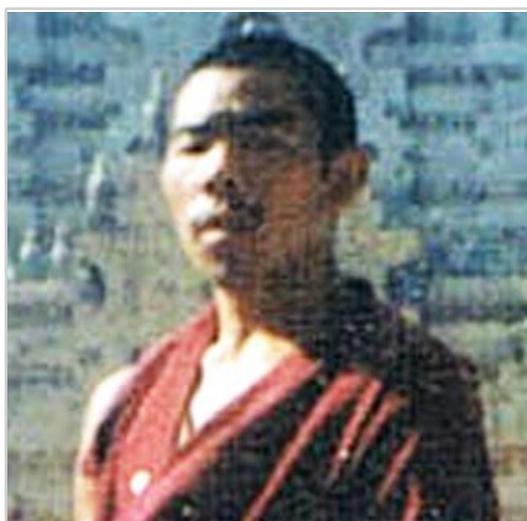
Tenzin Choedron

Tenzin Choedron, an 18-year old nun from Mame Dechen Chokorling, died after setting fire to herself on February 11, 2012. The oldest of four brothers and sisters, Tenzin Choedron self-immolated in the same location near Mame nunnery, just outside Ngaba county town, as Tenzin Wangmo, a former nun at Mame who died after her protest on October 17, 2011



Lobsang Gyatso

Nineteen-year old Lobsang Gyatso, a monk at Kirti monastery in Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan province, set fire to himself in protest on February 13, 2012. Shouting slogans of protest against the Chinese government, Lobsang Gyatso set fire to himself while standing along the main road in Ngaba county town. Armed security personnel extinguished the flames and beat Lobsang Gyatso as they took him away. His current whereabouts and well being remain unknown.



Damchoe Sangpo

On Friday, February 17, 2012, Damchoe Sangpo set fire to himself in Themchen county, Tsonub Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai province. The 38-year old monk was a member of Bongthak monastery's Democratic Management Committee, the government-established body that runs the monastery. The 38-year old monk died as a result of his protest.



Tsering Kyi

Tsering Kyi was 19-years old when she set fire to herself in the vegetable market in Machu town in Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu province. Even though Chinese vegetable traders nearby attempted to extinguish the flames by throwing soil on her, nearby police beat Tsering Kyi as they tried to put out the fire. She died on the spot.



Jamyang Palden

Jamyang Palden, a monk from Rongpo monastery in his thirties, survived after setting fire to himself in protest on March 14, 2012, though his current whereabouts and wellbeing are unknown. Local Tibetans gathered to pray at the scene of his self-immolation. The gathering led to a peaceful protest, with Tibetans calling for the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet.



Lobsang Tsultrim

On March 16, 2012, Lobsang Tsultrim became the 13th current or former monk from Kirti monastery to set fire to himself as a form of protest. Days later, on March 19, he died while in the custody of the authorities. Lobsang Tsultrim's body was not turned over to the family; government authorities cremated it the same day and gave them a portion of his ashes.



Sonam Dargye

A 44-year old father of three, Sonam Dargye died after self-immolating on March 17, 2012 in Rongpo town, Rebkong county, Malho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai province (Tibetan area of Amdo). Soon after, thousands of Tibetans in the area gathered to mark the passing of Sonam Dargye.



Tenpa Darjey

Tenpa Darjey, a 22-year old monk from Tsodun monastery in Ngaba who was considered one of the best students in logic and debate at the monastery, set fire to himself, along with fellow monk Chimey Palden, aged 21, on March 30, 2012 outside the prefectural government offices in Barkham, Ngaba. Tenpa Darjey, who was the youngest of four brothers and sisters, died as a result of his protest.



Chimey Palden

On March 30, 2012 Chimey Palden and Tenpa Darjey set fire to themselves in protest outside of the prefectural government offices in Barkham, Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan province. Both young men, who died following their protest, were monks at Kirti monastery in Ngaba. In 2010, on a visit to Lhasa, Chimey Palden was searched by Public Security personnel, who found a photo of the Dalai Lama, a picture of the Tibetan national flag and a Tibetan song on his mobile phone. He was detained for over a month.



Dorje Tseten

Nineteen-year old Dorje Tseten, along with another young Tibetan named Dargye, self-immolated outside of the Jokhang temple, considered the holiest temple in Tibetan Buddhism, in Lhasa on May 27, 2012. Both young men died as a result of their protest. The self-immolations took place during Saga Dawa, an important religious period for Tibetan Buddhists that commemorates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death. The self-immolations were the first in Lhasa where Chinese security has been tight since March 2008 when protests occurred across Tibet.



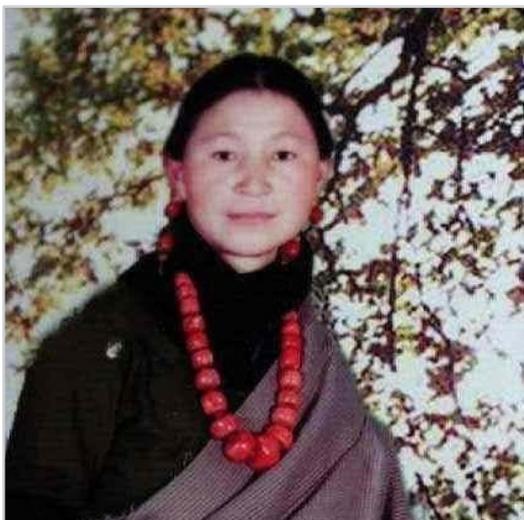
Dargye

Dargye, believed to be 25-years old, set fire to himself along with 19-year old Dorje Tseten in front of Lhasa's Jokhang temple on May 27, 2012. Both young men died as a result of their protest. Dargye had once been a monk at Kirti monastery in Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan province (Tibetan area of Amdo), before disrobing several years ago.



Tenzin Khedup

Tenzin Khedup, a 24-year old former monk, set fire to himself, along with Ngawang Norphel, 22, on June 30, 2012 in Dzatoe township in Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai province (Tibetan area of Kham). The two young men carried Tibetan flags and called for Tibetan independence. Tenzin Khedup died following their protest. Ngwang Norphel survived, but was badly burned and last known to be in serious condition in hospital.



Dolkar Tso

Dolkar Tso, mid-twenties, died after setting fire to herself in protest on August 7, 2012 near a white stupa outside of Tsoe Gaden Choeling monastery in Tsoe city, Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu province (Tibetan area of Amdo). During her protest the young mother of two called for the return of the Dalai Lama and shouted that there was no freedom in Tibet.



Gudrub

On October 5, 2012 Gudrub, a writer, died after setting himself on fire in a protest in Nagchu county, Nagchu prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region. Similar to many of the self-immolation protests that have taken place throughout Tibet, Gudrub, aged 43, called for freedom in Tibet and for the return of the Dalai Lama. In an article penned earlier in the year, Gudrub wrote that Tibetans "are sharpening [their] nonviolent movement... declaring the reality of Tibet by burning [their] own bodies to call for freedom in Tibet."



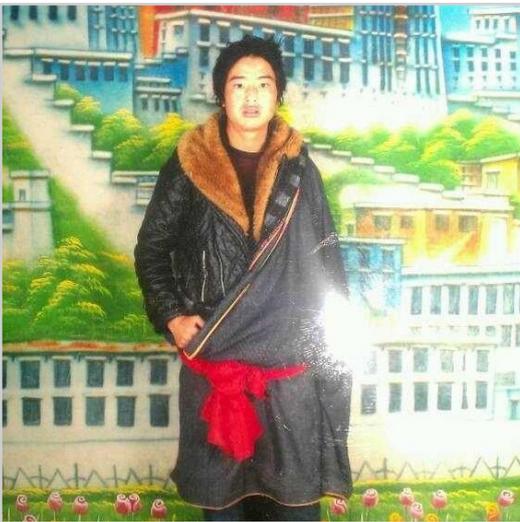
Sangay Gyatso

Sangay Gyatso, the fifty-fourth Tibetan to self-immolate since 2009, is believed to have died as a result of his October 6, 2012 protest. The 27-year old set fire to himself near Dokar Gelug monastery in Tsoe city, Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu province (Tibetan area of Amdo). Before his death, Sangay Gyatso called for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet and for the right of Tibetans to freely express their language and religion.



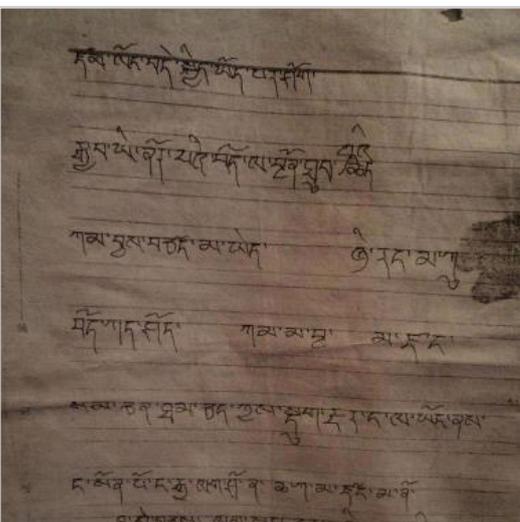
Jamyang Palden

Jamyang Palden, a monk in his thirties from Rongpo monastery in Rebkong (Chinese: Tongren), Qinghai (the Tibetan area of Amdo), set fire to himself on March 14 (2012). He was the first Tibetan to self-immolate in Rebkong. Jamyang Palden survived the self-immolation, but later died.



Wangchen Norbu

Wangchen Norbu self-immolated on the evening of November 19, 2012 in near Kangtsa Gaden Choepheling monstery in Kangtsa, located in the Tibetan area of Amdo, in Qinghai province.



Rikyo

A letter left behind by Rikyo, a 33-year old woman who self-immolated on May 30, 2012 in Dzamthang, reads, "Prayers for world peace and happiness! To ensure His Holiness the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet, do not indulge in slaughtering and trading of animals, do not steal, speak Tibetan, do not fight, Bearing all sufferings of the sentient beings on myself, do not resist by fighting if I get into Chinese hands alive. Be united, study Tibetan culture, On fire I burn, do not worry my family".



Tashi

A photo of Tashi, believed to have been taken outside of Kirti monastery in 2011. Tashi, 21-years old, and Lungtok, a 20-year old student in Kirti monastery's medical college, set fire to themselves on August 13, 2012 in Ngaba county town. The two young men set fire to themselves in a prayer wheel enclosure on the monastery's perimeter, and then emerged shouting protest slogans onto the 'Heroes' road' leading into town from the monastery. Both young men died as a result of their protest.



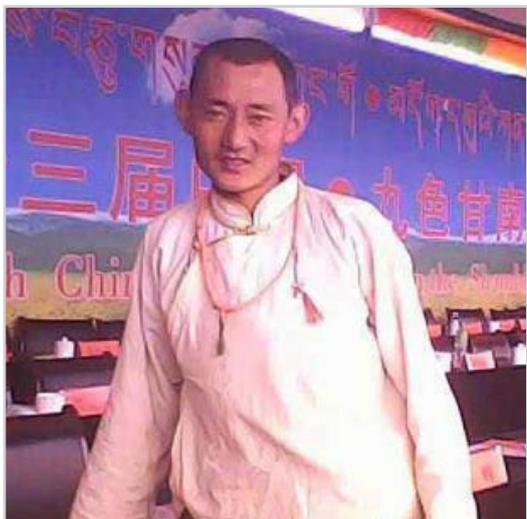
Sangay Dolma

Sangay Dolma, a young Tibetan nun, set fire to herself on December 2 (2012) outside her home in Tsekhog (Chinese: Zeku) in Malho, Qinghai. Tibetans reported that she took out a photograph of the Dalai Lama before doing so and prostrated in front of it. The photograph is one she left behind, showing Tibetan script on her hand referring to Tibetan independence.



Lhamo Kyab

Lhamo Kyab died after setting himself on fire in protest near Bora monastery in Sangchu county, Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu. Lhamo Kyab set himself aflame and ran long the road, calling for the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet. A man nearby attempted to use his shirt to put out the flames, but the fire was too strong. Lhamo Kyab, a husband and father of two young children, was in his late twenties.



Tsering Dhondrup

Tsering Dondrup died after his self-immolation protest on November 20, 2012 in Sangchu county, Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu province. The 24-year old was a farmer and nomad, originally from Amchok township in Sangchu county.



Dorje Rinchen

On October 23, 2012 Dorje Rinchen self-immolated near a military camp along the main street in Sangchu county town in Labrang, Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu. In his late fifties, Dorje Rinchen did not die immediately, but later passed away. Local Tibetans prevented security forces from taking his body and his body was instead transported to his home in the village of Sayi, approximately two kilometers east of Labrang Tashikyil monastery.



Lhamo Tseten

Lhamo Tseten died after setting himself on fire in protest on October 26, 2012 in Amchok township in Sangchu county, Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu. The father of a two-year old girl, Lhamo Tseten was married to a local Tibetan woman named Tsering.

The self-immolations in Tibet: the lives and deaths of Tibetans who set themselves on fire

When the time comes to light the body, to burn so fiercely that death is certain, a calm mind and resolute will are essential. Only the most powerful of accelerants, kerosene or petrol, can negate life in the short span before others intervene, for whatever reason. It is not enough to pour it. To be sure of exiting this life, heavily padded, absorbent clothing must be worn, to be drenched in fuel, perhaps bound firmly by wire or chain to the body to be burned, the self to flame and light the world. To be absolutely sure, not only is the outside soused, but the petrol is also swallowed. Only then is the match lit.

How can we bear to contemplate such acts? How can we not? We cannot flinch or turn away in horror. To refuse to imagine a fellow human deliberately, carefully, methodically, calmly burning the body, one's own live body, is to betray those brief flames and refuse their meaning. It cannot be too horrible to imagine, too transgressive of our cocooned lives.

Gabriel Lafitte ¹⁶⁵

The following case studies only include the 58 individuals who self-immolated between February 27, 2009, and October 23, 2012. In the ensuing month or so between these case studies being written and this report going to press, a further 31 people self-immolated. Limitations of time and space regrettably led to the decision not to attempt a comprehensive listing of all case studies. However, ICT is maintaining an online Fact Sheet on the the self-immolations with links to reports by ICT and other reporting organizations. ¹⁶⁶

Tapey

Date: February 27, 2009

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 20

Monastery: Kirti

Condition: Survived; whereabouts unknown

Tapey self-immolated on the afternoon of February 27, 2009 close to a crossroads near the market area of Ngaba County Town. According to several sources, Tapey's self-immolation was in protest against the local authorities banning events at Kirti Monastery to mark the annual Monlam prayer festival.

Several hundred monks reportedly intended to defy the ban at Kirti Monastery, but they were persuaded to return to their quarters by senior monks and local government officials who feared serious repercussions if the banning order was ignored.¹⁶⁷

Monlam, also known as The Great Prayer Festival, is one of the most important monastic festivals in the Tibetan Buddhist calendar, involving various rituals over a period of several days. During Monlam, monks and nuns pray for the long life of gurus in all Tibetan Buddhist traditions, for the survival and spread of the Dharma to all sentient beings, and for world peace. The prayers are intended to “help to overcome obstacles to peace and generate conducive conditions for everyone to live in harmony.”¹⁶⁸

According to the Beijing-based writer Woesser, who interviewed monks at Kirti a period of time after Tapey’s self-immolation, monks were also intending to pray for the those – at the very least 10, possibly many more – who were shot dead by Chinese security forces during a large-scale protest in Ngaba on March 16 the previous year, part of the wave of protests that was sweeping across all of Tibet at the time.¹⁶⁹

Lobsang, a Kirti monk now in exile who knew Tapey, told the New York Times in an interview that Tapey had been seen kicking military trucks in Ngaba County Town two days before his self-immolation, apparently trying to provoke a reaction from the paramilitary officers. “I asked myself, ‘What happened? What’s wrong with him?’ That day he was really different, and in his eyes I could see how he hated the military.”¹⁷⁰

According to several sources, Tapey left the monastery after other monks had returned to their quarters and walked to the local county town.¹⁷¹ Lobsang, the Kirti monk in exile, said Tapey had left a note saying he would kill himself if the government banned the prayer ceremonies.¹⁷² Having apparently doused himself in fuel, he set himself alight at a crossroads.¹⁷³ Kirti monks in exile said he was holding a home-made Tibetan flag bearing a portrait of the Dalai Lama at its center. Lobsang, the Kirti monk in exile, added, “The people very much respected his motivation and the price he paid for freedom.”¹⁷⁴

Most reports of the incident claim police opened fire on Tapey hitting him at least three times.¹⁷⁵

For several days it was unclear whether Tapey had survived. Then on March 5, 2009, an article published by the Party-controlled Xinhua news agency claimed Tapey had indeed survived his self-immolation, but denied he had been shot by police as widely reported in the Tibetan exile media and elsewhere.

The Xinhua report instead claimed police had apprehended another Kirti monk called Jangkor who reportedly confessed to starting and spreading the rumor that Tapey had been shot by police in order to “create greater disturbances so as to attract attention from overseas.”¹⁷⁶

The Xinhua article quoted various people who supposedly witnessed Tapey’s self-immolation and who were reported stating that they had not heard gunfire. Tapey’s mother was also quoted saying she had asked Tapey himself if he had been shot, and that he too had said he had not been shot.

In a still photograph of the aftermath of the incident which emerged several months later, Tapey is seen lying on the ground in his charred robes surrounded by police, with at least three officers holding drawn firearms – the officer closest to the camera appears to be inspecting his rifle which invites speculation he had just fired at least one round.¹⁷⁷

Previously unseen footage of Tapey’s self-immolation appeared in a documentary issued by Chinese Central Television in May 2012, showing Tapey engulfed in flames but still walking unsteadily forward. Several police officers can be seen slowly keeping pace with him at a distance until someone – possibly a plain-clothed officer – runs up behind Tapey and discharges a fire extinguisher over him at close range. With the flames put out, Tapey then runs a few steps away from the person with the fire extinguisher and the police officers following him, but the footage cuts away before Tapey falls to the ground.¹⁷⁸

The same Xinhua article that denied Tapey had been shot did not attempt to explain the reasons behind Tapey’s actions – there was no mention that he had held a Tibetan flag or shouted slogans – stating only that he had “a strong desire for survival” following treatment for severe burns over more than half his body, and that he was “cooperating with treatment.” His mother, named in the report as Mekar, is quoted as saying “I’m heartbroken to see his injuries. He is very silly.”¹⁷⁹

The CCTV documentary attempts to explain Tapey’s actions by claiming he had been mocked by other monks at Kirti Monastery for not participating in the protests in Ngaba in March 2008, and chose to self-immolate “to regain the honor.”¹⁸⁰

The documentary also includes a short interview with Tapey, who appears wearing monk’s robes and whose head, neck, arms and legs are heavily scarred. He speaks briefly in Chinese to an interviewer about his physical pain and the limited use of his hands, and then his mother is seen speaking to the interviewer in Tibetan, saying “He said he deeply regrets what he’s done.” Notably, Tapey himself does not express any remorse or regret to camera.¹⁸¹ According to a June 25, 2012 Xinhua article broadly discussing the wave of self-immolations that was to follow Tapey’s self-immolation, “Tapey is now recovering and refused to touch upon the subject of self-immolation with visitors.”¹⁸²

It's impossible to know with any certainty what if any pressures were put on Tapey and his mother to appear in front of the camera and speak about the self-immolation. The Chinese authorities in Tibet – and across all areas of the PRC – are known to use the threat of withdrawing or limiting medical treatment as a means to coerce cooperation from detainees and their families, and it is therefore far from inconceivable that Tapey and his mother spoke to camera under duress and out of fear of the consequences if they did not cooperate with the documentary makers.

The writer Woesser also reports that surgeons at a major hospital in Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan, planned to amputate Tapey's right arm in order to remove evidence he'd been shot – he was hit once in his right arm and in both legs, according to Woesser, who also reports it was only his mother's determination to advocate for her son that his arm was not amputated. A consequence, however, has been that Tapey has remained hospitalized ever since and faces no prospect of being discharged, suggesting his hospitalization is being used as a form of arbitrary detention.¹⁸³

Woesser adds that ever since Tapey was detained, he has been granted only sporadic and very limited access to visitors – generally only his mother and her brother. However, in the CCTV documentary, Tapey's mother says to camera that Tapey "feels very sorry for his family," and that his younger sister "washes his feet every night."¹⁸⁴

According to Woesser, Tapey was 20 years old when he self-immolated; his given name is Tapey, but when he became a monk he was given the religious name Lobsang Tashi. He has an elder brother called Tsebo, who was 27 at the time of Tapey's self immolation, and a younger sister called Tsering Kyi, who was 18.¹⁸⁵

Tsewang Norbu

Date: August 15, 2011

Protest location: Tawu (Ch: Daofu) County, Kardze (Ch: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Kham

Age: 29

Monastery: Nyitso

Condition: Deceased

Tsewang Norbu, 29, died at the scene of his self-immolation in Tawu County at 12:30 pm on August 15, 2011, having imbibed a quantity of gasoline before pouring more over himself and setting it alight.¹⁸⁶ Tsewang Norbu reportedly shouted slogans calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet and for freedom in Tibet for around 10 minutes before self-immolating.¹⁸⁷ A receptionist at a nearby hotel told AFP news agency on condition of anonymity, "I saw a monk lying on the ground and burning, he died right in front of the county government building. Before setting himself on fire, he was distributing leaflets."¹⁸⁸

Footage of Tsewang Norbu lying on the ground engulfed in flames appears in the Chinese Central Television documentary “The Dalai clique and the self immolation event,” apparently shot from a traffic or security surveillance camera in Tawu County Town.¹⁸⁹ According to the group Free Tibet, the precise location was Chume Street (Ch: Binghe Lu).¹⁹⁰ The footage shows local people and monks apparently pushing police officers away from Tsewang Norbu.

One monk even appears to be swinging a long stick apparently warning people not to approach Tsewang Norbu as he lay burning. An officer interviewed in the documentary said he and other officers tried to help Tsewang Norbu. He says, “We rushed to him and tried to help him, but several lamas stopped us. The man was still breathing when the fire died out, but the monks wouldn’t let us rescue him – we said, ‘we came to rescue him’ and they said ‘It’s none of your business’ and then they pushed us away with their fists.”¹⁹¹

A few months after Tsewang Norbu’s self-immolation, a video taken on a cell-phone by a bystander emerged, in which the last of the flames can be seen still rising from his head and upper torso. People can be heard chanting prayers in the background, and the police appear to have been driven from the scene. The video is harrowing, showing Tsewang Norbu lying on his back completely burned with his arms extended in front of him as if in prayer with occasional spasms wracking his body – he is apparently still alive at this point.¹⁹²

The Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) reports that monks from Nyitso Monastery – who were supposedly at the scene – then took Tsewang Norbu’s remains back to the monastery, which was soon surrounded by paramilitary police who demanded that the monks hand over Tsewang Norbu’s remains.¹⁹³ However, hundreds of local Tibetans also arrived at the monastery to participate in a funeral service for Tsewang Norbu, and while they were unable to cross police lines into the monastery, the service apparently went ahead despite the police presence.¹⁹⁴

The Party-controlled news agency Xinhua almost immediately published a report confirming Tsewang Norbu’s self-immolation, but added “It was unclear why he had burnt himself” and that “The local government has launched an investigation.”¹⁹⁵

The Beijing-based Tibetan writer Woesser told CNN in an interview that she was unable to make contact with her acquaintances in the area,¹⁹⁶ and ICT received other reports that internet and telephone connections had been severed.

TCHRD reported that Nyitso Monastery, and the nearby Gaden Jangchup Choeling Nunnery, had been under particularly intense pressure from police and local authorities since leading unapproved large-scale and public celebrations marking the 76th birthday of the Dalai Lama some five weeks earlier on July 6, 2011.¹⁹⁷

Dramatic images of part of the celebrations show dense plumes of incense rising from numerous homes across a valley in the area.¹⁹⁸ According to TCHRD, water and electricity were immediately cut off at both the monastery and nunnery as a consequence of those celebrations.¹⁹⁹

Journalist Hannah Beech visited Tawu after Tsewang Norbu's self-immolation, reporting: "Two and a half months later, under the cover of night, I visit the bridge in Tawu (or Daofu in Chinese) where Norbu ended his life. The town is under virtual lockdown. New security cameras affixed to lampposts record all movements. Half a block away, a few Chinese police cradle machine guns. Every few minutes, a reddish glow from the flashing lights of police vehicles on constant patrol illuminates the site of martyrdom."²⁰⁰

Tsewang Norbu's monastery, Nyitso, is located within Tawu County Town and is populated by more than 200 monks (prior to the Cultural Revolution nearly 2000 monks are believed to have been based there). Nyitso has more than 400 years of history and is recognized as a protected heritage site in Sichuan. Monks from other areas of Kham and Amdo frequently come to Nyitso to study, while monks from Nyitso also travel elsewhere for study. There is a school within the monastery for young monks to learn grammar, philosophical debate, Buddhism, history, poetry and literature, taught in the Tibetan language.

Lobsang Kelsang (1)²⁰¹ **Lobsang Kunchok**

Date: September 26, 2011

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 18 and 19

Monastery: Kirti

Condition: Survived

Lobsang Kelsang and Lobsang Kunchok jointly self-immolated at around 10:30 a.m. on September 26, 2011 in Ngaba County Town, not far from Kirti Monastery.²⁰²

Both monks arrived at the spot where Phuntsog had self-immolated on March 16, 2011: "They were wrapped in heavy cloaks," said the Tibetan source, speaking to Radio Free Asia. "They sat down together for a short time, they then rose, held up a Tibetan flag, embraced each other, and shouted slogans calling for the return of the Dalai Lama and for freedom for Tibet. After this, they took off their cloaks, moved into the road, doused themselves in gasoline, and set themselves on fire. They then ran down the road, shouting slogans." According to the same RFA report, Lobsang Kelsang is the brother of Phuntsog.²⁰³

A short report issued that day by the Party-controlled Xinhua news agency stated that both monks had been “rescued” having suffered only “slight burns,” and that their “suicide attempt is under further investigation.”²⁰⁴

Police reportedly arrived at the scene and used fire-extinguishers to put out the flames on both men before taking them away in police vehicles. Little was immediately known about their condition, with initial reports suggesting one of the young men may have died at the scene.²⁰⁵

Around a month after their self-immolations, a video was posted to YouTube shot by a bystander showing Lobsang Kunchok moments after the fire that had engulfed him was extinguished. He is lying prostrate with powder from at least one fire extinguisher covering him and the road surface around him, while smoke is still rising from his body. When the video starts, although a stationary police car is nearby there is no one within 20 feet of him, so it is not clear who used the fire extinguisher. He is craning his neck to look around and women’s voices are heard shouting close by. Paramilitary police in anti-riot gear then arrive in a somewhat confused and disorderly fashion, eventually clearing people away from the scene, including whoever was videoing what was happening.²⁰⁶

Confirmation that both men survived their self-immolation attempt in May 2011, when they appeared in the documentary “The Dalai clique and the self immolation event.” Still images of both of them, possibly soon after they were initially hospitalized, appear on screen²⁰⁷ before they are both briefly interviewed a little later in the documentary.

Lobsang Kelsang is sitting up in bed expressing gratitude to the doctors who treated him, his head bandaged and with some scarring visible on his arms and shoulders; Lobsang Kunchok is alert, although lying on his back. He does not appear to have any scarring on his face or neck, but heavy scarring is just visible on his upper arms. An interviewer asks him in Tibetan, “Will you set yourself on fire again after you recover?” to which he replies, “No, I wont.”²⁰⁸

An article in the official Chinese media entitled “Self-immolation truth” claimed Lobsang Kelsang and Lobsang Kunchok were urged to self-immolate by an older monk. In an unconvincing and unsubstantiated report, Xinhua stated: “Rala Lodro, a 40-year-old painter and lama... approached [Lobsang Kelsang and Lobsang Kunchok] while they were eating sunflower seeds in the monastery courtyard, and advised them to commit self-immolation during the daytime. ‘Our life is bad now. It would be better to commit self-immolation to become a wisp of smoke. Do not burn at night otherwise the Communist Party will be happy because America’s cameras above the Kirti Monastery can not capture it,’ Rala Lodro was quoted as saying by Xinhua.”²⁰⁹

Uncorroborated reports emerged from Tibetan exile sources in March 2012 that Lobsang Kunchok's arms and legs had been amputated as a consequence of his injuries, and that he was being fed through a tube inserted into his stomach. These same uncorroborated reports added that doctors and government officials have been verbally abusing Lobsang Kunchok, accusing him of trying to destroy "his country."²¹⁰

Both Lobsang Kelsang and Lobsang Kunchok had studied at Kirti Monastery for several years, according to most sources.²¹¹ They are both from the same rural area of Ngaba County – Me'uruma (Ch: Mairuma) Township – and it is possible therefore that they were acquaintances before joining Kirti.

Kelsang Wangchuk

Date: October 3, 2011

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 17

Monastery: Kirti

Condition: Survived

Kelsang Wangchuk, a 17-year old monk from Kirti monastery self-immolated in Ngaba County Town at approximately 2:00 pm local time on October 3, 2011, according to Tibetans in exile in contact with Tibetans in the area. Kelsang Wangchuk was displaying a photograph of the Dalai Lama and shouting slogans against the Chinese government when he set fire to himself along the main street in Ngaba County Town. Some exiled sources say at the time said he was immediately surrounded by security personnel, who extinguished the fire and beat Kelsang Wangchuk before taking him away.²¹²

Locals then gathered at the scene to protest further, but police quickly dispersed the crowd.²¹³

Kelsang Wangchuk, from Chujee'ma (Ch: Qiujiima) Township in Ngaba County, was the third monk from Kirti Monastery to self-immolate in a single week following the September 26, 2012 self-immolations of fellow Kirti monks Lobsang Kelsang and Lobsang Kunchok.²¹⁴ According to monks at Kirti Monastery in exile in Dharamsala, India, Kelsang Wangchuk was repeatedly interrogated and beaten in hospital.²¹⁵

ICT did not observe any reports of Kelsang Wangchuk's self-immolation in the official media, although he appears briefly in the Central Chinese Television documentary "The Dalai clique and the self-immolation event." Wearing a jacket over a hooded top, no burns or scarring are visible on his face or head.

He sits against a blue background apparently in a television studio and expresses the same messages of regret and contrition attributed to all interviewees in the documentary: "I didn't tell anyone about my self-immolation except my mother. She suffers a lot and I regret what I did." ²¹⁶

Kayang Choepel

Date: October 7, 2011

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 18 and 19

Monastery: Formerly of Kirti Monastery

Condition: Both deceased

Kayang, 18, and Choepel, 19, both former monks from Kirti Monastery, reportedly shouted slogans along the main street of Ngaba County Town at around 11:30 a.m. on October 7, 2011. According to Tibet Express, a Tibetan-language newspaper based in Dharamsala, India, the young men shouted, "Tibet has no freedom! We have no human rights! Invite the Dalai Lama back to Tibet!" and "All Tibetans should return!" ²¹⁷ Then with hands clasped in prayer, they reportedly self-immolated. ²¹⁸

Security personnel arrived with fire extinguishers and put out the flames on both young men, and according to several sources, proceeded to beat them. According to at least one source, Choepel died at the scene; ²¹⁹ although another source told Radio Free Asia (RFA) a few days later that he had initially survived, ²²⁰ but then died in hospital on October 11, 2011. ²²¹ The same RFA report and a Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) report cite sources claiming that even as police were beating and trying to put Kayang into a police vehicle, he was still raising his fist and shouting slogans. ²²²

Kayang is reported to have died the following day in hospital. ²²³ Kayang told his attendants in hospital that he had no regrets over self-immolating, and that he was gratified with his self-immolation for the cause of Tibet. ²²⁴ According to RFA, Kayang was the nephew of Tashi, who was sentenced to death for his part in the protests in Ngaba in 2008. ²²⁵ Another source reported that one of Kayang's cousins was shot dead by Chinese security forces during the same wave of protests in Ngaba. ²²⁶

In a report dated October 8, 2011, Xinhua, the official Chinese agency, cited a local county government spokesperson who claimed both men "were slightly injured" and that "their injuries were not life-threatening." The short report concludes "Police are investigating their motives of self-immolation." ²²⁷

A source told RFA, “All the Tibetan shops and restaurants in Ngaba area closed their shutters and paid respect to the protesters,” with businesses remaining closed for three days.²²⁸ This is a pattern that has been repeated with many of the self-immolations in Ngaba.

The same source added that Kayang’s remains were cremated by the authorities as soon as he died, despite his family’s requests to perform traditional funeral rites for him. Police allowed monks from Kirti Monastery to perform rituals in the family home, but barred friends and supporters from attending. Another source told ICT, “People in Ngaba offered money for butter lamps and another religious activities such as prayers and kora [circumambulation of a religious site] for three days [after the death].”²²⁹

One of the young men’s self-immolations may have been caught on video. In a documentary made by Chinese Central Television, “The Dalai clique and the self-immolation event,” footage of paramilitary police covering the burning body of a young man rolling on the ground is accompanied by the narrator listing Choepel and Kayang’s self-immolations, and stating that both men died. The footage is not seen elsewhere in the documentary.²³⁰

It is not known whether both Kayang and Choepel chose to disrobe or whether they were forced to leave Kirti Monastery by local authorities.

Norbu Damdrul

Date: October 15, 2011

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 19

Monastery: Formerly of Kirti

Condition: Deceased.

Norbu Damdrul, a 19-year old former Kirti monk, set fire to himself in a protest on the main street of Ngaba County Town just before noon on October 15, 2012, according to exiled Tibetan sources. According to Kirti monks in exile, Norbu Damdrul shouted “We need freedom and independence for Tibet,” and called for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet as his body was burning. Norbu Damdrul was badly burned, but according to the same sources he was still alive when police stationed on the street extinguished the flames and kicked him before taking him away. According to at least one source in the area, the vehicle transporting Norbu Damdrul left the scene headed in the opposite direction of the local hospital.²³¹

Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported, “Chinese police chased Norbu Dramdul as he ran in flames for a distance before they extinguished the fire, beat him up, bundled him in a police car and sped away, eyewitnesses said.”

Another eyewitness was quoted by RFA saying, “I heard loud shouts of ‘Freedom for Tibet’ and ‘Let the Dalai Lama return to Tibet’ coming from behind me. When I looked back, I saw a person on fire running towards us. As soon as I saw that, I was gripped with fear. His hair was burning and the back of his upper garment burned and fell to the ground in pieces. I could tell that he had long hair and was wearing pale-colored pants. He did not fall to the ground despite being kicked [by policemen] who also tried to douse him with water.”²³²

A large crowd of Tibetans who had gathered at the scene was dispersed at gunpoint by security personnel, according to several reports.²³³

In the Central Chinese Television documentary “The Dalai clique and the self immolation event,” footage is shown of police using four fire extinguishers and placing blankets over a young man lying face down on the ground and screaming in pain, as the narrator gives the date and place of Norbu Damdrul’s self-immolation, suggesting that the footage is indeed of Norbu Damdrul. The narrator states only that the self-immolator seen in the footage suffered serious burns without actually naming him.²³⁴

ICT did not observe any reports of Norbu Damdrul’s self-immolation in the Party-controlled official media at the time of his self-immolation.

Norbu Damdrul died on January 5, 2012 in hospital in Barkham (Ch: Ma’erkang), the prefectural capital of Ngaba, around two and a half months after he self-immolated.²³⁵

It is not known whether Norbu Damdrul chose to disrobe or whether he was expelled from the monastery by government authorities; the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) report that he left Kirti – voluntarily or otherwise is not made clear – in June 2010,²³⁶ since when he had been living with his parents.²³⁷

Norbu Damdrul was the cousin of the Kirti monk Lobsang Tultrim, who self-immolated outside Kirti Monastery on March 16, 2012 and passed away on March 19, 2012.

Tenzin Wangmo

Date: October 17, 2011

Protest location: Sumdo Bridge, approximately three kilometers outside Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 20

Nunnery: Mame Dechen Chokorling

Condition: Deceased

Tenzin Wangmo, a 20-year old nun, died at the scene of her self-immolation on October 17, 2011, close to her nunnery and several kilometers outside Ngaba County Town.²³⁸ She reportedly set herself on fire then shouted slogans calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet and for religious freedom for “close to seven or eight minutes” before succumbing to the flames, according to various reports.²³⁹

Nuns from Tenzin Wangmo’s nunnery – called Mame Dechen Chokorling, also known as Mame Nunnery – took Tenzin Wangmo’s remains back to the nunnery to perform funeral rites for her. According to the Kirti monks in exile, the authorities demanded that the body either be handed over or buried that same night, but rather than bury it, the nuns cremated Tenzin Wangmo’s remains that night. Shortly afterwards, soldiers and police came and sealed off the nunnery and surrounding villages.²⁴⁰

However, police demanded that they hand her remains over to them; the nuns refused, and police surrounded the nunnery and nearby villages. Eventually, police ordered the nuns to bury Tenzin Wangmo before the end of the day,²⁴¹ and they reportedly cremated her that night.²⁴²

Tenzin Wangmo was the first woman to self-immolate in Tibet. All of the previous nine people to have self-immolated were either monks or former monks, with most affiliated to Kirti Monastery in Ngaba County Town. Mame nunnery, situated around three kilometers northwest of Ngaba county town, belongs to the Gelukpa school and is the largest nunnery in Ngaba with a community of 350 nuns.

Tenzin Wangmo is briefly mentioned in the Chinese Central Television documentary “The Dalai clique and the self immolation event,” where she is listed as one of six people who self-immolated in October 2011.²⁴³ No official Xinhua report of her self-immolation was observed at the time. However, a June 25, 2012 report in the official media entitled “Self-immolation truth” mentions Tenzin Wangmo’s self-immolation and death, alleging that Tsultrim – a former Kirti monk who died two days after a joint self-immolation with Tennyi on January 6, 2012 – had previously promised to jointly self-immolate with Tenzin Wangmo.²⁴⁴

On February 11, 2012, another nun from Mame Nunnery self-immolated in the same spot at Tenzin Wangmo. Tenzin Choedron, 18, died on route to hospital, according to a Xinhua report.

A photograph of Tenzin Wangmo later emerged from Tibet, taken as she was laying face down on an expansive area of grass and most probably already dead, if not close to death. Smoke can be seen rising from her back, and a few figures in maroon robes, possibly nuns from her nunnery, can be seen in the distance running towards her.²⁴⁵

Reporters Sans Frontieres (Reporters Without Borders) – a Paris-based organization which advocates for press freedoms and freedom of information around the world – reported on August 23, 2012, that Yonten Gyatso, a respected Tibetan monk at Khashi Monastery in Ngaba County, was sentenced to seven years imprisonment on June 18, 2012 on charges related to sending pictures of Tenzin Wangmo abroad, and charges relating to disseminating information about the crackdown in Tibet. He was arrested at his monastery on October 18, 2012 – the day after Tenzin Wangmo’s self-immolation – and spent the ensuing months in arbitrary detention where he was reportedly beaten and tortured by officers from the powerful State Security Bureau.²⁴⁶

Dawa Tsering

Date: October 25, 2011

Protest location: Kardze (Ch: Ganzi) County, Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Kham

Age: 38

Monastery: Kardze

Condition: Unknown

Dawa Tsering, 38, self-immolated within Kardze Monastery on October 25, 2011 while participating in an important religious ritual attended by most of the other monks in the monastery and as many as several hundred locals who had gone to the monastery to attend the ceremony.²⁴⁷ Dawa Tsering reportedly shouted slogans as he burned, calling for the long life of the Dalai Lama and for the Dalai Lama’s return to Tibet. Radio Free Asia (RFA) cited a source saying that Dawa Tsering inadvertently splashed kerosene people standing close to him moments before he self-immolated, and that the clothes of some of these people also caught fire. RFA’s source did not report whether any of these people suffered burns.²⁴⁸

After Dawa Tsering had fallen to the ground, monks and other spectators managed to extinguish the flames and immediately took him to hospital, according to several accounts.²⁴⁹ Other accounts indicate he pleaded not to be taken to hospital,²⁵⁰ and that he refused treatment when he got there. According to a second source who spoke to RFA, “His head is badly burned, he cannot speak, and he is just lying there, staring, fully covered in bandages. His head, neck, nose, were all badly burned and the skin has peeled off. He refused any medication and told the monks to let him die.”²⁵¹

Police stationed at the monastery reportedly followed the private vehicle carrying Dawa Tsering to hospital, and then cordoned off the area once reinforcements had arrived, according to the same RFA report.

Soon after arriving at hospital, Dawa Tsering was taken back to Kardze Monastery. Some sources indicated that family and fellow monks considered him to be at greater risk of harm in police custody and in hospital than in the monastery in the care of monks; the monks therefore risked confrontation with the police and took him back to the monastery.²⁵² Other sources suggested Dawa Tsering was thought to be so close to death that there was little doctors could do, even if Dawa Tsering would have consented to allow them to treat him, and so he was released into the care of the monks.²⁵³

A video of Dawa Tsering later emerged, showing him lying on a bed, outside, with a canopy over the bed. Although conscious, his breathing is extremely shallow and his eyes appear to be closed. His entire face and head is severely burned, while his chest and midriff appear unscathed. Other burns can be seen on his arms and legs. A narrator, possibly the camera operator, introduces him as Dawa Tsering: "For the Tibetan people he self-immolated," and goes on to explain that he hasn't yet been treated. Towards the end of the clip Dawa Tsering turns his head slightly to look at the camera operator.²⁵⁴ Dawa Tsering's welfare and current whereabouts are not known; Kirti monks in exile report that he is believed to be still alive, as of August 2012.

The Torgyak Ritual that Dawa Tsering was performing when he set himself alight is an annual occasion at the monastery attended by hundreds of people in the local community, and includes ritualized dances performed by monks in elaborate costumes making offerings of food as a means of reducing obstacles in the coming year. The precise circumstances of Dawa Tsering's self-immolation are not known; however, part of the Torgyak Ritual includes burning the food offerings, suggesting that the means to self-immolate may have been available to him.

RFA reported that Dawa Tsering was from Yepa Village in Kardze County, close to Kardze Monastery and that he had been at the monastery for seven years prior to his self-immolation. TCHRD reported that his father's name is Delek, and his mother's name is Dontso.²⁵⁶

ICT did not observe any mention of Dawa Tsering's self-immolation in the official Chinese media. However, in "The Dalai clique and the self-immolation event," the documentary made by the official Chinese Central Television, the narrator states "On October 25th, there were more self-immolations by monks in Ganzi [Kardze] County."²⁵⁷ Although it is certainly possible that there was more than one self-immolation in Kardze County on October 25, 2011, it would appear to be more likely that the narrator simply read a mis-translation from the original Chinese narration.

Palden Choetso

Date: November 3, 2011

Protest location: Tawu (Ch: Daofu) County, Kardze (Ch: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Kham

Age: 35

Nunnery: Ganden Jangchup Choeling

Condition: Deceased

Palden Choetso, a nun in her mid-thirties from Ganden Jangchup Choeling Nunnery in Tawu County, self-immolated early in the afternoon of November 3, 2011 in the center of Tawu County Town. She was the second nun to have self-immolated in Tibet following the self-immolation of Tenzin Wangmo on October 17, 2011 a few kilometers outside Ngaba County Town. She also reportedly self-immolated close to the spot where Norbu Tsewang, a monk from Nyitso Monastery in Tawu County, had self-immolated on August 15, 2012.²⁵⁸ As she burned, Palden Choetso reportedly shouted slogans including “Long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama,” “Free Tibet” and “Let His Holiness return to Tibet.”²⁵⁹

Video of Palden Choetso’s self-immolation emerged a few weeks later, followed by at least two other videos shot by different people from different angles. Still images of Palden Choetso on flames taken from the first video are among the most iconic footage depicting the wave of self-immolations in Tibet.

In the video itself the flames engulfing Palden Choetso are rising 10 to 15 feet above her head while her form, dressed in a nun’s robes is visible within the flames, still upright, although starting to buckle. As she burns, other people start shouting the slogans with her. Just before the video footage cuts out, a young woman in a long, traditional Tibetan dress steps purposefully forward with her back to the camera and tosses a khatag – a white scarf traditionally presented as a blessing in Tibet – towards Palden Choetso; as the woman turns away, Palden Choetso collapses to the ground.²⁶⁰

The second video, shot from a second or third floor window overlooking almost the exact spot where Palden Choetso self-immolates, starts after she has fallen to the ground and continues for several minutes while Palden Choetso burns. Small movements of Palden Choetso’s head and legs suggest she is still alive.

As with Norbu Tsewang who self-immolated in almost exactly the same spot less than three months previously, Tibetans including several monks form a ring around Palden Choetso when police arrive on the scene, with some monks and onlookers wielding long and heavy pieces of timber and even banging them on the ground, apparently warning officers to stay away.

An officer can be seen standing back and holding a blanket, apparently ready to throw it over Palden Choetso's body but he is evidently unwilling to break through the crowd of people around her. A monk is seen standing close to Palden Choetso's still burning body unfurling a yellow blessing scarf; people surround Palden Choetso ever more closely as the flames eventually die away, and possibly led by the monk who had produced the yellow scarf, which he places over and around her body, they pick her up and prepare to carry her away. A dozen or so police officers press in when they see Palden Choetso being taken away, but they are pushed back and threatened by the people in the crowd, including those carrying clubs.

In remarkable scenes, some people in the crowd are throwing khatags over Palden Choetso while at the same time others are throwing sticks and rocks at the police, who can be seen retreating away from the area. Two officers remain watching from across the street, occasionally ducking and flinching as rocks and other missiles continue to be thrown at them. The video ends with what appears to be scenes of people putting Palden Choetso into a car, although the camera is shaking badly making this detail difficult to confirm.²⁶¹

The third video is shot from a vantage point in the street and only several feet away from Palden Choetso, and starts as the flames that engulfed her have already started to subside. A woman's voice can be heard screaming "Gyalwa Rinpoche" over and over again – an honorific title for the Dalai Lama.²⁶²

Xinhua, the Party-controlled official news agency, acknowledged Palden Choetso's self-immolation in a brief report, concluding, "It was unclear why she killed herself. The local government has launched an investigation."²⁶³

A crowd of some two dozen people seen carrying or escorting Palden Choetso in the video took her back to her nunnery, according to some sources,²⁶⁴ while other sources said she was taken to the prayer hall in Nyitso Monastery, where Norbu Tsewang had been a monk.²⁶⁵ She died soon afterwards, according to all accounts.

Police immediately shut the area down, closing roads and placing a cordon of officers around both the nunnery and monastery, while leaders from both institutions were summoned by police as part of an attempt to suppress information about the self-immolation reaching the outside world, according to a witness who spoke to Radio Free Asia (RFA).²⁶⁶

As news of Palden Choetso's self-immolation spread throughout the local Tibetan community, thousands of people reportedly gathered in the town's market area, then marched to Ganden Jangchup Choeling Nunnery and to Nyitso Monastery in a public show of support for Palden Choetso.²⁶⁷ Footage of nuns from Ganden Jangchup Choeling marching and shouting slogans after Palden Choetso's self-immolation appeared at the same time as the original footage showing her self-immolation.²⁶⁸

Three days later, on November 6, 2011, thousands of local people gathered at Nyitso Monastery for Palden Choetso's funeral while monks and nuns held prayers for her inside. ²⁶⁹

Prior to Palden Choetso's self-immolation the situation in Tawu County had been extremely tense. Reporter Hannah Beech had traveled to the region around a week before Palden Choetso's self-immolation and reported, "My colleagues and I only dared enter Tawu at night because of the heavy police presence. Other foreign journalists who visited Ngaba (or Aba), the neighboring prefecture where seven Tibetan clerics have immolated themselves, were detained and hassled. But even under these less than ideal reporting conditions, it was easy to see just how frustrated Tibetans are about China's oppressive rule, which has only gotten more heavy-handed since the 2008 protests that erupted across the Tibetan plateau." ²⁷⁰

The Wall Street Journal reported that Palden Choetso had pinned a list above her bed in her quarters of the names of everyone who had self-immolated in Tibet; the report added that photographs of her and Norbu Tsewang were seen hanging in people's homes in Tawu. ²⁷¹

Palden Choetso was from Drogcho Village in Geshe (Ch: Gexi) Township in Tawu County, according to TCHRD; ²⁷² Xinhua reported she was from Tongfoshan Village. ²⁷³ No sources reported on her personal details, such as her family situation or how long she'd been a nun.

According to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), the day Palden Choetso self-immolated was the last day of the *Nyung-Ney* festival, ²⁷⁴ marked by a period of fasting and intense meditation and prayer, which is regarded as "a powerful practice for the accumulation of positive energy." ²⁷⁵

Tenzin Phuntsog

Date: December 1, 2011

Protest location: Chamdo (Ch: Changdu) County, Chamdo Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region, in the Tibetan region of Kham

Age: 40s

Monastery: Formerly at Karma Monastery

Condition: Deceased

Tenzin Phuntsog, a former monk at Karma Monastery in Chamdo County initially survived his self-immolation on December 1, 2011 after police reportedly extinguished the flames and took him to hospital. ²⁷⁶ A source speaking to Radio Free Asia (RFA) said, "There were many Tibetans in the area who witnessed the self-immolation and saw a huge ball of fire around him." ²⁷⁷ However, Tenzin Phuntsog then passed away in Chamdo Hospital on December 6, 2011, five days after his self-immolation. ²⁷⁸

An official at the Propaganda Department in Chamdo County denied there had been a self-immolation when contacted by the Huffington Post: “‘Nobody self-immolated. Nothing like that happened in Chamdo,’ said the woman, who would not give her name,” reported the Post.²⁷⁹

China Daily, the Party-controlled English-language official news outlet, did report Tenzin Phuntsog’s self-immolation, claiming he was an “eccentric” farmer who had fallen foul of the local authorities after illegally felling some trees, and that “His suicide attempt was believed to be connected with the incident.” The report, dated the day after Tenzin Phuntsog’s self-immolation, claimed he was “in a stable condition.”²⁸⁰

Karma Monastery had been under police lockdown since October 26, 2011 following a suspected bomb blast at a government building near the monastery.²⁸¹ RFA reported that while no one was injured in the explosion, slogans calling for Tibetan independence had been painted on the building’s walls, and that police then took over the monastery,²⁸² apparently assuming monks at the monastery were either involved in the explosion, or at least had information on who was involved.

Up to 70 monks from the monastery were detained by police investigating the bombing, according to RFA, while a further 40 fled the monastery;²⁸³ Tenzin Phuntsog’s son, Choying Nyima, was reportedly among a group of younger novice monks who were simply ordered by police to leave the monastery. Sources in touch with the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) reported that these novice monks were then subjected to intense interrogations by police trying to compile information on the 70 monks who had been detained. Police then threatened the families of the 40 monks who had left the monastery that the monks would be arrested if the families did persuade them to return to the monastery within four days, according to a source who spoke to RFA.²⁸⁵ Aside from the detentions, two abbots at Karma Monastery – Lodo Rabtsel and Namsey Sonam – along with seven other monks, were formally arrested on October 29, 2011 for refusing to denounce the Dalai Lama or cooperate with the intensive ‘patriotic education’ that was held at the monastery following the explosion.²⁸⁶

The same RFA source who described the 40 monks abandoning the monastery indicated that Tenzin Phuntsog self-immolated on the same day that police officers threatened their families with arrest.²⁸⁷ Another source speaking earlier to RFA had said that Tenzin Phuntsog had discussed “the status of Tibet and the Tibetan people’s welfare” with friends and family a few days before. “He was very frustrated by the recent imposition of restrictions on Karma monastery and by the detention of many monks. There was even talk by Chinese officials of closing the monastery,” the source told RFA.²⁸⁸

According to Kirti monks in exile and Beijing-based Tibetan writer and blogger Woesser, Tenzin Phuntsog distributed leaflets before he self-immolated, bearing four different statements:

“Please post on the Gates of Karma Monastery: When Karma [Monastery] abbots Lodroe Rabsel, Namsey Sonam and other members of the community, upholders of the unmistakable teachings of Buddhism, Tibet’s treasured heritage, are arrested and abused in this way, I would rather die in the name of all who feel grief for them than continue living. Signed, the lowliest of the loyal, Tenzin Phuntsog.”

“My co-religionists, you who practice the exchange of self for others, reflect on the two abbots, upholders of the teachings, and the monastic community, Is the dominion that forbids the teaching of religion anything to believe in? Tenzin Phuntsog.”

“Fellow supporters of Karma Gonpa [Monastery]. Just thinking about our thrice qualified abbot and monastic community will not help. Stand up! Run from the corpse-like eight worldly Dharmas,²⁸⁹ gain and praise and the rest, like deer from a hunter. I pray at the feet of Sanggye Nyenpa [a senior Lama of the Karma school in Kham], one who cannot be taken in by the insignificance of this present life. Signed the lowly Tenzin Phuntsog, filled with misery.

“When I think of the suffering of Tibet in general, and now Karma Gonpa, I can no longer go on living in this world.”²⁹⁰

Tenzin Phuntsog had two sons and a daughter by his wife, Dolmo.²⁹¹ When Dolmo heard about Tenzin Phuntsog’s self-immolation and hurried to the scene, she was detained by police,²⁹² and her whereabouts and well-being are still not known.

Repression has been intense in Chamdo, particularly since the 2008 protests, which led to a dramatic tightening of security in the area and the imposition of ‘emergency’ measures by the authorities including a “readiness to defend to the death key sites, key aims, and key areas at sensitive and highly critical periods,” according to a notice of strategies issued by the Chamdo government in 2009.²⁹³

Chamdo has been described by the official media as the ‘frontline’ of the ‘patriotic education’ campaigns favored by the Chinese Communist Party as a means of preempting further nationalist protest in Tibet. The authorities have emphasized ‘security work’ in the region, including the use of ‘vigilante’ squads, the stepping up of military drilling, and the imposition of more checkpoints to monitor people arriving in and leaving the area.²⁹⁴

Karma monastery, located on the eastern bank of the Dzachu River – the upper reaches of the Mekong River – in Chamdo, was founded in the 12th century by the First Karmapa, leader of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism and the first of the reincarnation lineages. In May, 2012, Tsering Tsomo, the director of the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy, told the Phayul news website, “The monastery initially had over 300 monks but now not many are left.

For instance, the dialectic department in the monastery had to be shut down as all of its 120 students left the monastery. Many monks fled to escape the repeated visits and questionings by security officials.”²⁹⁵

Tsultrim Tennyi

Date: January 6, 2012

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Ages: Around 20

Monastery: Kirti

Condition: Both deceased

Two men in their early 20s, Tennyi and Tsultrim, a monk and former monk at Kirti Monastery, self-immolated in Ngaba County Town on the afternoon of January 6, 2012.²⁹⁶ Initial reports in the official Chinese media and reports in the Tibetan exile media indicated both men had self-immolated at slightly different times and places.²⁹⁷ However, a later account in a documentary about the wave of self-immolations in Tibet produced by Chinese Central Television, claimed both men set fire to themselves in a hotel room, where Tennyi died almost immediately, while Tsultrim ran out of the hotel room and onto the street, and died “two days later” in hospital. Tsultrim is briefly seen in the documentary in closed-circuit video footage walking and shouting while on flames, then turning to walk backwards and out of shot with his hands pressed together. According to text in the bottom right of the video frame, the footage was shot by a camera connected to the Qatang West Road Police Station junction.²⁹⁸

According to a source who witnessed Tsultrim’s self-immolation, he shouted slogans calling for the return of the Dalai Lama, before police officers arrived on the scene and extinguished the flames.²⁹⁹ Kirti monks in exile said that both young men called out “His Holiness the Dalai Lama must return to Tibet!” and “May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live for 10,000 years!”

Footage from the same camera of two police officers tending to Tsultrim immediately after his self-immolation is included in the Chinese Central Television documentary, showing Tsultrim lying on his back with his arms and legs bent and raised. A fire extinguisher is standing close by, and the ground around him is covered in powder. The time-stamp on the footage jumps forward about 20 seconds, and the video then shows a police car pulled up and a crowd gathered around what are now five police officers lifting Tsultrim into the back of a police car. Two women rush forward from different points in the crowd, apparently trying to stop police taking Tsultrim away. This is commented upon in the narration, but not explained.³⁰⁰

One of the first two officers who were tending to Tsultrim, Lei Kaiwei, is interviewed

in the documentary, and identified as the political commissar for Ngaba County Police – the equivalent of Party Secretary, and therefore a senior official within the county's Party apparatus. According to a June 25, 2012 article in official Chinese press entitled "Self-immolation truth," Lei Kaiwei was also one of the first officers on the scene when Losang Jamyang self-immolated on January 14, 2012.³⁰¹ On that occasion, the police response to Losang Jamyang's self-immolation – beating and kicking him as he was burning – sparked outrage among a large crowd that quickly gathered, resulting in police opening fire on the crowd and killing at least two people.

The official Xinhua report of the self-immolations, issued two days after the event, claimed Tsultrim "confessed" that he and Tennyi had "conspired the two self-immolation incidents." The report continued, "They were involved in thefts, with the deceased man [Tennyi] being a suspect at large in the case of the Kirti Monastery Buddha statue burglary, according to the investigation."³⁰²

This Xinhua report reflected an increasingly assertive official Chinese approach to both discredit Tibetans who carry out self-immolations, and to deflect attention from the government policies they were protesting. Citing a Tibetologist based at the Sichuan Tibetology Research Center, the report added that the recent self-immolations – not just those carried out by Tsultrim and Tennyi – had been carried out by "people who previously had got punished for their wrongdoings such as whoring, gambling and burglary, or deep in debt because of gambling."³⁰³

This theme continues in the official Chinese Central Television documentary, which paints an elaborate picture of both men either stealing valuable statues from Kirti Monastery, or burgling significant sums of money from relatives which they then spent in "just four days" – the video includes a brief interview with a woman who is referenced as a prostitute and whose face is pixelated, confirming she had slept with both men two days before their self-immolation.³⁰⁴

An article in the official media on June 25, 2012 entitled "Self-immolation truth" further claimed that Tsultrim had promised to jointly self-immolate with Tenzin Wangmo, a nun who self-immolated and died on October 17, 2012; the article claims they had met during the previous year's annual movement of people out onto the local grasslands to collect valuable medicinal plants, but doesn't explain why Tsultrim didn't in fact self-immolate at that time. The article also claims that in his confession to police, Tsultrim said, "[Tennyi] told me he wanted to burn himself too to ask for the forgiveness of the Buddha because he had stolen the golden Buddha statute of the Kirti Monastery. I felt he was so lofty and was inspired by his courage."³⁰⁵

For most if not all of the information about the alleged background of the two men, the Central Chinese Television documentary apparently relies upon testimony supposedly given by Tsultrim under police interrogation after his self-immolation, when he would have been hospitalized and in great pain and distress, only hours away from death.

A short sound recording supposedly of Tsultrim's voice played over a still image of his portrait appears in the documentary, in which Tsultrim claims he and Tennyi had self-immolated as a means to gain respect.³⁰⁶

According to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), Tennyi was from Thawa Goma Township in Ngaba County, and Tsultrim was from Barma Township, also in Ngaba County. As in previous cases of self-immolation, Tibetan businesses and markets throughout the county town closed in a mark of respect to the deceased.³⁰⁷ According to a Tibetan exile source who was in Ngaba in 2011, some Chinese closed their shops as a mark of respect, too.³⁰⁸

Sonam Wangyal, aka Sobha Rinpoche

Date: January 8, 2012

Protest location: Darlag (Ch: Dari) County, Golog (Ch: Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 40s

Monastery: Dungkyob Monastery

Condition: Deceased

Sonam Wangyal, a highly respected senior lama also known as Sobha (or Sopa) Rinpoche, self-immolated and died on the morning of January 6, 2012 outside a police station in Dari County in Qinghai Province. According to initial reports, witnesses claimed his body was blown apart after he'd drunk a quantity of gasoline and poured more over himself. However, in images that later emerged of Sobha Rinpoche's corpse placed next to a shrine, his body is intact although severely burned. Reports indicate he shouted slogans while he burned, calling for the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet and for Tibetan freedom, while Tibetans who witnessed his self-immolation reportedly chanted prayers for him.³⁰⁹

Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported Sobha Rinpoche self-immolated outside a police station, and that police officers took his remains into the building.³¹⁰ Later reports suggested he may have still been alive at that time, possibly surviving for an hour or so after his self-immolation.³¹¹ Hundreds of Tibetans gathered outside the police station demanding that police return Sobha Rinpoche's remains. According to some sources, although it remains unclear, people among the crowd reportedly threw rocks and stones at the police station, breaking windows and doors before police then relented and gave back Sobha Rinpoche's remains.

On January 9, 2012, the Party-controlled official Chinese news agency Xinhua issued a brief English-language report of Sobha Rinpoche's self-immolation – the report was not observed by ICT to have been issued in Chinese or Tibetan within China or Tibet.

The report said Sobha Rinpoche “claimed to be” a reincarnate lama, possibly deliberately implying there were doubts about his legitimacy. The report added that his remains had “been returned to his relatives so they may hold a funeral in accordance with local traditions” and that “Local police and government authorities are investigating the cause of the incident.”³¹²

Sobha Rinpoche – the honorific title ‘Rinpoche’ means ‘precious jewel’ – was a reincarnate lama, and therefore the most senior Tibetan Buddhist cleric known to have self-immolated. Born in nearby Gade (Ch: Gande) County, he had two brothers and one sister, and had studied Tibetan Buddhism at Dungkyob Monastery from an early age. He was a popular and highly respected figure who taught Tibetan Buddhism in the community, founded and ran a home for the elderly, and in 2011 also founded a school in Dharlag County that provided free education to children from poor families. He had applied to the local authorities to expand the capacity of the school, but his application was reportedly rejected.³¹³

According to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), Sobha Rinpoche had applied for a passport allowing him to travel to India to attend an important religious teaching – the Kalachakra³¹⁴ – delivered by the Dalai Lama over 10 days, starting on January 1, 2012, but his application was refused.³¹⁵ Other sources reported that Sobha Rinpoche had attended a Kalachakra teaching given by the Dalai Lama in India in 2006, and that his application to renew his passport in order to attend the January 2012 Kalachakra was rejected.³¹⁶

At his funeral service on Sunday, January 15, 2012 – held at Dungkyob Monastery where he had studied – several thousand people traveled in from the surrounding countryside to express their grief and support, according to the exile Tibetan news service Phayul citing Tibetan-language reports provided by Voice of America. The same report also claimed that thousands of people in Pema (Ch: Banma) County in Golog Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture held a day-long demonstration in support of Sobha Rinpoche and the 15 other Tibetans who at that time had self-immolated in Tibet. Police did not try to break up the demonstration, but they did shoot video and take still images of the people participating.³¹⁷

The Dharamsala-based Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice reported that: “On January 15, a cremation chamber (Dungkhang, built to cremate high Lamas) was specially built near the county town, and his body was cremated. On the front wall was written ‘Snowland hero Tulku Sobha.’ The authorities ordered it to be destroyed but the people protected it and did not allow it to be destroyed. Three days after the cremation, Amdo Geshe Rinpoche’s reincarnation Trulku Tsesam came to open the chamber and collect Tulku Sobha’s ashes. The public and elderly from the nearby old people’s home declared that the chamber should be kept as a place of worship in his memory, and it remains there today. Monks of the nearby monasteries came to offer their condolences

and show their solidarity. In tribute to all those who have self-immolated and sacrificed their lives, Tibetans in most counties in Golog decided not to celebrate Tibetan New Year and decided to hold prayer sessions in their own homes instead.”³¹⁸

Before Sobha Rinpoche self-immolated, he climbed a local hill where he burned incense and prayed, and then distributed leaflets in which he wrote that his self-immolation was “not for his personal glory but for Tibet and the happiness of Tibetans.” According to the same source speaking to RFA, Sobha Rinpoche added, “Tibetans should not lose their determination. The day of happiness will come for sure. For the Dalai Lama to live long, the Tibetans should not lose track of their path.”³¹⁹

Sobha Rinpoche recorded a tape that was later found wrapped in his robe saying that he was offering the sacrifice of his life and body “as a token of long-life offering to our root guru His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all other spiritual teachers and lamas.” The nine-minute recording, acquired by the Tibetan-language service of RFA is spoken in the Amdo dialect,³²⁰ and is interspersed with prayers for the long life of the Dalai Lama, and a moving call to Tibetans for unity and the protection of Tibet’s culture, religion and language “by using all your resources and by involving your body, speech and mind.”³²¹

A full English translation of Sobha Rinpoche’s testimony is as follows:³²²

“ To all the six million Tibetans, including those living in exile – I am grateful to Pawo Thupten Ngodup [Tibetan exile Thubten Ngodup self-immolated in Delhi on April 27, 1998] and all other Tibetan heroes, who have sacrificed their lives for Tibet and for the reunification of the Tibetan people; though I am in my forties, until now I have not had the courage like them. But I have tried my best to teach all traditional fields of knowledge to others, including Buddhism.

“ This is the 21st century, and this is the year in which so many Tibetan heroes have died. I am sacrificing my body both to stand in solidarity with them in flesh and blood, and to seek repentance through this highest tantric honor of offering one’s body. This is not to seek personal fame or glory.

“I am giving away my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering, and to lead them – each of whom has been our mother in the past and yet has been led by ignorance to commit immoral acts – to the Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite light. My offering of light is for all living beings, even as insignificant as lice and nits, to dispel their pain and to guide them to the state of enlightenment.

“ I offer this sacrifice as a token of long-life offering to our root guru His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all other spiritual teachers and lamas.

[Lama Sobha recites prayers of the Mandala Offering.]

*" The universal ground purified with blessed water spread,
This magnificent continent adorned with the sun and moon.
I offer them with pure realm of the enlightened in mind,
May all sentient beings enjoy this pure land!
My mind, body, speech, all my possessions and merits,
And this precious Mandala and all other offerings
I offer all these to the Three Jewels with my fervent prayers
Compassionately accept these and bless me and all other sentient beings.
I send forth this bejewelled Mandala to you, precious teacher!*

" I am taking this action neither for myself nor to fulfill a personal desire nor to earn an honor. I am sacrificing my body with the firm conviction and a pure heart just as the Buddha bravely gave his body to a hungry tigress [to stop her from eating her cubs]. All the Tibetan heroes too have sacrificed their lives with similar principles. But in practical terms, their lives seemingly ended with some sort of anger. Therefore, to guide their souls on the path to enlightenment, I offer prayers that may lead all of them to Buddhahood.

" May all spiritual teachers and lamas inside Tibet and in exile live long. Especially, I pray that His Holiness the Dalai Lama will return to Tibet and remain as Tibet's temporal and spiritual leader.

[Lama Sobha recites this long-life prayer for His Holiness the Dalai Lama.]

*" Circled by ramparts of snow-mountains, this sacred realm,
This wellspring of all sustenance and happiness.
Tenzin Gyatso, bodhisattva of compassion.
May his reign endure till the end of existence.
May his great deeds spread across the space.*

*" All those who have forms and are formless
Those who bear hostility towards the Buddha dharma
May all of them be found and defeated
By the Three Jewels and the power of truth.*

[Lama Sobha also recites other prayers.]

" To all my spiritual brothers and sisters, and the faithful ones living elsewhere: You must unite and work together to build a strong and prosperous Tibetan nation in the future. This is the sole wish of all the Tibetan heroes. Therefore, you must avoid any quarreling amongst yourselves whether it is land disputes or water disputes. You must maintain unity and strength. Give love and education to the children, who should study hard to master all the traditional fields of studies.

“ The elders should carry out spiritual practice as well as maintain and protect Tibetan language and culture by using all your resources and by involving your body, speech and mind. It is extremely important to genuinely practice Buddhist principles in order to benefit the Tibetan cause and also to lead all sentient beings towards the path of enlightenment. Tashi Delek.

“ To all my close friends, relatives, students, everyone from my native home and especially [name not clear in the audio]; I have not accumulated any wealth in my life. Whatever I had, I spent it on teaching and in pursuit of spiritual matters. This will leave no doubt or talks about having left behind huge sums of money. Thus, my siblings, relatives and patrons from different places should bear this in mind. As for my personal belongings and other items, I hope they will be given away to needy people or offered to spiritual teachers and lamas.

“ May all the merits that I have accumulated benefit all sentient beings, especially those who are suffering in lower realms such as hell. I offer these prayers for them to attain higher rebirth.

[Recites more prayers.]

“ To my spiritual friends living in exile: I want to request you not to be sad. If you single-mindedly pray to the spiritual teachers and lamas, we will be inseparable until we all attain Buddhahood. I would like say the same thing to old people and the general public. Remember, whether in times of happiness or in times of sadness, or for that matter, under any circumstances, our only refuge is the Three Jewels. You must never forget this. Tashi Delek.”

Losang Jamyang

Date: January 14, 2012

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 20s

Monastery: Formerly of Andu Monastery

Condition: Deceased

Losang Jamyang, a former monk his early 20s, poured fuel over himself inside a public toilet in the center of Ngaba County Town on January 14, 2012, then set himself alight then ran into the street on flames shouting slogans calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet and for Tibetan independence. ³²³

Footage later emerged showing Losang Jamyang on flames and being beaten by police as a crowd of Tibetans converge on the scene amidst tear gas. ³²⁴

A crowd of hundreds of people who had gathered at the scene were incensed by the police actions, and as the situation deteriorated rapidly police fired live ammunition and tear gas into the crowd, killing at least two people.³²⁵ Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that one of those killed was an elderly woman.³²⁶ Another woman was struck in the eye by a policeman wielding a stick studded with nails and reportedly lost her sight in that eye, while a man was struck on the back of his neck with a similar if not identical weapon, and suffered serious injuries.³²⁷

According to a statement by Kirti Monastery in exile reported by the exile Tibetan news service Phayul, another woman “was taken to hospital in critical condition, with little chance of survival, two youths were also seriously wounded by the beatings, and a woman was blinded in one eye. Two women were wounded by gunshots fired by security forces.” The statement added that eyewitnesses described the scenes as “terrifying,” and that people were “beaten mercilessly” by police. Many of the injured were too scared to seek treatment at hospital. “The consequence of the medication would be much worse than the injury itself if Chinese security personnel traces and arrests the patient on charges of participating in the protests,” concluded the statement.³²⁸

ICT did not observe any official Chinese report of the Losang Jamyang’s self-immolation, nor of the ensuing clashes between Tibetans and the police. However, a June 25, 2012 report in the official media entitled “Self-immolation truth” purported to interview one of the police officers at the scene, who basically describes the police as defending themselves against Losang Jamyang’s attacks. The police officer, cited as “Lei Kaiwei, political commissar of the Public Security Bureau of Aba County,” said, “When I thought the fire on his body was quenched and [I] was about to disperse the on-lookers, I heard a ‘bang.’ The guy rose, surrounded by an even fiercer fire due to his re-exposure to air. Shockingly, he started to catch the eight police officers on the site. Each of them flinched instinctively. It was chaotic. I heard screams and felt the crowd closing in.”

The article continues, “With bare hands, Lei caught the burning waist of Losang Jamyang, and a scuffle ensued. Lei said he gathered all his strength to pry open the arms of Lhorang Jamyang from his neck after both fell to the ground.”³²⁹

Lei Kaiwei also appears in the documentary made by Central Chinese Television, “The Dalai clique and the self-immolation event.” In it, he’s interviewed on camera describing his response to the self-immolation of former Kirti monk Tsultrim on January 6, 2012, in which he’s pointed out in video footage of the aftermath of Tsultrim’s self-immolation placing his jacket over Tsultrim, and warding off two women who had run out of the crowd to try and stop police taking Tsultrim away.³³⁰

Kirti monks in exile reported that Losang Jamyang died in hospital in Ngaba’s prefectural capital Barkham (Ch: Ma’erkang) on January 16, 2011.

At least part of the confrontation between onlookers and the police was over attempts by police to take Losang Jamyang away. While initial reports over the ensuing days were unclear over Losang Jamyang's condition or whereabouts, a January 18, 2012 report by RFA claimed Losang Jamyang's father had traveled to Barkham to retrieve Losang Jamyang's ashes, indicating police had not only taken him away from the scene, but also cremated him³³¹—undermining the value and purpose of traditional Tibetan Buddhist funeral rites.

According to relatives in exile, police visited Losang Jamyang's family and demanded payment for fire damage to police uniforms, which were described as 'state property.'³³²

Losang Jamyang was from Shewa Village in Andu (Ch: Andou) Township in Ngaba County. He joined Andu Monastery as a child, but later joined a primary school (Bontse School) in Ngaba County and completed his education there. A Tibetan who knew him and who is now in exile told ICT: "When he was very small, he used to be quite self-sufficient and he would play for hours with a small thing, like just one blade of grass. After being a monk as a child, he went to school and learnt Tibetan and Chinese. His family are not well-off and they depended on him, so he continued as a layman, not a monk. I hadn't seen him for some time but I heard that after 2008 [when protests swept across Tibet from March 10 onwards] he became more nationalistic, and inspired by Tibetan actions. He said that Tibetans couldn't stay as they were, under these conditions."

In 2011, Losang Jamyang became a leading member of a popular association for the promotion of the Tibetan language in his village. The same Tibetan told ICT: "He was involved in something called the Pure Land program. It was really wonderful, drawing so many students and encouraging competency in the pure Tibetan language. Even one of my close relatives who spoke only Chinese now speaks fluent Tibetan. Losang Jamyang helped to set it up and they also set up a competition to encourage people further."

The Tibetan told ICT that on the day of his self-immolation, Losang Jamyang asked for a ride into town from a Tibetan neighbor. He asked the driver to stop at Andu Monastery and he did a circumambulation (kora). The Tibetan said: "No one knew what he was going to do. He didn't tell anyone. On the way he talked to the Tibetan who gave him a ride about his Tibetan language program, and said that people should be more united and put in more effort with it. When they reached Ngaba he told the driver that he was going to have some vegetarian food, and then he went to the toilet and it was there that he poured kerosene over himself, and also drank kerosene. When he ran into the road on fire he faced Kirti monastery and I don't know exactly what he said but I think he was praying something." The Tibetan, who is around the same age as Losang Jamyang, added: "Every night before I go to sleep I imagine this in my mind. It is like a nightmare."³³³

According to RFA citing a source close to the family, Losang Jamyang's mother, Lacham, was proud of her son, and said "He sacrificed his life for the Tibetan cause, so our family has no regret for his death."³³⁴

Rinzin Dorje

Date: February 8, 2012

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 19

Monastery: Former monk at Kirti

Condition: Deceased

Rinzin Dorje, a former Kirti monk thought to be 19-years old, self-immolated in an elementary school campus in Ngaba County Town on the evening of February 8, 2012.³³⁵ Rinzin Dorje shouted slogans, according to a source who spoke to RFA, but it is not known what he actually shouted.³³⁶ Police officers arrived at the scene and extinguished the flames, then took Rinzin Dorje first to a hospital in Ngaba County, then soon after to a larger hospital in Barkham (Ch: Ma'erkang), the capital of Ngaba Prefecture.³³⁷ Two other monks who were in the immediate vicinity when Rinzin Dorje self-immolated were detained by police.³³⁸ Reports a few days later described Rinzin Dorje as "fighting for his life" in hospital in Barkham, and he died on February 21, 2012. Police officers reportedly cremated his remains, undermining his family's wishes to provide him with a traditional Tibetan funeral service.³³⁹

ICT did not observe any reports of Rinzin Dorje's self-immolation in the official media in mainland China or Tibet.

The day of Rinzin Dorje's self-immolation was a particularly sensitive date amid a period of already extreme tension and repression. February 8, 2012 was designated as a day of mourning among Tibetans and their supporters around the world for the 17 people who by that time had self-immolated in Tibet – 16 in less than a year. According to Kenyag Tsering, a monk at Kirti Monastery in exile in Dharamsala, India, who spoke to Radio Free Asia (RFA), "The Tibetans in Tibet are aware of the exile Tibetans' global solidarity protest today, and as a result there was a massive security presence in Ngaba. During the daytime, almost no Tibetans were seen in the street. This self-immolation took place in the evening, when the security forces had considerably withdrawn from the scene. The scene of the self-immolation protest was not in a public gathering square. It was in a little secluded area."³⁴⁰

The day Wednesday was chosen for its auspicious association with the Dalai Lama – who was born on a Wednesday; since the Tibet-wide protests of 2008 in particular, many Tibetans on Wednesdays of every week deliberately and overtly assert their cultural and national identity by wearing traditional clothes, speaking only Tibetan and patronizing only Tibetan businesses.³⁴¹

February 8 was also the last day of the annual Monlam Chenmo prayer festival at Kirti, which began on January 25.

The Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice write: “During that period some 400 police and soldiers disguised as government officials were staying in the monastery, and for the last five days they intensified the security clampdown, searching, questioning and harassing local people wherever they went. On the morning of the 8th, the streets of town were filled with police, special police and soldiers, as well as checkpoints on all the roads leading into town, at which people were individually searched and questioned. It was the last day of Monlam Chenmo, and local people coming to worship were confronted with flanks of armed soldiers and police making a lot of noise, military trucks with guns and cannon parked here and there, as if in readiness to suppress a disturbance. Monlam Chenmo was also being held at Gomang monastery in upper Ngaba, Andu monastery, upper and lower, Sey monastery and so on, and that day the security forces laid on a major show of force, both overtly and covertly, greatly intimidating the monks and lay worshippers.”

In addition to the wave of self-immolations in Ngaba County contributing to the tense security situation, Rinzen Dorje’s self-immolation followed a number of protests in Ngaba and neighboring Kardze (Ch: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in which at least three Tibetans were shot dead by security forces.³⁴²

Rinzen Dorje, from a nomadic area of Me’urama (Ch: Mairuma) Township in Ngaba County, had been a monk from a young age but left the monastery in 2010 and had been living since then with his family. The youngest of six children, Rinzen used to enjoy looking after the birds that lived around the monastery, according to one source. One of his relatives, now living in India, said: “He was a humble and kind person, and a hard and persistent worker.”³⁴³

A Kirti monk now in exile who knew Rinzen Dorje, told the New York Times in an interview that Rinzen Dorje disrobed in 2010 and left Kirti Monastery because he couldn’t tolerate the stringent security measures imposed on the monastery and the region in general. The monk in exile, who last saw Rinzen Dorje in July 2011, said, “He told me he felt very uncomfortable and had headaches when he saw the atmosphere in Ngaba town.”³⁴⁴

Sonam Rabyang

Date: February 9, 2012

Protest location: Triwang (Ch: Chenwen) Town, the seat of Tridu (Ch: Chengduo) County, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: Mid 30s

Monastery: Lab Monastery

Condition: Thought to have survived; whereabouts not known

Sonam Rabyang, a monk from Lab Monastery in Tridu County, self-immolated on February 9, 2012, in Triwang, the seat of Tridu County in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous

Prefecture in Qinghai Province. He set fire to himself in the center of the main road through the town and was reportedly in a serious condition when police took him away. ³⁴⁵ A later report suggested he'd been taken to a military hospital in Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province. ³⁴⁶

Reports since have claimed he remains in serious condition in hospital suffering severe damage to his lungs from smoke inhalation, and that his right leg has been amputated below the knee. ³⁴⁷

Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that following Sonam Rabyang's self-immolation, police removed the monastery's Khenpo – a lama with particular academic achievements – and several other high lamas to the prefectural capital. Local people were reportedly preparing to demonstrate if they weren't returned to the monastery. ³⁴⁸

ICT has not observed any reporting of Sonam Rabyang's self-immolation in the official Chinese press in mainland China or Tibet.

Tridu County had been the scene of a large demonstration involving up to 350 monks the previous day. The monks staged a march calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet among other demands. Police reportedly blocked the marchers – who it was claimed were marching in response to international calls for an international day of Tibetan solidarity on February 8, 2012 – but no arrests were made, and the monks returned to their monasteries later that same day. ³⁴⁹

According to the same source, four youths had been arrested on February 4, 2012 for shouting slogans outside a police station in the same area. The whereabouts and welfare of the four is not known. ³⁵⁰

Tenzin Choedron

Date: February 11, 2012

Protest location: Close to Ngaba County Town, Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province

Age: 18

Nunnery: Mame Dechen Chokorling

Condition: Deceased

Tenzin Choedron, an 18-year old nun at Mame Dechen Chokorling Nunnery in Ngaba County, self-immolated on the evening of February 11, 2012 in the same spot where Tenzin Wangmo, another nun from the same nunnery, had self-immolated and died some four months previously. ³⁵¹ Witnesses report she shouted anti-Chinese government slogans while she was on fire, and was apparently still alive when police arrived on the scene to extinguish the flames and drive her towards Barkham (Ch: Ma'erkang), the prefectural capital of Ngaba. ³⁵²

Six months later, in August 2012, Tenzin Choedron's younger brother Lobsang Damchoe, 17, self-immolated and died in Ngaba.

The Daily Telegraph newspaper in the UK reported on February 12, 2012, "Government and police officials reached by telephone in [Ngaba] said they knew nothing about any self-immolation and hung up."³⁵³ *Xinhua*, the Party-controlled state news agency, reported on February 13, 2012 that Tenzin Choedron passed away on route to hospital. The two-sentence report stated only that she had self-immolated and died, and where she was from.³⁵⁴

Immediately after Tenzin Choedron's self-immolation, police put a security cordon around the nunnery and sealed it off. "Nothing more is known of the situation inside," said Losang Yeshe and Kanyag Tsering, monks at Kirti Monastery in exile in Dharamsala, India, speaking to Radio Free Asia (RFA).³⁵⁵

Citing sources in the Tibetan Parliament in Exile based in Dharamsala, the exile Tibetan news service *Phayul* reported on February 13, 2012, "Tenzin Choedron's father has been told that her body will not be handed over to the family for the last rites."³⁵⁶ Later reports indicated police gave Tenzin Choedron's family only a portion of her ashes.³⁵⁷

Tenzin Choedron's self-immolation occurred during several days of exceptional tension and repression in Tibet. In a single week, police had shot and killed two brothers in Draggo (Ch: Luhuo) County in Sichuan Province who were suspected of participating in protests a couple of weeks previously. (Those protests were among several large-scale protests across a broad swath of eastern Tibet in Sichuan Province in which at least 6 people had been shot dead by police and dozens more were injured.)³⁵⁸ Furthermore, Rigzin Dorje self-immolated in Ngaba County Town on February 8, 2012; Sonam Rabyang self-immolated in Tridu County in Qinghai Province on February 9, 2012 – the same day that the two brothers were shot dead in Draggo County; and then Tenzin Choedron self-immolated on February 11, 2012.

Mame Nunnery is the largest nunnery in Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture with around 350 nuns. There was a protest march from the nunnery during the Tibet-wide protests of March 2008, where nuns carried a portrait of the Dalai Lama, after which many nuns were detained.³⁵⁹

Appalled that two young nuns from the same nunnery should have self-immolated in such a short period of time, the Beijing-based Tibetan writer Woesser looked into the recent history of Mame Nunnery. Founded over 200 years ago, the nunnery was apparently shut down at some point after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950-1951, but then "opened as a venue for religious activities" again in July 1983 "with the approval of the Ngaba People's Government."

Woeser found on-line articles lauding the work of a woman called Tsering Wangmu, an ethnically Tibetan Deputy Director of the *Ngaba Daily* newspaper – owned and operated by the Ngaba Party Committee’s Propaganda Department – who reportedly won numerous awards and citations for her “brave idea” and work to establish an “All-China Women’s Federation branch” at Mame Nunnery, where she was posted in November 2009.

The All China Women’s Federation branch is a well-funded and highly influential organization often referred to as an NGO, but which has strong connections to the Chinese Communist Party. The branch at Mame Nunnery was to be the first one established in a nunnery in Ngaba Prefecture. It was Tsering Wangmu’s intention to use the organisation to “transmit the voice of the Party, and transmit the care and concern of the Party and government for the temple’s monastics,” according to the articles about her found by Woeser. The branch was established in late December 2009, and Tsering Wangmu herself was “elected” its leader.

Although Woeser does not explicitly say so, Tsering Wangmu would ultimately have been in charge of administering and overseeing ‘patriotic education’ at the nunnery, a long series of lectures, study and appraisals where nuns are required to affirm their support for the Chinese Communist Party and its policies on Tibet, and often to publicly denounce the Dalai Lama.

According to a September 2010 article about Tsering Wangmu cited by Woeser, “Tsering Wangmu would always modestly and warmly say, ‘I was sent by the Party and government, and the work I do is all arranged by the Party and government. If anyone should be thanked, thank the Communist Party, thank the People’s Government and the state.’ ‘Life is so good for us now, but a small number of splittists are attempting to cause harm, to cause a split, making us lose the good life of today and go back to the era of serfdom, so we must resolutely draw a clear line between ourselves and them, and resolutely resist splittist harm.’”

The article concludes: “On [Chinese] New Year’s day 2010, when the bright red five-starred [Chinese national] flag was being solemnly raised above the nunnery, the nun Sanmurang who was standing next to Tsering Wangmu said to Tsering Wangmu, ‘Last year, all we knew was that when other people told us to take part in demonstrations, we took part, and we didn’t know it was breaking the law. We’ll never do that again!’ Upon hearing Sanmurang’s words, all the other nuns said “Yes, yes! Our good lives today were given to us by the Communist Party, but the splittist elements haven’t even given us a single mouthful of tsampa! [A Tibetan staple of roasted barley flour.] From now on, we will never again be cheated by the splittists, and never again do anything to harm the unity of the nationalities or social stability. We will definitely follow the Party, we will follow the Party for ever!’”

Woeser concludes by wondering whether Tsering Wangmu was still in her post at Mame Nunnery when Tenzin Wangmo and Tenzhi Choedron self-immolated. “This still isn’t known,” she writes. “What is certain though is that if it wasn’t her, it would likely be another ‘dispatched cadre’ posted at the nunnery carrying out all manner of ‘thought education’ with the nuns, but actually pressing harder and harder a spiritual oppression and an unbearable psychological pressure.”³⁶⁰

According to Losang Yeshe and Kanyag Tsering, the monks at Kirti Monastery in exile in Dharamsala: “As a child Tenzin Choedron went to primary school in Cha Township for three years, and after that became a nun at Mame Nunnery. There are 12 members in her family, and she is the eldest of four brothers and sisters. She spoke little, followed the rules, studied hard, and got excellent grades, so she was smart as well as brave.”³⁶¹

Lobsang Gyatso

Date: February 13, 2012

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 19

Monastery: Kirti

Condition: Unknown

Lobsang Gyatso, a 19-year old monk at Kirti Monastery self-immolated on the afternoon of February 13, 2012 in the center of Ngaba County Town.³⁶² Radio Free Asia (RFA) quoted sources saying that “While burning, he walked along the road to the county office and shouted slogans. At that time, armed security officers and special forces arrived and extinguished the flames, beating him as he burned. Two Tibetans who tried to help Lobsang Gyatso were also beaten, with one reportedly bleeding profusely from a head wound and a wound to his arm. Lobsang Gyatso was taken away by police, and his current whereabouts and condition are unknown.”³⁶³

ICT did not observe any reports in the official Chinese media about Lobsang Gyatso’s self-immolation.

Lobsang Gyatso was the fourth person to self-immolate in less than a week, following the self-immolations of Rinzin Dorje, Sonam Rabyang and Tenzin Choedron.

Lobsang Gyatso’s self-immolation occurred a day before Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping was due to travel to Washington, DC in a visit seen as important for asserting his credentials as the presumptive Chinese president.³⁶⁴

Lobsang Gyatso's self-immolation also occurred the day before The Guardian newspaper in the UK published an important article by its China correspondent Jonathan Watts, who managed to evade security checkpoints throughout the region and visit Ngaba. The report, which includes clandestinely shot video footage, offers a graphic description of the intense and intimidating security presence in Ngaba County Town. In the video footage, Jonathan Watts points out police officers "carrying very mean-looking batons with spikes on them – it almost looks medieval." He writes in his article, "On the roof of the world, Chinese paramilitaries are trying to snuff out Tibetan resistance to Beijing's rule with spiked batons, semi-automatic weapons and fire extinguishers." ³⁶⁵

Lobsang Gyatso was the eldest of four siblings from Cha township in Ngaba County. According to monks at Kirti Monastery in exile in Dharamsala, India, who spoke to RFA, his father's name was Badzri, and his mother's name was Pekar.

"He was one of the best students in his class at Kirti Monastery. He has a very good character, and was always one of the most enthusiastic participants in religious debates," said the monks. ³⁶⁶

Damchoe Sangpo

Date: February 17, 2012

Protest location: Themchen (Ch: Tianjun) County Town, Themchen County, Tsonub (Ch: Haixi) Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 40

Monastery: Bongthak

Condition: Deceased

Damchoe Sangpo self-immolated and reportedly died at the scene on the morning of February 17, 2012, outside his monastery in Themchen County in Qinghai Province. ³⁶⁷ According to a source who spoke to Radio Free Asia (RFA), "When monks came out of the temple after morning services, they saw Damchoe burning. He died on the spot." It was not clear at the time whether his remains stayed at the monastery or if police took them away. ³⁶⁸

Damchoe Sangpo was around 40 years old, and served on Bongthak Monastery's 'Democratic Management Committee,' an administrative body that government regulations require every monastic institution in Tibet to establish as part of attempts to ensure official oversight of monastic affairs. Damchoe Sangpo was the first monk known to be serving on a Democratic Management Committee to self-immolate.

He was also the Gekoe, a Disciplinary Monk at Bongthak Monastery, which has a population of around 80 monks. ³⁶⁹

The post of gekoe is a traditional monastic post in charge of enforcing discipline within the monastery during monastic assemblies and during public festivals.

ICT did not observe any reports in the official media about Damchoe Sangpo's self-immolation.

Damcho Sangpo's self-immolation took place after local authorities banned monks at Bongthak Monastery from holding the annual Monlam Prayer festival at the monastery. (A ban on monks observing Monlam at Kirti Monastery is thought to have been a trigger for Tapey's self-immolation over two years previously). The decision for the ban was possibly due to tensions in the area, reports suggest. Security in the region was already high amid the ongoing wave of self-immolations and other protests, and the Tibetan lunar new year in this region of Tibet – Amdo – falls at the same time as the Chinese lunar new year. A popular form of protest in Tibet is to purposefully avoid celebrating the New Year with traditional fireworks and other festivities, and instead treat the period as a time of mourning for those who were killed or who had disappeared in the Tibet-wide protests of 2008.³⁷⁰ Such protests have put police in the region on high alert for other more overt forms of protest, and there were several protests in areas of eastern Tibet in Sichuan Province around the lunar New Year in January 2012 – less than a month before Damchoe Sangpo's self-immolation – where police opened fire killing a total of at least six people.³⁷¹

RFA report that police officers were stationed at the monastery soon after the New Year to ensure that the festival didn't go ahead, and that Damchoe Sangpo had told them that if they didn't withdraw, "The monks should not be held responsible for any incident that might follow," according to a source.³⁷²

Damchoe Sangpo was the youngest of 10 siblings – all women aside from him, according to RFA. His father's name is Takhla, while his mother passed away when he was young. Damchoe Sanpo was ordained in 1991, when he would have been around 20 years old, and in 1994 he traveled to India to study for three years. On his return he became Gekoe – the Disciplinarian Monk – at Bongthak Monastery, and before his death he had been tutoring other monks on Buddhist texts.³⁷³

News emerged in early July 2012 that three senior monks at Bongthak Monastery were sentenced to lengthy prison terms, reportedly for "instigating" Damchoe Sanpo's self-immolation. Details of what this entailed were not available. The director of the monastery, Venerable Jamsem, was sentenced to nine years, while his subordinates Khendup and Samgyal were sentenced to 11 and 10 years, respectively, according to a source in the area in touch with Radio Free Asia.³⁷⁴

According to the same source, a layperson called Damchoe had been arrested for collecting Tibetan signatures on a petition calling for the release of eight monks from Bongthak Monastery who had been detained in the wake of Damchoe Sanpo's self-immolation. Damchoe had previously been arrested on charges of "instigating" Damchoe Sanpo's self-immolation, but a Chinese lawyer reportedly argued his defense successfully, and he was released. ³⁷⁵

In the meantime, the majority of monks at Bongthok Monastery left due to pressure from the Chinese authorities, while 10 other Bongthok monks in detention were told they would only be released if they disrobed. ³⁷⁶

On the same day that Damchoe Sangpo self-immolated, news emerged that Thich Quang Do, the patriarch of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam who has spent some 30 years under various forms of house arrest in Vietnam, had sent a letter to the Dalai Lama via the International Buddhist Information Bureau in France. Thich Quang Do reportedly wrote, "Self-immolation is indeed a tragic and extreme act, one that should be avoided at all costs. But there are moments when this ultimate gesture, that of offering one's body as a torch of Compassion to dissipate darkness and ignorance is the only possible recourse." ³⁷⁷

Citing the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc at a busy road intersection in Saigon in 1963, Thich Quang Do wrote, "It is therefore with a deep sense of communion and understanding, but also with infinite pain and grief, that I learn of the immolation of such young Buddhist monks and nuns in Tibet, and the escalation of violence by China's communist regime to prevent the world from hearing their tragic cry." ³⁷⁸

He added, "Your suffering is our suffering. Your struggle is our struggle. The Buddhists of Vietnam stand beside you in this non-violent movement for religious freedom and human rights. For without human rights, human beings can never fully and freely exist." ³⁷⁹

Nangdrol

Date: February 19, 2012

Protest location: Dzamthang (Ch: Rangtang) County, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 18

Occupation: Unknown

Condition: Deceased

Nangdrol, an 18-year old man, self-immolated and died at the scene outside Jonang Dzamthang Gonchen Monastery in Dzamthang County in Ngaba Prefecture on February 19, 2012.

As he was burning he reportedly shouted “May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live 10,000 years!” and “Freedom for Tibet!”³⁸⁰ When police arrived at the scene, they attempted to take Nangdrol’s remains away; however, several monks reportedly managed to get his body back into the monastery to conduct a traditional funeral.³⁸¹ Police demanded that Nangdrol’s remains be cremated that night – before a funeral service could have been completed – and so hundreds of people from the local community gathered at the monastery to hold a vigil and protect Nangdrol’s remains from the police.³⁸²

Initial reports indicated that Nangdrol was a monk at Jonang Dzamthang Gonchen Monastery. However, information later emerged confirming he was a lay-person, making him the first person – out of 22 before him – who was neither a monastic nor former monastic to have self-immolated.³⁸³

ICT did not observe any reports in the official Chinese media about Nangdrol’s self-immolation.

The police presence had been highly visible in Dzamthang County since the start of the Tibetan lunar New Year on January 23, 2102 when a large number of monks and lay-people gathered in another part of Dzamthang County to pay tribute to everyone who had self-immolated to date; and on January 27, 2012, police opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators who had gathered outside a police station close to where Nangdrol was to self-immolate, calling for the release of someone from a separate protest. One person was shot dead and several others were injured.³⁸⁴

Several months later, photographs of Nangdrol before and after his self-immolation emerged from Tibet along with a testimony he had written soon before he self-immolated. The following translation of his testimony was prepared by the Central Tibetan Administration.³⁸⁵

*“ Head raised high with indefatigable loyalty and courage,
I, Nangdrol, call on
My grateful parents,
brothers and relatives,
For the cause of grateful Tibetan people,
By giving up my life to fire,
Men and women of Tibet,
I hope you all will keep unity and harmony;
Wear Tibetan [dress] if you are Tibetan;
Moreover, you must speak Tibetan;
Never forget you are Tibetan;
You must have love and compassion if you are Tibetan;
Have respect for parents;
Have unity and harmony amongst Tibetan;*

*Be compassionate to animals;
 Restrain from taking lives of living beings.
 May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live for many ten thousand years,
 May Lamas and Tulkus [reincarnate lamas] of Tibet live for ten thousand years.*

*May Tibetan people get liberation from China's evil rule,
 Under China's evil rule there is immense suffering,
 This suffering is very unbearable,
 This evil China has invaded Tibet,
 It is not possible to live under this evil rule,
 The evil China having no love and compassion,
 Inflict us with unbearable beatings and pain,
 Ultimately to smother Tibet.*

May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live for many 10,000 years."

Nangdrol was the fourth of eight children, and was born and raised close to Jonang Dzamthang Gonchen Monastery. According to Tibetans in the area in contact with Tibetans in exile, Nangdrol cared passionately about Tibetan culture and language. In the weeks following his self-immolation, people traveled from many different areas to pay their respects to Nangdrol. ³⁸⁶

The Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice reported: "At the time of his protest, Nangdrol called 'for Tibetans in all three provinces to unite. Even if we cannot achieve our overall aims, at least don't do anything to harm our cause. Don't steal or fight with each other. Keep your language and culture,' and these words were made widely known in Dzamthang after the protest, and made a strong impact on local people. From the 19th onwards, every day some 1000 – 2000 people came voluntarily to Nangdrol's family house and pledged before a photo of the Dalai Lama and of the deceased martyr never to engage in theft, feuding or cheating within the community."

Tsering Kyi

Date: March 3, 2012

Protest location: Machu (Ch: Maqu) County Town, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 19

Occupation: Student

Condition: Deceased

Tsering Kyi, a 19-year old female student, self-immolated and died at the scene on March 3, 2012 in Machu County in Gansu Province.

She was the first lay female Tibetan to self-immolate.

Tsering Kyi reportedly doused herself in gasoline inside a public toilet at the town's vegetable market, then set herself alight and stepped out into the market.³⁸⁷ Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that Chinese traders at the market threw rocks at Tsering Kyi while she was burning – and that the traders called police who then instructed the traders to stop Tsering Kyi leaving the scene.³⁸⁸ Both RFA and the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) reported that there was almost a serious clash between Tibetans on the scene and the Chinese stone-throwers.³⁸⁹ Other sources claimed that the Chinese traders threw stones and earth onto Tsering Kyi's burning body to try and put out the flames.³⁹⁰

When police arrived, they reportedly beat Tsering Kyi as they were putting out the flames, and then cordoned off the area and set about systematically checking people's cell-phones to delete any images of the self-immolation that people may have taken.³⁹¹

A journalist with the UK's The Daily Telegraph newspaper called a police station in Machu to try and confirm Tsering Kyi's self-immolation. "A police official in [Machu] said she was unaware of the report involving the student and hung up."³⁹²

A meeting of local Party and government officials was reportedly convened on the evening of Tsering Kyi's self-immolation, and her school was sealed off by troops. According to one Tibetan source in the area in contact with Tibetans in exile, families were not allowed to contact their children and students were questioned individually about Tsering Kyi's self-immolation. Internet cafes in the local area were also closed down.³⁹³

According to the Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice, "Following the incident, police shut down the vegetable market, stayed until 9 pm checking the mobile phones of passersby for photos of the protest, and even called a meeting to announce that the self immolation had taken place due to a lovers' quarrel and threatened local people not to spread the news. That night there were emergency meetings in Machu county government on how to present the incident or how to cover it up, and on investigating the background and preventing future incidents."

Tsering Kyi's relatives organised several days of dedicatory prayers at the Tsendrok monastery in lower Machu, and representatives from monasteries and communities in the county came there to pay their respects and offer condolences, according to Kirti monks in exile.

Implausibly, the Chinese state media alleged that Tsering Kyi had suffered from severe depression and frequent fainting spells ever since hitting her head against a radiator one day at school (Xinhua, March 7, 2012).

This is in contrast to what is known about Tsering's childhood and life at school. Tsering Kyi was the second child in a family of nomads, who was born in 1992 and lived with her family raising livestock on open pastures a two-hour drive from Machu. According to Tibetan sources in exile, she and her family were affected by government policies to settle nomads and introduce fencing to the pastures.³⁹⁴ At the age of 11, Tsering Kyi went to Machu to attend school and to board in accommodation provided by the school.

Despite starting her formal schooling so late in life, she was an able student. A relative told Guardian journalist Jason Burke: "She did really well. She was starting late like most nomad children but made up for lost time. Her teachers said she was an example to the other kids."³⁹⁵

The Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice report: "Tsering Kyi was a respectful and diligent student. During school holidays she helped her relatives with the pastoral work, milking the cows, collecting dung and herding cattle, and read books in her spare time. She was counted among the hardest working and best behaved students at school, and received several awards. She took an interest in the protection of Tibetan language, and made a strong impression on her classmates. She had always been of sound mind and never suffered a serious illness."

Tsering Kyi always returned home during school vacations where she preferred life with her family to life in the rapidly urbanizing Machu, according to a relative in exile

During the Tibet-wide protests of 2008, Machu was the scene of one of only a handful of the many individual protests across the entire plateau and beyond where protestors turned violent against property, targeting police cars, government buildings and other symbols of Chinese authority.³⁹⁶

Tensions in Machu remained high, and in 2010 students at Tsering Kyi's school – the Machu Tibetan Middle School – staged an unprecedented demonstration through Machu County Town,³⁹⁷ following which the school principal was dismissed and at least two teachers were detained, leading to further unrest at the school, including protests about relegating Tibetan as the language of instruction. Tsering Kyi was very affected by the protests and their aftermath. The Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice reports: "As one of the more aware students at her school, she was strongly affected by the 2008 protests and especially the student protests of 2010, when some of the most trusted and respected principals and teachers were removed, two fellow students detained and sentenced to prison terms. During the last winter vacation, she told one of her aunts 'Now in Ngaba and other parts of Tibet people are setting themselves on fire for the Tibetan cause, and I also feel like doing something for Tibet rather just sitting and watching what they are doing to us.'"

The *Guardian* article concludes, “Kyi died the day after returning from a month’s winter break spent with her family in the winter pastures. She had spent the night at a cousin’s home and a friend had given her a lift on his motorbike to school. Kyi did not enter – had she signed the registration book she would have been the responsibility of her teachers and thus have exposed them to reprisals – but headed into the town. One petrol station refused to serve her. A second did not.”³⁹⁸

Tsering Kyi was the fourth woman to self-immolate in Tibet following the self-immolations and deaths of the three nuns Tenzin Wangmo on October 17, 2011, Palden Choetso on November 3, 2011 and Tenzin Choedron on February 11, 2012, and the first woman layperson to self-immolate in Tibet; the man who self-immolated and died immediately before her on February 19, 2012, Nangdrol was the first male layperson.

Tsering Kyi self-immolated on the same day that a major annual Chinese Communist Party conference convened in Beijing – one of two major conferences that take place around the same time each year with much fanfare in the Party-controlled media. The events are marked by heightened security across all of the People’s Republic of China in an attempt to “maintain stability” for the “two conferences.” Tsering Kyi’s self-immolation was the first of three self-immolations over three consecutive days in different parts of Tibet – the third, on March 5, 2012, by an 18-year old man named Dorjee in Ngaba County took place on the same day that the second conference convened in Beijing – China’s national legislative assembly, the National People’s Congress.

Rinchen

Date: March 4, 2012

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: Early 30s

Occupation: Unknown

Condition: Deceased

Rinchen, a widowed mother of four in her early thirties, self-immolated outside a temporary police checkpoint by the main gates to Kirti Monastery in Ngaba County Town early in the morning of March 4, 2012. She died at the scene. As she set herself on fire, Rinchen shouted, “Return His Holiness to Tibet” and “We need freedom.”³⁹⁹ Local people reportedly managed to take her remains into the monastery.⁴⁰⁰

Rinchen was the eldest of eight children, according to one source.⁴⁰¹ Her husband had died several months prior to her self-immolation, leaving her with four children, the eldest of whom was 13 and the youngest was only several months.⁴⁰²

The UK newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* called the local Party Propaganda Department to try and confirm Rinchen's self-immolation, and reported, "A woman who answered the phone declined to comment or give her name and referred calls to provincial authorities, who could not immediately be reached."⁴⁰³

ICT did not observe any reports of Rinchen's self-immolation in the Party-controlled official media.

Several days before Rinchen self-immolated, Gillian Wong, a journalist with the Associated Press, managed to travel into the area, and reported seeing similar scenes as described by Jonathan Watts, a journalist with the UK's *The Guardian* newspaper who had traveled to the same region a few weeks earlier. Gillian Wong writes, "Soldiers with helmets, rifles, sticks and shields march in rows along this monastery town's main road against a backdrop of snow-speckled mountains, while police stare at passing cars, scanning license plates and faces of passengers for unwelcome visitors." The article goes on to describe how the local authorities were also "policing the minds of a community," where people are questioned by police on the streets and expected to express support for the Chinese Communist Party's policies in Tibet.

A teacher interviewed by Gillian Wong said, "The locals are definitely feeling very heavy-hearted, very frustrated, all day. The soldiers are everywhere. At every moment, people wonder what will happen to the person next to them, what the soldiers will do to them." The teacher added, "In the people's hearts, what they probably can't stand the most is that the authorities scold our living Buddha, the Dalai Lama. We cannot stand it when they scold him. He's the person we are most loyal to."⁴⁰⁴

Several days after Rinchen's self-immolation, journalists with Sky News managed to travel to the same area and acquire footage of the extraordinary security measures in place in the town, including vast numbers of uniformed and highly drilled paramilitary police offices, and numerous checkpoints barricaded behind high steel-mesh fences.⁴⁰⁵

Another AP report on March 6, 2012, noted "A man at the management office of the Kirti monastery in [Ngaba] county said Tuesday [March 6] that he had heard rumors of immolations Monday and Sunday. "The control here is too tight. It is not convenient for you and me to talk like this. If you need to know more, come down here and see for yourself," he said and hung up."⁴⁰⁶

Dorjee

Date: March 5, 2012

Protest location: Cha (Ch: Jia) Township, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 18

Occupation: Unknown

Condition: Deceased

Dorjee, 18, shouted slogans against the Chinese government as he walked towards the local Cha Township government offices, then set himself alight.⁴⁰⁷ Witnesses in touch with Tibetans in exile said Dorjee's body was scarcely visible as the flames around him were so fierce. "Many people in the streets were reciting mantras and praying to His Holiness the Dalai Lama with tears and grief in their eyes," reported a monk at Kirti Monastery in exile in Dharamsala, India.⁴⁰⁸

Police officials took Dorjee's remains away, according to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), despite the opposition of several Tibetans at the scene.⁴⁰⁹

The Associated Press, attempting to confirm Dorjee's self-immolation, reported, "An official with the Communist Party propaganda office in [Ngaba] said he hadn't received any notice of an immolation. He refused to give his name and referred calls to the provincial propaganda department, where phones rang unanswered."⁴¹⁰

ICT did not observe any reports of Dorjee's self-immolation in the Party-controlled official media.

Dorjee was from the same group of rural villages as Rinchen, who self-immolated the previous day in another part of Ngaba County. Little if anything else is known about Dorjee among Tibetans in exile.

On March 8, 2012, three days after Dorjee's self-immolation, well-known Tibetan writer Woenser wrote a joint letter with senior Tibetan lama Arjia Rinpoche, now living in exile in the United States, and Amdowa poet Gade Tsering, calling upon Tibetans to end the self-immolations. Woenser wrote that the burnings had already sent a clear message to Beijing that they are against Chinese rule, and that Tibetans should be "staying alive to struggle and push forward" their objective of winning greater freedom.

"Twenty-six cases make it clear what Tibetans have wanted to articulate," said the joint letter. "Yet, articulation of one's will cannot be an ultimate goal. The will has to be put into practice, transforming into reality. [...] Only by staying alive can the will become a reality. As long as self-immolation continues, every life would become another irredeemable loss."⁴¹¹

Gepey

Date: March 10, 2012

Protest location: Near a Chinese military camp located 1.5 kilometers from Kirti Monastery in Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 18

Monastery: Kirti

Condition: Deceased

Gepey, an 18-year old monk at Kirti Monastery, self immolated and died almost immediately on March 10, 2012, behind a large military base close Kirti Monastery in Ngaba County Town, and close to the spot where Rinchen, a widowed mother of four, had self-immolated less than a week previously. Soldiers from the base – which was the first military base established by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army during the 1950 invasion – took Gepey’s remains into the base, despite pleas from local Tibetans to allow Gepey to be given a traditional funeral at the monastery.⁴¹²

As this report has shown, Tibetans believe it is important to carry out prayer rituals after death in order to ensure a peaceful transition for the person into their next life. In Tibetan culture, for this reason, the body of a person who has died should be disturbed as little as possible. In the case of Tibetans who have self-immolated, many Tibetans believe that they are giving their lives as a form of dedication, or to be of benefit to others, and so it becomes even more important for the bodies to be returned for prayer ceremonies.

According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), Gepey’s family didn’t learn of his death until the following day.⁴¹³ However, officials did reportedly give Gepey’s remains back to his family, but insisted he be cremated that same day and in the presence of no more than five relatives, according to one source.⁴¹⁴ Another source said only five monks were allowed to attend Gepey’s funeral service, and that his family and all others were barred from attending.⁴¹⁵

Gepe’s mother, Chako, was detained and questioned for “several hours” over the two days following Gepey’s self-immolation, before being released. RFA added that Tibetan-owned shops and restaurants in the area were closed in a gesture of solidarity with Gepey.⁴¹⁶

The Associated Press reported, “A woman from the county communist party propaganda department said she had no information about [Gepey’s self-immolation]. Calls to the prefectural communist party department and police and county police rang unanswered. A man who answered the phone at the Kirti Monastery hung up when he was asked about the self-immolation.”⁴¹⁷

ICT did not observe any reports in the Party-controlled official media about Gepey's self-immolation. However, according to RFA, news of Gepey's self-immolation was spread within mainland China by microbloggers using services similar to Twitter, but postings were quickly deleted.⁴¹⁸

Gepey self-immolated on the most sensitive date in the Tibet's political calendar: March 10, the anniversary of the Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule in 1959, and of the wave of protests that swept Tibet in 2008.⁴¹⁹

Gepey was one of three brothers, all of them monks. Gepey's father, Chakdor, died several years prior to Gepey's self-immolation.⁴²⁰ Gepey had studied at Kirti Monastery from a young age, and was regarded as a particularly good student.⁴²¹

Jamyang Palden

Date: March 14, 2012

Protest location: Rebkong (Ch: Tongren) County, Malho (Ch: Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 30s

Monastery: Rongpo (Rongwo)

Condition: Deceased

Jamyang Palden, a monk in his mid-thirties at Rongpo Monastery in Qinghai Province, self-immolated at around 10:30 a.m. on March 14, 2012 in a public square outside the monastery.⁴²² He reportedly shouted "Let His Holiness return! Freedom for Tibet and the Tibetan language!" before setting himself on fire.⁴²³

One source claims he was seen on flames in the otherwise empty square by an elderly Tibetan man, who managed to put the flames out "by hugging him and stamping out the fire with his hands."⁴²⁴ Jamyang Palden survived and was taken to hospital by monks and laypeople, according to some sources;⁴²⁵ other sources say he was taken to hospital by monks and police officers.⁴²⁶ Jamyang Palden died some weeks later.

While Jamyang Palden was in hospital, a large crowd of people gathered at the monastery to recite prayers and show solidarity with him. Security forces surrounded the monastery and tried to force people to leave the square, but according to a source who spoke to Radio Free Asia, "The local police ordered them not to recite prayers and to disperse, but the crowd refused."⁴²⁷ Extraordinary footage of the gathering⁴²⁸ soon emerged from Tibet showing several hundred people including monks and laypeople gathering while long-life prayers for the Dalai Lama are heard being recited in the background.⁴²⁹ Additional footage, apparently from later the same day, shows Shartsang Rinpoche, the Abbot of Rongpo Monastery, standing amid the large crowd now sitting on the ground, as he urges people to protest peacefully.⁴³⁰

Various reports indicate that monks from Rongpo went to the hospital and took Jamyang Palden back to the monastery, fearing he would be arrested and possibly abused by police.⁴³¹ Voice of America report that he was taken out of the hospital by the monks and then taken elsewhere for treatment before being taken back to the monastery.⁴³² Photographs of Jamyang Palden being treated by two doctors emerged soon after his self-immolation, showing him wearing an oxygen mask while his arms appear to be seriously burned. It's impossible to judge the scale or severity of his injuries from the photographs.⁴³³

According to the Associated Press reporting on March 15, 2012, "Calls to [the local] police, local government and Communist Party offices rang unanswered."⁴³⁴

Xinhua, the Party-controlled official Chinese news agency, issued a report on March 15, 2012 of Jamyang Palden's self-immolation, quoting a local spokesman saying "Monks and local residents went to the hospital at noon and forcibly took Jamyang Palden away from the hospital," without attempting to explain why they would have done so. The report added, "Local authorities are talking with the monk's relatives, hoping to send Jamyang Palden to a hospital in the provincial capital of Xining for better treatment."⁴³⁵

According to Free Tibet, Jamyang Palden was detained and tortured by police in 2008 having participated in the Tibet-wide protests that started in Lhasa March of that year, and required long-term medical care to recover from the injuries inflicted on him.⁴³⁶

Video footage emerged of several dozen monks surrounding and tending to Jamyang Palden back at Rongpo Monastery on the night of March 14, 2012. The monks can be heard chanting long-life prayers for the Dalai Lama while Jamyang Palden can occasionally be glimpsed amid the crowd.⁴³⁷

Rongpo (also known as Rongwo) Town is the county seat of Rebkong County. The monastery is an ancient center of Tibetan religious tradition, founded in 1301. There are around 35 branch monasteries at Rongpo, which was known for its expertise in Tibetan medicine and painting.⁴³⁸

A friend of Jamyang Palden who is now in exile told ICT, "We were at the same monastery some years ago, and I remember him as a truly hard-working and humble monk. He was a very good monk. I remember hearing him reading his texts at night, he was always very conscientious, and was a role model for all of us. Some monks often used to talk about politics, including me, but he never did, he always talked about religion. Of course he used to talk about His Holiness, we all did. But I have not seen him for many years; I know that things changed dramatically and became much worse after 2008. It must be very hard to survive now. There is so much surveillance, it is impossible to even take a breath, impossible to express oneself. I don't know what was in his mind [before he set fire to himself]."

When you are 19 or 20 and you take some actions, you don't really think it through, about the consequences. But at his age, in his early thirties, and given his character, he must have thought through what he was going to do." ⁴³⁹

The Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice published a letter received from Tibetans in Rebkong on the same day as the protests following the self-immolation.

The letter, translated from Tibetan into English, makes the following points:

- "1. Since last year, peoples' elected representatives are no longer recognised, capable people at local level are not being allowed to continue, and the government has appointed Chinese officials in their place, which cannot satisfy the public.*
- 2. Restrictions on the use of native language have put everyone from primary and middle school students to university students, teachers and officials in a state of anxiety.*
- 3. The settlement of nomads is not popular, and is robbing people of their traditional livelihood.*
- 4. The faith and values of the common people are not respected, such as forbidding the possession of pictures of the Dalai Lama, there is no religious freedom, and the demand to keep the portraits of Communist leaders in monasteries and homes is an unacceptable intrusion.*
- 5. Whether in Tibetan language use, public welfare or cultural life, they use various political pretexts to close down any opportunity for expression. They (the provincial and local authorities) misrepresent the real situation not just to foreign journalists from free countries, but even to central government leaders. In brief, taking no account of popular sentiment, they torment the people to the limit by pursuing policies at odds with the actual situation, and this has become a matter of open complaint in both monasteries and lay communities. This is the background to the present wave of unrest, and particularly the self immolation protests." ⁴⁴⁰*

Lobsang Tsultrim (jnr) ⁴⁴¹

Date: March 16, 2012

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 20

Monastery: Kirti

Condition: Deceased

Lobsang Tsultrim, a 20-year old monk at Kirti Monastery, self-immolated on the evening of March 16, 2012 ⁴⁴² – the fourth anniversary of large-scale protests in Kirti when police opened fire on protestors killing at least 10 people, although it is not known if Lobsang Tsultrim deliberately timed his self-immolation to coincide with the anniversary. It was also the first anniversary of the self-immolation of Kirti monk Phuntsog on March 16, 2011.

After setting himself on fire, Lobsang Tsultrim reportedly walked along the center of a main street in Ngaba County Town, although the slogans he was shouting could not be heard according to witnesses. ⁴⁴³ When police officers ran towards him he turned and started to run in the opposite direction, but officers caught up to him, “beat him, knocked him down, and threw him into an open truck,” according to a source in touch with Radio Free Asia (RFA). ⁴⁴⁴ Another source added, “Even as Chinese security personnel had pinned him on the floor of the moving vehicle, Lobsang Tsultrim was seen raising his fist in the air and raising slogans.” ⁴⁴⁵

ICT did not observe any reports of Lobsang Tsultrim’s self-immolation in the Party-controlled official media.

Lobsang Tsultrim died in hospital under police custody on March 19, 2012. According to Kenyag Tsering and Lobsang Yeshe, two monks at Kirti Monastery in exile in Dharamsala, India, Lobsang Tsultrim’s family demanded his remains so they could perform traditional funeral rites, but he was cremated on the orders of police and only his ashes were given to his family. According to the same sources, “The full assembly of Kirti monks sat through the night performing scriptural recitations” on the night Lobsang Tsultrim died. Tibetan-owned shops and restaurants in Ngaba County Town remained closed for three days after Lobsang Tsultrim’s self-immolation as a mark of respect and an expression of solidarity. ⁴⁴⁶

Lobsang Tsultrim was from a rural township in Ngaba County, and was the eldest of four children. At the age of eight he began attending a school affiliated to Kirti Monastery – The Buddhist Youth Academy – which was shut down in 2003, whereupon he joined the monastery’s tantric college. Various reports state he was an outstanding student. ⁴⁴⁷

Lobsang Tsultrim was the cousin of Norbu Damdrul, a former Kirti monk who died after self-immolating on October 15, 2011. ⁴⁴⁸

Sonam Dargye

Date: March 17, 2012

Protest location: Rebkong (Ch: Tongren) County, Malho (Ch: Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 44

Occupation: Farmer

Condition: Deceased

Sonam Dargye, a 44-year-old farmer, self-immolated and died on March 17, 2012, in Rongpo, the seat of Rebkong County in Qinghai Province.⁴⁴⁹ Sonam Dargye had made his final preparations for his self-immolation in a hotel next to the monastery. According to exile Tibetan sources in touch with Tibetans who knew him, he made offerings before a photograph of the Dalai Lama before drinking gasoline and pouring more over himself.

He stepped out into the street, in the middle of the road by the Snowland hotel and Tonmi cultural bookstore, and shouted "Bring His Holiness back to Tibet!" before setting himself on fire.⁴⁵⁰

"Sonam Dargye used to say that nothing was more important than bringing the Dalai Lama back to Tibet," said exiled Tibetans in the Norbulingka research unit in Dharamsala in a letter translated from Tibetan. "He used to say out loud that if the Dalai Lama could be brought back, the whole Tibet issue would soon be settled. He was also someone who stood up against internal feuding between groups of villages."

Passersby tried to put out the flames, but he was burning too strongly. Sources in touch with Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that Sonam Dargye had bound cotton padding around his body with wire. "The Tibetans who were at the scene attempted to put out the flames but death was very fast because of the kerosene inside and outside the body," a spokesperson for the exile Rebkong community in Dharamsala, India, told RFA.⁴⁵¹

A video of Sonam Dargye lying on the ground and probably already dead while flames still rise from his chest and midriff emerged from Tibet soon after the event. Several dozen people are standing around him at a distance while cars and motorbikes occasionally pass. Immediately behind Sonam Dargye, a parent and a small child stand watching from a shop doorway.⁴⁵²

Sonam Dargye's was the third self-immolation in four days in Tibet following those of Jamyang Palden on March 14, 2012 – very close to where Sonam Dargye had self-immolated – and Lobsang Tsultrim on March 16. Sonam Dargye, a father of three, was reportedly close friends with Jamyang Palden.⁴⁵³

Immediately after Sonam Dargye's self-immolation, his body was taken to Rongpo Gonchen Monastery, where Jamyang Palden had been a monk. Hundreds of people began gathering in the square in front of the monastery – the square where Jamyang Palden had self-immolated days before – with some sources claiming as many as 7000 people eventually filled the square. ⁴⁵⁴

The same Tibetan sources said: "Tibetans in the vicinity then carried the body, weeping and singing the Mani Mantra, ⁴⁵⁵ up to the Drolma Tangchen courtyard in front of the monastery. By the time they reached, quite a few Gonchen monks and local people were there, chanting prayers, and after some time, as word went around of what had happened, crowds of people started coming towards the monastery from all directions. At first the soldiers and armed police tried to stop them at checkpoints, but their numbers swelled, and the soldiers pulled back."

After the prayers, the monks and laypeople carried the body to an area at the foot of the mountain behind the monastery called Dunggya Laka, where monks are cremated. It was believed to be the first time that a layperson has been cremated there.

As people gathered at the cremation, several truckloads of soldiers arrived. When one section of the crowd moved towards the soldiers, they withdrew. Monks and laypeople continued their prayers at the cemetery until nearly 1 in the morning.

RFA published a photograph sent to them by a listener of Sonam Dargye lying on a pyre and draped with khatag – the white scarves traditionally given as a blessing in Tibet. Only his face is visible, blackened by the flames. He is surrounded by monks and two portraits of the Dalai Lama are hanging by his head. ⁴⁵⁶ Footage of his cremation broadcast by Voice of America's Tibetan language service shows hundreds of people gathered at the scene. ⁴⁵⁷

ICT did not observe any reports of Sonam Dargye's self-immolation or the subsequent gathering of thousands of people attending his funeral in the Party-controlled official Chinese media. Agence France Presse reported, "The government and police of Huangnan prefecture, which oversees [Rebkong], and restaurants, hotels and art centers in the city refused to comment when contacted by AFP." ⁴⁵⁸

Sonam Dargye, married to Dolkar Tso, was a farmer and a carpenter who had two sons and a daughter, and a mother in her seventies. Free Tibet reported that Sonam Dargye had said before his self-immolation: "His Holiness the Dalai Lama must return to Tibet. If he returns, Tibet's problems will be solved. If not, the future of Tibet is unsure. So we have to make our best effort to ensure the return of His Holiness." ⁴⁵⁹

Lobsang Sherab

Date: March 28, 2012

Protest location: Cha (Ch: Jia) Township, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 20

Monastery: Ganden Tenpeling Monastery

Condition: Deceased

Lobsang Sherab, a 20-year-old monk at Ganden Tenpeling Monastery in Ngaba County, self-immolated and died at around 7:00 p.m. on March 28, 2012 along the main street in Cha Township, also in Ngaba County.⁴⁶⁰ After setting light to himself Lobsang Sherab shouted slogans, but witnesses said they couldn't make out what he was shouting.⁴⁶¹

Local Tibetans intended to take Lobsang Sherab's remains back to his family, but police took his body away despite repeated pleas from the local Tibetans.⁴⁶² Free Tibet report that up to 100 people confronted police over returning Lobsang Sherab's remains to his family, but police beat protestors back and fired warning shots into the air. Injured protestors did not go to the local clinics and hospitals for fear of being reported and detained by police.⁴⁶³

ICT did not observe any reports about Lobsang Sherab's self-immolation in the official Chinese media.

Lobsang Sherab was the second person to self-immolate in Cha Township after Dorjee self-immolated and died on March 5, 2012.

Lobsang Sherab had been a monk at Ganden Tenpeling Monastery – a small monastery with a population of only 31 monks – in another part of Ngaba County since the age of nine, according to various reports.⁴⁶⁴ In October 2011, he was accepted for study at Kirti Monastery, but left Kirti and returned home on March 26, 2012, two days before he self-immolated. According to a Kirti monk in exile speaking at the time, "These days some 300 Chinese government officials of various positions and rank are stationed at Kirti monastery, and throughout Ngaba armed police and special police forces maintain a security clampdown."⁴⁶⁵

Both of Lobsang Sherab's parents are alive, and he had three siblings.⁴⁶⁶

Chimey Palden Tenpa Darjey

Date: March 30, 2012

Protest location: Barkham (Ch: Ma'erkang) Count, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Ages: 21 and 22

Monastery: Tsodun Monastery

Condition: Both deceased

Chimey Palden, 21, and Tenpa Darjey, 22, jointly self-immolated outside the Ngaba Prefecture Government building in Barkham, the prefectural capital of Ngaba, on March 30, 2012. Both men were monks at Tsodun Monastery in Barkham County.⁴⁶⁷ Both reportedly shouted slogans against the Chinese government as they burned, but none of the reports of their self-immolations indicate precisely what they shouted.

Police put out the flames on the two men, put them into a police vehicle and drove them to Barkham hospital.⁴⁶⁸ Initial reports could not confirm the condition of the two men. Some sources suggested one of them had died at the scene while one had survived.⁴⁶⁹

The prefectural government building in Barkham is the administrative center of Ngaba Prefecture, a large and high-profile building in the middle of the large town. ICT did not observe any reports in the Party-controlled official Chinese media about Chimey Palden and Tenpa Darjey's self-immolations at the time; however, their self-immolations were mentioned in a June 25, 2012 Xinhua report discussing the wave of self-immolations more broadly, claiming they had self-immolated outside a "telecommunications outlet" as opposed to the government building, and that their self-immolations occurred "while hundreds of students of the nearby primary and junior high schools were on their way home during lunch break."⁴⁷⁰ The suggestion that the self-immolations were witnessed by potentially hundreds of children arises in the context of claims that amidst the unprecedented wave of self-immolations, local authorities had provided special classes in schools to "teach students to cherish their lives," and could therefore be apocryphal.

On hearing of the self-immolations, several monks drove from Tsodun Monastery towards Barkham in three vehicles with the intention of claiming the body of one of the monks if dead, or taking care of the other monk if still alive. They were stopped around 30 kilometers away from the monastery by armed police and special forces, who sent them back to the monastery.⁴⁷¹

Free Tibet reported that up to 100 people gathered at the hospital demanding information on the wellbeing of Chimey Palden and Tenpa Darjey, and that several people were detained by police.⁴⁷²

Free Tibet also reported that Chimey Palden died early in the morning of March 31, 2012, and was immediately cremated on police orders.⁴⁷³

Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that Tenpa Darje died in hospital on the morning of April 6, 2012, a week after his self-immolation. Police refused to give his remains to monks from Tsodun Monastery, and cremated him instead. Three police vehicles closely followed the monks on their return journey to Tsodun Monastery, and during the funeral service the following day, a large contingent of paramilitary police carried out exercise drills in full sight of people attending the service.⁴⁷⁴

Chimey Palden had been detained by police for a month in 2010, according to several sources. When traveling to Lhasa he was searched by police who found he was carrying a portrait of the Dalai Lama, a Tibetan flag, and that he had a Tibetan nationalist song on his cellphone called “Sound of Unity” by the singer Sherten.⁴⁷⁶

Tenpa Darje studied philosophy at Kirti Monastery in Ngaba County from 2003 to 2009, then returned to Tsodun Monastery – which is a branch monastery of Kirti – where he was regarded as an exceptional student. He was the youngest of four brothers and sisters. Chimey Palden went to Kirti as a philosophy student in 2009, but stayed only a few months.⁴⁷⁷

Both men were from the same small village – Khorlachang Village – in Barkham County.⁴⁷⁸

Thubten Nyandak Rinpoche Atse

Date: April 6, 2012

Location: Tawu (Ch: Daofu) County, Kardze (Ch: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Kham

Ages: 45 and 23

Status: Both deceased

Uncertainty surrounds the circumstances of the deaths of Thubten Nyandak Rinpoche, 45, and his niece Atse, a 23-year-old nun. They both died when their quarters on the grounds of Dragkar Monastery in Tawu County caught fire, reportedly as they were lighting butter lamps in honor of all the Tibetans who had self-immolated. Radio Free Asia (RFA) quoted a source who claimed the monastery’s administrators regarded the fire as accidental – and persuaded police it was an accident – while some local Tibetans believed it was deliberate.⁴⁷⁹

The Beijing-based Tibetan writer Woesser published a photograph on her blog on August 2, 2012 of the small wooden building which had caught fire resulting in the deaths of Thubten Nyandak Rinpoche and Atse.

The image shows scorch marks around one of the windows, but Woesser contends that both people would have had time to escape the fire, if they chose to do so. ⁴⁸⁰

Thubten Nyandak Rinpoche was reportedly head Dragkar Monastery, where he and his niece died. He was also the former abbot of Dzamthang Monastery in Dzamthang (Ch: Rangtang) County, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Prefecture, the site of one self-immolation before his own death, on February 19, 2012, and three more after his death, those of Choepak Kyap and Sonam who jointly self-immolated on April 19, 2012, and Rikyo who self-immolated on May 30, 2012. ⁴⁸¹ It is not known when or under what circumstances he left Dzamthang Monastery.

Both Thubten Nyandak Rinpoche and Atse were known to be staunch advocates of Tibetan culture and religion and of unity among Tibetans. Before their deaths, Thubten Nyandak Rinpoche had called family members asking them to bring butter to fuel the lamps he said he was lighting for all of the self-immolators. ⁴⁸²

Choepak Kyap Sonam

Date: April 19, 2012

Protest location: Barma Township, Dzamthang (Ch: Rangtang) County, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Ages: 25 and 24

Occupation: Not known

Condition: Both deceased

Choepak Kyap, 25, and Sonam, 24, jointly self-immolated on April 19, 2012 close to a local government office near Jonang Dzamthang Gonchen Monastery in Dzamthang County in Ngaba Prefecture. ⁴⁸³ None of the accounts of their self-immolation report whether or not Choepak Kyap and Sonam shouted slogans at any point during their protest. Both men are thought to have initially survived although they were gravely injured; police arrived at the scene and tried to take the men away, but local Tibetans managed to take them to Dzamthang Monastery, where it is thought they passed away. ⁴⁸⁴

Video footage later emerged from Tibet, showing both men in apparently separate locations and still on flames. In harrowing scenes, Choepak Kyap is seen lying engulfed in flames lying on his back by the side of a road. Several people are looking on as motorbikes and other vehicles occasionally pass by, and a woman's voice can be heard chanting prayers to the Dalai Lama. At one point, Choepak Kyap slowly brings his hands together despite his arms being severely burnt and his torso still on flames. Sonam is seen in a separate clip edited into the same video, lying motionless on his back with his arms and legs raised and severe burns covering his entire body.

Small flames are still rising from his belly and his groin. Whoever is shooting the video appears to be the only person in the immediate vicinity, and he can be heard reciting prayers. More people can be heard approaching, and footage from a different camera is edited into the video, showing people putting a blanket over Sonam's body – suggesting he may have died at the scene – and starting to try and move him. ⁴⁸⁵

Police ordered the men's families to cremate Choepak Kyap and Sonam by 1:00 a.m. of the following day, according to one report. Hundreds of people from the region – including monks from other monasteries – traveled in to attend the funeral ceremony.

ICT has not observed any reports of their self-immolations in the official Chinese media.

Both men self-immolated close to where Nangdrol, an 18-year-old Tibetan had self-immolated and died on February 19, 2012. The area was also the scene of a large-scale protest on January 26, 2012, when police opened fire on demonstrators killing one and injuring several more. ⁴⁸⁶

Choepak Kyap and Sonam were cousins and reportedly from nomad families. ⁴⁸⁷ Prior to their self-immolations, they recorded testimonies explaining their decision to self-immolate. A translation of their testimony prepared by the Central Tibet Administration is below: ⁴⁸⁸

"The Tibetan Nation is distinct from others, as it has its own religion and culture. It is unique as it shows compassion and love and serves the well being of others. But the Tibetan Nation was forcibly occupied, oppressed and cheated by China. As a result we the Tibetan people suffer without our fundamental human rights.

"So, for the sake of world peace I set my self on fire. The suffering Tibetan people experience due to the denial of our freedom is much greater than the suffering of setting my body on fire.

"Our grateful parents, family members, siblings. It does not mean that we do not care about you or want to be separated from you... It does not mean we do not cherish our own lives.

"Both share the same idea. So we set fire to ourselves on fire for freedom in Tibet, for the development of Buddhism, so all sentient beings can prosper, and for world peace.

“Therefore, you need to fulfill our last wishes. Do not do anything if we are taken away by the Chinese. If no one is hurt because of us then our wishes will be realized. If you are sad because of us then listen to learned Abbots and Tulkus.

“Follow the guidance of these people. If you educate yourself and choose the right direction, show loyalty and affection for your people, diligently preserve your culture and do not lose your dignity, remain united as one, then our wishes are fulfilled. Please, we urge you from our hearts to do as our message says.”

Dorje Tseten Dargye

Date: May 27, 2012

Protest location: The Jokhang Temple, Lhasa City, Tibet Autonomous Region, in the Tibetan region of U-Tsang (Central Tibet)

Ages: 19 and 25

Profession: Restaurant workers

Condition: Dorje Tseten: deceased; Dargye: deceased.

Two Tibetan men named as Dorje Tseten, 19, and Dargye, 25, self-immolated in front of the Jokhang Temple in central Lhasa on May 27, 2012.⁴⁸⁹ According to one source, both men had rented a hotel room next to the Jokhang Temple around an hour before self-immolating in order to prepare, and shouted traditional “victory calls” before setting themselves alight.

Xinhua, China’s Party-controlled official news agency, reported the self-immolations, saying that Dorje Tseten (identified as Tobgye Tseten) died at the scene, while Dargye was taken to hospital. He later died.

A sequence of photographs later emerged taken from different vantage points that showed plain-clothed police running towards and tackling the men to the ground while discharging fire-extinguishers over them. A photograph also emerged showing Dorje Tseten’s blackened corpse lying on the ground amid a small crowd of onlookers – most probably police and other officials.⁴⁹⁰

Police entirely cleared the Jokhang Square in front of the temple and the surrounding streets within 15 minutes of the self-immolations, according to several reports. An eyewitness told Radio Free Asia (RFA), “Not a trace of the incident was left at the site.” Unconfirmed reports claimed Tibetans who tried to reach the site of the self-immolations to stage a protest were detained. People’s cell-phones were also confiscated in an apparent attempt to delete any photographs that people may have taken of the self-immolations, and cellphone networks were shut down.⁴⁹¹

Agence France Presse reported, “Security authorities in Lhasa contacted by telephone refused to comment on the incident.”⁴⁹² Xinhua reported, “The incident was settled quickly and order was restored and chaos avoided.”⁴⁹³

In the ensuing days and weeks and in an apparently direct response to Dorje Tseten and Dargye’s self-immolations, the Chinese authorities imposed a stringent security crackdown on Lhasa, which included armed checkpoints at every major junction in the city where Tibetans were singled out and their identification papers were scrutinized. Hundreds of Tibetans – particularly those from eastern Tibet including Ngaba, where Dargye was from – were expelled from the Tibet Autonomous Region, even those who had businesses and families there.⁴⁹⁴

Dorje Tseten’s family was said to be deeply distressed at not being allowed to have his body back for carrying out traditional funeral rituals. They did receive ashes from the Chinese authorities, although it is not clear that they were Dorje Tseten’s. The family was understood to be seeking clarification, but it’s not clear if their doubts were ever resolved.⁴⁹⁵

Dargye’s father, Lodey, reportedly traveled to Lhasa hoping to see Dargye – the youngest of six children – but he was turned back and sent home by police without learning anything at all about his son’s condition or whereabouts. It was later revealed that he had died.⁴⁹⁶

Dorje Tseten was from Labrang (Ch: Xiahe) County in Gansu Province in the Tibetan region of Amdo, and had visited there shortly before his self-immolation.⁴⁹⁷ Dargye was from Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County in Sichuan Province, also in Amdo, the site of the majority of self-immolations to have taken place in Tibet at that time; as a boy he had reportedly entered Kirti Monastery, where a majority of people who had self-immolated were either monks or former monks, but he had disrobed a few years prior to his self-immolation.⁴⁹⁸

Dorje Tseten had left home after high school and had been renting a room in a house in Lhasa. The entire household was detained soon after his self-immolation, and his family in Gansu Province were immediately subject to security restrictions. The family who owned the restaurant in Lhasa where Dargye worked as a cashier were also reportedly arrested.

Dorje Tseten and Dargye self-immolated during Saga Dawa, an important religious period for Tibetan Buddhists that commemorates the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and death. Lhasa is typically busy with Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims during this period, and most Tibetans consider the Jokhang Temple as the most sacred and important temple in Tibet.

Rikyo

Date: May 30, 2012

Protest location: Dzamthang (Ch: Rangtang) County, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 33

Occupation: Nomad

Condition: Deceased

Rikyo, a mother of three in her early thirties, set fire to herself and died almost immediately on May 30, 2012, outside Dzamthang Monastery in Dzamthang County in Ngaba Prefecture. The flames engulfing her were so intense that police officers attempting to put them out were beaten back.⁴⁹⁹

Her body was taken inside the monastery by monks and laypeople, but government officials arrived and demanded she be taken away, according to one source;⁵⁰⁰ other sources reported that police ordered the monastery to cremate Rikyo's remains straight away.⁵⁰¹

A large number of Tibetans gathered to pray for Rikyo, the Tibetan mother of three who set fire to herself on Wednesday, May 30, and died straight away. Some Tibetan sources said the total number was as high as several thousand, including monks and laypeople. According to a source from the area in touch with Tibetans in exile, "Although it was raining and a heavy storm, people did not move from the cremation area near the monastery until around 3:00 a.m."⁵⁰²

ICT did not observe any reports of Rikyo's self-immolation in the official media at the time of her death. However, Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, reported Rikyo's self-immolation in a June 25, 2012 article discussing the wave of self-immolations, claiming she self-immolated following arguments with her alcoholic husband about the couple's eldest son who "ran away" to become a monk. Rikyo's self-immolation "was not politically motivated, according to police," the article stated.⁵⁰³

Rikyo self-immolated close to where Nangdrol had self-immolated on February 17, 2012 and where Choepak Kyap and Sonam had jointly self-immolated on April 19, 2012. Several sources noted that all four had been neighbors.⁵⁰⁴

According to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), Rikyo is survived by her husband, Nangtong, 41, two sons, Lobsang, 17 and Kunga, 10, and a daughter, Semlha, 14, and her mother and father, Rinlha and Apang Chuklo.⁵⁰⁵

Rikyo was described by sources as being deeply religious. She had reportedly carried out prostrations, a gesture used in Buddhist practice to show reverence, for nearly two months before her death.

Some speculated that the prostrations had been made to prepare her for the act of self-immolation.⁵⁰⁶

Several months after her death, TCHRD received a hand-written note purportedly written by Rikyö before her self-immolation. TCHRD prepared the following translation:⁵⁰⁷

*“Prayers for world peace and happiness!
To ensure His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s return to Tibet,
do not indulge in slaughtering and trading of animals,
do not steal, Speak Tibetan,
do not fight,
Bearing all sufferings of the sentient beings on myself,
Do not resist by fighting if I get into Chinese hands alive,
Be united, Study Tibetan culture,
On fire I burn, do not worry my family.”*

Tamdin Thar

Date: June 15, 2012

Protest location: Chentsa (Ch: Jianza) County Town, Malho (Ch: Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 50s

Occupation: Unknown (former nomad)

Condition: Deceased

Tamdin Thar, a Tibetan man thought to be in his fifties, self-immolated outside a People’s Armed Police compound in Chentsa County, Qinghai Province on June 15, 2012.⁵⁰⁸

A video later emerged of Tamdin Thar lying on the ground close to the entrance of the police compound with flames still rising from his body. He does not move in the video and the flames seem to have consumed most of the flesh from his arms and legs. Several people’s voices can just be heard in the background.⁵⁰⁹ Although his last words are not known, Tibetans in exile who are in contact with people in the area believe that he called for freedom in Tibet and for the Dalai Lama to return home.⁵¹⁰

Police reportedly arrived and used fire extinguishers to put out the flames, when Tamdin Thar was reportedly seen to move slightly, suggesting he was still alive. Police officers put Tamdin Thar into a vehicle and drove him away, supposedly to a hospital, where he reportedly died a few hours later.⁵¹¹

A photograph of the spot where Tamdin Thar self-immolated emerged soon afterwards, showing ashes and scorch-marks on the ground where he'd been lying – identifiable from the video-footage mentioned above – as well as stains supposedly left by fire-extinguishers. On the steps in the background, dozens of lit candles and several prayer flags have been placed in what appears to be a makeshift shrine.⁵¹²

According to the Beijing-based Tibetan writer Woesser, Tamdin Thar left behind a note before he self-immolated;⁵¹³ the translation below was prepared by ICT from a Chinese translation of the original Tibetan:

*"In the name of the Three Jewels
Pray for world peace
Pray that His Holiness the Dalai Lama will return home.
To protect the nation of Tibet
I am to dedicate my body in self-immolation."*

Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency reported Tamdin Thar's self-immolation in a two-sentence article that didn't actually name him, stating only that his "identity and cause of the death are under investigation."⁵¹⁵

Despite the sudden deployment of a large contingent of security forces on the streets of Chentsa in response to Tamdin Thar's self-immolation, hundreds of local Tibetans gathered in the center of the town to demand that police return his remains so that traditional funeral rites could be performed for him.⁵¹⁶

According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), a crowd of up to 300 people gathered outside a police station in Chentsa. According to a woman who was in the crowd and who spoke to RFA, "We went to the Chentsa county police station and demanded the body. Finally the authorities gave us custody of his body."⁵¹⁷

In extraordinary scenes, hundreds of local Tibetans then formed a procession to carry Tamdin Thar's body to a cremation site on the outskirts of the town. Photographs from the scene show a highly intimidating police presence lining the route of the procession, yet allowing the procession to pass⁵¹⁸. A short video posted to YouTube shows several hundred people watching as Tamdin Thar's body – completely shrouded by ceremonial khatag blessing scarves thrown over him by onlookers – is carried to the cremation site.⁵¹⁹

Tamdin Thar came from a nomadic background in Chentsa County. According to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), his family was 'relocated' several years previously from their traditional pastures into the county town as part of the authorities' ongoing strategy of 'settling' nomads across all of Tibet.⁵²⁰

According to the exiled Buddhist scholar Geshe Lobsang Nyandak who is originally from Chentsa and who spoke to the Tibetan-language service of Voice of America, in the months prior to his self-immolation, Tamdin Thar had gone on a pilgrimage visiting the sites of previous self-immolations by Tibetans in Golog Prefecture in Qinghai Province, and Ngaba Prefecture in Sichuan Province, both in the Tibetan region of Amdo. ⁵²¹

At the time of Tamdin Thar's self-immolation, his family members were said to be away searching for the valuable medicinal plant yartsa gumbu in the grasslands surrounding Chentsa County Town – after the loss of their land and livelihoods, and ill-prepared to compete with Chinese migrant workers for employment, more Tibetans in Tibet, particularly former nomads, depend on collecting the plant to earn a living. ⁵²³

Ngawang Norphel Tenzin Khedup

Date: June 20, 2012

Protest location: Tridu (Ch: Chengduo) County, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Ages: 22 and 24

Occupations: Ngawang Norphel: carpenter; Tenzin Khedup: nomad (former monk)

Condition: Both deceased.

Ngawang Norphel, 22, and Tenzin Khedup, 24, self-immolated in Tridu County in Qinghai Province in the Tibetan region of Amdo on June 20, 2012. "They called for freedom for Tibet, the return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Tibet and for his long life. Both of them were carrying Tibetan flags in their hands at the time of the self-immolation," said a witness who spoke to Radio Free Asia (RFA). Tenzin Khedup died at the scene, while Ngawang Norphel initially survived having suffered serious injuries. ⁵²⁴ He eventually died on July 30, 2012. ⁵²⁵

A video of their self-immolation circulated almost immediately after the event. The few seconds of footage shows both men holding Tibetan flags above their heads and shouting slogans, when they are both suddenly enveloped in flames. Ngawang Norphel falls to the ground almost immediately and knocks Tenzin Khedup over as he does so. Tenzin Khedup manages to scramble to his feet and sprints away from the scene, completely engulfed in flames. Ngawang Norphel is briefly seen rolling on the ground, also engulfed in flames. ⁵²⁶

None of the reports of Tenzin Khedup and Ngawang Norphel's self-immolations mention the involvement or even the presence of police officers at the scene.

Xinhua issued a brief report on the self-immolations, stating that Tenzin Khedup – described as a herder – had died, while at the time of releasing the report, Xinhua hadn't identified Ngawang Norphel as he was "still unconscious."⁵²⁷

Initial reports instead indicated only that local Tibetans took Tenzin Khedup's remains to nearby Zilkar Monastery, where monks conducted a funeral service for him.⁵²⁸ Later reports added that Ngawang Norphel was also taken to the monastery, where monks tried to tend to his injuries, but he was then transferred to a military hospital in Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province,⁵²⁹ possibly following the intervention of the Chinese authorities.

Following the self-immolations, a heavy paramilitary presence was reported in Tridu County, while the friends and relatives of both Ngawang Norphel and Tenzin Khedup were detained and interrogated by police.⁵³⁰ Zilkar Monastery was put under heavy police surveillance and the monks' movements restricted. Two monks who traveled with Ngawang Norphel to Xining were barred from the hospital by police. Ngawang Norphel's father – Lhakpa – was reportedly permitted to visit his son in hospital after eventually discovering he was there, but was warned by police not to discuss Ngawang Norphel's self-immolation or his condition with the media, or he'd "pay the price," reported RFA citing a source close to the family.⁵³¹

Just over two months later, troops raided Zilkar and detained five monks, beating others. A Tibetan source told the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy: "Around 60 vehicles full of armed police forces raided the Nyitso Zilkar Monastery on [September 1] without any explanation, and locals say it's because of the monastery's role in preserving and teaching Tibetan language, culture, and Buddhism in the region."⁵³²

Tenzin Khedup was from Tundu County, and had himself been a monk at Zilkar Monastery before disrobing in 2006, according to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD).⁵³³ Ngawang Norphel was originally from Nyalam (Ch: Nielamu) County in Shigatse (Ch: Rigaze) Prefecture in the Tibet Autonomous Region, and had been living in Tundu County since 2008, according to RFA.⁵³⁴

Both men jointly left a note, according to RFA:⁵³⁵

"We could not contribute significantly towards the Tibetan religion and culture and we could not [help bring about] economic benefits to Tibetans.

"Therefore, we have decided to self-immolate with the hope that His Holiness the Dalai Lama may live long and return to Tibet as soon as possible. For the cause of Tibetans, we chose to die for these reasons.

"We also want to appeal to our fellow youth that they should not quarrel among themselves and they should not have any ill feelings against each other. Everyone should unite to uphold the cause of the Tibetan race and nationality."

Another video emerged a few days after Ngawang Norphel and Tenzin Khepdup's self-immolation, showing Ngawang Norphel apparently in Zilkar Monastery lying on his side with his body covered but his badly burned and disfigured face and head visible. He is in obvious pain, yet still manages to express the sentiments behind his decision to self-immolate. He is also deeply anxious about the fate of Tenzin Khedup; monks in the room try to placate and soothe him by assuring him Tenzin Khedup survived.⁵³⁶ An English translation prepared by the Central Tibetan Administration follows below:⁵³⁷

N.N: *My people have no freedom of language. Everybody is mixing Tibetan and Chinese. Be that as it may, take my wealth. I don't need them. What has happened to my Land of Snow? What has happened to my Land of Snow? How is Tenzin Khedup?*

Monk by his side: *He is fine.*

N.N: *Where is he?*

Monk: *He is home.*

N.N: *We two "sworn brothers," we won't fail next time. [This is] for the sake of Tibet. We are in the land of snow. If we don't have our freedom, cultural traditions and language, it would be extremely embarrassing for us. We must therefore learn them. Every nationality needs freedom, language and tradition. Without language, what would be our nationality? [Should we then] call ourselves Chinese or Tibetan? Aro Khedup! Aro Khedup! Khedup! Where are you?*

Voice from back: *Just behind you.*

N.N: *What?*

Voice: *Just behind you.*

N.N: *Are you behind me? What are you doing? Aro! How is my face?*

Voice: Not bad. It will get better.

N.N: *I don't look like a human? Aro! I look dreadful, don't I?
I smell kerosene. We poured quite a lot of kerosene.
[As if he is talking to Tenzin Khedrup] Really, the way you fell down and rose
up again, you really showed some courage. Aro!*

Voice: Right.

N.N: Aro! Now you hold it.

Monk: It is better now. It really is!

N.N: Did you hand me over to the Chinese?

Monk: All the monks of monastery are taking care of you.

N.N: Thank you. Thank you. I am grateful to Silkar monastery.

Monk: All the monks of Silkar monastery are here. We don't have good medical facilities but we are doing our best.

N.N: Thank you. There is no hope of my recovery. I have only one wish in my heart. I just wish to raise the prestige of my people. Aro! I have no other wish. What is Tenzin Khedup doing?

Monk: Tenzin Khedup is fine. He is home.

N.N: Swear.

Monk: Yes. Then.

N.N: You are fooling me.

Monk: I am not fooling you.

N.N: Is he dead?

Monk: He is not dead.

N.N: What?

Monk: He is not dead.

N.N: He is dead, right?

Monk: He is not dead.

N.N: Where is he? N.N: What has become of my "sworn friend"?

Monk: He is fine.

N.N: Where is he?

Monk: At home.

N.N: Where is he?

Monk: He was taken to his home.

N.N: What?

Monk: He was taken to his home.

N.N: Where is he?

Monk: He is at his home.

N.N: Is he dead?

Monk: He is not dead.

N.N: Swear.

Monk: Okay.

Dickyi Choezom

Date: June 27, 2012

Protest location: Kyegudo (Ch: Jiegu) County Town, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 40s

Occupation: Unknown

Condition: Unknown

Dickyi Choezom, a mother of two in her 40s, self-immolated on June 27, 2012 in Kyegudo in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo. Radio Free Asia (RFA) quoted a source who said it was “unclear what slogans the woman had shouted before setting herself alight.”⁵³⁸

One report claimed Dickyi Choezom was among 70 families participating in a demonstration against loss of land to government-directed redevelopment plans in Kyegudo⁵³⁹ following an earthquake in April 2010 that devastated the town and surrounding areas, and which killed up to 3000 people.⁵⁴⁰

Police at the scene put out the flames, and took Dickyi Choezom away, reportedly to a hospital in Xining, the provincial capital of Qinghai, although this has not been confirmed by any sources and her current condition and whereabouts are not known.⁵⁴¹

ICT did not observe any reports in the official Chinese media about Dickyi Choezom’s self-immolation.

According to a witness in touch with Tibetans in exile, two of Dickyi Choezom’s relatives, named as Tashi Yangzom and Tashi Dhondup, were severely beaten by police at the scene and taken into detention. The witness added, “Many of the gathered Tibetans demanded their release, threatening to set themselves on fire. The two were released later in the day carrying serious injuries.”⁵⁴²

The Chinese authorities’ re-development plans for Kyegudo have been a source of deep resentment among Tibetans in the town, leading to several large-scale protests over land-seizures, at least one of which involved up to 300 people and was violently broken up by police.⁵⁴³ Following the earthquake in April 2010, the original Tibetan inhabitants have largely been pushed aside to make way for new roads and buildings with little or no compensation. Once an important hub of Tibetan culture, the re-development plans essentially envisage the town as a tourist destination for China’s domestic market.⁵⁴⁴

Tsewang Dorjee

Date: July 7, 2012

Protest location: Damshung (Ch: Dangxiong) County, Lhasa Municipality, Tibet Autonomous Region, in the Tibetan region of U-Tsang (Central Tibet)

Age: 22

Occupation: Nomad

Condition: Deceased

Tsewang Dorjee, a 22-year-old nomad, self-immolated in a busy market area in Damshung County Town in Lhasa Municipality late in the morning on July 7, 2012. He reportedly shouted slogans in support of the Dalai Lama, and walked up to 100 meters before falling to the ground. Police arrived at the scene and doused the flames, then took Tsewang Dorjee to hospital in Damshung, where visitors were forbidden from seeing him; he was then taken to a hospital in Lhasa City. Tsewang Dorjee suffered burns over 90% his body, according to sources in touch with Radio Free Asia (RFA).⁵⁴⁵

Reports suggest Tsewang Dorjee died later the same day of his self-immolation.⁵⁴⁶ A police official in Damshung contacted by RFA denied there had been a self-immolation,⁵⁴⁷ and no reports of Tsewang Dorjee's self-immolation were observed in the official Chinese media.

In the wake of Tsewang Dorjee's self-immolation, witnesses were detained by police and told not to speak to anyone about what they had seen, according to one report, while all communications into the area were cut by the authorities in an apparent attempt to stop news of the self-immolation from spreading.⁵⁴⁸ A report by the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) issued on July 11, 2012 said communications were still down four days after Tsewang Dorjee's self-immolation.⁵⁴⁹

Other than the fact that Tsewang Dorjee is survived by an elderly mother,⁵⁵⁰ no other information about Tsewang Dorjee is available among Tibetans in exile, and there is no known photograph of him.

Losang Lozin

Date: July 17, 2012

Protest location: Barkham (Ch: Ma'erkang) County, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan Region of Amdo

Age: 18

Monastery: Tsodun

Condition: Deceased

Losang Lozin, an 18-year-old monk at Tsodun Monastery in Barkham County, self-immolated in front of the monastery's main assembly hall on July 17, 2012, then attempted to walk towards the local Township Government offices. According to an e-mailed account of Losang Lozin's self-immolation provided by monks at Kirti Monastery in exile in touch with people in the area, "After going only a short way, the flames became fiercer, and Losang Lozin fell to the ground. He died on that spot. While on fire, he uttered many things, but it is not yet clear what these were. After this happened, the monks at his monastery took away his body and are now performing after-death rituals in his honor. They are planning to cremate his remains this evening."⁵⁵¹

A photograph of Losang Lozin lying on his back and still on flames – possibly already dead – emerged soon after the event. Three people standing in the background can be seen with their hands pressed together in prayer.⁵⁵²

Paramilitary police reportedly descended on the area in numbers soon after Losang Lozin had self-immolated and his remains had been taken back to Tsodun Monastery. However, a number of local Tibetans reportedly occupied the road bridge to the monastery, stopping police from advancing.

Fears reportedly grew of an impending clash between police and local Tibetans. However, monks on the monastery's Democratic Management Committee – a body set up on government orders in all monasteries and nunneries in Tibet to oversee the institution's affairs – managed to negotiate with police that they would keep the situation under control if police withdrew and the local Tibetans returned home.⁵⁵³

The Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) reported on August 28, 2012, that Lobsang Rabten, a member of the Democratic Management Committee at Tsodun Monastery, was detained by police on August 19, 2012, on unknown grounds, and was thought to be held at a detention center in Barkham, the prefectural capital of Ngaba. It was not reported whether Lobsang Rabten was involved in discussions with police following Losang Lozin's self-immolation. According to TCHRD, five other monks were also detained on unknown grounds on August 12, 2012 and August 16, 2012. Tsodun Monastery had remained under intense police scrutiny ever since Losang Lozin's self-immolation a month or so previously.⁵⁵⁴

Losang Lozin was reportedly given a water burial at Tsodun Monastery; his remains were lowered into the river that runs beside Tsodun Monastery. Water burials in Tibet are based on the same principle as sky burials or cremations, returning the body to the elements. This was the first reported instance of someone who had self-immolated being given a water-burial since the wave of self-immolations began in February 2009. Given the tense situation and under pressure from the authorities, monks may have calculated that a traditional Tibetan ritual in the form of a water burial would be more appropriate than engaging in the preparations required for a cremation. ⁵⁵⁵

During the funeral ceremony, paramilitary police reportedly carried out exercise drills on the opposite side of the river and in full view of the people attending the funeral. ⁵⁵⁶ Chimey Palden and Tenpa Darjey, who jointly self-immolated and died on March 30, 2012, were also from Tsodun Monastery; during their funeral service at the monastery, police also reportedly carried out exercise drills in full view of the funeral participants. Losang Lozin was from Khorlachang Village in Tsodun Township – the same village as Chimey Palden and Tenpa Darjey.

The day after Losang Lozin's self-immolation and funeral, local Tibetans gathered at the monastery for prayers, while Tibetan-owned shops and restaurants in the township closed in a show of mourning. ⁵⁵⁷

According to monks at Kirti Monastery in exile in Dharamsala, India, Losang Lozin joined Tsodun Monastery at a young age and was in the senior class. The monks in exile, Lobsang Yeshe and Kanyag Tsering, said he was "a model student in both his studies and his personal conduct." ⁵⁵⁸ He is survived by his father Jorgyal and mother Tsepopo. ⁵⁵⁹

Lobsang Tsultrim (snr) ⁵⁶⁰

Date: August 6, 2012

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 21

Monastery: Kirti

Status: Deceased

Lobsang Tsultrim, a 21-year-old monk at Kirti Monastery, self-immolated at around 5:00 p.m. on August 6, 2012 in Ngaba County Town. ⁵⁶¹ He walked several paces shouting out slogans calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet and for the reunification of Tibetans in Tibet and in exile before falling to the ground. ⁵⁶² Other sources claim he shouted also for the return of the exiled abbot of the monastery, Kirti Rinpoche, and for the re-opening of Kirti Monastery School. ⁵⁶³

Police officers arrived at the scene and put out the flames; witnesses claim Lobsang Tsultrim was still alive at that point. Radio Free Asia (RFA) cited a source who claimed “police were observed throwing a badly burned body into a vehicle and driving away.”⁵⁶⁴

Reports claim that Lobsang Tsultrim was first taken to a local hospital, then transferred to another hospital in Barkham (Ch: Ma’erkang), the prefectural capital of Ngaba, where he died soon afterwards.⁵⁶⁵

The Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) reported on August 9, 2012 that Lobsang Tsultrim’s remains were cremated at the hospital in Barkham, despite his family’s pleas for his body to be returned to them to carry out traditional funeral rites.⁵⁶⁶

Monks at Kirti Monastery then reportedly re-cremated his remains on the night of August 7, 2012 as a token gesture towards affording Lobsang Tsultrim a traditional funeral ceremony. According to Kirti monks in exile, Lobsang Tsultrim left behind a final testimony. ICT did not observe any reports in the official Chinese media about Lobsang Tsultrim’s self-immolation.

Lobsang Tsultrim reportedly joined Kirti Monastery when he was very young, and was a classmate of Phuntsog, who self-immolated in March 2011. He was reportedly detained by police during the protests of March 2008 and badly beaten in custody. Lobsang Tsultrim was from Ngaba County and was reportedly a keen basketball player.⁵⁶⁷ He is survived by his father Tsewang, and his mother, Donkar Kyi.⁵⁶⁸

The Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice published a copy of the last testament of Tsultrim, which was translated from Tibetan into English as follows:

“January 9, 2012

“The last testament of Losang Tsultrim

“Moved by freedom and justice, defiant of oppression and subjection, I have a body to serve the Tibetan cause. As for one’s body, it is a given that the body is considered the most highly valued treasure of all treasures, and life the most precious of all things precious, not only by humans but even animals. But in these astonishing times, some people are setting themselves on fire, sacrificing their lives, going empty-handed in nonviolence, and calling out with all the breath in their bodies for the same freedoms, the political rights of individuals enjoyed in freedom-loving countries in this world. They belong to a people with truth on its side.

“For in these exceptional times, look what has become of a people like the Tibetans, ever since being forcibly taken over by China in 1958, more than a million murdered, their temples, treasuries and houses and their culture destroyed, all precious possessions, both state and private, taken away, Lamas and leaders, and chiefly Tibet’s spiritual refuge HH Dalai Lama, driven into exile or put in prison, and today the forced im- position of the deviant system of ‘Patriotic’ reeducation in monasteries, which no Tibetan can easily accept. In brief, they deprive us of the rights of expression, movement, communication, assembly, religion and so on, but they do not allow the slightest word of it to reach the outside world, and even if it does, they cover it up with lies, and allow no one to see the real situation, and anyone who does show the real situation they shamelessly slander with false accusations, and secretly murder or secretly imprison.

“It is in testimony to this subjection to abuse and oppression, and so that everyone on earth may come to know about it, for the sake of truth, the altruistic blood of the martyrs gone before, and the freedom struggle, that I too shall give up my precious body, and sacrifice my life in the great confidence and aspiration that one who takes a noble death may be protected from fear of death by truth and altruism, using my body to make all who belong to humanity open wide their eyes of mercy, examine things with a loving heart, and heed the law of Karma and the principles of justice, seeing from my example the torture and suffering inflicted on a sorry little people whose freedom has been taken away by another, more powerful people.”

Dolkar Tso

Date: August 7, 2012

Protest location: Tsoe Gaden Choeling Monastery in Tsoe (Ch: Hezuo) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 26

Occupation: Nomad

Status: Deceased

Dolkar Tso, a 26-year-old mother of two young children, set fire to herself at around 2:30 p.m. on August 7, 2012 outside Tsoe Gaden Choeling Monastery in Gansu Province. She reportedly shouted slogans calling for Tibetan freedom and for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet. According to one report, local Tibetans who were circumambulating the monastery managed to put out the flames on her body while she was still alive, but she reportedly pleaded with people to kill her by beating her head with a stone rather than let her fall into the hands of Chinese security forces. ⁵⁶⁹

Monks from the monastery took her inside, where they were soon joined by members of Dolkar Tso's family, who insisted on taking her back to her home village around 10 kilometers away, according to one source; however, she died on route.⁵⁷⁰

At around 10:00 later that night, police entered the monastery and detained three of the monks who were supposedly among those who brought Dolkar Tso into the monastery immediately after her self-immolation. The three were named as Choephel, Sherab, and Tsonдру; Tsonдру was soon released, but at around 5:00 in the morning of August 8, 2012, around a dozen police vehicles arrived at Tsoe Monastery and attempted to detain a further 17 monks on suspicion of "sheltering" Dolkar Tso, all of whom were reportedly involved in trying to bring her into the monastery or taking her back to her home village after she had died.⁵⁷¹

A large group of people reportedly mobbed the police officers, demanding the release of those detained, while another demonstration was staged outside Tsoe Monastery prayer hall by people demanding the release of Choephel, one of the monks detained the previous night.⁵⁷²

Elsewhere, up to 300 monks from Labrang Monastery – one of the most important seats of learning in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism – attempted to reach Dolkar Tso's home in a convoy of vehicles to offer their prayers. The convoy was stopped on route by police and officials who threatened to confiscate all of the monks' vehicles, whereupon the monks reportedly attempted to continue on foot. Monastic officials, possibly members of the monastery's Democratic Management Committee,⁵⁷³ persuaded the monks not to travel any further, whereupon the monks sat in the road and offered their prayers from there, to be joined by numerous other monks and local Tibetans.⁵⁷⁴

Dolkar Tso was the second person to self-immolate in two days, following the self-immolation and death of Lobsang Tsultrim the day before; with the self-immolation and death of Chopa on August 10, 2012, there were three separate self-immolations and deaths in Tibet in five days. ICT did not observe reports in the official media of any of the three self-immolations.

Dolkar Tso is survived by her husband and a four-year old son and two-year old daughter. According to exile Tibetan sources in touch with Tibetans in the area, two days before her self-immolation she was seen at the monastery with her husband, praying at each of the temples inside. Instead of returning to the family's home in a different village, the couple left instead to go to the village where Dolkar Tso was born and where her parents still lived.

Chopa

Date: August 10, 2012

Protest location: Me'uruma (Ch: Mairuma) Township, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 24

Occupation: Unknown

Condition: Deceased

Chopa, a 24-year-old man, self immolated in Me'uruma Township in Ngaba County on the morning of August 10, 2012. He shouted slogans as he burned, but none of the reports of his self-immolation indicate what he shouted. Within minutes, security personnel extinguished the flames and took him away. His condition was initially unclear; most reports indicated he survived but with serious injuries, with one source describing the flames as "fierce," and doubting he would survive long.

Chopa reportedly died at around 3:00 p.m. on route to hospital in Barkham (Ch: Ma'erkang), the capital of Ngaba Prefecture. He was cremated immediately and his ashes were given to his family, according to various reports.⁵⁷⁵

He was the third person to self-immolate and die in Tibet in five days, following Lobsang Tsultrim on August 6, 2012 and Dolkar Tso on August 7, 2012. ICT did not observe any reports in the official Chinese media of any of these three self-immolations.

Chopa was reportedly wanted by police having been among several people to lead a candle-lit march in Me'uruma against Chinese rule in Tibet on January 23, 2012. He had been in hiding ever since.⁵⁷⁶ Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported a protest in Me'uruma Township on January 23, 2012 in which several hundred monks and laypersons marched into Me'uruma, ignoring police orders to stop. The protestors then occupied a road junction in Me'uruma town, and despite the winter temperatures, laypeople stripped down to their waists and ate tsampa, the Tibetan staple of roasted barley flour, a food that has become symbolic of Tibetan identity.⁵⁷⁷

Those protests in Me'uruma were among a wave of protests that broke out in eastern Tibet in particular over the Tibetan New Year, during which at least five people were shot dead by paramilitary police and many more were injured.⁵⁷⁸

None of the reports of Chopa's self-immolation offer any background information on him, and no photographs of him are available in exile.

Lungtok Tashi

Date: August 13, 2012

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Ages: Lungtok, 20; Tashi, 21

Monastery: Kirti (Lungtok)

Occupation: Unknown (Tashi)

Condition: Both deceased

Lungtok, a 20-year-old monk at Kirti Monastery, and Tashi, a 21-year-old former Kirti monk and classmate of Lungtok, jointly self-immolated in the early evening on August 13, 2012 in Ngaba County Town. Both men emerged on flames from one of several structures that house prayer wheels around the monastery, and shouted slogans as they walked towards the town. A witness described police surrounding Lungtok and discharging fire extinguishers over him,⁵⁷⁹ while another source claimed police beat Tashi as they put out the flames.⁵⁸⁰ Both men were reportedly taken to the local county hospital; sources said both men had suffered severe burns and expressed doubts that either would survive.⁵⁸¹

Sources report Lungtok either died at the scene,⁵⁸² or soon after being taken away by police.⁵⁸³ Tashi died on August 14, 2012 in a hospital in the capital of Ngaba Prefecture, Barkham (Ch: Ma'erkang), where he had been taken soon after the county hospital. He was cremated and his ashes were given to his family, while local people reportedly visited monasteries to offer prayers, and shops and restaurants in Ngaba County Town were closed in a mark of respect.⁵⁸⁴

Immediately after Lungtok and Tashi had self-immolated and been taken away, local people gathered at the scene and began shouting protest slogans. Police responded by indiscriminately attacking people in the crowd with batons studded with nails, according to all reports of the incident.⁵⁸⁵ Several arrests were made, and according to Radio Free Asia (RFA), one person died after being struck on the head by a police officer wielding a spiked baton.⁵⁸⁶

The Associated Press called government offices in Ngaba County to try to confirm reports of Lungtok and Tashi's self-immolations and the disturbances that followed. "A woman who answered the telephone at the [Ngaba] police department said there had been no immolations or confrontations between police and Tibetan locals. 'Nothing like that has happened,' said the woman, who like many bureaucrats in China refused to give her name. The phone of the local Communist Party Propaganda Office rang unanswered."⁵⁸⁷ ICT did not observe any reports of Lungtok and Tashi's self-immolations in the official Chinese media.

Lungtok was studying traditional medicine at Kirti Monastery; Tashi had been his classmate until he disrobed in 2011. On the morning of his self-immolation, Lungtok reportedly handed out 1-renminbi bills to each of his classmates at the medical college morning assembly as an offering on behalf of all of the Tibetans who had self-immolated. ⁵⁸⁸

Lobsang Damchoe
Lobsang Kelsang (2) ⁵⁸⁹

Date: August 27, 2012

Protest location: Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County Town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Occupation: Unknown (Lobsang Damchoe)

Ages: 17 and 18

Monastery: Kirti (Lobsang Kelsang)

Status: Both deceased

Lobsang Damchoe, 17, and Lobsang Kelsang, 18, jointly self-immolated close to the eastern gates of Kirti Monastery in Ngaba County Town on August 27, 2012. They ran a few paces together shouting slogans until both fell to the ground. ⁵⁹⁰ Witnesses reported that both men shouted traditional Tibetan victory calls while they lay on the ground in flames. ⁵⁹¹ Police officers discharged fire-extinguishers over them and then took them to the local county hospital. They were then taken to another hospital in Barkham (Ch: Ma'erkang), the capital of Ngaba Prefecture, where both reportedly died. ⁵⁹² It was unclear what happened to the young men's remains.

ICT did not observe any reports of their self-immolations in the official Chinese media.

Lobsang Kelsang was a monk at Kirti Monastery, while Lobsang Damchoe used to be a monk there but had disrobed to help his family in a nomadic area of Ngaba County. Both men were cousins, while Lobsang Damchoe's elder sister is believed to have been Tenzin Choedron, who also self-immolated and died on February 11, 2012, when she too was 18 years old. Lobsang Damchoe is survived by both parents, while Lobsang Kelsang is survived by both parents and a younger brother. ⁵⁹³

Yangdang

Date: September 29, 2012

Protest location: Dzatoe (Ch: Zaduo) County Town, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Occupation: Unknown

Age: 27

Status: Deceased

At around 7 p.m. on September 29, 2012, Yangdang, a 27-year old man wearing traditional Tibetan clothes, set himself alight on the main road in Dzatoe County Town (Chinese: Zaduo) county in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. Radio Free Asia reported: “While burning, he shouted various slogans—calling for the independence of Tibet, inviting the Dalai Lama and Karmapa [another senior Tibetan Buddhist figure] to Tibet, asking for long life for the Dalai Lama and addressing Lobsang Sangay [the political head of the Tibetan government in exile] ⁵⁹⁴ as the King of Tibet,’ one source said, speaking on condition of anonymity. ⁵⁹⁵

As he walked, Chinese and Tibetan store-owners reportedly threw water over him in an attempt to douse the flames. “Witnesses said they saw his internal organs falling out at the height of the fire before he was bundled away by Chinese police,” Radio Free Asia reported, citing a Tibetan source.

Police arrived at the scene and took Yangdang to hospital, and reportedly told his family the next day that he was to be transferred to another hospital elsewhere; however, his family were told that Yangdang died on route. Information received a day after his death indicated his family had not yet been given his remains. ⁵⁹⁶

According to Radio Free Asia citing the Dharamsala-based Tibetan newspaper Tibet Express, several days before Yangdang’s self-immolation the authorities had attempted to coerce local Tibetans into participating in the filming of a documentary which was reportedly themed “the happiness of Tibetans.” According to a source who spoke to Tibet Express, “The Tibetans resented it and expressed their unwillingness to participate. This incident had led to protest against the Chinese policy.” ⁵⁹⁷

Security in the area was reportedly stepped up in the wake of Yangdang’s self-immolation, with local travel in particular reported to be severely restricted by security forces. ICT did not observe any reports of Yangdang’s self-immolation in the Chinese media. Yangdang self-immolated the day after a large meeting of around 400 Tibetan exiles from 26 countries had gathered in Dharamsala, India, the base of the Tibetan government in exile. Conference delegates had called for the self-immolations in Tibet to stop.

Yangdang was from Karma Township in Chamdo (Ch: Changdu) County in Chamdo Prefecture in the Tibet Autonomous Region, in the Tibetan region of Kham. ⁵⁹⁸

Gudrub

Date: October 4, 2012

Protest location: Driru (Ch: Biru) County, Nagchu Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region, in the Tibetan region of Kham

Age: 43

Occupation: Writer

Status: Deceased

Gudrub, a 43-year-old writer from Driru County in Nagchu Prefecture, set himself alight at around 10:30 a.m. on October 4, 2012 after shouting slogans calling for Tibetan freedom and the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet.⁵⁹⁹ According to sources who spoke to the Tibet Express published in Dharamsala, Gudrub shouted “Wherever we go, we have no freedom,” “Freedom for Tibet,” “Let His Holiness the Dalai Lama return to Tibet!”⁶⁰⁰ He continued walking and remained vocal for up to a minute before collapsing to the ground.⁶⁰¹

Some sources indicate he was then taken to hospital by a group of Tibetan bystanders, where he was then taken into police custody,⁶⁰² while other sources claim he was taken to hospital by police who arrived at the scene of his self-immolation.⁶⁰³ All sources report that Gudrub died soon after arriving at hospital. ICT did not observe any reports in the Chinese press of Gudrub’s self-immolation.

According to sources who spoke to Radio Free Asia, Gudrub was an avid student of Tibetan history; he had also studied at a school for Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala, India, before returning to Tibet in 2005.⁶⁰⁴

In an article titled “The Sound of a Victorious Drum Beaten by Lives” posted to an online messaging service on March 14, 2012, Gudrub, who used the pen-name “Youth of the Snowland,” voiced strong criticism of the Chinese government’s handling of the Tibet issue, with a call to intensify non-violent protest, and a call for Tibetan unity. A translation of the essay, prepared by the Tibetan service of Voice of America, appears below:

“The Sound of a Victorious Drum Beaten by Lives

“The people of the Land of Snow [a traditional term for Tibet] share a common goal of bringing His Holiness the Dalai Lama back to an independent Tibet. But when His Holiness opted for autonomy for Tibet through nonviolent struggle, the six million Tibetans accepted his wishes. However, the Chinese government has not supported his proposal. Moreover, Tibetans who are concerned about the welfare of the people are subjected to arbitrary arrests and beatings.

Tibetans who refuse to denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama or accept China's rule on Tibet are secretly killed or made to disappear.

"Since China is uninterested in the well being of the Tibetan people, we are sharpening our nonviolent movement. We are declaring the reality of Tibet by burning our own bodies to call for freedom of Tibet. Higher beings, please see Tibet. Mother earth, extend compassion to Tibet. Just world, uphold the truth.

"The pure Land of Snow is now tainted with red blood, where military crackdowns are ceaseless. We as sons and daughters of the Land of Snow will win the battle. We will win the battle through truth, by shooting the arrows of our lives, by using the bow of our mind. Dear brothers and sisters of the Land of Snow, please unite together and prioritize the well being of all Tibetans by putting aside personal issues. We can only enjoy equality and freedom then."

By Gudrub from Driru, March 14, 2012.

Sangay Gyatso

Date: October 6, 2012

Protest location: Tsoe (Ch: Hezuo) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 27

Occupation: Layperson

Status: Deceased

Sangay Gyatso, 27, a father of two young children, self-immolated close to Dokar Monastery in Tsoe County on October 6, 2012, and died at the scene.⁶⁰⁵ Sangay Gyatso reportedly shouted slogans calling for Tibetan freedom and for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet as he burned, according to the Tibetan media.

Later accounts of events surrounding his self-immolation report that he did not tell his immediate family of his intention to set himself on fire; the night before he did so, he and his wife, Dolkar Kyi, reportedly talked late into the night about family matters. On the morning of his self-immolation, Sangay Gyatso put on traditional Tibetan clothes and left the family home with an empty gasoline can, saying he was going to help a friend who had broken down nearby.⁶⁰⁶

Graphic images sent into exile purportedly show Sangay Gyatso's body almost completely charred, with flames still rising from the ground beside him and from his side.⁶⁰⁷ ICT did not observe any reports of Sangay Gyatso's self-immolation in the Chinese media.

Local people reportedly took Sangay Gyatso's remains back to his home in Dzeruwa Village, around a mile from Dokar Monastery, which is itself around six miles from the center of Tsoe (Chinese: Hezuo) town, Kanlho (Chinese: Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture), Gansu.⁶⁰⁸ Paramilitary police arrived at the village and at Dokar Monastery in heavy numbers, although none of the reports at the time indicated that police attempted to confiscate Sangay Gyatso's remains or otherwise halt prayer services held for him by his family in his village. Large numbers of people from surrounding villages traveled to Dzeruwa Village to participate in the prayer ceremonies.

According to Radio Free Asia, police interrogated all of the monks at Dokar Monastery in the immediate wake of Sangay Gyatso's self-immolation. An RFA source said, "Many elders from the Tibetan community arrived at the monastery and appealed to the authorities not to blame the monastery and [said] that the monks had nothing to do with the self-immolation." RFA noted that police had kept the monastery under close surveillance since the Tibet-wide protests of 2008, when monks from the monastery as well as numerous lay-people participate in large protests in Tsoe County Town.⁶⁰⁹

A total of four monks from Dokar Monastery were later detained, supposedly for their role in tending to Sangay Gyatso's remains, and for taking and distributing photographs of him. On October 17, 2012, a "huge contingent" of paramilitary police arrived at the monastery and took away Jigme Gyatso, the monastery's cashier, Kalsang Gyatso, the accountant, and another monk called Kunchok Gyatso, while a fourth monk, Tashi Gyatso had been detained a few days previously, according to a source in touch with RFA.⁶¹⁰

The Chinese authorities later offered Sangay Gyatso's wife, Dorjee Kyi, one million RMB (US \$158,599) if she signed a document stating that her husband had committed suicide following a family dispute; however, she refused, according to a source in touch with RFA.⁶¹¹

Sangay Gyatso is survived by his two children, his wife, Dorjee Kyi, and his parents Gompo Dhondrup and Gompo Tso.⁶¹²

Tamdin Dorjee

Date: October 13, 2012

Protest location: Tsoe (Ch: Hezuo) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 54

Occupation: Layperson

Status: Deceased

The grandfather of a prominent young Tibetan reincarnate lama died after setting fire to himself near a monastery in Kanlho (Chinese: Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture) in Gansu Province (the Tibetan area of Amdo) on October 13, 2012. Tibetans gathered to pray for him despite an intense military buildup in the area following the self-immolation.

Tamdin Dorje, who was in his early fifties, was from Drong che village in Khasag township in Kanlho. He was a father of three and the maternal grandfather of the 10 year old boy who is recognised as one of the most important lamas in historic Labrang Tashikyil (Chinese: Xiahe) monastery, Gungthang Rinpoche.

Tamdin Dorje set fire to himself in the same place as mother of two Dolkar Tso, who self-immolated on August 7, near a white stupa beside Tsoe Gaden Choeling monastery in Kanlho.

Images from the area show dozens of people gathered in prayer around the spot where he died, his smoldering remains just visible among a group of people.⁶¹³ Other images show a car surrounded by people as it carries Tamdin Dorjee's remains back to his village, while other images show a heavy and intimidating paramilitary police presence; plain-clothed police also reportedly flooded the area, and telephone links out of Tamdin Dorjee's village were reportedly cut even before his funeral procession had got there.⁶¹⁴

Tamdin Dorje's self-immolation is likely to have caused particular alarm among local officials due to his connection to the officially installed 7th Gungthang Rinpoche. The boy lama's predecessor, the 6th Gungthang Rinpoche Jigme Tenpe Wangchug (1926-2000) was a highly influential lama known as a great and popular scholar in Amdo. He was imprisoned in 1958 during the period of 'Democratic Reform' by the Communist authorities and following his release in 1979, was very active as a leader of the religious revival in eastern Tibet, and the reconstruction of his home monastery, Labrang. His teachings of the Kalachakra religious empowerment in the 1990s drew tens of thousands of Tibetans.

Four years after the 6th Gungthang Rinpoche's death in 2000, his reincarnation was announced by the Chinese news agency Xinhua following the involvement of respected Tibetan lama, the 6th Jamyang Zhepa. The Chinese Communist Party, which promotes atheism, has imposed regulations on controlling the selection, installation and education of reincarnate lamas, and seeks to control and co-opt the 7th Gungthang Rinpoche. ⁶¹⁵

ICT did not observe any reports of Tamdin Dorjee's self-immolation in the Chinese media. Tamdin Dorje is survived by his wife and three adult children.

Lhamo Kyab

Date: October 20, 2012

Protest location: Close to Bora Monastery in Sangchu (Ch: Xiahe) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 27

Status: Deceased

Lhamo Kyab, a married 27-year old father of two, self-immolated at around 2:00 p.m. on October 20, 2012 close to Bora Monastery in Sangchu County. ⁶¹⁶ According to eye witness accounts obtained by Radio Free Asia, Lhamo Kyab shouted slogans calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet while he was on flames, and was immediately approached by plain-clothed police officers who were pretending to be pilgrims and circumambulating the monastery. Amidst the confusion, Lhamo Kyab then ran towards the officers causing them to flee; a local Tibetan tried to put his shirt over Lhamo Kyab to put out the flames, but he was beaten back by the intense heat. Lhamo Kyab then turned and walked back towards the monastery before collapsing. He died soon afterwards. ⁶¹⁷

According to a Tibetan in exile, Lhamo Kyab mentioned the Communist Party Congress in Beijing, to be held on November 8, 2012, in what appears to be his last words to a friend. This appears to indicate that Lhamo Kyab may have wanted a connection to be made between his self-immolation and the upcoming change of leadership in Beijing. In the conversation, Lhamo Kyab asked his friend whether he could pick him up on the day he later self-immolated. The friend said it would not be possible as he didn't have his motorbike, and asked why he needed a lift – knowing that Lhamo Kyab had a motorbike. Lhamo Kyab said that it was nothing important, but that "maybe you will hear something later." Lhamo Kyab went onto ask his friend about the date of the 18th Party Congress. When his friend did not know the exact date, Lhamo Kyab said: "The Chinese government are not allowing us to be in peace and happy."

According to the same Tibetan source, Lhamo Kyab's family had no idea of his plans, and did not notice additional containers of petrol on his motorbike when he left that day. Local Tibetans converged on the site of Lhamo Kyab's self-immolation and took his remains to Bora Monastery, where a prayer service was held for him. His remains were then taken back to his village despite the sudden appearance of a large and intimidating paramilitary presence.⁶¹⁸ Around 100 people went to Lhamo Kyab's home despite attempts by police and officials to stop them, and the family was warned not to accept offerings from people.⁶¹⁹

Monks from Bora Monastery were involved in a peaceful protest some seven months before Lhamo Kyab's self-immolation, leading to the detention of around 40 monks, and the situation has continued to be tense in the area. On March 20, 2012, around 100 monks from the monastery marched to the township government offices carrying banned portraits of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan flags, and shouting slogans calling for religious freedom, human rights, and the protection of the Tibetan language. The monastery was raided by police that night, when the 40 monks were detained; however, the next day the remaining monks at the monastery again protested demanding their release. The authorities relented, but demanded that the monks submit all portraits of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan flags. Unusually, Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, reported the demonstration, although it referred to it as a "parade" and made no mention of the monks' demands, claiming only that they were persuaded to return to the monastery.⁶²⁰

ICT did not monitor any reports of Lhamo Kyab's self-immolation in the Chinese media. Lhamo Kyab is survived by his wife, Dorjee Kyi, and two daughters, Pema Tso and Drukmo Tso, both under the age of ten, according to a source in contact with RFA.

Dhondup

Date: October 22, 2012

Protest location: Near the entrance of Labrang Tashikyil Monastery, Sangchu (Ch: Xiahe) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Age: 63

Status: Deceased

Dhondup, a local man in his early 60s, self-immolated at around 9:30 a.m. next to a temple called Serkhang (meaning golden house or temple) within Labrang Tashikyil Monastery in Sangchu County. Dhondup died at the scene.⁶²¹

Images circulated online soon after Dhondup's self-immolation show his burning body, probably when he is already dead, and an image of a khatag – a ceremonial scarf presented as a blessing in Tibet – placed at the spot where he died.⁶²²

Before his death, Dhondup had often talked to young people, and expressed the view that if Tibetans need to self-immolate, then it should be the older generation who does so, not the young. A Tibetan who is from Labrang and is now living in exile said: “He used to say that we had a very difficult life under the Chinese authorities, saying that the Chinese torture us and look down on us. He said to young people that their lives were really important to Tibet’s future.”⁶²³

The images show that Dhondup self-immolated close to a circumambulation route within Labrang Tashikyil Monastery; Radio Free Asia reported a source claiming that many Tibetans were walking around the route at the time, and that services were being held in the temple next to where Dhondup self-immolated.⁶²⁴

Police then arrived at the scene, apparently after Dhondup had died, and took away his remains despite the protestations of monks from the monastery, according to some sources.⁶²⁵ Other sources suggest that monks and monastery officials managed to persuade police to leave Dhondup’s remains at the monastery.⁶²⁶ Later reports indicated police had indeed taken Dhondup’s remains away, but then fearing large-scale protests, returned them to his family.⁶²⁷

Monks attempted to hold a prayer service at the spot where Dhondup self-immolated and died, but police, monastery management officials and local government officials dispersed them. However, locals continued to gather at the scene and leave khatags. ICT did not observe any reports of Dhondup’s self-immolation in the Chinese media.

Labrang Tashikyil Monastery is one of the great monasteries in the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, and one of the most important centers of Tibetan religious culture in Tibet.

It has also been the scene of several major protests since the Tibet-wide protests of March 2008 in particular, including a protest on April 9, 2008, when a group of 15 monks staged a bold protest in front of a group of foreign journalists, dramatically undermining the Chinese authorities’ assertions to the foreign journalists that human rights concerns in Tibet were unfounded.⁶²⁸

Labrang Tashikyil Monastery is also the seat of the ten-year old 7th Gungthung Rinpoche – an important lineage in the Amdo area – whose maternal grandfather Tamdin Dorjee self-immolated and died on October 13, 2012, a week before Dhondup’s self-immolation and death.

Dhondup was from a farming and nomadic family from a village in Denme Township in Sangchu County. When he married he moved to Gyoegya Township, and the couple had an adopted son.⁶²⁹

Dorje Rinchen

Date: October 23, 2012

Protest location: Labrang, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province in the Tibetan region of Amdo

Occupation: Farmer

Age: 58

Status: Deceased

Dorje Rinchen, 58, self-immolated at around 3:30 p.m. on October 23, 2012 in Sangchu County Town – close to Labrang Tashikyil Monastery – and ran along the main street of the town while on flames. A dramatic set of still images that circulated online soon after his self-immolation show Dorje Rinchen enveloped in flames as he runs forward, then collapsed on the ground. ⁶³⁰

Dorje Rinchen self-immolated near the military camp and in front of the Gyugya market on the main street of Labrang. Paramilitary police arrived at the scene almost immediately. A remarkable set of images from Labrang depict the attempts by the armed police to retrieve his body from local people who were trying to protect him. Some of the images depict a crowd of people gathered around Dorje Rinchen's remains still smoldering on the ground, while at least a dozen paramilitary officers in full riot gear gather close to the crowd, then press in to try and retrieve Dorje Rinchen's remains. ⁶³¹

The crowd of people managed to take Dorje Rinchen's remains back to his home, around two kilometers east of Labrang Monastery. Monks from Labrang Monastery tried to reach Dorje Rinchen's home to preside over the prayer ceremonies for him, but they were stopped by police, according to a source in touch with Radio Free Asia. The monks then conducted their prayers standing by the side of the road as a form of protest, according to the same source. ⁶³²

According to a different source in touch with RFA, "Dorje Rinchen got up very early [that] morning and went to pray at Labrang Monastery. He walked around the monastery several times, and walked three times between the monastery and his home. After that, he cleaned his house inside and out and then went to the Chinese police station, where he self-immolated and died." ⁶³³

Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, confirmed Dorje Rinchen's self-immolation and death in a short English-language report, in which "a provincial government source" was cited. The report did not name Dorje Rinchen, nor attempt to report what his motives may have been, and concluded, "The local government is handling the incident." ⁶³⁴ ICT did not observe the report on any of Xinhua's Chinese- or Tibetan-language sites.

Dorje Rinchen reportedly sold bread for a living in Labrang Monastery. He is survived by a wife, Luthar Tso, and a son, Tabo.

Tibetan self-immolations in exile

The first self-immolation in Tibetan society took place in exile in Delhi, India, on April 27, 1998, when Thubten Ngodrup set himself on fire as a Tibetan Youth Congress hunger strike was broken up by Indian police. A shocking video of his self-immolation caused great distress among Tibetans in exile, and a statue stands in his memory by the Dalai Lama's temple in Dharamsala, India. Thubten Ngodrup died in hospital in Delhi.

Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu described the scene in an article written in 1998: "We see him charging out to the area before the hunger-strikers tent, causing chaos in the ranks of the police as well as the Tibetans there. A very English female voice — off camera — screams 'Oh my God, oh my God' again and again. With that and other screams and shouts, it is impossible to hear what the burning man is saying. According to someone there he shouted 'Bod Gyal lo' or 'Victory to Tibet.' Others heard him crying 'Bod Rangzen,' or 'Independence for Tibet.' He also shouted 'Long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama.' How on earth he managed to shout anything, much less run about as he did is a mystery to me. Every breath he took must have caused live flames to rush into his lungs and sear the air sacs and lining.

"The burning man then appears to pause and hold up both hands together in the position of prayer. At this point the fire seems terribly intense and the cameraman later remarked that he could distinctly hear popping sounds as bits of flesh burst from Thupten Ngodup's body. The cameraman was so shaken he found it difficult to hold his camera steady. Then policemen and Tibetans beat at the flames with rugs and sacks, and finally pushing Thupten Ngodup to the ground, stifled the blaze." ⁶³⁵

Also in exile in Delhi, a 25-year old Tibetan man called Sherab Tsedor set himself on fire in protest outside the Chinese embassy on November 4, 2011. ⁶³⁶ In the first such incident in Kathmandu, Nepal, a Tibetan monk called Bhutuk set himself on fire on November 10, 2011. ⁶³⁷ Both men survived. On March 26, 2012, Jampa Yeshe, 27, set himself alight on in New Delhi amidst several hundred protestors representing numerous causes who had gathered to mark an up-coming international summit which was to be attended by Chinese President Hu Jintao. Jampa Yeshe died in hospital.

Sherab Tsedor

On November 4, 2011, Sherap Tsedor, 25, reportedly stepped from a public bus outside the Chinese embassy in New Delhi, poured fuel over himself and started shouting slogans against the Chinese presence in Tibet after setting himself alight. Police on the scene intervened immediately and managed to put out the flames before they could take hold, leaving Sherap Tsedor with only minor burns on his legs and waist. ⁶³⁸

In a statement later given to The Guardian newspaper, Sherab Tsedor, who was born in India, said that police at the embassy recognized him from numerous previous Tibetan protests at the embassy, and started running towards him as soon as he stepped from the bus.

He told The Guardian: "I don't remember any pain at all – not until I got to hospital. While the flames were there, I was just thinking, 'Freedom for Tibet.' I had these three words in my mind all the time the policemen were around me with a blanket and a fire extinguisher. I was shouting at them as they took me to hospital." ⁶³⁹

He concluded: "For me, it was a failure because I'm still alive... I would be ready to do it again. That is how strongly I feel about the situation there in Tibet." ⁶⁴⁰

Bhutok

On November 10, 2011, a Tibetan monk – later revealed to be named Bhutok – reportedly wrapped a Tibetan flag around himself, doused himself in kerosene while shouting slogans calling for a free Tibet, then set himself alight at the Boudhanath Buddhist stupa (a reliquary) in central Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal and home to a large community of Tibetans. Buddhist pilgrims at the stupa managed to quickly put out the flames.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, nothing was publicly known about Bhutok – not even his name or his age, and no photographs of him were made available. The Nepalese police reportedly didn't arrive on the scene for a considerable time after the event, and then launched an extensive manhunt amid a security crackdown in the city. ⁶⁴¹

Tibetans live a precarious existence in Nepal, particularly in Kathmandu, where the Nepalese authorities are under intense pressure from the Chinese government to curb Tibetan nationalist activities. It appears that after Bhutok's self-immolation, there may have been a considerable effort within the Tibetan community to hide Bhutok's identity and whereabouts to allow him to evade arrest. Bhutok is originally from Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) in Sichuan Province, the Tibetan region of Kham, and had he been detained in Nepal there were fears that he may have been deported back into Chinese custody.

A week or so after his self-immolation, reports emerged that Bhutok had managed to leave Nepal and travel to Dharamsala, India, where he was receiving medical treatment for the 15-20% burns he suffered during his self-immolation. He told Phayul, the exile Tibetan news service based in Dharamsala that he was initially treated in a private home, before being taken to the Nepalese border with India in West Bengal, before taking a train to Dharamsala. He reportedly told Phayul that he plans to continue his activism for Tibet: "I am determined to give my life for Tibet with the hope that my sacrifice will help the Tibetan cause." ⁶⁴²

Jampa Yeshe

Jampa Yeshe, 27, set himself alight on March 26, 2012 in New Delhi amidst several hundred protestors representing numerous causes who had gathered to mark an up-coming international summit which was to be attended by Chinese President Hu Jintao. Extraordinary images of Jampa Yeshe's self-immolation showed him running with flames enveloping his entire body and his face contorted with pain and the effort of shouting slogans. He was reportedly on flames for almost two minutes before falling to the ground, when other protestors gathered at the scene put the flames out and he was taken to hospital. ⁶⁴³

Jampa Yeshe, who is from Kardze in eastern Tibet (Kham), and who had been in India since 2006, died in hospital on March 28, 2012.

Jampa Yeshe's funeral was held in Dharamsala on March 30, 2012, and was attended by thousands of people including most of the senior members of the Central Tibetan Administration. ⁶⁴⁴

Jampa Yeshe left a hand-written testimony in his room in New Delhi before self immolating. The translation below was prepared by the Central Tibetan Administration. ⁶⁴⁵

"1. Long Live His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who is the shining example of world peace. We must strive to ensure [the] return of His Holiness to Tibet. I pray and believe that the Tibetan people in and outside Tibet will be united and sing the Tibetan national anthem in front of the Potala Palace.

2. My fellow Tibetans, when we think about our future happiness and path, we need loyalty. It is the life-soul of a people. It is the spirit to find truth. It is the guide leading to happiness. My fellow Tibetans, if you want equality and happiness as the rest of the world, you must hold onto this word 'LOYALTY' towards your country. Loyalty is the wisdom to know truth from falsehood. You must work hard in all your endeavours, big or small.

3. Freedom is the basis of happiness for all living beings. Without freedom, six million Tibetans are like a butter lamp in the wind, without direction. My fellow Tibetans from three Provinces, it is clear to us all that if we unitedly put our strength together, there will be result. So, don't be disheartened.

4. What I want to convey here is the concern of the six million Tibetans. At a time when we are making our final move toward our goal – if you have money, it is the time to spend it; if you are educated it is the time to produce results; if you have control over your life, I think the day has come to sacrifice your life.

The fact that Tibetan people are setting themselves on fire in this 21st century is to let the world know about their suffering, and to tell the world about the denial of basic human rights. If you have any empathy, stand up for the Tibetan people.

5. We demand freedom to practice our religion and culture. We demand freedom to use our language. We demand the same right as other people living elsewhere in the world. People of the world, stand up for Tibet. Tibet belongs to Tibetans. Victory to Tibet!"

Jampa Yeshe was from Tawu (Ch: Daofu) County in Kardze (Ch: Ganzi) Prefecture, the same area where Tsewang Norbu had self-immolated on August 15, 2011, and Palden Choetso on November 3, 2011. Jampa Yeshe fled Tibet for India in 2006.

Jampa Yeshe's story was told in detail in a National Geographic article by Jeff Barthelet published November 30, 2012 (<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2012/12/121130-tibet-burning-protest-china-world/>). In the article, Jeff Barthelet writes: "A neighbor later told the monk that he was with Jashi's [Jampal Yeshe's] mother a few days after her son's immolation. She was cooking on a traditional stove, stoked with firewood, and accidentally touched the hot surface, burning her finger. She sobbed and through her tears muttered, "Imagine how much pain my son felt."

In the same article, Lodi Gyaltsen Gyari, Executive Chairman of the Board of Directors of the International Campaign for Tibet and formerly the lead negotiator for the most recent rounds of dialogue between the Dalai Lama's envoys and the Chinese authorities, is cited as saying: "The only reason the Tibetans are so committed to nonviolence is purely because of the influence of the Dalai Lama. [...] I have also told the Chinese this. It's a very thin line. One day, somebody may say, 'I've had enough, it's meaningless for me, but I'm not going to go alone ... I'm going to take a couple of Chinese guys with me.' That can happen any day."

“People living under the gun”: Self-immolations in Ngaba

The wave of self-immolations that has spread across Tibet began with the young monk Tapey setting himself on fire in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, the Tibetan area of Amdo. Ngaba people are known for their strong sense of Tibetan identity and resistance to Chinese rule. The police and security crackdown in Ngaba has been particularly severe since March, 2008, when demonstrations broke out across the Tibetan plateau. In a powerful testimony to the Tom Lantos Commission for Human Rights in Washington, D.C., the head of Kirti monastery in exile, Kirti Rinpoche, drew an earlier parallel, saying that Ngaba was the first Tibetan area to encounter Maoist excesses even before the foundation of the PRC.

Kirti Rinpoche said: “Ngaba in Amdo was the first place that the People’s Republic of China attacked during its occupation of Tibet. Before the founding of PRC, in 1935 during the Long March when the Red Army marched through Ngaba, the Chinese army destroyed Lhateng Monastery, which housed over 2000 monks. They then walked through Muge Gonchen during which many monks and civilians were either killed or wounded. The army convened a meeting in Muge Monastery and later confiscated valuables and grains from Gyarong Choktse, Kyomkyo, Japhuk and Datsang Monastery, which led to the first-ever famine in Tibet. This was the first time that Tibetans in this region survived by eating leaves of trees.”

On March 16, 2008, 18 people were killed after the protests in Ngaba, involving many monks from Kirti, neighboring monasteries and laypeople. The protests involved calls for a free Tibet, and pictures of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan flags were on display. Armed police opened fire on the demonstrators, and among the dead was a 16-year old Tibetan school girl, Lhundup Tso.⁶⁴⁶ It was on the anniversary of this protest, on March 16, 2011, that Kirti monk Phuntsog set fire to himself and died on ‘Heroes Road,’ the intersection between the secular and monastic community in Ngaba.

Kirti monastery is one of the largest in Tibet with a population of over 2500, and many branch monasteries in the region. Many Ngaba people, including monks, have come into exile in India over the years and established large monastic institutes there.

In May, 2008, Kirti monks wrote to their counterparts in exile in India, saying that the suppression in the area was “too much for our hearts to hear about, and too much for our eyes to witness.” In the letter, which was dictated to monks in exile in India, the Kirti monks said: “Since March 10, in all places covering the three main regions of Tibet, Tibetans protested against the Chinese authorities. The Chinese Communist Party sent in personnel in an organized fashion, and marked every Tibetan, especially monks, as criminals.

Bloody killings and beatings that were completely inhuman took place – too much for our hearts to hear about, and too much for our eyes to witness. Innocent Tibetans were labeled as criminals in the minds of the Chinese, with whom we have shared thousands of years of history as neighbors. But because of these negative views, Tibetans, especially monks, are treated more like enemies by ordinary Chinese people. But from our side, we are making it clear that we are not protesting against ordinary Chinese people but against the policies of the Chinese government towards Tibet.”⁶⁴⁷

The following three testimonies from Ngaba give insights from a historical, political and personal perspective of the unfolding situation in the area today.

Kanyag Tsering; bearing witness from exile

“Following months and years of living under the crackdown, the monks seem to have lost any fear, and are determined in hoping for some improvement in the situation”

Kanyag Tsering, Kirti monk in exile

In addition to his monastic studies, Kanyag Tsering, a Kirti monk based in Kirti monastery in exile, monitors the ongoing situation in Tibet together with another monk colleague, Lobsang Yeshe. He gave the following account of his experience in doing so to ICT in June, 2012:

“I arrived in Dharamsala, India at the end of January 1999. I don’t remember the exact date. From that day I joined Kirti monastery in exile and pursued a Tibetan education up until 2008. Since then, my studies have suffered, and for the last four years this work [monitoring the situation in Tibet] has been my main occupation. I am 30 years old. My family name is Kanyag Tsering. For the last four years since the great 2008 uprising, taking on the role of a spokesman for the people of my homeland, I have experienced nothing but misery. Sometimes I sit crying when I hear the news of what is happening and sometimes in the morning when my telephone rings my stomach clenches with dread.

“The number of people, both those associated with us and not, arrested, detained and sentenced for making phone calls outside was not small, but so far Tibetans inside and outside are not able to forsake this means of communication. Ngaba people for example will not have internet access in the forthcoming period, newsworthy images and footage are rare, and the few there are were not sent directly. SMS messaging is also very heavily restricted.

“In terms of the atmosphere at my former monastery in Tibet, the reeducation campaign started at Kirti monastery from March 20, 2011 and went on until the end of August. After that it stopped and is not being conducted daily.

“From January 25 to February 8, 2012 the great prayer festival (Monlam Chenmo) was held at the monastery, and during that time about 400 police disguised as government officials were staying in the monastery. Since then the security clampdown was tightened still further and Ngaba people were arbitrarily searched, questioned and harassed wherever they went or wherever they stayed. Then from the early morning of February 8, 2012, not just in Ngaba county town but on all the roads leading into town people were stopped, searched and questioned one by one, the streets were filled with army, police and special police, and local people were unable to move around. It was the last day of Monlam, and they acted like they were ready to crack down on the public coming to visit the monastery for the occasion.

“Likewise at Gomang monastery in upper Ngaba, at Andu monastery, upper and lower and at Se monastery of the Jonang sect, Monlam Chenmo was also being celebrated, and on those days there was strict security clampdown in all ways and monks and lay devotees were subject to significant harassment.

“We do not know how many Kirti monks left the monastery since the re-education and crackdown began. It seems like many people, monks especially, have left their places in the course of the present troubles. But as far as we understand, while it has not been possible to enter Ngaba from other areas, there does not seem to have been any problem leaving. The authorities have told many of the significant monks at Kirti that they have to go elsewhere, but in reaction the monks are unwilling to go, and even determined to stay out of solidarity. In addition following months and years of living under the crackdown, the monks seem to have lost any fear, and are determined in hoping for some improvement in the situation.

“I am very concerned that if current policies on all of the above continue unchanged, there will be a rise in self-immolation protest and in the Chinese government’s crackdown. It is even more worrying to think of things getting worse, like a possible massacre. It is clear that Tibetans are set on confrontation and are not minded to pull back or give in. Recently someone from Tibet told me ‘Even if all the Tibetans in Ngaba have to set themselves on fire, or be killed, we will have no regret.’

“There is no guessing the commitment and determination of the young generation to make sacrifices for the cause of Tibet.

“There have been 13 from Ngaba [at the time of the interview], starting with Tapey and up to the unknown person who protested today. I hope he will be the last. I do not know any of them personally. I have been in exile in India for 13 years now. Most of them were children at the time I left. Tapey was 17 at that time, but I do not remember him.

“I imagine they all had different ways of reaching such a courageous and resolute position, but all had the same causes leading them to make the highest sacrifice, which is that someone brought up in Ngaba for the first 20 years of their life must endure the most unbearable injustice and discriminatory cruelty and oppression day after day, month after month and year after year, until in the end they make this choice.

“Two Kirti monks were recently released from prison. One is called Khedrup. At the time of his arrest he was in perfect health, but when he returned to the monastery he needed two people with him to help him walk. He is half paralyzed. At the age of 38. And he was a good student. The other monk is called Jigme. He was also in perfect health. Now he has lost his mind. He is 31. They have now both returned to the monastery. Many such things have happened and are still happening. According to the Chinese government they never happened, and they will even use their power to have us tell you people that they never happened. But it is important for everyone to realise that there are limits even to their power.”

The people of Ngaba are having their hearts torn out: reflections on the origins of the present crisis

This essay was written by an exile Tibetan from Ngaba in 2011, when the self-immolations began to increase in frequency, and passed onto ICT by Kirti monks in exile. It was translated into English by Matthew Akester.

“The Chinese government has until now presented Tibet’s history and current situation in accord with its own political viewpoint and interests, but because history is on their side, 21st century Tibetans unquestionably see the suffering of Tibetans under Chinese rule in terms of the historic injustice. It is because of the current worsening of popular misery inside Tibet that these facts [of history] can no longer be ignored. [...] What China’s leaders have to understand is that ethnic allegiance is a natural and unstoppable force, and ultimately people are loyal to their own kind and their own forebears. The more it is repressed, the stronger it becomes.

“In recent years, there have been continuing outbreaks of overt and desperate protest in the Ngaba region of lower eastern Tibet, and especially, many suicides. Two self-immolation protests, one after another, made international headlines. But the long history and social causes that gave rise to this situation are more serious and complex than [is immediately apparent].

“The present situation is not, as the Chinese government maintains, trouble stirred up by a small number of people, nor is it orchestrated from the outside. Quite the opposite; it is the product of a long history and of major problems in society, and the causes of those problems issue from the totally wrongheaded baiting [of the people by the state] and inhumane exercise of power.

“The Chinese government has until now presented Tibet’s history and current situation in accord with its own political viewpoint and interests, but because history is on their side, 21st century Tibetans unquestionably see the suffering of Tibetans under Chinese rule in terms of the historic injustice. It is because of the current worsening of popular misery inside Tibet that these facts [of history] can no longer be ignored.

“It’s not that I’m seeking glory for a particular locality by harping on its achievements, but my native land, Amdo Ngaba, is now under tighter restriction than other regions, and its suffering more intense. At a time like this, when they are trivialising big issues and blowing small ones out of proportion, covering up the evident hardships suffered by local people, I want to recall some historical facts that cast light on certain issues.

“Until the 7th century, the Ngaba region was controlled by the Asha and Minyak people. These were two of the four or six great clans of Tibet in antiquity, not separate peoples, so it is clear that this land has been owned by the forefathers of the Tibetan people for well over a thousand years.

“In the time of the emperors, Ngaba was colonised by Tibetan troops from the western regions of the plateau and became a military area. According to some, the territory was named ‘Ngaba’ after the unit who used to beat the war drums [‘Nga’ means drum], but at any rate, the region became a battlefield in the wars between Tibet and Tang China at that time.

“During [what is known as] the ‘era of fragmentation’ after the fall of the empire, it came under the control of rulers such as the kings of Tsongka, who were descendants of the imperial line, Gesar of Ling, and so on.⁶⁴⁸ During the period of Mongol domination of Asia, there are many stories of the Mar and the six divisions of Ngaba resisting outside domination with the power of spells and the force of arms.

“In the age when Tibet was ruled by the Sakya, Pakmodrupa, Rinpungpa and Tsangpa houses, religious and political dignitaries scrambled for the certificates and titles conferred by Chinese and Mongol rulers, but in Amdo in general, and Ngaba in particular, the practice of accepting titles was not widespread. Rather, many communities participated in a social order with religious foundations, in which community leaders deferred to the monasteries, and monastery heads deferred to the centre [the Ganden Potrang government of old Tibet and the great monasteries in Lhasa].

“Since that time, there have been over 200 rulers, or leaders of various kinds, in the region currently designated ‘Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture,’ and the majority of them ruled independently. There was a great deal of interaction between Tibetan leaders, so not only was it extremely rare for them to seek the protection of external forces to resolve internal differences, but Chinese and Muslims entering their territory were subject to their taxes and laws.

“In the Ganden Potrang era too, there was the historic war between the Manchu state and Gyalrong, a region with close geographic, ethnic and religio-political ties to Ngaba, and during the great Gorkha-Tibet war of the 18th century, many local militias from upper Gyalrong and lower Ngaba went to fight. This is recalled in a celebratory verse including the following lyrics: ‘The Gorkha troops, like a hawk hovering over a rabbit or a wolf pouncing on a sheep/driven back by their righteous power, heroic troops of Gyalrong...’

“The oral tradition of lower Ngaba still remembers how many of their communities were depleted by that war effort. Such is the history of our forebears, defending the borders from east to west and west to east.

“During the Ganden Potrang era the region was under the rule of the kings and ministers of the 18 Gyalrong principalities, descendants of the Tibetan emperors and military tradition, the Me’u Gyalpo kings of Ngaba, Achong Khang-gen and other chieftains. At that time, it was self-governing in political terms, and in religious terms had enduring links with the ‘three great seats’ of central Tibet, the Dalai and Panchen Lamas and the Gelugpa [Yellow Hat] school [of Tibetan Buddhism]. [...]

“However, in 1935-36 some parts of Amdo were visited by the ‘Long March’ of the Red Army, there were serious confrontations between Ngaba people and the Chinese soldiers, and the monastery and many laypeoples’ dwellings were burned down. ⁶⁴⁹ “There was a major attack on cultural and material property, and they say that the smoke from burning large stores of grain filled Ngaba for months.

“During the 1950s, the Chinese Communists built up a military presence in Ngaba in the name of ‘Resisting the Guomindang [Nationalists],’ ‘Democratic Reform’ and ‘Bringing development for the local population,’ and made many new fortifications, so that it became [like today] a battlefield between Chinese and Tibetans.

“The 17 Point agreement between the two countries was signed in 1951.⁶⁵⁰ Then from 1955 on there was unceasing conflict between Chinese and Tibetans, such that murder and bloodshed was rife in every locality. The loss of thousands of Tibetan lives in routine assassination, massacre of communities, imprisonment and torture is something that community elders clearly recall even today.

“During 1958 and for months and years after, as in most of Tibet and China, the death caused by unprecedented famine was something like the ‘black plague’ of medieval Europe. This ‘black plague’ in Chinese-ruled Tibet was a politically induced epidemic, and those affected were the present population, our parents’ generation.

“In the mid-1960s, China descended into the chaos of the ‘Cultural Revolution,’ there were many internal feuds within China, and at the time incidents of cannon-firing around the airfield injured thousands of people in Chengdu [the capital of Sichuan province], the Ngaba people staged a major uprising to free themselves from the extreme hardships they were suffering. [...]

“It started with a demonstration by ten thousand people in Ngaba county on March 17, 1968, and spread to seven or eight neighboring counties. As a result, over 2000 people were imprisoned in Ngaba county alone, and imprisonment and murder went on unabated for the next ten years up to 1978.

“In March 1988, following the outbreak of protest in Lhasa in September 1987,⁶⁵¹ a lot of leaflets and literature related to the Tibetan struggle were disseminated in Ngaba region, and over the next four years there were 42 incidents of raising the Tibetan national flag in Ngaba, and thousands of leaflets pasted up and distributed, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of a great many Tibetans.

“In 1998 the ‘Patriotic Religion’ reeducation campaign began in Ngaba region. Monks unable to accept their distorted version of Tibet’s history and especially to accept that a religious person can reject the object of his own devotion [i.e., the Dalai Lama] were characterised as separatists by the Chinese state, and they threatened to close down the monastery many times in that period.

“Moreover, recognising that the ‘Patriotic Religion’ [patriotic education] campaign had not been successful, they crossed all limits in obstructing the management and many of the monastery’s religious observances through reeducation and intimidation, and continually arrested and imprisoned monks both openly and covertly.

“In 2003 Kirti monastery’s Buddhist college (Nangten Loping) was forced to close. That college had over 700 young monk pupils, the biggest in that part of Tibet, and they closed it, and tried to stop under 18 year olds from joining the monastery, depriving them of educational opportunities and religious rights, along with a variety of other repressive policies.⁶⁵²

“In 2006, there were burnings of wild animal pelt garments all over Tibet, and in Ngaba, pelts worth many millions of Yuan were burnt [in response to HH Dalai Lama’s appeal to protect wildlife].⁶⁵³ In the Ngaba region many environmental activists were imprisoned, interrogated, and prosecuted. A crackdown more severe than elsewhere was visited on the Ngaba people.

“Starting on March 16, 2008, thousands of people from monasteries, schools and the lay community joined in mass peaceful protest. Many monks, students and ordinary people were killed, and thousands were arrested and imprisoned.

“On the day of that protest, 23 local people were killed,⁶⁵⁴ a more vicious crackdown than elsewhere. At that time many local people with no involvement in any incident were arrested and imprisoned, and in the way they were mistreated and tortured, the long prison sentences and heavy fines handed down and so on, the Ngaba people were subjected to a higher degree of terror and repression.

“Since that time, army bases and troop reinforcements have been boosted in Ngaba. In Ngaba they do military exercises as intimidation by both land and air. Squads of gun-toting soldiers patrol all over town in trucks bearing the banner “Salute the people of Ngaba,” provoking and intimidating the local population.

“Many teachers and learned people in the Ngaba region have been imprisoned or lost their positions after being tainted by various allegations. It is peoples’ aspirations and loyalties, in general and in particular, such as learned people who are obliged to work for the United Front or Religious Affairs departments against their will, that are the main targets of the repression.

“Similarly, with respect to the imprisonment and sentencing of many local writers who have given voice to Tibetan suffering through literature, the dismissal of government employees from households with children [at exile govt schools] in India, the prevention of Ngaba people abroad from returning home and restriction on residents from leaving, there is even tighter control than in other Tibetan areas, and Ngaba people do not even enjoy the basic rights of citizens of the ‘People’s Republic.’

“Under such conditions of prolonged and intense suffering, there have been many cases of suicide in Ngaba: for example, in March 2009, Kirti monk Kanyag Losang Jinpa and a 74 year old monk from Gomang monastery in upper Ngaba were driven to suicide, and even one of Kirti monastery’s blind monks committed suicide on April 16 after suffering harassment. In their death notes, these suicides wrote that they could not continue living under such circumstances. In 2009, when the local government was preventing the annual new year prayer festival from taking place at Kirti monastery, a monk named Tapey set himself on fire as a struggle for freedom and protest against repression. He was shot down by soldiers and police, and taken away as soon as he hit the ground, and it is still not known whether he is alive or dead. On March 16 this year [2011], Kirti monk Phuntsok set fire to himself as a way of demonstrating and commenting on the misery of living under oppression.

“Since that time, Ngaba people as a whole and especially Kirti monks have been like prisoners locked in their own monastery. Under those circumstances, many school students in Ngaba region went on hunger strike and were confined to their schools. The Kirti monks are under house arrest in their monastery, and not even given the right to go out to buy or procure food. Those laypeople who tried to resist their mass deportation to prison were treated with inhumane force; about 300 local people fingerprinted pledges of readiness to die for the struggle during that time. ⁶⁵⁵

“When 100 monks and ordinary people from Ngaba have gone missing, when they will arrest the mothers of six-month old children and separate mothers from babies, and so on, a great many people feel driven to desperation, and a situation is created in which many feel they have no option but to choose death.

“In such circumstances, Ngaba is under a kind of invisible martial law. Communication networks are closed down, roads are closed, people are prohibited from gathering, normal religious observances are suspended and so forth. The monasteries and schools have turned into prisons, Ngaba people in Beijing, Lanzhou and Chengdu are being detained or restricted, and a broad crackdown imposed on all monasteries in the region.

“In the recent period, monks from monasteries all over Ngaba county have been prevented from travelling, particularly to the county town. Once the county used to be known as ‘Monks county’, but now it has become a big prison for monks.

“One of the basic premises of human life is the will to live, yet the point of living is to be happy, so for people to choose death over life is an extreme predicament: such is the state of my land under the rule of New China, that proclaims to the outside world and inside Tibet that it is bringing ‘liberation,’ development, harmony and a new prosperity.

“What China’s Socialist leaders have to understand is that ethnic allegiance is a natural and unstoppable force, and ultimately people are loyal to their own kind and their own forebears. The more it is repressed, the stronger it becomes, and this is one of the dialectical processes in life, which history shows to be a characteristic of human psychology.

“Throughout its history, there has been a clear sense of identity in the Ngaba region, a deep ethno-national consciousness accompanied by a sharp sensibility that has developed over more than a millennium. The present situation is bound up with long term and far-reaching issues, so fundamental that Tibet’s pain has become Ngaba’s pain, and vice versa.

“With the emergence of the present crisis in Ngaba, Tibetans abroad have mounted worldwide protests, and especially HH Dalai Lama and the exile parliament have made international appeals, and the condemnations of the crackdown in Ngaba from governments and political parties in other continents, the European Union, Amnesty International, the International Campaign for Tibet and so on are not just political postures, but a clear sign of the human aspiration for freedom, peace and democracy.

“What I would say in conclusion is that it is not that there are many people who cannot bear to be in Ngaba, but that many conditions unbearable for many people are developing there, and it is not that the Ngaba people are making trouble, but that many historical troubles have made the Ngaba people, monks and laity, as they are. In short, the occurrence of suicide as protest in Ngaba is because many people there do not have a way to live. Regrettably, local Chinese authorities present this reality upside down, so that ordinary local people are the ones to blame, so it is essential for commentators familiar with the situation or not to present a detailed explanation in correct sequence.

“The ‘Patriotic’ reeducation and forceful intimidation being touted as the solution to this issue are just a return to the old patterns of confrontation and will lead only to the creation of new confrontations, rather than serving as the foundations of ‘peaceful stability’ or a ‘harmonious society.’ To have to relinquish our ethnic-national identity and culture is to relinquish the point of living for Tibetans, so the present repressive and punitive policies are literally tearing out the hearts of the Ngaba people.”

Testimony of Kirti Rinpoche, Chief Abbot of Kirti Monastery to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Washington, DC, USA, November 3, 2011

“I would like to thank the US Congress for giving me this precious opportunity to talk about the worsening human rights situation in Tibet today.

“Today at this session I would like to report that Tibet was an independent country that the Communist China occupied. It has been more than half a century since the occupation and the situation in Tibet has been deteriorating year by year. The main reason for this is the fact that the early promises made by China to help the Tibetans through the so-called Democratic Reforms have disappeared like a rainbow and instead policies to oppress the Tibetan people were carried out. The Chinese government has not brought about any positive policy changes by pretending not to know that the promises it made earlier have now totally disappeared. As a result the local party cadres carry out repressive policies such as to deny religious freedom and forceful confiscation of farm and nomadic produce. By decreeing everything that they say as laws, the legal punishment has now become a source of income, which has rendered any hope of justice worthless and consequently driven the Tibetan youth into desperation.

“Tibet is divided into so-called autonomous regions and autonomous provinces, which sounds nice and appears to have liberal political systems. But in fact let alone such tolerant system, Tibetans do not even have half rights that ordinary Chinese do. The policies framed by the Han chauvinists / ultra-nationalists have driven the Tibetan people to the end of their tether. It has become a fact that whether a Chinese is educated or not he or she is bound to become a leader. Moreover, the fact that even the few Tibetans who work for the Chinese government are not trusted indicates that there is racial discrimination. If the Chinese leaders had accepted the mutually beneficial Middle Way policy initiated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tibetans and the Chinese by now would be having the same equal relations as enjoyed during the time of Tibet’s great religious kings.

“Hu Yaobang accepted that the Han chauvinists / ultra-nationalists officials, who are the real people who engage in separatism, have kept the central government in dark by filing reports written in flowery language. At this point, I would like to report about the situation in Tibet in general and particularly the events taking place in Ngaba in Amdo, a province in North-eastern Tibet that has close personal association with me. Apart from the general suffering of the people of Ngaba Autonomous Prefecture, the people of this region have a particular wound causing excessive suffering that spans three generations. This wound is very difficult to forget or to heal.

“1. The wound of the first generation: Ngaba in Amdo was the first place that the People’s Republic of China attacked during its occupation of Tibet. Before the founding of PRC, in 1935 during the Long March when the Red Army marched through Ngaba, the Chinese army destroyed Lhateng Monastery, which housed over 2000 monks. They then walked through Muge Gonchen during which many monks and civilians were either killed or wounded. The army convened a meeting in Muge Monastery and later confiscated valuables and grains from Gyarong Choktse, Kyomkyo, Japhuk and Datsang Monastery, which led to the first-ever famine in Tibet. This was the first time that Tibetans in this region survived by eating leaves of trees.

“The king of Choktse, chief of Meu and people from many other areas fought against the occupying army but were defeated by sheer numbers of Chinese soldiers. The relatives of Aku Thapkey, the forty-fourth abbot of Ngaba Kirti Monastery and many others were shot dead. When the Red Army Chief, Zhu De, and his soldiers occupied the central prayer room of the Kirti Monastery during which they looted and destroyed images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the people realised that the Red Army members were not only against religion but they were also looters. It was during this time that Mao saw the vast Tibetan region and developed the idea about its occupation, which was done by ordering the Eighteenth Army to be sent into Tibet the year after the PRC was founded in October 1949. These events have caused a wound in the heart of Ngaba people, which is hard to heal.

“2. The wound of the second generation: In 1958 the so-called Democratic Reform was carried out in Ngaba. The Cultural Revolution began in 1966 and two years later a local Red Guards called Hung Cheng was formed in Ngaba. All these campaigns, enforced one after another, led to the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of Tibetans, torture, public struggle sessions, famine and other forms of inhuman persecutions. The king of Meu, Trinley Rapten was tortured until he committed suicide by jumping into a river. The Tulku of Jigme Samten Tsang and many others were sentenced to death. In short a policy to eliminate the entire Tibetan people was carried out. All the religious institutions were destroyed.

Even names of all the places and people in Tibetan language were changed into Chinese, thus undermining and stifling Tibetan language and culture. For over half a century, the rich natural resources around Ngaba, particularly forests, were excessively exploited, leading to landslides, floods and other natural disasters. The destruction of the natural environment is so extensive that it appears beyond repair. Thus these caused wounds in the hearts of the second generation of Tibetans growing under Chinese rule.

“3. The wound of the third generation: Since 1998, the ‘Patriotic Education’ campaign has been strongly enforced in monasteries around Ngaba. In the same year, on 27 April Thupten Ngodup, an elderly Tibetan man, set himself on fire and died in the Indian capital city of Delhi. In 2003 and again in 2008, the school with over 1200 students run and managed by Kirti Monastery in Ngaba was forcefully shut down and private schools such as Bontse School and another school near Khashe Thon operated by Tibetans were taken over by the government. However, the Chinese monasteries and Chinese people are permitted to run and operate schools.

“On 16 March 2008, when the people of Ngaba led by the monks of Kirti Monastery peacefully protested in Ngaba district, the Chinese security forces immediately cracked down against the protesters, killing 23 Tibetans. Kirti Monastery was surrounded by the Chinese forces and was cut off from the outside world, turning it into a virtual prison. Since then five military garrisons have been built up in Ngaba district. According to a recent report by New York-based Human Rights Watch, the security expenses in Ngaba is twice as much as other areas in China’s Sichuan Province. This report further states that there are now over fifty thousand armed security personnel in Ngaba area.

“Since 20 March monks of the Kirti Monastery have been divided into eight divisions and a ‘Patriotic Education’ campaign is forcefully imposed on them almost day and night. Monks’ quarters are searched, all electronic devices have been confiscated, holy scriptures are cut into pieces by knives and monks are forced to stamp on photos of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. About 100 monks were arrested en-mass, tortured and interrogated. Furthermore, the ritual instruments offered to the monastery’s protective deity were seized and the monastery was wrongly accused of possessing weapons to fight against the Chinese government and this accusation was widely propagated. Two monks from Kirti Monastery, one monk from Dongri Monastery and another monk from Gomang Monastery committed suicide in their quarter because of torture and intense fear. A 70-year-old monk from Kirti Monastery died from heart attack under this suffocating circumstances and the Kirti Monastery was barred from holding an important religious festival in the winter. Likewise an order was given to ban this year’s Tibetan New Year celebration, which was planned according to traditional Tibetan astrological calculation.

“On 27 February 2009, 27-year-old monk, Tapey, from Kirti Monastery in Ngaba set himself on fire as a protest against China’s repressive rule. The security personnel instead of putting out the fire shot him. His whereabouts remains unknown to date.

“Following the immolation incident of 20-year-old monk, Lobsang Phuntsok, on March 16, 2011, the armed security personnel have been deployed in the Kirti monastery and surrounded the monastery for the second time. All communication to the outside world was cut off for the past seven months, the situation in Kirti monastery became like a dreaded jail. Within the barricaded monastery, the monks were divided into fifty-five groups and over 800 government officials moved into the monastic compound. They carried out ‘political re-education’ and ‘patriotic education’ campaigns, which were strictly imposed on the monks. There have been cases of starvation in the monastery as well.

“Electronic surveillance apparatus such as listening devices and CCTV cameras in the monks’ quarters and watchtowers are being built in all sides of the monastery. Furthermore, unscheduled searches are being carried out in monks’ rooms at any time by smashing the windowpanes, walls and doors, and monks are randomly beaten, dogs let loose on the people and there are also cases of thieving by security personnel. Monks are threatened that the monastery would be destroyed if they did not excel in ‘Patriotic Education’ and ‘Re-education’ campaigns. In nutshell, the monks are driven to a state of utter fear and desperation.

“On the night of 21 April 2011, a large contingent of army swooped down on the monastery and arrested more than 300 monks in military trucks and were detained in an unspecified location. Since then many new rules have been imposed such as banning young boys to become monks, setting limit to the number of monks in the monastery and threatening that the survival of the monastery was in the hands of the monks.

“Thus on 15 August, Tsewang Norbu, a monk from Nyatso Monastery in Kham set himself on fire to protest against the brutal Chinese rule in Tibet.

“On 26 September by 18-year-old, Lobsang Kalsang and 19-year-old Lobsang Kunchok, both from Kirti Monastery, set themselves on fire on 3 October 3. Subsequently many others followed suit: 17-year-old Kalsang Wangchuk from Kirti Monastery on 7 October, 19-year-old Choephel and 18-year-old Khaying on 15 October, 19-year-old Norbu Damdul on 17 October, 20-year-old nun Tenzin Wangmo, from Mamae Dechen Choekhorling nunnery on 25 October and Dawa Tsering, a monk of Kardze Monastery on 26 October. These brave Tibetans set themselves on fire to protest against the China’s oppression and to bring attention to the deteriorating situation in Tibet.

“On 29 August, the Chinese authorities accused three monks from the Kirti Monastery of aiding Phuntsok, who set himself on fire. Phuntsok’s uncle, Lobsang Tsundue, 46, was sentenced for eleven years in jail on 29 August, 22-year-old Lobsang Tenzin (aka Tenzin Gyalmokha) to thirteen years on 30 August and 21-year-old Lobsang Tenzin (aka Nakten) was sentenced to ten years in jail.

“Three more monks from Kirti Monastery were sentenced: 30-year-old Tsekho and 22-year-old Lobsang Dhargyal to two and six years, respectively, on 5 September; and Dorjee to a three-year jail term. In all these case no legal or judicial procedures were followed during the trial. The decisions of the court were kept secret and only made available much later.

“Thus, from 16 March 2008 to 17 October 2011, thirty-four Tibetans have died in Ngaba region from extreme torture, execution, suicides and by setting themselves on fire and more than 619 have been detained (this does not include mass detention of 300 Kirti monks). Only 108 detainees have been put on trial. There have been over 20 writers, poets and intellectuals among the 619 who were detained.

“In brief, for the Tibetan people both in and outside Tibet, particularly those born and raised under the red banner, there is no greater expression of their desperate opposition to the Chinese government than by resorting to the most powerful method of a non-violent movement, which is by refraining from causing any harm to the Chinese people and appealing to the Chinese government, than by setting themselves on fire. The main slogans chanted were: “His Holiness the Dalai Lama must be allowed to visit Tibet. Tibet demands freedom. We want religious freedom.” Most of those who have committed self-immolation have already died. If any of them are still alive, we ardently appeal to you to please save their lives.

“During the first wave of repression in Ngaba this year, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, along with the peace-loving governments and individuals, have urged China to stop repression and start earnest negotiation with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Since the Chinese government not only refused to listen to those appeal but also continue resorting to oppression, it has been the main cause behind the wave of self-immolation protests. If repression continues, it will certainly harm the interest of both Tibet and China. If the repression and the hard line policies are stopped, it will naturally lead to peace and harmony. In fact, in order to promote harmony between Tibetans and the Chinese, I have recently proposed that I will extend my full cooperation whenever required. Upon requests from many of the people concerned, I have, time and again, approached the Chinese government for permission to visit Tibet, thinking that my visit will give me an opportunity to deliver a few words of advice and solace.

“Unfortunately, I have yet to receive any response from the Chinese government.

“The Tibetan youth are setting themselves on fire is a proof of the sufferings of the Tibetan people. They want their appeal heard by peace-loving governments and people around the world, including world leaders and human rights organizations, so that they could appeal to China to stop oppression in Tibet and also to tell that that repression cannot bring stability. In order to forge a friendly co-existence between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples and in order to create a harmonious society as advocated by Hu Jintao, the dialogue between Tibet and China must start at the earliest. We also urge you to pressure China to allow independent international delegates and the media to visit Ngaba and other Tibetan areas. Your support restores the inner strength of Tibetan people, both in and outside Tibet. As one of the spokespeople of the Tibetans, it is my duty to convey to you the aspiration of the Tibetan people, particularly those who have been directly affected by the recent events in Tibet.

“I would like to express my deep appreciation for giving me this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Tibetan people and their plight.”

An Eight-Point Petition from Qinghai

On October 5, 2012, a month in advance of the Party Congress in Beijing, an eight-point petition written by Tibetan teachers and students to the Chinese authorities was published in the Tibetan media in exile (Tibetan: <http://goo.gl/AaB7b> , Chinese: <http://goo.gl/bK7TI>). The detailed petition demonstrates an understanding of Chinese policies and approach, with the teachers and students pointing out where existing circumstances contravene legal measures. The points target many of the factors that have led to the self-immolations, including ideological pressure on Tibetans in monasteries, downgrading of the Tibetan language, and Chinese migration to Tibet.

The petition, which was published in Tibet Times, was written just over a month before Tibetan students and schoolchildren in Rebkong, Qinghai, took to the streets in a major peaceful protest on November 9, 2012, after two self-immolations in the area in two days.⁶⁵⁶ It follows a series of protests in 2010 by Tibetan school and college students in several areas of Qinghai and even Beijing over plans to change the language medium of instruction. The protests in 2010 involved thousands of Tibetan students in the Rebkong and Chabcha areas of Qinghai and several hundred Tibetan students at Minzu (Chinese: Nationality) University of China who protested to express their concern about the downgrading of the Tibetan language. The protests in Qinghai were aimed at new measures that focus on Chinese as the main language of instruction with the Tibetan language to be treated only as a language class, and with less time allocated to it in the curriculum. This reflects the Qinghai authorities' emphasis on enforcing the importance of the Chinese language for Tibetans, which strikes at the core of Tibetan fears over the survival of their identity and culture.⁶⁵⁷

The protests in 2010 were followed by the presentation of a petition to the local authorities, signed by more than 300 teachers and students from Qinghai and expressing their view that while learning Chinese is essential for students in Tibet today, the main language medium for teaching should remain Tibetan.

An ICT translation of the main points of the petition in October 2012 is below:

First, in pursuit of social harmony and ethnic equality, and to end political suppression and economic marginalization, we call upon the central government to create an environment that respects different ethnicities and does not oppress them.

Second, we call for the government to seriously consider giving Tibetan language equal status with Chinese in the Tibet Autonomous Region, and in the various Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties.

Third, in consideration for Tibetan grassroots development, which cannot just be limited to housing construction and material goods, we call for more Tibetan professionals and meritocracy in the Tibetan Departments of the different Nationality Universities, and for opening courses on Tibet's history, politics, law, economy, science, and sociology.

Fourth, we must change the policy of implementing Chinese-based teaching in Tibetan secondary schools, because this constitutes a serious case of ethnic discrimination.

Fifth, Tibetans place far greater emphasis on mental values, not material values, and therefore we request more respect, freedom, and rights for religious belief in Tibetan regions.

Sixth, stop strengthening the Party's ideological management of Tibetan monasteries, and train Tibetan cadres and officials to exercise real power.

Seventh, many Han and Hui people are immigrating to Tibet, such that Tibetans, the true masters of Tibet, are becoming a minority, which makes many Tibetans worried.

Eighth, we call for implementing laws from the central government regarding ethnic autonomy, and changing the policies of unlimited mineral exploitation and forced nomad resettlement policies which trample on traditional Tibetan culture and customs, and which fill Tibetan hearts with unbearable pain.

Recommendations

A fundamentally new approach is warranted in Tibet. The Chinese government needs to take immediate steps to address the current emergency in Tibetan areas. United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, Navi Pillay, has observed that “Social stability in Tibet will never be achieved through heavy security measures and suppression of human rights. Deep underlying issues need to be addressed.”⁶⁵⁸ Sustained international pressure has always been critical to help create the conditions for positive change inside Tibet, and is even more justified given the Chinese authorities’ attempts to seal off Tibet from international scrutiny. Governments in the international community should coordinate their efforts with other like-minded countries and explicitly call upon the Chinese government to address the policies in Tibet threatening Tibetan culture, religion and identity that are at the root cause of the current crisis. A statement issued by the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, Navi Pillay, on November 2 (2012) provides a roadmap for collaborative action on the Tibet issue and these recommendations are reflected below.

For the international community:

- As a matter of urgency, the international community should prevail upon the new Chinese leadership to re-evaluate the ‘stability maintenance’ approach as applied in Tibet, to end the military buildup and limit the dominance of the security apparatus. These are factors that have intensified the dangers in Tibet, increasing the risk of more self-immolations and future instability.
- Governments should press the Chinese authorities to acknowledge the importance of the Dalai Lama to the Tibetan people and his critical role in Tibet’s future, and engage in a broader and more substantive dialogue with Tibetan representatives.
- Individual governments should further coordinate their efforts with other like-minded countries and support each other in explicitly calling on the Chinese government to address those policies toward Tibetan areas that are the root cause of the self-immolations, and that threaten the unique culture, religion and identity of the Tibetan people. Scholars have noted that the undermining and destruction of a sophisticated religious culture based on strong moral values and the importance of compassion only risks long-term instability and potential conflict.⁶⁵⁹ Specific reference to and emphasis on Chinese policies that harm Tibetan culture, religion and identity should be included routinely in governments’ statements on the situation in Tibet, in both bilateral and multilateral contexts.⁶⁶⁰
- A new approach is also warranted on Tibet from governments worldwide. Tibet - the world’s highest and largest plateau - is of increasing geopolitical significance. It is in a strategic location in Asia, which has the world’s fastest-growing economies, fastest-rising military expenditures and fiercest competition for resources.

Tibet has the largest reserve of accessible fresh water on earth and is the source of most of Asia's major rivers, supplying water to nearly half the world's population. As such it needs to be brought back to center stage. There is a need for the international community to re-evaluate Tibet as an issue tied to Asian and global security, at the center of Asia's unfolding future.

The major donor governments, including the European Union, should maintain and, where possible, expand targeted programmatic assistance for Tibetans, including: support for Tibetan-language media; support for sustainable, culturally appropriate development assistance to Tibetan communities; educational and cultural exchange and development programs targeted to Tibetans, both in Tibet and in exile; support to stabilize the Tibetan refugee community, particularly in Nepal; and regular dialogue with authentic Tibetan representatives, including but not limited to the elected Sikyong or political head [Lobsang Sangay] of the Central Tibetan Administration and the Dalai Lama and his representatives. Donors should establish legally binding project principles to govern official development assistance carried out in Tibetan areas.

Concerned countries should specifically task their embassies and consulates to expand their outreach to Tibetan communities and monitoring of the situation in Tibet, including by maintaining a specific action officer on Tibet in the embassy's political section. Specifically, the United States should vigorously pursue its long-stated goal of establishing a consulate in Lhasa. Drawing on the U.S. initiative, the EU and others should begin negotiations with China on establishing consulates in Lhasa.

Diplomats, including representatives of multilateral organizations, and journalists should continue seeking access to all Tibetan areas until it is granted, based on the principle of reciprocity by which Chinese diplomats and journalists presently enjoy relatively open access and unrestricted travel in the countries where they are posted.

The various thematic agencies and organs of the United Nations—including the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN Development Program (UNDP), the UN Environmental Program (UNEP), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), treaty bodies for various human rights instruments, and the UN Human Rights Council and its special mechanisms—should undertake specific initiatives to address the relevant aspects of cultural and religious repression in Tibet within their mandates. The international community should press for the adoption of policies recommended by UN Special Rapporteurs, such as suspension of non-voluntary settlement of nomadic herders; a review of policies and incentives for the settlement of mainland Chinese into Tibet; independent inquiry into reported excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators in 2008, and allegations of torture and ill-treatment against those arrested and detained.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights should (i) urgently secure dates for a visit to the People's Republic of China by also ensuring adequate time to access the situation in all Tibetan areas (ii) continue to express strong concern over the deteriorating human rights situation faced by the Tibetan people in the light of more than 80 self-immolations across Tibet (iii) Support the recommendation by the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child that China allow an independent expert to visit Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama of Tibet. There are 12 outstanding requests for official visits by UN Special Rapporteurs.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) should add a new Tibet pillar to its current China-DAC Study Group to discuss with Chinese counterparts the application in Tibetan contexts of: best practices in the area of community based and participatory models of development for minorities—including issues such as minority education, language policies and cultural preservation; and international best practices in the areas of environmental preservation and restoration, grasslands management and eco-tourism.

For the Government of the People's Republic of China:

To address the core issues that have led to Tibetan self-immolations, ICT recommends that Chinese authorities should:

After engaging in immediate confidence building measures to address the current emergency in Tibetan areas, work with the designated representatives of the Dalai Lama to establish a broader and more substantive dialogue regarding the most serious current threats to Tibetan culture, including Chinese policies on religious practice and expression, education and language, in-migration by non-Tibetans, and economic development.

Acknowledge the importance of the Dalai Lama to the Tibetan people and his critical role in Tibet's future, and engage in a broader and more substantive dialogue with Tibetan representatives.

Conduct an independent assessment of existing policies, legislation and regulations that negatively impact Tibetan culture, utilizing international expertise and incorporating Tibetan participation. This review should focus on both social and economic policy, as well as the various provisions of law and policy on administration of national autonomy, grasslands management, education, and the environment.

Establish a tripartite mechanism that includes Tibetan representatives, Chinese representatives, and appropriate international experts, including representatives of inter-national (U.N.) agencies, to form working groups on best practices for: culturally and environmentally appropriate economic development;

cultural preservation; environmental preservation; bilingual and minority education; and autonomous self-government. Make the findings of this effort public, and work to adopt policies reflecting the recommendations of these working groups.

- Reassess current security policies in response to unrest or protest in Tibetan areas, and where possible permanently draw down the security presence in Tibetan areas.

- Eliminate the practice of placing police and Party cadres in monasteries and other religious institutions, and permit self-management of these institutions by appropriate religious authorities under regulations that are consistent with international standards for protection of freedom of religion.

- Work with appropriate international institutions, such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and the UN Development Program, to conduct independent, transparent environmental, human development and human rights impact assessments that meet international standards for current and planned infrastructure and major industrial projects in Tibetan areas. Make the findings public, and involve Tibetan communities in all phases of the review and remediation processes.

- Work with Tibetan communities and appropriate international bodies to develop a culturally appropriate strategic plan for implementation in Tibet of the current PRC-wide campaign to strengthen culture and expand cultural production.

As immediate targeted steps to alleviate tensions in Tibetan areas, the Chinese authorities should:

- Withdraw police and other security forces from all monasteries and nunneries; suspend plans to permanently house party cadres in monasteries and all ongoing patriotic education campaigns; and initiate local dialogues with Tibetan community and religious leaders on issues related to security, access to monasteries and the appropriate level of official intervention in religious matters.

- In Lhasa and other municipalities, scale back the present, heavily militarized security presence in favor of a more community-oriented approach that respects the basic rights of Tibetans.

- Stop rhetorical attacks and other propaganda efforts directed against the Dalai Lama; accept the Dalai Lama's offer to engage in dialogue regarding the crisis of self-immolations in Tibet; and provide opportunities for affected communities in Tibet to hear the Dalai Lama's appeal for peace and an end to the self-immolations.

- Open access to all Tibetan areas for journalists, diplomats - including special mechanisms of the U.N. - and other investigative entities that can document the current situation and assist in developing longer-term recommendations for diffusing tension, and commit to permanently reopening Tibet to foreign journalists.
- Undertake an urgent review of the cases of individuals who have been arrested in all Tibetan areas on state security charges since March 2008. Any cases where due process violations are present should be subjected to further review and rehearing as needed. Allegations of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment should be fully investigated and, if warranted, prosecuted.
- End formal or informal administrative and political barriers for Tibetans to receive travel documents, including both restrictions on internal travel for monks and current practices related to withholding or delaying the issuance of passports to Tibetans.
- Announce the suspension of State Administration for Religious Affairs' "State Order Number 5: Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism," which codifies the Chinese Communist Party's inappropriate assertion of control over the process of recognition of reincarnate lamas; and announce a moratorium on the promulgation of new legal and policy measures that repress Tibetan Buddhists' right to freedom of religious expression.
- Suspend major infrastructure projects in Tibetan areas and impose a moratorium on settlement of Tibetan nomads displaced by development or environmental protection initiatives, pending an independent assessment, including legal review, of policies that require or produce displacement or resettlement, loss of property rights or forced slaughter of livestock.
- Suspend any initiative that reduces or eliminates Tibetan language instruction in schools in Tibetan areas.
- End the targeted censorship of Tibetan writers, performers and other cultural actors, whether in print or electronic media, particularly the targeting of Tibetan vernacular cultural expression.
- Suspend any construction or development project that would result in the destruction or damage of Tibetan historic sites, including but not limited to monasteries, stupas, mani walls, and well-preserved examples of classic Tibetan architecture. Ensure that any new construction in Tibetan areas is undertaken with genuine input from Tibetans on the architectural motifs and construction techniques that are appropriate to the area.

Enforce household registration requirements that prevent non-Tibetans from changing their household registration to Tibetan autonomous areas. Suspend all programs and projects that include an element of recruitment or relocation of non-Tibetans to Tibetan autonomous areas pending further review for necessity and appropriateness of the proposed in-migration.

END NOTES

- 1 This report covers in detail the period between the first self-immolation in Tibet, Tapey on February 27, 2009, and November 22, 2012, shortly after the new leadership was installed at the Party Congress in Beijing (November 8-15). A list is updated online as the self-immolations occur at ICT's website: <http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/maps-data-fact-sheets/self-immolation-fact-sheet>.
- 2 The two-character Chinese phrase *weiwun* is an abbreviated form of the full phrase, *weihu wending*, meaning to preserve or safeguard stability.
- 3 The state media declared on February 10, 2012, that the situation in Tibet is so grave that officials must ready themselves for "a war against secessionist sabotage." (Tibet Daily.)
- 4 A phrase coined by Tibetan writer Wooser.
- 5 This report features individual stories of Tibetans who self-immolated, including details of notes they left behind, or communication with friends or family before they died whenever it has been possible to obtain this information, covering the period of February 2009 to November 15, 2012.
- 6 "China: Immolations Are Terrorism In Disguise," March 6, 2012, Sky News, see: <http://news.sky.com/home/world-news/article/16183059>
- 7 "ANALYSIS: The meaning of self-immolation in Tibet — Ajaz Ashraf," November 9, 2012, Daily Times, see: www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2012\11\09\story_9-11-2012_pg3_2
- 8 A video of the song with English subtitles can be viewed at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxFK10D7m28
- 9 Tapey survived his self-immolation, and is still alive. Little was known about his whereabouts and welfare until he was featured in a Chinese state media video in May, 2012, pictured in a hospital bed. Unofficial reports received by ICT indicated that once he was hospitalized, amputation of his limbs was considered but not carried out. He is still effectively in the custody of the authorities, apparently in the prefectural capital of Barkham (Chinese: Ma'erkang), Sichuan. See: "Monk in Tibet sets himself on fire; shot by police during protest," February 27, 2009, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/monk-tibet-sets-himself-fire-shot-police-during-protest
- 10 The image was not used by news agencies at the time, most likely because of the poor quality of the image and the fact that it emerged some days after the self-immolation itself. Edited video clips of Tapey's self-immolation was later featured in the Chinese state media broadcast which can be viewed with English subtitles at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYcVa7yp6BA&list=UUT8RMFbTJV5LaVykrluOQg&index=2&feature=plcp WARNING: This video contains scenes of self-immolation. Viewer discretion is strongly advised.
- 11 This report covers the period of February 2009 to November 21, 2012 and gives detailed case studies of more than 50 self-immolators. ICT maintains an up-to-date fact sheet on the ensuing self-immolations, available at: www.savetibet.org/resource-center/maps-data-fact-sheets/self-immolation-fact-sheet
- 12 For the period January 1, 2012 to November 21, 2012, four were former monks and one was a nun. An analysis of numbers and participants of self-immolations up until August 10, 2012 is available in a Special Report by the Congressional-Executive Commission on China entitled "Tibetan Self-Immolation: Rising Frequency, Wider Spread, Greater Diversity." The report can be downloaded at: www.cecc.gov/pages/virtualAcad/index.phpd?showsingle=180760
- 13 "Tibetan self-immolations escalate in number on eve of China's Party Congress; Tibetans gather en masse in Rebkong," November 8, 2012, ICT, see: <http://savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-self-immolations-escalate-number-eve-chinas-party-congress>
- 14 For an ICT map showing locations of self-immolations, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/map-tibetan-self-immolations
- 15 Based on ages of the self-immolators that are known, up until November 22, 2012; two are uncertain
- 16 "Tibetan farmer self-immolates in Labrang," October 23, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-farmer-self-immolates-labrang
- 17 Michael Biggs was speaking to the Associated Press, April 2, 2012. Professor Biggs' analysis is based upon a generalised definition of self-immolation "on behalf of a collective cause." He writes: "Like a suicidal attack, an act of self-immolation involves an individual intentionally killing himself or herself (or at least gambling with death) on behalf of a collective cause. Unlike a suicidal attack, an act of self-immolation is not intended to cause physical harm to anyone else or to inflict material damage." See: "Dying Without Killing: Self-Immolations, 1963-2002," by Michael Biggs in Diego Gambetta, 'Making Sense of Suicide Missions,' Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 173, see: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/immolation.pdf>
- 18 Cheng Li, Director of Research of the John L Thornton China Center in the US says: "In China, this [generational transfer of power] only occurred three times in the PRC history. The first time - two times, actually - ended up, sadly and tragically, with the Cultural Revolution for the first, and 1989 Tiananmen for the second. The third generational transfer of power took place nine years ago in 2002 [and] was remarkably [...] orderly." (www.brookings.edu/interviews/2011/1201_china_leadership_li.aspx)

- 19 The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) announced its new 'Fifth Generation' leadership on November 15, with Xi Jinping appointed as Party Secretary and head of the CCP Central Military Commission in a once-in-a-decade leadership transition. Members of the new seven-member Standing Committee of the Politburo headed by Xi are older, conservative, and associated with harsh policies in Tibet. The new top leadership, which excluded two senior Party members known for their emphasis on political reform, may seek to assert their authority on Tibet at an early stage. "China's new leadership and Tibet," November 16, 2012, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/china%E2%80%99s-new-leadership-and-tibet '
- 20 An eight-point petition by students and teachers in Qinghai is translated in this report.
- 21 "Tibetans at Qinghai Nationalities University show solidarity with self-immolators," November 13, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetans-qinghai-nationalities-university-show-solidarity-self-immolators
- 22 "Thousands of Tibetan students and schoolchildren gather for peaceful demonstration in Rebkong," November 9, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/thousands-tibetan-students-and-schoolchildren-gather-peaceful-demonstration-rebkong
- 23 "Tibetan self-immolations escalate in number on eve of China's Party Congress; Tibetans gather en masse in Rebkong," November 8, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-self-immolations-escalate-number-eve-chinas-party-congress
- 24 "Troops surround monastery as Tibetan monk dies after setting himself on fire & calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet," August 16, 2011, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/troops-surround-monastery-tibetan-monk-dies-after-setting-himself-fire-and-calling-return
- 25 "Thousands of Tibetans mobilize in reaction to self-immolations despite security build up," November 14, 2012, ICT, see: <http://savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/thousands-tibetans-mobilize-reaction-self-immolations-despite-security-build>
- 26 "Two Tibetan Self-Immolators Left Letters Behind," November 20, 2011, Voice of America, see: www.voatibetanenglish.com/content/article/1549979.html
- 27 "Chinese Netizens Speak Out on Tibetan Self-Immolations despite Censorship," November 21, 2012, Human Rights in China, see: www.hrchina.org/content/6388
- 28 "Many Chinese Intellectuals Are Silent Amid a Wave of Tibetan Self-Immolations," November 9, 2012, New York Times, see: www.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/world/asia/educated-chinese-are-silent-amid-tibetan-self-immolations.html?pagewanted=all
- 29 This was the first such public reference to 'Skynet,' a massive television surveillance network that the CCP is using to cover restive areas of Tibet and attempt to bring an end the wave of self-immolations. See: "China using massive surveillance grid to stop Tibetan self-immolation," November 9, 2012, The Telegraph, at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9667701/China-using-massive-surveillance-grid-to-stop-Tibetan-self-immolation.html
- 30 "Xinhua Insight: Firemen in Monk's Robes," November 19, 2012, Xinhua, see: www.chinadaily.com.cn/xinhua/2012-11-19/content_7541213.html
- 31 "Change in Beijing, Change in Tibet?" November 13, 2012, The Diplomat, <http://thediplomat.com/2012/11/13/will-xi-jingping-save-tibet/>
- 32 Kyodo News, reported in Japanese, November 12, 2012.
- 33 The state media documentary, entitled 'The Dalai clique and the self-immolation incident,' was broadcast in both Chinese and English (with some variations between the two) on Chinese Central Television (CCTV). The video can be viewed in English at www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYcVa7yp6BA&list=UUT8RMFbTJV5iLaVykrLUOQg&index=2&feature=plcp Analysis of this video is included in this report.
- 34 See: <https://twitter.com/#%21aiww>
- 35 "On Terrorism and the Politics of 'Naming,'" April, 2012, Journal of The Society of Cultural Anthropology, see: www.culanth.org/?q=node/526
- 36 "Harrowing images and last message from Tibet of first lama to self-immolate," February 1, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/harrowing-images-and-last-message-tibet-first-lama-self-immolate
- 37 Phuntsog's last words were recorded on audio and passed onto ICT
- 38 "ANALYSIS: The meaning of self-immolation in Tibet — Ajaz Ashraf," November 9, 2012, Daily Times, see: www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2012\11\09\story_9-11-2012_pg3_2 This remarkable report includes translations of a number of notes or last words left by Tibetans.

- 39 Dzamthang (Chinese: Rangtang) County, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, in the Tibetan region of Amdo. Nangdrol self-immolated and died outside Jonang Dzamthang Gonchen Monastery. As he was burning he reportedly shouted "May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live 10,000 years!" and called for freedom in Tibet. See: "Iron Hare 2011: Flame of Resistance," by the Dharamsala-based Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice, which can be downloaded from ICT's website at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/iron-hare-2011-flames-resistance
- 40 The full text is included in this report, with English translation by the Tibetan government in exile. The video can be viewed online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oD8QBVFJK8
- 41 The Tibetan government in exile states that most of the self-immolators have called for the former. ICT has documented a mixed number of calls for 'rangwang' and 'rangzen'. Dicki Choyyang, a Minister (Kalon) from the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, India, referred to this distinction when expressing the view of the exile authorities to Tibet supporters: "To opt to give one's life is a critical decision that reflects a profound process of introspection and strength of conviction. Every word, written and oral testimony, left by the self-immolators has been carefully weighed by these individuals [who] were fully cognizant of their meaning and implication. Tibetans inside Tibet know the difference in meaning between the words rangwang and rangzen. Their command of the Tibetan language is equal if not greater than the Tibetan community in exile. With a few exceptions all self-immolators have clearly called for rangwang." Dicki Choyyang, Minister for Information and International Relations, was speaking at the International Tibet Support Groups conference in Dharamsala, India, November 16-18, 2012. See: www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=7QbBIKARXkl
- 42 The religious and cultural context is explored in a later section of this report.
- 43 "Self-immolation at Tibet's Labrang monastery," October 22, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/self-immolation-tibets-labrang-monastery
- 44 "Tibetan mother in her twenties dies after self-immolation today; monk taken away after self-immolation yesterday," August 7, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-mother-in-her-twenties-dies-after-self-immolation-today
- 45 See images with this report
- 46 The official website of His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa is at: www.kagyuoffice.org
- 47 The Dalai Lama was speaking to Ann Curry in an NBC television interview during his visit to Syracuse, New York, USA. He added that: "The ongoing struggle in Tibet is between the power of truth and the power of the gun... In the short term the power of the gun is much stronger, and in the long term the power of truth is much stronger." See: www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=j7MyCWJkohU
- 48 "Sikyong Dr Sangay: Blame and solution for self-immolations lie with Beijing," November 9, 2012, Phayul, see: www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=32415&t=1
- 49 According to Tibetans who knew her, Rikyo was a deeply religious person who had carried out prostrations, a gesture used in Buddhist practice to show reverence, for nearly two months before her death. Some speculated that the prostrations had been made to prepare her for the act of self-immolation. See: "Detentions, fear after Lhasa self-immolations; prayer gathering in Dzamthang," June 1, 2012, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/detentions-fear-after-lhasa-self-immolations-prayer-gathering-dzamthang
- 50 "Hundreds of Tibetans face down police to gather for cremation of Tibetan who self-immolated today," June 15, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/hundreds-tibetans-face-down-police-gather-cremation-tibetan-who-self-immolated-today
- 51 Op cit.
- 52 Woesser published a picture of the shrine on her website at: http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-h0Y8_01nK6Y/T9skUQs7YXI/AAAAAAAAAP2Y/WyzDBHmNK2Y/s1600/000.jpg The sign on the wall reads: Qinghai Province Jianza County Department of People's Armed Police.
- 53 "Dying Without Killing: Self-Immolations, 1963–2002," by Michael Biggs in Diego Gambetta, 'Making Sense of Suicide Missions,' Oxford University Press, 2005, see: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/immolation.pdf>.
- 54 "HRIC Commentary: Hu Ping on Tibetan Self-Immolations," uploaded to Human Rights in China's YouTube channel on March 16, 2012, see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=615NFT-zRGE&feature=youtu.be
- 55 The three traditional Tibetan areas of Kham (eastern Tibet), Amdo (northeastern Tibet) and U-Tsang (central and Western Tibet). The Tibet Autonomous Region (Chinese: Xizang zizhiqu) was established by the Chinese government in 1965 and covers the area of Tibet west of the Yangtze River (Tibetan: Drichu) including part of Kham, although it is often referred to now as 'central Tibet' in English. The rest of Amdo and Kham have been incorporated into Chinese provinces, and where Tibetans were said to have 'compact inhabitancy' in these provinces, they were designated as Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures and Tibetan Autonomous Counties. As a result, most of Qinghai and parts of Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces are designed by the Chinese authorities as 'Tibetan.'

- 56 The translation from Tibetan into English was carried out by Matthew Akester and is yet to be published. The long essay was published in Tibetan in March, 2010, and became an underground bestseller in China after its ban by the Chinese authorities. Tagyal was imprisoned for nearly six months as a result of its publication; his detention was particularly significant because he is a well-established editor and an 'official intellectual' whose views were seen by many Tibetans as close to the Chinese Communist Party and the state. In a letter written in Chinese to his employer clarifying why he wrote his book and dated April 15, 2010, Tagyal explains: "I believe that the problem of the Tibetan nationality is complicated and urgent. If it is not solved in accordance with the people's thoughts, things difficult to fathom may occur. This is why, based on Article 35 of the [Chinese] Constitution that states that society enjoys the right of free speech and of publishing, I put this right into practice and I expressed my ideas. My hope is that the Tibet issue can be resolved in the best way, by the core principles of kind heart, tolerance, freedom, equality, human rights and human values." See: "Tibetan writer Tagyal released from prison on bail," October 15, 2011, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-writer-tagyal-released-prison-bail
- 57 Tsampa represents 'Tibetan-ness' in the face of threat, as explained by historian Tsering Shakya in his essay, 'Whither the Tsampa Eaters?' (Himal, Vol. 6, No. 5, 1993, pp: 8-12). In the essay, Shakya refers to a letter published in 1959 by The Tibetan Mirror – a Tibetan newspaper printed in Kalimpong (India) – at the height of Tibetan resistance to the Chinese invasion that was symbolically addressed to all tsampa eaters. As Shakya points out, the use of tsampa transcended dialect, sect, gender and regionalism. In March 2008, protesters in Lhasa were calling out to 'tsampa-eaters' to join them. See: "Tsampa eaters and sweet tea drinkers: Tibetan identity assertion through food," January 19, 2011, High Peaks Pure Earth blog, see: <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2011/tsampa-eaters-and-sweet-tea-drinkers-tibetan-identity-assertion-through-food/>
- 58 A film accompanying this report with the same title features some contemporary songs from inside Tibet and focuses on this new solidarity
- 59 Gene Sharp was speaking at the Frontline Club for journalists in London on January 30, 2012. A video of the talk can be viewed at: www.viddler.com/v/99247622. Dr Sharp's ideas for non-violent rebellion are credited with inspiring the Arab Spring; in September 2010 the Associated Press news agency reported that opposition groups in Cairo were quietly meeting in private homes to discuss a possible civil disobedience movement aimed at undermining the Mubarak regime. AP reported that the instructors drew inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Gene Sharp. Referring to the Arab Spring, at the same talk, Gene Sharp said: "I have been pleased and shocked and surprised at the numbers of countries in which people have risen up. When people lose their fear and use their brains and plan skillfully and act bravely and maintain non violent discipline and you have a wise grand strategy carefully thought through and planned, you have a good chance of succeeding. You know the old story – this genie was hidden in a bottle and kept corked in, [the genie] could do magic. The genie somehow escaped the bottle [...] and they couldn't put it back in. The knowledge of how people can free themselves is the escaped genie in the bottle, it is now there, it cannot be put back again. It can be crushed here and there you can smother those people here and there but the knowledge of how people can be free is spreading across the world. You can expect some quite amazing struggles in the next few years and from then on."
- 60 "New Generation' – Hip Hop Music Video from Amdo," March 10, 2010, High Peaks Pure Earth blog, <http://highpeakspureearth.blogspot.co.uk/2010/03/new-generation-hip-hop-music-video-from.html>
- 61 In two decades of painstaking research, Chinese scholar Yang Jisheng compiled a minutely chronicled, detailed account of the death by starvation of 35 to 40 million Chinese over three years from 1958, which the Party has long sought to cover up. Interview with Yang Jisheng cited by Richard McGregor in "The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers," Penguin Books, 2011.
- 62 "Stability Drive ahead of Party Congress," July 16, 2012, RFA, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/china/drive-07162012142422.html
- 63 The open letter to the Chinese leadership was written about the former Communist Party Secretary of Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Prefecture, Shi Jun. For a full translation, see: "An Open Letter by a Tibetan Cadre," April 12, 2012, High Peaks Pure Earth blog, at: <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2012/an-open-letter-by-a-tibetan-cadre/>
- 64 "Stability Drive ahead of Party Congress," July 16, 2012, RFA, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/china/drive-07162012142422.html
- 65 In an article published by China Media Project entitled "Preserving Stability," Qian Gang writes: "'Stability above everything else' is a slogan much beloved by Party leaders associated with the conservative faction, or baoshoupai, who oppose reforms in China. [...] When Jiang Zemin passed the baton on to Hu Jintao in 2002, a careful balance of these three ideas – stability, reform and development – was maintained. [...] Some within China have referred to the 10 years of President Hu Jintao's leadership as the 'stability preservation decade.' During these years, political reform has stalled as an agenda item, and powerful interest groups have hijacked politics and the economy." See: "Preserving Stability," undated, China Media Project, at: <http://cmp.hku.hk/2012/09/14/27074/>
- 66 "Xi plans to crack down on security," September 15, 2012, The Age, see: www.theage.com.au/world/xi-plans-to-crack-down-on-security-20120914-25xhm.html#ixzz26UT5m6CR
- 67 "China Analysis: Control at the Grass Roots," European Council on Foreign Relations, undated, see: http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/china_analysis_control_at_the_grassroots. Prominent Chinese academics told Hannah Beech of TIME magazine that the number today is probably double that of 2011. See: "Big Brotherhood," October 22, 2012, TIME, at: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2126667,00.html
- 68 "Exploring the Human Rights Footprints of China's New Leaders," October 29, 2012, Dui Hua Foundation, see: <http://duihua.org/wp/?p=6865>

- 69 "Xi plans to crack down on security," September 15, 2012, The Age, see: www.theage.com.au/world/xi-plans-to-crack-down-on-security-20120914-25xhm.html#ixzz26UT5m6CR"
- 70 "China security chief down but not out after blind dissident's escape," April 20, 2012, Reuters, see: www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/30/us-china-politics-security-idUSBRE83T06J20120430
- 71 "Xi plans to crack down on security," September 15, 2012, The Age, see: www.theage.com.au/world/xi-plans-to-crack-down-on-security-20120914-25xhm.html#ixzz26UT5m6CR"
- 72 "China's Leaders – Zhou Yongkang," undated, BBC, see: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/in_depth/china_politics/leadership/html/10.stm Professor Tsering Shakya was cited in TIME magazine on July 17, 2000, as saying: "At a meeting of China's NPC, Zhou Yongkang (Sichuan) announced that teaching Tibetan in schools was a drain on government resources."
- 73 "Meng Jianzhu appointed head of CPC Political and Legal Affairs Commission," November 19, 2012, Xinhua, see: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/19/c_131984826.htm
- 74 "Big Brotherhood," October 22, 2012, TIME, at: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2126667,00.html
- 75 "The Struggle for Tibet," by Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya, (Verso, 2009) p. 168.
- 76 The state media declared in February 2012 that the situation in Tibet is so grave that officials must ready themselves for "a war against secessionist sabotage." Tibet Daily, February 10, 2012.
- 77 Leaders focus on stability," October 23, 2012, Global Times, see: www.globaltimes.cn/content/739820.shtml
- 78 In addition to efforts made to suppress information inside Tibet, the Citizens Lab based at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto has also tracked "Murky and more difficult-to-attribute malware attacks launched against Tibetan rights advocates," and reference "numerous malicious emails around the theme of self-immolation" that have been circulating among Tibetan organizations and activists. See: "Information Operations and Tibetan Rights in the Wake of Self-Immolations: Part I," March 9, 2012, Citizen Lab, at: <https://citizenlab.org/2012/03/information-operations-and-tibetan-rights-in-the-wake-of-self-immolations-part-i/>
- 79 "China: End Crackdown on Tibetan Monasteries: Heavy-Handed Security Exacerbates Grievances, Desperation," October 12, 2011, Human Rights Watch, see: www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/12/china-end-crackdown-tibetan-monasteries
- 80 "Self-immolations in Tibet show no sign of slowing'," March 10, 2012, LA Times, see: www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-china-tibet-immolate-20120310,0,3895376.story
- 81 "Thousands of Tibetans mobilize in reaction to self-immolations despite security build up," November 14, 2012, ICT, see: <http://savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/thousands-tibetans-mobilize-reaction-self-immolations-despite-security-build>
- 82 "China: Last Words of 19 Tibetans Who Committed Self-Immolation," November 23, 2012, Global Voices, see: <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/11/23/china-last-words-of-19-tibetans-who-committed-self-immolation/>
- 83 Chen said: "For those irresponsible officials who walk away from their duties, fail to implement policies or are found guilty of dereliction of duty in maintaining stability, they shall be immediately removed from their posts, pending punishment, regardless of how great the contributions they made in the past or what kind of position they held." February 10, 2012, Global Times, see: www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/695365/Tibet-officials-prepare-for-war.aspx
- 84 The open letter to the Chinese leadership was written about the former Communist Party Secretary of Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Prefecture, Shi Jun. For a full translation, see: "An Open Letter by a Tibetan Cadre," April 12, 2012, High Peaks Pure Earth blog, at: <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2012/an-open-letter-by-a-tibetan-cadre/>
- 85 Op cit.
- 86 "Wang Lixiong: A Petition to the National People's Congress to Self-criticize and to Rectify Current Nationality Policies," March 8, 2012, Invisible Tibet blog (in Chinese), see: woeser.middle-way.net/2012/03/blog-post_09.html
- 87 Compilation of government statements on Tibetan self-immolations at ICT's website www.savetibet.org/resource-center/maps-data-fact-sheets/government-statements-tibet-immolations-and-crisis-kirti-monastery
- 88 The Chinese term is 'xibu da kaifa,' the strategy to develop the western regions of the PRC. The Chinese term 'kaifa' in this context is often rendered into English as 'development'; however, standard dictionaries define 'kaifa' as 'develop,' 'open up,' 'exploit,' which reflects how the Party perceives the western areas of the PRC, essentially as providers of resources in order to facilitate development in the central and eastern regions. The PRC's western region's resources are used to supply the nation's rising demand for water, minerals and energy. See ICT report, "Tracking the Steel Dragon," February 2008, at: www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tracking-steel-dragon

- 89 "Rethinking Ethnic Policy," May 30, 2012, China Policy, see: <http://brief.policy.cn/rethinking-ethnic-policy/> See also: "Towards a Second Generation of Ethnic Policies," July 6, 2012, Jamestown Foundation, at: [www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=39590&cHash=f6546cfc679f21c0f476fa77da69f849](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39590&cHash=f6546cfc679f21c0f476fa77da69f849)
- 90 "A few thoughts on current problems in the field of ethnicity," by Zhu Weiqun, Director of the United Front Work Department, June 2012, 'China Brief, see: <http://brief.policy.cn/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/TEXT-A-few-thoughts-on-current-problems-in-the-field-of-ethnicity.pdf>
- 91 "Protests by students against downgrading of Tibetan language spread to Beijing," October 22, 2010, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/protests-students-against-downgrading-tibetan-language-spread-beijing
- 92 "Harrowing images and last message from Tibet of first lama to self-immolate," February 1, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/harrowing-images-and-last-message-tibet-first-lama-self-immolate
- 93 See for example: "Ma Rong: Is there a risk of national split in 21st century China? April 13, 2011, 21ccom.net, see (in Chinese): www.21ccom.net/articles/zgyj/ggzhc/article_2011041333510.html
- 94 It was notable that Zhu Weiqun did not attain a place in the Central Committee of the CPC leadership following the line-up announced on November 15, 2012, although he was a member of the 17th CPC committee. This is more surprising when we consider that the former head of the UFWD, Du Qinglin, is in the new Central Committee. Du is older than Zhu Weiqun (born in November 1946 while Zhu was born in 1947), indicating that age may not have been a consideration. For further information on leadership changes in November, see ICT report, China's New Leadership and Tibet, November 16, 2012, at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/china%E2%80%99s-new-leadership-and-tibet
- 95 "Persist in the Basic Political System, Resolve Ethnic Issues Through Development — An Outline of the Chinese Ethnic Theory Association Symposium" February 23, 2012, Liu Ling, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, see (in Chinese): <http://iea.cass.cn/content-BA0810-2012031609383390681.htm>
- 96 Shanghai Communique, issued in Shanghai, February 28, 1972, following the visit of the then US President Richard Nixon to China from February 21 to February 28, 1972, see: www.chinadaily.com.cn/09chinausrelations/2009-01/07/content_7374002.htm
- 97 "Zhu Weiqun Talks About Dalai and Other Issues With EU Officials, Scholars, and Reporters," [Zhu Weiqun yu oumeng guanyuan, xuezhe, jizhe tan dalai deng wenti], China Tibet Online, December 29, 2011 (translated in Open Source Center, January 12, 2012). Cited in the Congressional-Executive Commission on China Annual Report 2012, www.cecc.gov
- 98 Other efforts on the world stage to over-compensate as news of the self-immolations made global headlines were unsuccessful. For instance, a "Beauty of Tibet" painting exhibition sponsored by China Tibet Online, China's largest website on Tibet-related information, and the Shanghai Overseas Chinese Foundation began its tour in Berlin and Hamburg in the last week of July, 2012. ("Self-immolation maneuvered by 'Tibet independence' forces," July 31, 2012, China Tibet Online, see: http://eng.tibet.cn/2010home/news/201207/t20120731_1764511.html). At the height of the protests in Tibet in 2008, the Chinese government had launched an exhibition showing what it characterised as the horrors of feudal serfdom prior to the Chinese invasion in 1949-50. A Chinese visitor was quoted in China Daily as saying: "I feel in the exhibition the barbarianism and darkness that permeated in old Tibet, and have a better understanding how the backward system of mixing politics and religion thwarted Tibet's development and progress." ("Tibet Exhibition draws appreciation from visitors," May 5, 2008, Xinhua, see: www.china.org.cn/china/Lhasa_Unrest/2008-05/05/content_15066306.htm) Leading historian and scholar Tsering Shakya comments: "That the metropolitan center needs to be persuaded of the merits of the colonizing mission indicates the uncertainty and anxiety underlying the entire colonizing project." ("Echoes of the Past" in "The Struggle for Tibet," by Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya, Verso, 2009, p.259.)
- 99 CCTV is broadcast globally, running programming in at least half a dozen languages, claiming to reach 219 million households in 156 countries. CCTV officials told the Associated Press that the documentary about the self-immolations was aired on the network's English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Russian channels twice as well as on CCTV-4, the international Chinese language station. ("China TV blames Dalai Lama for Tibe immolations," May 16, 2012, Associated Press, see: www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/10244342). The video, entitled "The Dalai clique and the self-immolation event," can be viewed in English at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYcVa7yp6BA&list=UUT8RMFbTJV5LaVykrLUOQg&index=2&feature=plcp WARNING: This video includes scenes of self-immolation. Viewer discretion is strongly advised.
- 100 "CCTV's explanation for the Tibetan self-immolations, by Woesser," July 18, 2012, High Peaks Pure Earth blog, see: <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2012/cctvs-explanation-for-the-tibetan-self-immolations-by-woesser/>
- 101 Op cit.
- 102 The number of Tibetans who were killed by shooting or died as a result of torture in March, 2008, and beyond, is still not known.
- 103 "Echoes of the Past," by Tsering Shakya, in "The Struggle for Tibet" by Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya, Verso, 2009.
- 104 See ICT's self-immolation fact-sheet at: www.savetibet.org/resource-center/maps-data-fact-sheets/self-immolation-fact-sheet#JamyangPalden. See also: "Tensions escalate in Qinghai: Rebkong self-immolation, student protest, monks commemorate March 10," March 14, 2012, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tensions-escalate-qinghai-rebkong-self-immolation-student-protest-monks-commemorate-march-

- 105 "Independence after the March 'incident,'" by Wang Lixiong in "The Struggle for Tibet," by Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya, Verso, 2009. In the same essay, Wang Lixiong details the 13 institutions at the provincial and ministerial level that are directly concerned with Tibet, including the governments of the TAR, Qinghai, Sichuan, the CPC Tibet Work Coordination Group, the United Front Work Department, and others (p. 224). In addition to this there are 11 institutions (at the provincial or ministerial level or higher) that do not deal directly with Tibet but oversee 'anti-separatist' responsibilities and have 'anti-separatist' divisions and personnel, including the Central Commission of Politics and Law, and the CPC Xinjiang Work Coordination Group. This means, writes Wang, that there are 24 provincial or ministerial-level institutions within China's bureaucratic system that perform 'anti-separatist' roles.
- 106 "CCTV's explanation for the Tibetan self-immolations, by Woesser," July 18, 2012, High Peaks Pure Earth blog, see: <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2012/cctvs-explanation-for-the-tibetan-self-immolations-by-woesser/>
- 107 Official media specifically named Students for a Free Tibet in the following article: "Tibetan monk confesses spreading shooting rumors," May 3, 2009, Xinhua, see: www.china.org.cn/china/news/2009-03/05/content_17384798.htm
- 108 For this image, and numerous other images relating to the wave of self-immolations in Tibet, see Students for a Free Tibet's photo archive at: www.flickr.com/photos/sfthq/6323790362/in/photostream/
- 109 "Iron Hare 2011: Flame of Resistance," by the Dharmasala-based Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice, which can be downloaded from ICT's website at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/iron-hare-2011-flames-resistance
- 110 His mother is shown speaking to the interviewer in Tibetan, saying "He said he deeply regrets what he's done. "The Dalai clique and the self-immolation event, part 2," May 10, 2012, Chinese Central Television's YouTube account, see: www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=6H1eQpGxfs at 0 mins, 55 secs.
- 111 Interview with ICT soon after his arrival in exile in India, November, 2011.
- 112 "Tibet at a Turning Point: The Spring Uprising and China's Crackdown," August, 2008, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tibet-a-turning-point, p. 58.
- 113 "Dramatic new footage reveals Ngaba crackdown, refutes Chinese claims of 'normal life,'" April 20, 2011, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/dramatic-new-footage-reveals-ngaba-crackdown-refutes-chinese-claims-normal-life
- 114 This account is based on a translation from the Tibetan of an audio recording of Phuntsog's last words, conveyed through a Tibetan who was with him at the time and whose identity is withheld.
- 115 Kesang Jinpa was editor and contributor to the Amdo literary journal called 'I of the modern age,' and was arrested on charges of separatist activity on July 19, 2010, a month after the birth of his second daughter, and sentenced to three years in prison.
- 116 A Tibetan called Phuntsog who had been adopted by Tsering Kyi's family was also detained, according to the Kirti monks in exile, who give a full account of the details in the report "Iron Hare 2011: Flame of Resistance," by the Dharmasala-based Dhomay Alliance for Freedom and Justice, which can be downloaded from ICT's website at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/iron-hare-2011-flames-resistance "
- 117 "Tibetan monk dies of self-immolation in SW China," March 17, 2011, Xinhua, see: http://china.org.cn/china/2011-03/17/content_22162814.htm The Chinese state television documentary, "The Dalai clique and the self-immolation incident," that was aired in May 2012 did acknowledge that Phuntsog was 19.
- 118 Footage can be viewed in a film accompanying this report, soon to be online at www.savetibet.org or contact press@savetibet.org for film clips
- 119 In April 2008, hundreds of armed police raided Lhasa's three main monasteries, Sera, Drepung and Ganden, already under lockdown following the beginning of major protests on March 10 of that year. The raids took place in the early hours of the morning over several nights and hundreds of monks were taken away from the monasteries. Their families and friends had no idea where they were, often for months, or whether they were still alive. At least 600 monks were taken from Drepung at dawn on April 25, 2008, some with black hoods over their heads. Many of them were taken to Golmud (Chinese: Ge'eremu) in Qinghai by train and held in a military prison. Tibetan teachers were required to carry out 'rule of law education classes.' Often monks with medical conditions were not treated and others suffered severe anxiety and trauma due to the conditions of virtual imprisonment. A Drepung monk held in custody at Golmud at this time composed a song based on a popular folk song, including the following lyrics: "The weary gloom of anguish has set in./ O Sun! Come forth with speed!/ O Sun! We cannot wait much longer!/ My karmic destiny shaped in past lives/ Has rendered this youth a victim of circumstance./ In the Three Seats of learning of the U-Tsang region [Drepung, Sera and Ganden]/ There's no freedom of movement." 'See: "A Great Mountain Burned by 'Fire," March 2009, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/great-mountain-burned-fire-china%E2%80%99s-crackdown-tibet
- 120 Since two self-immolations in Lhasa in May, 2012, there has been even greater pressures on Tibetans from Kham and Amdo who are in Lhasa, and hundreds have been expelled from the city. More details are given in the section on Lhasa in this report.
- 121 "China bans foreigners from restive Tibetan areas," April 22, 2011, Reuters, see: www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/22/us-china-tibet-travel-idUSTRE73L1E020110422

- 122 In a clear indication that the Chinese government feels unrestrained by relevant articles of international law which protect the right of liberty and security of a person, it rebuffed a strongly worded appeal by the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances issued in Geneva on June 8, 2011 "to disclose the fate and whereabouts of all those who have been subject to enforced disappearances in China, including a group of Tibetan monks whose fate or whereabouts still remain unknown." See: "Fears for future of Kirti monastery; UN seeks answers," June 14, 2011, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/fears-future-kirti-monastery-un-seeks-answers
- 123 "Dramatic new footage reveals Ngaba crackdown, refutes Chinese claims of 'normal life'," April 20, 2011, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/dramatic-new-footage-reveals-ngaba-crackdown-refutes-chinese-claims-normal-life. To view the footage, see: www.youtube.com/user/VOAKunleng#p/u/0/zwmstGsFJc
- 124 "Checkpoint on the road to Lhasa," October 19-25, 2012, New Statesman (edition guest-edited by Ai Weiwei), see: www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/lifestyle/2012/10/checkpoint-road-lhasa
- 125 "Lockdown in Lhasa at Tibetan New Year; unprecedented detentions of hundreds of Tibetans after Dalai Lama teaching in exile," February 22, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/lockdown-lhasa-tibetan-new-year-unprecedented-detentions-hundreds-tibetans-after-dalai-lam.
- 126 A term coined by Michael Ignatieff in "How Syria Divided the World" on the 'New York Review of Books' blog posted on July 11, 2012, to characterise China's authoritarian approach, reads as follows: "What makes Syria a hinge-moment is that Russia and China are proving that they have no strategic interest in transitions beyond dictatorship, not just in Syria but anywhere else. Both Russia and China see Syria not through the prism of international peace and security or human rights, but through the logic of their own despotism. For Putin, Syria is Chechnya; for China it is Tibet. They understand Assad perfectly. He is doing what they have done many times and they want the world to understand that they will support any dictator facing similar challenges." See: "How Syria Divided the World," July 11, 2012, New York Review of Books, at: www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/jul/11/syria-proxy-war-russia-china/
- 127 "The end of Tibetan Buddhism" in "The struggle for Tibet," by Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya, Verso, 2009.
- 128 "China: Attempts to Seal Off Tibet from Outside Information," July 13, 2012, Human Rights Watch, see: www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/13/china-attempts-seal-tibet-outside-information
- 129 Op cit. In March 2012, Padma Thrinley said: "Let's face reality: the Dalai Lama and his followers do try to attract young Tibetans, but what we need to do is not to compete with them ... Instead, the key is to improve people's livelihood ... the popularity of the government will depend on its work."
- 130 The state media declared on February 10, 2012, that the situation in Tibet is so grave that officials must ready themselves for "a war against secessionist sabotage." (Tibet Daily.)
- 131 Chen Guanguo said on March 1, 2012: "Mobile phones, internet and other measures for the management of new media need to be fully implemented to maintain the public's interests and national security." See: "Official urges internet watch in Tibet," March 2, 2012, Reuters, see: www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2012/03/02/2003526819
- 132 "China: Tibetan Monasteries Placed Under Direct Rule," March 16, 2012, Human Rights Watch, see: www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/16/china-tibetan-monasteries-placed-under-direct-rule
- 133 Li Chengye, cited in the Congressional-Executive Commission on China Annual Report 2012, Tibet section: "Chen Quanguo Gives Important Instructions on Further Improving the Work of Cadre Presence in Monasteries: Let Monks and Nuns Who Love Their Country and Their Religion Experience the Solicitude and Loving Care of Party and Government and Consciously Make Greater Contributions to the Building of Harmonious Tibet and Peaceful Tibet," Tibet Daily, 2 February 12, reprinted in China Tibet Online (translated in Open Source Center, February 10, 2012).
- 134 Cited by the Congressional-Executive Commission on China Annual Report 2012, Tibet section. Chen Run'e, "Be a Close Friend to Monks and Nuns" [Zuo sengni de tiexin ren], Tibet Daily, 18 April 12, reprinted in China Tibet News. According to the report, cadres posted to monasteries "must establish and perfect records on monks and nuns who hold professional religious personnel certification, detailing and recording their individual information and their family circumstances." The CECC observed in the same report that Monastery Management Committees, in terms of status and function, are more intrusive and repressive than Masses Supervision and Appraisal Committees (MSACs) established in Qinghai province by prefectural-level Tibetan Buddhist affairs regulations.
- 135 Op cit.
- 136 See: "A Great Mountain Burned by Fire: China's Crackdown in Tibet," March 2009, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-press-releases/a-great-mountain-burned-by-fire-chinas-crackdown-tibet and "Tibet at a Turning Point," August 2008, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tibet-a-turning-point
- 137 Translation provided to ICT by a Tibetan viewer in exile.
- 138 "The New Face of Lhasa," July 2012, Human Rights in China, see: www.hrichina.org/crf/article/6137

- 139 Saga Dawa, an important religious period for Tibetan Buddhists. Lhasa is typically busy with Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims during this period, and most Tibetans consider the Jokhang Temple, the site of the two self-immolations, as the most sacred and important temple in Tibet.
- 140 The pictures are uploaded on Woesser's twitter feed at <https://twitter.com/degewa/status/207522543597387776/photo/1/large>. Woesser told the Associated Press that she did not know who took the photos but that they were forwarded to her by someone she trusts. See: "Tibetan Immolation Photos Allegedly Show Protester Ablaze," June 1, 2012, Associated Press, at: www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/01/tibetan-immolation-photos_n_1561948.html
- 141 "China: Arbitrary Expulsions of Tibetans from Lhasa escalate: Tibetans from protest areas targeted in unprecedented Lhasa Security Drive," June 19, 2012, Human Rights Watch, see: www.hrw.org/news/2012/06/19/china-arbitrary-expulsions-tibetans-lhasa-escalate
- 142 "Checkpoint on the road to Lhasa," October 19-25, 2012, New Statesman (edition guest-edited by Ai Weiwei), see: www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/lifestyle/2012/10/checkpoint-road-lhasa
- 143 Op cit.
- 144 "Who is really safeguarding Lhasa?" April 22, 2010, High Peaks Pure Earth blog, see: <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2010/who-is-really-safeguarding-lhasa-by-woesser/>
- 145 "A Terrible Act of Reason: When Did Self-Immolation Become the Paramount Form of Protest?" May 16, 2012, James Verini, New Yorker, see: www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/05/history-of-self-immolation.html#ixzz21Ao54cS4
- 146 "The Making of a Quagmire," by David Halberstam, Bodley Head, London, 1965, cited by Michael Biggs in his essay "Dying without Killing: Self-Immolations 1963-2002," in "Making Sense of Suicide Missions," Edited by Diego Gambetta, Oxford University Press, 2005.
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- 149 "Tunisia one year on: New trend of self-immolations," January 12, 2012, BBC, see: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16526462
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- 152 "HRIC Commentary: Hu Ping on Tibetan Self-Immolations," uploaded to Human Rights in China's YouTube channel on March 16, 2012, see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=615NFT-zRGE&feature=youtu.be
- 153 The texts are named as Fanwang jing ("The Book of Brahma's Net") and the Shouleng'yan jing ("Suramgama-sutra, The Book of the Heroic-march Absorption.") James A Benn writes: "In no surviving Chinese scripture other than the Fanwang jing and the Shouleng'yan jing do we find burning the body defined and endorsed as a practice for Buddhist monks and nuns, as opposed to advanced mahasattvas (great beings). The term shao shen, while it may in some contexts indicate cremation of the corpse – most notably, of course, that of the Buddha himself – also covers a range of practices applied to the living bodies of Buddhist monks and nuns in East Asia. These practices extend from the least common and most spectacular – aut cremation of the living body, through the burning off or branding of limbs (usually the arms), and the burning off of fingers – to the most common practice, the burning of incense or moxa (i.e., Artemisia tinder) on the body (the crown of the head or the forearm) at ordination." From: "Where text meets flesh: burning the body as an apocryphal practice in Chinese Buddhism," History of Religions, Vol. 37 No. 4, May 1998, pp. 295-322, University of Chicago, available online at: <http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-EPT/benn.htm>
- 154 "In Search of the Enemy of Man (addressed to the Rev. Martin Luther King)," Thich Nhat Hanh, 1965, see: www.aaww.org/special_features/letters_thich_abstract02.html
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- 167 "Monk in Tibet sets himself on fire; shot by police during protest," February 27, 2009, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/monk-tibet-sets-himself-fire-shot-police-during-protest
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- 552 "[Updated] Teenage Tibetan monk burns self to death in Ngaba," July 17, 2012, TCHRD, see: www.tchrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=250 WARNING: This report contains a photographic image of a self-immolation. Viewer discretion is strongly advised

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- 554 "Clash averted after self-immolation," July 18, 2012, RFA, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/clash-07182012161713.html
- 555 "Monk official detained amid ongoing crackdown at Tsodun Monastery," August 28, 2012, TCHRD, see: www.tchrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=281:monk-official-detained-amid-ongoing-crackdown-at-tsodun-monastery&catid=70:2012-news&Itemid=162
- 556 "Teenage monk and model student self-immolates in Tibet," July 17, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/teenage-monk-and-model-student-self-immolates-tibet
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- 558 "Teenage monk and model student self-immolates in Tibet," July 17, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/teenage-monk-and-model-student-self-immolates-tibet
- 559 Op cit.
- 560 Another monk, also called Lobsang Tsultrim and also from Kirti Monastery, self immolated on August 6, 2012 in Ngaba County Town and died the following day; he was 21 years old. The Lobsang Tsultim who self-immolated and died on March 16, 2012, was 20 years old; they are differentiated in this report by the suffixes 'jnr' and 'snr.'
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- 567 "China hands over ashes of deceased Kirti monk to family," August 9, 2012, TCHRD, see: www.tchrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=261:china-hands-over-ashes-of-deceased-kirti-monk-to-family&catid=70:2012-news&Itemid=162
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- 569 "She survived initially when the Tibetans put out the fire, and when the local monks arrived she called on them to hit her on the head with a stone and kill her so that the Chinese would not take her into custody alive," a Tibetan source told RFA, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Woman strips, self-immolates," August 7, 2012, RFA, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/burn-08072012101822.html
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- 571 "Tibetan mother in her twenties dies after self-immolation today; monk taken away after self-immolation yesterday," August 7, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-mother-in-her-twenties-dies-after-self-immolation-today
- 572 "Protests as monks are detained," August 8, 2012, RFA, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/monks-08082012153912.html
- 573 Op cit.
- 574 "Democratic Management Committees" are established in all monasteries and nunneries in Tibet on the orders of Party and government offices, and are intended to oversee institutions' activities and ensure Party and government policies are adhered to.

- 575 "Local Tibetans beaten following three more self-immolations in Tibet," August 15, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/local-tibetans-beaten-following-three-more-self-immolations-tibet
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- 577 Tsampa represents 'Tibetan-ness' in the face of threat, as explained by historian Tsering Shakya in his essay, "Whither the Tsampa Eaters?" (Himal, Vol. 6, No. 5, 1993. pp: 8-12.). In the essay, Shakya refers to a letter published in 1959 by The Tibetan Mirror – a Tibetan newspaper printed in Kalimpong (India) – at the height of Tibetan resistance to the Chinese invasion that was symbolically addressed to all tsampa eaters. As Shakya points out, the use of tsampa transcended dialect, sect, gender and regionalism. In March 2008, protesters in Lhasa were calling out to 'tsampa-eaters' to join them. See also: See: "Tsampa eaters and sweet tea drinkers: Tibetan identity assertion through food," January 19, 2011, High Peaks Pure Earth blog, at: <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2011/tsampa-eaters-and-sweet-tea-drinkers-tibetan-identity-assertion-through-food/>
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- 578 "More shot dead as protests escalate," January 24, 2012, RFA, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/protest-01242012093312.html
- 579 "Three Tibetans shot dead on first day of Chinese New Year," January 23, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/three-tibetans-shot-dead-first-day-chinese-new-year; see also: "'New Year of Mourning' in Tibet: Police again open fire killing Tibetan," January 25, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/%E2%80%99new-year-mourning%E2%80%99-tibet-police-again-open-fire-killing-tibetan; see also: "Tibetan student killed, several injured, after police open fire in Ngaba; news of two more prayer vigils for New Year," January 27, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-student-killed-several-injured-after-police-open-fire-ngaba-news-two-more-prayer-v
- 580 "Local Tibetans beaten following three more self-immolations in Tibet," August 15, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/local-tibetans-beaten-following-three-more-self-immolations-tibet
- 581 "Protest against police brutality," August 14, 2012, RFA, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/brutality-08142012152819.html
- 582 "Local Tibetans beaten following three more self-immolations in Tibet," August 15, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/local-tibetans-beaten-following-three-more-self-immolations-tibet
- 583 "Tibetans beaten with spiked batons following double self-immolation," August 14, 2012, Free Tibet, see: www.freetibet.org/newsmedia/tibetans-beaten-spiked-batons-following-double-self-immolation
- 584 "Self-immolator Lungtok passes away, Situation in Ngaba tense after protests," August 14, 2012, Phayul, see: www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=31901&t=1
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- 588 <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=31901&t=1>
- 589 Another monk called Lobsang Kelsang, also from Kirti and also 18-years-old, self-immolated on September 26, 2011
- 590 ICT report, <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/two-tibetan-teenage-relatives-self-immolate-ngaba>
- 591 "Two teenage relatives self-immolate in Ngaba," August 27, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/two-tibetan-teenage-relatives-self-immolate-ngaba
- 592 "Two Tibetans self-immolate," August 27, 2012, RFA, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/immolate-08272012150023.html
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- 594 Lobsang Sangay is the Sikyong, or political head, of the exile Tibetan administration based in Dharamsala, India. He was former known as the Kalon Tripa. See: "Tibetan Parliament Amends Kalon Tripa to Sikyong," September 20, 2012, Central Tibetan Administration, see: <http://tibet.net/2012/09/20/parliament-amends-kalon-tripa-to-sikyong/>

- 595 This is the first reference that a Tibetan who has self-immolated has made to the Karmapa returning to Tibet, as far as ICT is aware. There would not be the same obstacles to the Karmapa doing so, compared to the return of the Dalai Lama. The Karmapa, who heads the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, escaped from Tibet in 2000 when in his early teens of his own volition. He said that it was because of a lack of religious freedoms. See: "Plea to stop burnings ignored," September 29, 2012, Radio Free Asia, at: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/burn-09292012164851.html
- 596 "Second Tibetan dies in less than a week as self-immolations continue in Tibet," October 5, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/second-tibetan-dies-less-week-self-immolations-continue-tibet
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- 598 "Second Tibetan dies in less than a week as self-immolations continue in Tibet," October 5, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/second-tibetan-dies-less-week-self-immolations-continue-tibet
- 599 "Second Tibetan dies in less than a week as self-immolations continue in Tibet," October 5, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/second-tibetan-dies-less-week-self-immolations-continue-tibet
- 600 "Breaking: Tibetan man dies in self-immolation protest, Leaves message of pride and unity," October 4, 2012, Phayul, see: www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=32234&t=1
- 601 "Man dies in 53rd burning protest," October 4, 2012, RFA, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/burning-10042012144221.html
- 602 "Second Tibetan dies in less than a week as self-immolations continue in Tibet," October 5, 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/second-tibetan-dies-less-week-self-immolations-continue-tibet
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- 604 "Man dies in 53rd burning protest," October 4, 2012, RFA, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/burning-10042012144221.html
- 605 "Third burning protest in a week," October 6, 2012, Radio Free Asia, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/burn-10062012100251.html
- 606 "Woman rejects cash offer," October 19, 2012, Radio Free Asia, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/cash-10192012192840.html
- 607 "Breaking: Tibet continues to burn, Second self-immolation in three days," October 6, 2012, Phayul, see: www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=32244&t=1 WARNING: This report includes a still image of Sangay Gyatso's charred remains. Viewer discretion is strongly recommended.
- 608 "Crackdown fears after burning," October 7, 2012, Radio Free Asia, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/security-10072012091243.html
- 609 Op cit.
- 610 "Four monks held over protest," October 17, 2012, Radio Free Asia, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/monks-10172012174610.html
- 611 "Woman rejects cash offer," October 19, 2012, Radio Free Asia, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/cash-10192012192840.html
- 612 "Third Tibetan Self-Immolation in One Week," October 6, 2012, Voice of America, see: www.voatibetanenglish.com/content/article/1521716.html
- 613 ICT report, <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/grandfather-tibetan-reincarnate-lama-dies-after-self-immolation-today>
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- 616 "Tibetan dies after self-immolating in Gansu," October 20, 2012, International Campaign for Tibet, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-dies-after-self-immolating-gansu
- 617 "Burning Tibetan charges at police," October 20, 2012, Radio Free Asia, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/burn-10202012112145.html

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- 620 "Tibetans in Rebkong continue prayer vigils, protests, despite heavy security presence," March 22, 2012, International Campaign for Tibet, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetans-rebkong-continue-prayer-vigils-protests-despite-heavy-security-presence
- 621 "Self-immolation at Tibet's Labrang Monastery," October 22, 2012, International Campaign for Tibet, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/self-immolation-tibets-labrang-monastery WARNING: This report includes an image of Dhondup's remains still on fire. Viewer discretion is strongly advised.
- 622 Op cit.
- 623 "Tibetan farmer self-immolates in Labrang," October 23, 2012, International Campaign for Tibet, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-farmer-self-immolates-labrang WARNING: This report includes images of self-immolation. Viewer discretion is strongly recommended.
- 624 "Burning at Labrang Monastery," October 22, 2012, Radio Free Asia, see: www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/burn-10222012091551.html
- 625 "Self-immolation at Tibet's Labrang Monastery," October 22, 2012, International Campaign for Tibet, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/self-immolation-tibets-labrang-monastery WARNING: This report includes an image of Dhondup's remains still on fire. Viewer discretion is strongly advised.
- 626 "Tibetan self-immolation in well-known Labrang Monastery," October 22, 2012, Free Tibet, see: www.freetibet.org/news-media/pr/tibetan-self-immolation-well-known-labrang-monastery#.Ulc4GoU1Zcw
- 627 "Tibetan farmer self-immolates in Labrang," October 23, 2012, International Campaign for Tibet, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-farmer-self-immolates-labrang WARNING: This report includes images of self-immolation. Viewer discretion is strongly recommended.
- 628 "Death of Labrang monk who protested during foreign journalists' visit," March 15, 2011, International Campaign for Tibet, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/death-labrang-monk-who-protested-during-foreign-journalists%E2%80%99-visit
- 629 "Self-immolation at Tibet's Labrang Monastery," October 22, 2012, International Campaign for Tibet, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/self-immolation-tibets-labrang-monastery WARNING: This report includes an image of Dhondup's remains still on fire. Viewer discretion is strongly advised.
- 630 "Tibetan farmer self-immolates in Labrang," October 23, 2012, International Campaign for Tibet, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-farmer-self-immolates-labrang WARNING: This report includes images of self-immolation. Viewer discretion is strongly recommended.
- 631 "New images from Tibet depict self-immolation of Dorje Rinchen in Labrang today and aftermath," October 23, 2012, International Campaign for Tibet, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/new-images-tibet-depict-self-immolation-dorje-rinchen-labrang-today-and-aftermath
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- 634 "Tibetan villager self-immolates in NW China," October 23, 2012, Xinhua, see: www.china.org.cn/china/Off_the_Wire/2012-10/23/content_26884071.htm
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- 640 Op cit.
- 641 "Exile monk attempts self immolation in Nepal – updated," November 10, 2011, Phayul, see: <http://phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=30350&article=Exile+monk+attempts+self+immolation+in+Nepal++updated&t=1&c=1>
- 642 "Self-immolater monk reaches the safety of India," November 18, 2011, Phayul, see: www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=30376&t=1
- 643 "Jampa Yeshi, Tibetan Exile, Sets Self On Fire In Self-Immolation Anti-China Protest," March 26, 2012, Associated Press, see: www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/26/jampa-yeshi-tibetan-exile-self-immolation_n_1379005.html#s813730
- 644 "Thousands attend funeral of Jampa Yeshe in Dharamsala," March 30, 2012, Central Tibetan Administration, see: <http://tibet.net/2012/03/30/thousands-attend-funeral-of-jampel-yeshi-in-dharamsala/>
- 645 "Thousands attend funeral of Jampa Yeshe in Dharamsala," March 30, 2012, Central Tibetan Administration, see: <http://tibet.net/2012/03/30/thousands-attend-funeral-of-jampel-yeshi-in-dharamsala/>
- 646 For an account of deaths at Ngaba after March 16, 2008, see "Tibet at a Turning Point," August 2009, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tibet-a-turning-point. Graphic images of some of those shot dead were released to the media.
- 647 For a full transcript of the letter, see: "Tibetans in monasteries under crackdown hold prayer ceremonies for earthquake victims: message of reconciliation from monastery," May 21, 2008, ICT, at: <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetans-monasteries-under-crackdown-hold-prayer-ceremonies-earthquake-victims-message-rec>
- 648 The Epic of King Gesar [Geser], the lord of the legendary kingdom of Ling, is believed to date from the 12th century. Reciting the legends is an important element of Tibetan culture; Gesar is a warrior fighting against the enemies of dharma.
- 649 Ngaba was the first Tibetan area to experience the impact of Mao Zedong and the Red Army, even before the founding of the PRC. Kirti Rinpoche has testified that in 1935, during the Long March, Chinese troops destroyed Lhateng Monastery, which housed more than 2000 monks. In testimony to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in Washington on November 3, 2011, Kirti Rinpoche stated: "They [the Red Army] then walked through Muge Gonchen during which many monks and civilians were either killed or wounded. The army convened a meeting in Muge Monastery and later confiscated valuables and grains from Gyarong Choktse, Kyomkyo, Japhuk and Datsang Monastery, which led to the first-ever famine in Tibet. This was the first time that Tibetans in this region survived by eating leaves of trees." Full text at: www.savetibet.org/policy-center/us-government-and-legislative-advocacy/testimony-kirti-rinpoche-chief-abbot-kirti-monastery-tom-lantos-hum
- 650 The 17-Point Agreement, broadly accepted to have been signed under duress by the Tibetans, left the local Tibetan government's decision-making over religion, language and political institutions intact in exchange for its acceptance of Chinese sovereignty. The agreement provided guarantees to respect mutual needs and establish a relationship between the two governments. Eight years after the Agreement was signed, in March 1959, tens of thousands of Tibetans were killed after they rose up against Chinese rule in an attempt to protect the Dalai Lama and defend their freedoms. Both the Tibetans and Chinese governments repudiated the Agreement, and cooperation effectively concluded with the Dalai Lama's escape into exile. See: "China's propaganda on the 17-point agreement distorts history and impedes path to resolving the Tibet problem," May 19, 2011, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/china%E2%80%99s-propaganda-17-point-agreement-distorts-history-and-impedes-path-resolving-tibet-
- 651 The then Party Secretary of the TAR, Hu Jintao, presided over the imposition of martial law in Lhasa in March, 1989, following the protests.
- 652 This is an issue that matters to Kirti monks today and has contributed to despair and unrest in the monastery.
- 653 The burning of wild animal furs as an expression of Tibetan loyalties was originally inspired by a statement made by the Dalai Lama during a major religious empowerment, the Kalachakra, in India in 2006 in which he said he felt "ashamed" when he saw Tibetans wearing the pelts of endangered animals such as tigers or leopards. See: "New images of burning of wild animal pelts in dramatic act of dissent," May 27, 2009, ICT, at: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/new-images-burning-wild-animal-pelts-dramatic-act-dissent
- 654 Other sources refer to 18 Tibetans killed on March 16, 2008. The exact number could not be confirmed.
- 655 As outlined elsewhere in this report, around 300 monks were taken away from Kirti monastery on April 21, 2011.
- 656 "Thousands of Tibetan students and schoolchildren gather for peaceful demonstration in Rebkong," November 9, 2012, ICT, see: <http://savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/thousands-tibetan-students-and-schoolchildren-gather-peaceful-demonstration-rebkong>
- 657 "Tibetan teachers write petition in support of Tibetan language; fears for students after detentions," October 26, 2010, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-teachers-write-petition-support-tibetan-language-fears-students-after-detentions

- 658 "China must urgently address rights violations in Tibet," November 2, 2012, UN News Centre, see: www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43399&Cr=China&Cr1#.ULuTbUmQ3Y
- 659 Chinese intellectual Wang Lixiong writes: "The complete religious system of Tibetan Buddhism has been an effective and necessary mechanism for maintaining social and ecological stability in Tibet. [...] Laws and police power are actually less effective than religion in creating social stability, because they only act as a negative deterrent and operate through the principle of punishment. They do not produce or promote goodness in society." "The End of Tibetan Buddhism" in "The Struggle for Tibet" by Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya, Verso, 2009.
- 660 "60 years of Chinese Misrule: Arguing Cultural Genocide in Tibet," April 2012, ICT, see: www.savetibet.org/resource-center/ict-publications/reports/60-years-chinese-misrule



Dorje Rinchen ablaze after he set fire to himself on October 23, 2012 in Labrang.



Troops are seen closing in on Dorje Rinchen's body after he has self-immolated. Smoke can still be seen arising from his body and it is not clear if he was still alive at this point. Laypeople and monks are trying to protect him from being taken away by troops. In Tibetan tradition, it is important to protect the body of someone who has died for religious ritual and offerings in order to ensure an auspicious rebirth. Since the self-immolations began in Tibet in 2009, many Tibetans have taken great risks to retrieve the bodies of those who have self-immolated in order to carry out religious practice.



Monks from Labrang Tashikyil monastery walking to the village of Sayi, the home area of Dorje Rinchen located approximately 2 kilometers outside of Labrang. Initially prevented from going, the monks were eventually allowed to travel to Dorje Rinchen's home to offer prayers following his death after self-immolating on October 23, 2012.



Phuntsog, a 20-year old monk, self-immolated on March 16, 2011, the 3rd anniversary of a protest at Kirti monastery in Ngaba in 2008 during which at least 10 Tibetans were shot dead. According to a witness of the protest, before he was stopped by police, Phuntsog shouted slogans including “May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live for 10,000 years!”



Monks gathered at Kirti monastery on March 18, 2011 to make offerings and pray for Phuntsog, who died after self-immolating on March 16, 2011. His body was then taken nearby for cremation. A Tibetan who was at the cremation told ICT: "It seemed to me that Phuntsog's cremation became a focus for Tibetan people's grief and sense of loss, as well as an expression of their solidarity and strength as Tibetans. I took this picture as around 500 Tibetans converged on the hillside, monks and laypeople. They bore khatags, Tibetan white blessing scarves. The noise of their chanting the mantra dedicated to His Holiness rang in my ears. There were mothers carrying children, there were old men walking with a stick. People were crying, they were sharing their sorrow. It was as if there was nothing else for them to do. It felt as though my heart was breaking. Ever since then, I have not been the same person."



Prayer session at sky burial site. This photo was taken during the prayer session for Phuntsog at the sky burial site located over 3 kilometers away from Kirti monastery in Ngaba county. People followed in procession with Phuntsog's body from Kirti monastery to the sky burial site, chanting "Om Mani Padme Hum." In this image we can see monks sitting in the upper area and lay people sitting below, praying for Phuntsog. Phuntsog's body was cremated at the sky burial site on March 18, 2011. The flame is visible in the top right of the photo.



Photos of the Dalai Lama and other senior religious leaders at Kirti monastery in Ngaba county, Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan province, were damaged following a raid on the monastery in early April 2008. Kirti monastery was at the center of the wave of protests in eastern Tibet when monks were joined by laypeople and schoolchildren in a major protest on March 16, 2008, calling for a free Tibet, with pictures of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan flags on display.



Tibetans have been at pains to demonstrate clearly their adherence to the Dalai Lama's emphasis on non-violence. This image, from Dzamthang (Chinese: Rangtang), Ngaba in eastern Tibet, shows knives that have been handed in to a central public area to be destroyed as a symbolic demonstration of this intent.



In a similar symbolic expression of non-violent intent, Tibetans have handed in knives to be destroyed along with wild animal pelts, in an area of eastern Tibet. This is also symbolic of a vow to quit internal strife and to stay united. The destruction and burning of wild animal furs as an expression of Tibetan loyalties was originally inspired by a statement made by the Dalai Lama during a major religious festival in India in 2006 in which he said he felt “ashamed” when he saw Tibetans wearing the pelts of endangered animals such as tigers or leopards.



There has been an upsurge in Tibetan expressions of their national identity, often through the commemoration of significant anniversaries and actions rooted in Tibetan religious culture. Earlier this year, monks (pictured) at the historic Lamu Dechen monastery in Chentsa, Malho, marked the March 10 anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising (and the 2008 protests) with a bold and peaceful religious commemoration including the burning of incense, and a strict lockdown was imposed by the authorities. Monks at Lamu Dechen created butter sculptures (a traditional form of offering) of the Dalai Lama and also of the Tibetan 'snow lion' flag, which is banned in Tibet.



People's Armed Police, equipped with fire extinguishers, patrolling the streets of Lhasa. Two young Tibetan men, Dargye and Dorje Tseten, self-immolated and died outside one of Tibet's holiest shrines, the Jokhang temple in Lhasa, on May 27, 2012.



While requirements for entering Lhasa were already stringent, on March 1, 2012 authorities in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) began requiring any ordinary citizen seeking to enter the TAR to show four different identity cards, and this image was posted by Tibetan writer Woesser on her blog. The consequences were devastating for Tibetans from the eastern Tibetan areas of Kham and Amdo. More than half of all Tibetans live outside the TAR in Tibetan areas of Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu, but many of them live or work in Lhasa and large numbers travel there frequently on pilgrimage, as it is the religious and cultural centre of Tibetan Buddhism. There are no bars on Chinese businesses or Chinese tourists or migrants entering Lhasa.



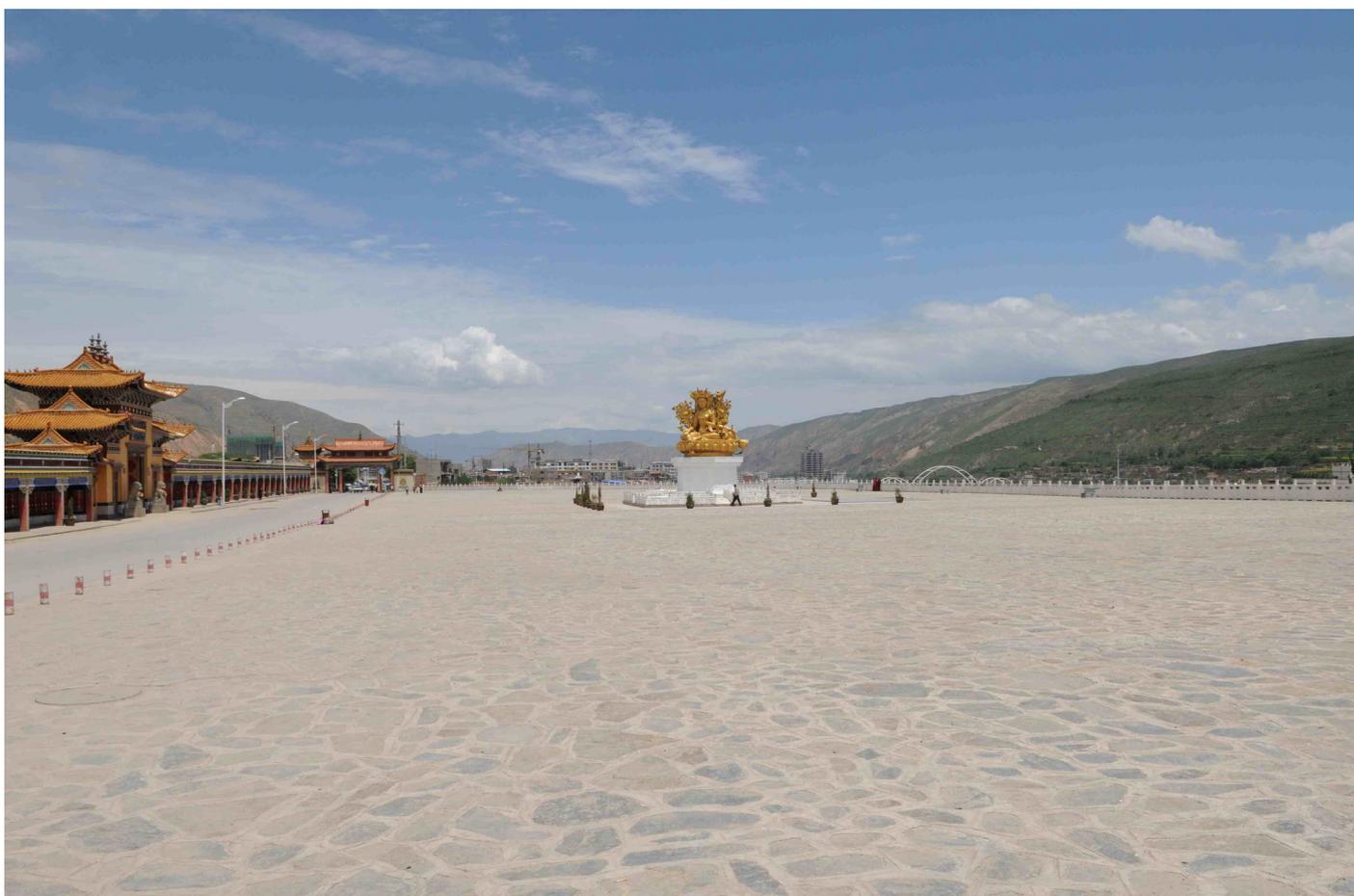
Tibetans in traditional dress bear aloft an image of the Chinese leaders Mao, Deng Xiaopeng, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao together with butter sculptures. Butter sculptures, traditionally created in Tibetan monasteries as an act of devotion, would normally be carried together with thangkas (Tibetan religious paintings or wall-hangings). This image appeared in the Chinese state media.



Images, such as this one of Tibetans ploughing the fields in rural areas with red Party flags on their tractors, have appeared in state media and reflect the Chinese government's strategy of actively establishing Party presence in rural areas as the answer to 'instability.' This has led to a more pervasive and systematic approach to 'patriotic education' and a dramatic increase in work teams and Party cadres in rural areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region as well as well-resourced initiatives in the cultural and social sphere in Lhasa and other urban areas.



Jamyang Palden receiving medical treatment following his March 14, 2012 self-immolation protest near Rongpo monastery in Rebkong. He later died from his injuries.



Dolma Square in front of Rongpo monastery in Rebkong county, Malho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai, where Jamyang Palden, Chagmo Kyi and Jinpa Gyatso set themselves on fire and died.



The body of Dhondup is seen still in flames on a side wall of Serkhang temple at Labrang Tashikyil monastery.



Dhondup, a Tibetan man in his sixties, died after setting fire to himself on the morning of October 22, 2012 at the side of Serkhang (meaning golden house or temple) temple in Labrang Tashikyil monastery, located in Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu.



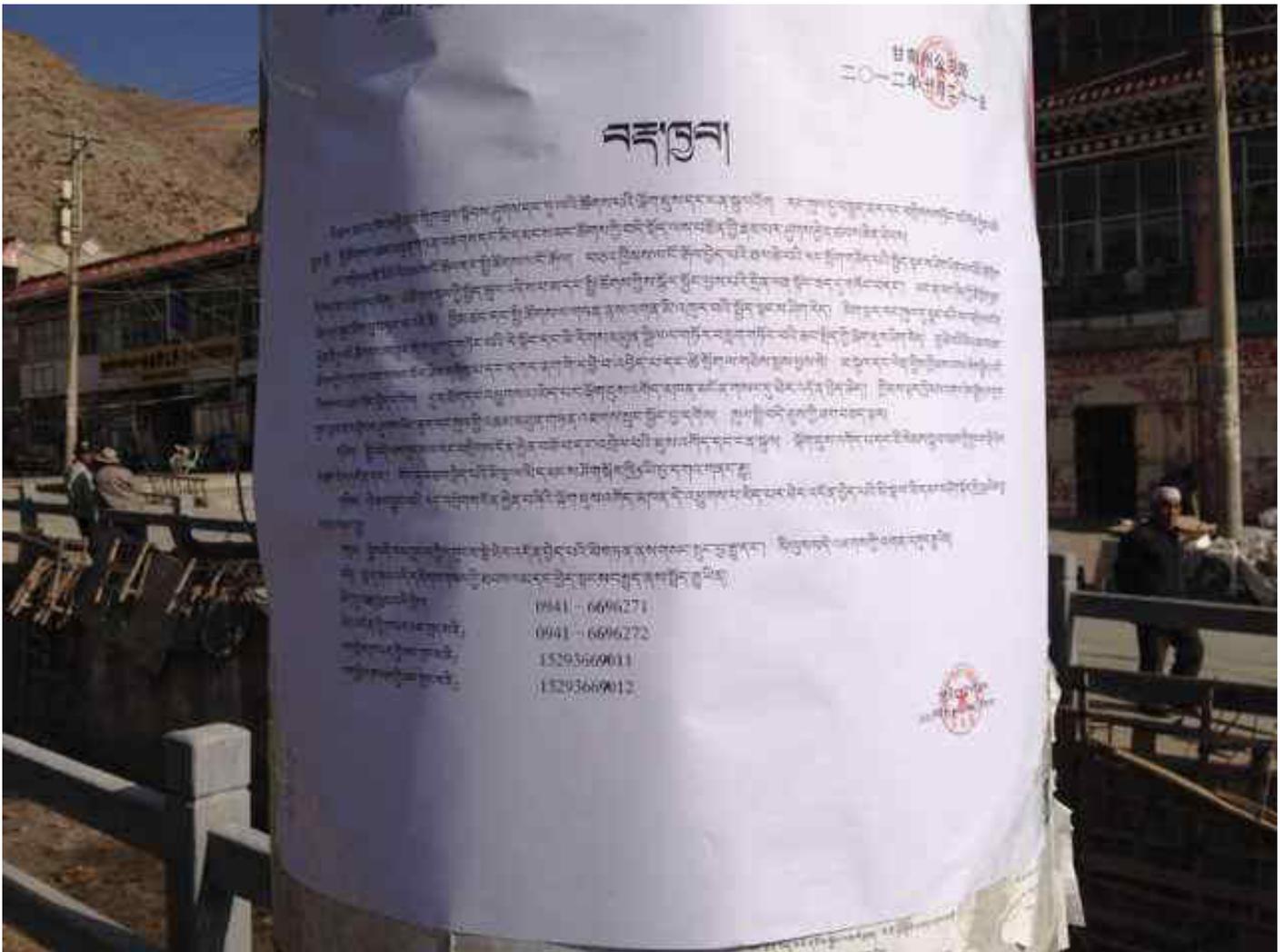
After security personnel took away the body of Dhondup, who self-immolated on October 22, 2012, local Tibetans began offering khatags (Tibetan white blessing scarves) at the site of his self-immolation protest.



Security forces gathered on October 22, 2012 in the main street of Labrang, Sangchu county, Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu. Dhondup, a Tibetan man in his fifties, became the 57th Tibetan to self-immolate when he set fire to himself in protest on October 22, 2012 outside Labrang Tashikyil monastery.



A khatag (Tibetan white blessing scarf) was placed on the site where Dhondup self-immolated and died near the entrance of Labrang monastery in the Tibetan area of Amdo.



Chinese security authorities posted notices in the Labrang area offering substantial rewards for information about the “black hand” behind Tibetan self-immolations in Kanlho (Chinese: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu province. ICT translation: <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/chinese-authorities-offer-large-rewards-information-%E2%80%98black-hand%E2%80%99-behind-tibetan-self-immol>



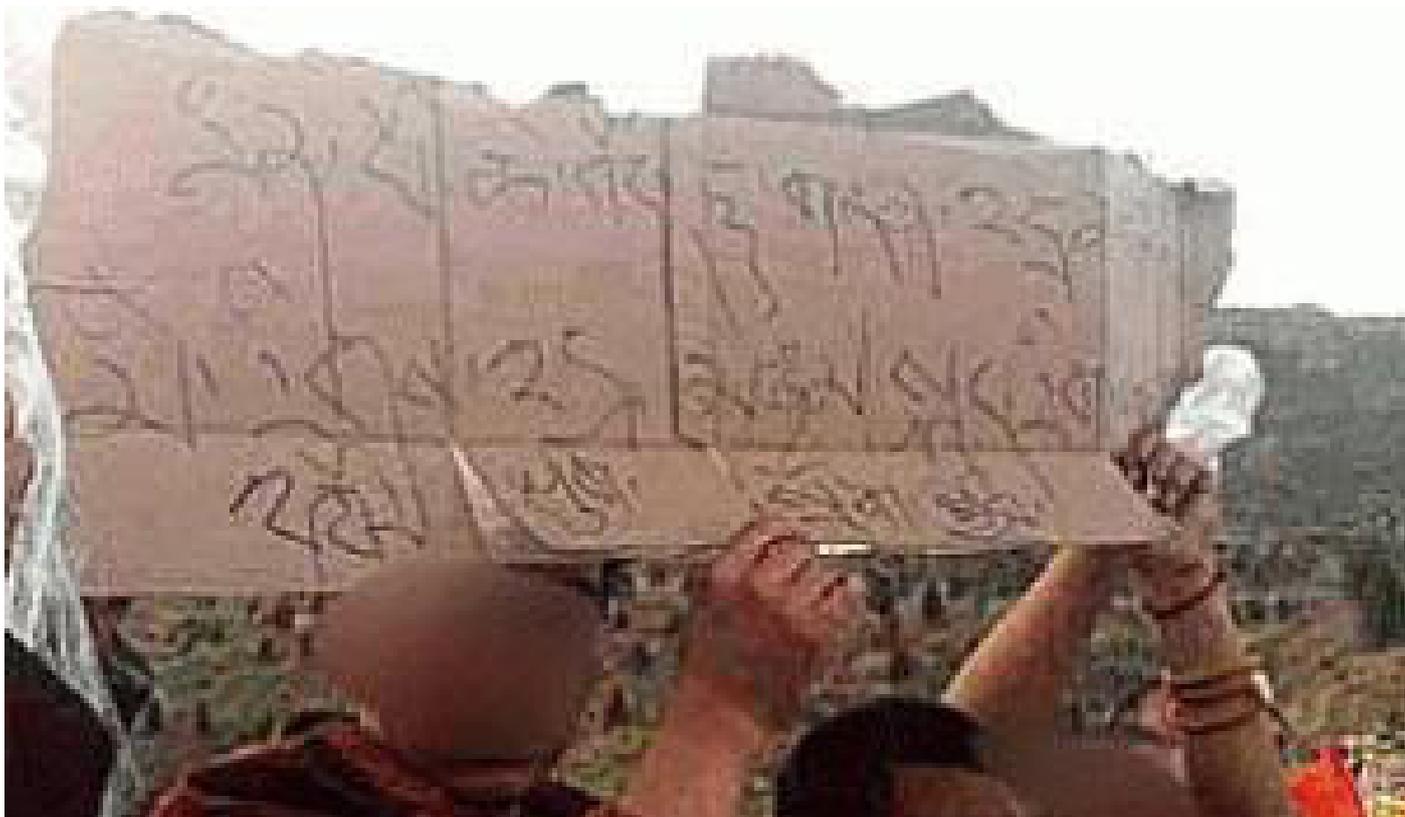
Ogyen, a 20-year old Tibetan student, was shot and killed after police opened fire into a crowd of Tibetans gathered in protest on January 26, 2012 in Dzamthang county, Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. The protest was in opposition to the detention of another young Tibetan, named Tarpa, who was taken into custody after posting leaflets stating that the self-immolation protests in Tibet were calls for Tibetan freedom and for the return of the Dalai Lama, and that the self-immolations would continue until authorities met these demands.



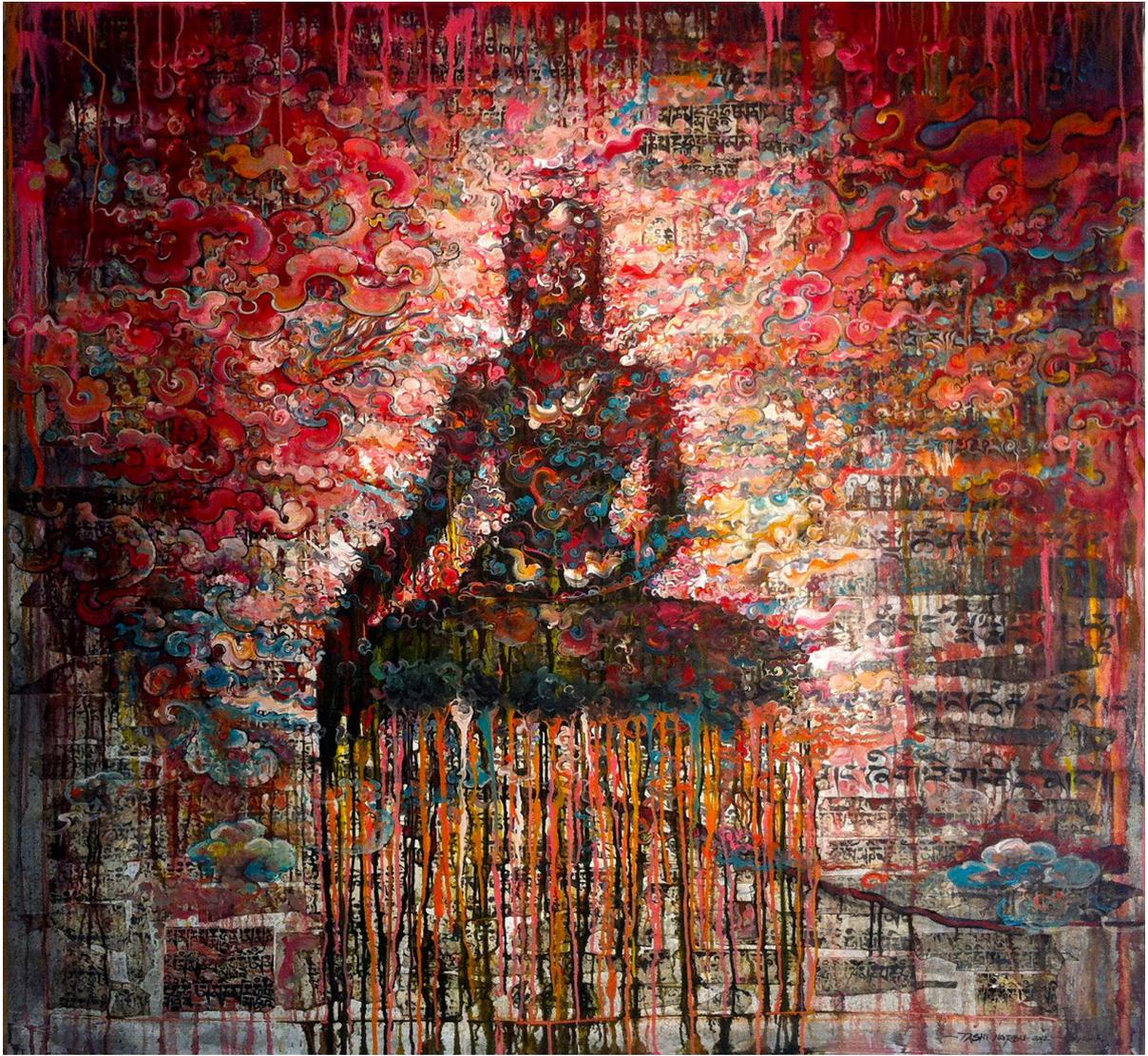
Yonden (pictured) was one of three Tibetans who were shot and killed (several others injured) when police opened fire on Tibetans who gathered to protest in Draggo county town in Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan (Tibetan area of Kham) on January 23, 2012, the first day of Chinese New Year. The incident followed the circulation of leaflets in the area saying that Tibetans should not celebrate the New Year in 2012 because of the self-immolations, and declaring an intention by the unnamed author of the leaflets to set fire to themselves at the time of Tibetan new Year (Losar, which occurred on February 22).



Troops are visible as Tibetan pilgrims gather at the Jokhang temple in Lhasa in September, 2012. At the Jokhang temple, one of Tibet's holiest sites, Tibetan pilgrims face intense security, with a constant presence of troops and airport-style scanners now in operation.



Monks holding a makeshift cardboard banner during Jinpa Gyatso's cremation in Rebkong, Qinghai (Amdo) on November 8, 2012 which reads: "Let the Dalai Lama return to Tibet; equality for minorities and language rights."



'Self-immolation' – a painting by Tashi Norbu, Tibetan artist based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, by kind permission of the artist. The work expresses the dual hope that the self-immolators' sacrifice will lead to their religious realization of ultimate reality, through burning away ignorance, and also 'burn away' the conventional reality of oppression. Tashi Norbu was born in Bhutan. www.tashinorbu.be



Schoolchildren and students demonstrated on November 9, 2012 in Rebkong (Chinese: Tongren), Qinghai, the Tibetan area of Amdo.



In the early evening of Friday, November 9, 2012, Tibetan students at the Qinghai Nationalities University held a candle-light vigil and said mantras for Tibetans who had self-immolated across Tibet.



On November 9, 2012 students at the Qinghai Nationalities University held a candle-light vigil and said mantras for Tibetans who had self-immolated. The students' peaceful gathering, which took place for about an hour, shows the impact of Tibetan self-immolations is spreading across segments of Tibetan society and also shows a willingness among Tibetans to demonstrate solidarity despite the build-up of security forces in Tibetan areas and inherent risk to their safety.



Wangchen Norbu's body, draped in khatags (Tibetan white blessing scarves), following his self-immolation protest near Kangtsa Gaden Choepheling monastery in the Kangtsa area of Qinghai (Tibetan region of Amdo). Wangchen Norbu, aged 25, died after setting himself on fire on November 19, 2012 and his body was taken to the nearby monastery, where a large number of monks and lay people gathered to pay their respects and offer prayers.



Tibetan artist Karma Phuntsok's painting 'Self Sacrifice in Tibet' (2011) is a critique, through mimicry of a painting, 'The Meeting of the General and the Monk in Kardze in 1936', a painting that was a collaboration in 1980 between Tibetan painter Rigzin Namgyal and a Chinese painter whose name is Tibetanized as Mis Ting Kha'e. In Karma Phuntsok's painting, Mao in military uniform looks towards a can of gasoline, with the oil connecting images of 13 Tibetans who had self-immolated amidst flames (there were 13 at the time the painting was created), including the first Tibetan to set fire to himself, Thubten Ngodrup (in April, 1998), and the first to self-immolate inside Tibet, Tapey. In each top corner there is a burning standing figure. Beneath Mao and the self-immolators are workers and soldiers holding aloft Mao's Little Red Book, resonant of images from Cultural Revolution-era Socialist Realism propaganda. Leigh Sangster writes: "Karma Phuntsok was seeking to make the point that the self-immolations are evidence that the glorified Socialist future promised has failed to deliver. 'Tibet is still the 1960s for Tibetans,' says Karma Phuntsok, who links successive generations' suffering." ('The Work of Art in the Age of Self-Immolation' Leigh Sangster, *Journal of the Society of Cultural Anthropology*, April, 2012). Karma Phuntsok lives in Australia. <http://www.karmaart.com/> Picture used by kind permission of the artist.

STORM IN THE GRASSLANDS

Self-immolations in Tibet and Chinese policy



The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) is a non-profit membership organization that monitors and promotes internationally recognized human rights in Tibet. The International Campaign for Tibet was founded in 1988 and has offices in Washington DC, Amsterdam, Berlin, London and Brussels.

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