



Causes of Self-Immolations in Tibet and reactions of Chinese Netizens

Speaker: Thubten Tsamphel

23 October 2013

**Institute of Chinese Studies
Delhi**

Thubten Samphel outlined the perceptions of the Chinese government and officials on the recent bout of self-immolations occurring in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). He described their perceived causes and the way the self-immolations responded to the political realities of Tibet, before describing the way certain individuals in China resorted to the internet to air their views on the same. One fundamental critique that could be made from the self-immolations is that most of them are occurring in the north-east Tibet, the parts that are now known as 'Greater Tibet.' This trend is evidence of the tension between the Chinese boundaries of the area and the people's perception that sees all three provinces of Kham, Amdo and U-tsang to be equally inherent parts of Tibet. The self-immolations in the provinces that are not part of the core areas of Tibet manifest the tensions caused by the official cartography.

The self-immolations can also be read as a latest expression of a long trajectory of critique from the Tibetan state that has been expressed towards China. The tenth Panchen Lama sent a petition to Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong known as the 70,000 character petition in 1962. When the petition was sent to Mao Zedong, the Panchen Lama was the senior most leader remaining in Tibet, after the flight of the Dalai Lama to India. It is believed to be the most extensive internal criticism of China's communist policies ever submitted to the leadership. It documented the mass arrests, excessive punishment and executions of Tibetans that followed the uprisings in the province after 1959 and the famine in eastern Tibet that resulted from Mao's Great Leap Forward in the 1950's. Mao denounced the petition as "a poisoned arrow shot at the party" and called its author "a reactionary feudal overlord." The leader spent the following fourteen years in prison or house arrest, and was released only after Mao's death. Days before dying in Shigatse, he stated that "Tibet has lost more than gained under Chinese rule."

Another figure within the Tibetan leadership who was vocal in his criticism of the communist rule was the eighth Arjia Rinpoche. An abbot of the Kumbum Monastery, he left Tibet in 1998 after he wrote that the natives in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Tibet are disappearing faster than glacial ice under the communist regime. He is currently stationed in United States. One of the self-immolators is said to have demanded for the monk to come back to Tibet along with the Dalai Lama, as a dying wish. Ngapa Ngawang Jigme, a former chairperson of the TAR and Bawa Phuntsok Wangyal, the Tibetan representative in the Chinese Communist Party were other two political figures who were snubbed even as they were presenting their criticisms within the party lines. Wangyal was a communist who even sought assistance from Indian communists (but was

denied) and participated in the Long March to Yunnan. The speaker met Wangyal as a member of the last delegation of the the 'Fact Finding Mission' in 1985.

As part of the delegation, Samphel recounts how the leadership in Beijing celebrated the Dalai Lama's birthday and sees this as signifying the degree to which China was willing to go to resolve tensions, back in 1985.

The Tibetan reading of Chinese rule in Tibet, therefore has categorized the same in the following phases: 1950-60 was the period where they lost the country; 1960-70 was the period that saw a lot of political posturing of the CCP; 1970-80 was the period marked by the Cultural Revolution and 1980-90 was the period of 'opening up' or economic reforms. The main features of the rule have been constant attacks on Tibet's Buddhist civilization, language and identity; interference in their spiritual life; demonization of the Dalai Lama and forcing monks to denounce him; influx of Chinese settlers taking away employment opportunities and forced removal of Tibetan nomads. The CCP official line in 1950-60s was that 'there can be no two suns in the same sky.' This is in sharp contrast with the seventh century Chinese civilization that produced Huang Tsang, the philosopher who travelled to Nalanda to study Sanskrit texts.

Today's Chinese society, however, has varied reactions to the burning of citizens in Tibet. Ai Weiwei the radical artist stated that with the self-immolations, Tibetans are begging to be respected, for the state to not touch them and leave them alone. Other pro-democracy activists like Ran Yunfei, Liu Xiaobo (the imprisoned Nobel laureate) and Yu Jie have also spoken in support of the self-immolators. Xu Zhiyong, a lecturer of the Beijing University of Post and Telecommunications and a human rights lawyer is one of the founders of the new citizen's movement in China. His organization, 'Open Constitution Initiative' supports students and others who have been convicted for political protests. The organisation's research into the unrest that occurred in Tibet in 2008 took place in all the three provinces of Tibet. The report stated that the "central government has backed incompetent local officials, created an economy that provides few options for young people, and deprived Tibetans of access to equal justice under the law." It recommended that any policy be implemented in Tibet keeping in mind, the aspirations of the people of the land. Liu Xiaobo along with three hundred and forty others urged the Chinese government to hold talks with the Dalai Lama.

In 2011, an online petition which would ask 'Ten Questions to the Dalai Lama' received over three hundred and twenty-six questions from over twelve thousand seven hundred and seventy-one Chinese netizens. The exercise was a first step in clearing misleading information about the Dalai Lama. His responses garnered worldwide acknowledgement and forged a new link with the Chinese people.

In the question-answer session, several queries were raised about the moral standing of the self-immolators vis-a-vis Tibetan Buddhism. The speaker responded by saying that several debates have occurred about whether the act of self-immolation goes against the principles of Tibetan Buddhism. But the fundamental question that remains is why are so many young Tibetans driven to take their own lives? The policy of denouncing the Dalai Lama disrupted the master-student lineage, which goes back to the Buddha. To criticize the Dalai Lama was akin to criticizing this lineage, which is intolerable for any Buddhist.

The other set of questions focused on the deep rooted resentment in Tibetans which festers the unrest that occurred around Olympics or burning of animal skin to protest the illegal hunting and sale of these skins. The act of self-immolations was in the trajectory of these protests but a very violent one. In a way, the act

was a manifestation of the tensions caused by cultural differences between Tibetans and Han Chinese. How then, were these self-immolations different from suicide bombings by other religious identities? The speaker responded that the Tibetans thought it was better to burn themselves rather than burn others as such acts would bring more state suppression on the members of the community who would have survived. The nature of state surveillance on the community dictated the choice of immolating oneself, which makes the act different from suicide bombing.

Disclaimer

*The Wednesday Seminar at the ICS is a forum for presentations and discussions on current affairs as well as ongoing research by renowned scholars, experts, diplomats and journalists as also younger emerging researchers from all over the world. These talks are the independent views of the speakers. We produce this summary or recording of the presentation only for purposes of dissemination and for generating discussion. **All views, positions, and conclusions expressed here should be understood to be those of the author(s) and not necessarily of the ICS.***