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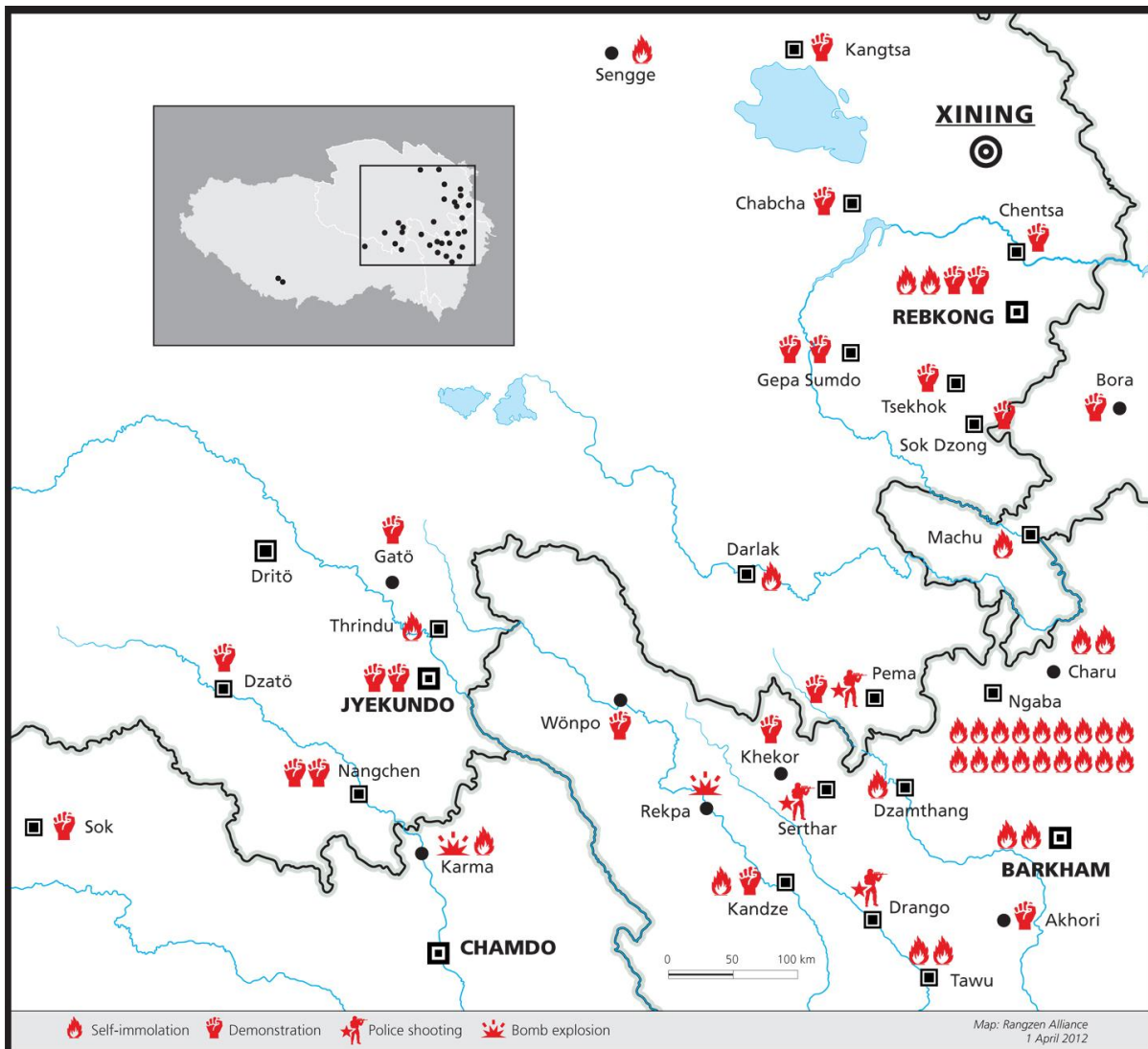
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The Geopolitics of Politico-Religious Protest in Eastern Tibet

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It is clear that the recent wave of self-immolations and protests taking place in southern Amdo and northern Kham in eastern Tibet is a reflection of an extreme form of defiance in response to an increasingly repressive atmosphere. The atmosphere is epitomized by the intensification of patriotic education campaigns in monasteries and is framed within a broader political context of discriminatory rule by authorities who generally see only variants of assimilation as the solution to the so-called ‘Tibet Question.’ However, it is less clear why this particular form of protest – self-immolation – is happening in this particular part of Tibet. The explanation is probably not found in differences of governance styles across this eastern Tibetan region, which has been fragmented, absorbed and ruled by the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and the Tibet Autonomous Region. Additionally, there are large Tibetan areas in these provinces, under similar conditions of rule, where self-immolations have not taken place. Rather, local histories in these Tibetan areas need to be carefully considered, especially with respect to the evolving fusion between religious faith, political dissidence, and rapid dislocating social change.

As a starting point, one obvious conditioning factor that is distinctive to this region of Tibet – on both sides of the Sichuan-Qinghai border – is that it has been the focal point of nomad resettlement programs over the last decade, in large part due to their ecologically-strategic location as part of, or adjacent to, the Three Rivers Source area (Ch. [sanjiangyuan](#), located in southern Qinghai). Admittedly, there has been a lot of confusion about these [resettlements](#) regarding the numbers involved or the degree to which they are forced or voluntary, coercive or incentivized, complete or partial, permanent or reversible. There has also been conflation between these resettlements and the much more lenient ‘[Comfortable Housing Program](#)’ in the Tibet Autonomous Region, which does not necessarily involve resettlement. Nonetheless, the resettlements in this region, especially in the Three Rivers Source area and also in adjacent counties in Gansu and Sichuan, have been of the most severe variety – partial or full relocations of pastoral communities to semi-urbanized settlements in small towns – and it is striking the degree to which the occurrence of self-immolations has corresponded, with a few exceptions, to this zone of intensive resettlement.



Map 1: Locations of self-immolations and protests in Eastern Tibet, February 2009 to 31 March 2012. Source: [Rangzen Alliance](#).

As far as we know, those who have immolated themselves so far have not made any explicit connection to the resettlements, although we also lack testaments from all but two of these individuals. Regardless, it is clear that the resettlements have been profoundly disruptive to local communities in this region and have added to the [already-existing pressures](#) for young people to move out of farming and herding and into small towns where [employment conditions are dire and social problems worsening](#). In this context of dislocation and alienation, it is understandable that the ordained – as vanguards of an indigenous moral order – might feel the need for extraordinary measures.

Parallel to such developments, this remote region of northern Kham and southern Amdo has also been a site of a vigorous local revival of Tibetan Buddhism since the 1980s, led by charismatic leaders who have often emerged from outside of the traditional Buddhist hierarchy. Especially notable was the [Serthar Institute in Serthar County](#), led by the extremely popular late [Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok](#), who was considered by many Tibetans throughout this region to be the greatest living lama of Tibet next to the Dalai Lama. This institute was targeted by the Sichuan authorities in 2001, leading to demolitions of most of the informal settlement and mass expulsions of thousands of devotees, including many mainland and overseas Chinese.

Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok passed away in January 2004 in a military hospital in Chengdu and there were widespread rumours that he had been [poisoned in the hospital](#). While doubtful, it is the power of popular belief rather than precise truth that matters in such instances. These combined events galvanized grievance in this region, which subsequently manifested in a variety of tensions and outbursts.

Similar tensions have been apparent on a variety of fronts for many years in this region even before the outbreak of widespread protests in spring 2008. Indeed, when I interviewed four Chinese Sichuan government officials in 2007 who were responsible for keeping track of developments in the Tibetan areas of Sichuan, they admitted then that although their economic strategies had been thus far a success (from a government perspective), their political strategies of creating stability had been a dismal failure. [The protests of 2008](#) were testament to this failure and the underlying tensions have continued to worsen with the various tactics of the government since then, especially the intensification of [patriotic education campaigns](#) in many monasteries.

Patriotic education might have been applied so fervently in this region precisely because the strength of this religious revival has been coupled with a strong sense of Tibetan nationalism and supported by a vibrant local business community. Nationalist expressions have not necessarily been secessionist, but they have involved strong support for local revivals of identity, language, culture and religion, as well as many locally initiated efforts to advance education. In particular, Ngawa (Ch. Aba) County, which appears to be the epicentre of the current self-immolations, is known for its successful business networks stretching across the plateau, from Golok and Chengdu to Lhasa, which in turn have been valuable sources of funding for local monasteries and for locally-run projects such as schools. To give one example, during my research in Ngawa County in 2004, a businessman was arrested and his successful primary school with over one thousand

students – fully funded by him – was closed by the authorities because of suspicions regarding his patriotism (or so it was officially claimed).

There are also strong ties with the exile community in India via many of the monasteries in this region, which explains the fervor of the authorities. Kirti Monastery in Ngawa County – which has been the largest single source of self-immolations so far, whether by monks from the monastery or by people in the community connected to the monastery – has a large monastery in Dharamsala, where many of its monks have gone to study and its head lama resides. Several monasteries that I visited in Kardze (Ch. Ganzi) or Draggo (Ch. Luhuo) counties have similar connections.

However, there are also very strong ties with mainland and overseas Chinese devotees through monasteries in this region. Indeed, such Chinese devotees have been an important source of funding for the religious revival, as has been particularly evident in the boom of monastery construction across Eastern Tibet. Such fusions of religion, nationalism, and subaltern economics serve as an archetypal microcosm for the changing dynamics of pan-Tibetan nationalism more generally, which, as noted by [Tsering Shakya](#) (2008), reflect interesting synergies within pan-Asian religious solidarities, ironically centred in China but in support of indigenous and traditional forms of Tibetan leadership.

On the question of the form of protest, although Tibetans do not appear to have a tradition of self-immolation, as is often noted, the spirit of self-sacrifice is nonetheless celebrated in Tibetan Buddhism, particularly when no harm is done to others. This derives from the bodhisattva ideal within the broader Mahayana tradition of Buddhism – the tradition shared with the Buddhisms of China, Japan and parts of Vietnam. It is not surprising that this ideal could be extended to self-immolation as a politico-religious act of resistance against a perceived oppressive and anti-religious foreign rule, particularly given the potential of this act to influence public opinion through hyper-communicative technologies. Nor is it surprising that monks and nuns would be leading this form of protest given that they have regularly been at the forefront of dissident activity since the 1950s and have generally conceived of their self-sacrificial role as a fusion of religious and political duty. It is a moot point whether the idea in this particular instance was inspired by the recent self-immolation in Tunisia in December 2010, or by the famous cases of self-immolation by monks in Vietnam in the 1960s, or else, more likely, by the fairly common practice of self-immolation as political protest in India, including one exiled Tibetan ex-monk who immolated himself in India in 1998.

Indeed, from the guru-devotional tantric perspective that these monks and nuns practice, the requirement to denounce the Dalai Lama (most likely their lineage lama and possibly even their actual direct lama) in the patriotic education campaigns is tantamount to the most cardinal of sins, condemning one to countless eons of ‘vajra hell.’ This undoubtedly makes the option of self-immolation appear as a far more lenient and briefer form of suffering, if not a virtuous act preserving one’s sanctity while also defending Buddhism in the face of oppression.

Given the current lack of access to the region and the fact that most of the immolators did not leave testaments or letters explaining their gesture, we might never know the precise triggers that set off these particular events in this specific region. However, there is no doubt that a certain breaking point was reached among certain religious communities and, arguably, among the wider population, who remain a deeply devout people. In the face of this breaking point, the Chinese authorities have obviously kept applying ever more hard-line policies with their own version of fervor, albeit one completely disconnected from the local population and derogatory towards its faith. The resultant resistance is not an issue of material deprivation, which is precisely why the strategy of the government to win the heart and minds of Tibetans through assimilationist material development is so fundamentally ill-conceived and will likely continue to fail in the near future.

2 April 2012

REFERENCE

New Left Review (2008), 'Tsering Shakya : Tibetan Questions – Interview', New Left Review, 51, May-June 2008. <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2720>