

Tibetan self-immolations ignored

Written by Dan Bloom

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Suicide is usually a private, impulsive response to extreme personal stress or anxiety, and is carried out, in most cases, in the confines of a person's home or office, far from the glare of photographers and news reporters.

However, for more than 100 Tibetans who have committed suicide in public by dousing themselves with gasoline and setting themselves on fire — “self-immolation” is the Western media's polite word for this — such actions were intentionally public and carry an important message.

Yet who is listening, and are the Tibetan protests having any impact? Where is the public outcry over these public and gruesome suicides in the West — or in Taiwan or Japan, for that matter?

In the 1960s, when US military forces invaded Vietnam, a series of public self-immolation suicides by Buddhist monks in Saigon served to wake up US anti-war protesters and government officials in Washington who were in charge of prosecuting the war.

However, 100 suicides by Tibetans protesting China's treatment of their people and their culture have had a small impact on the West. Where are the editorials in the New York Times or Washington Post calling on China to cease its maltreatment of Tibet and the Tibetans? Where are the voices of conscience in London or New York over these tragic Tibetan self-immolations?

“Self-immolation,” refers to setting oneself on fire, often as a form of protest or martyrdom, and since the Vietnam War, and now with Tibetans, it has become a type of extreme political protest. We might call these tragic protests by Tibetans today intentional suicides “on behalf of a collective cause.”

When a Buddhist monk in South Vietnam named Thich Quang Duc protested the regime of former Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, photos of his public suicide were splashed across the front pages of Western newspapers in Europe and the US, introducing the term “self-immolation” to English-speaking readers — and TV viewers — worldwide.

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Duc set himself on fire to protest the discriminatory treatment of Buddhists under Diem's Roman Catholic administration in South Vietnam. As more and more monks in Vietnam followed Duc's example, Western media outlets began to see and understand the suicides as the political and cultural protest acts that they were.

In the same way, the 100 self-immolations, so far, by Tibetans can be seen as dramatic, political and newsworthy, yet the Western and Asian media do not seem to be getting up in arms about this.

With China's propaganda "machine" telling Western and Asian media outlets that these Tibetan self-immolators are just crazy individuals being led astray, and even encouraged by "that splittist the Dalai Lama," Western and Asian newspaper editorials reflecting on the tragic deaths have been few and far between. For those media outlets in the West and in Asia that toady up to communist China, it is business as usual, with the emphasis on business. Do not upset the apple cart, do not upset Beijing.

When Tibetan government-in-exile Finance Minister Tsering Dhundup recently visited Taipei to commemorate the 54th anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising, he spoke about the 100-plus self-immolation protests.

In the 1960s, when self-immolation suicides of Buddhist monks caught the world's attention, who knew that 50 years later similar suicides by Tibetans would go more or less unnoticed by the world's media. In this well-connected Internet age, surely the images of the Tibetan suicides should be going viral and causing the West — and Taiwan — to react.

According to DPP Legislator Yu Mei-nu (俞梅努), President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has been silent on the Tibetan self-immolations and China's suppression of the region since taking office in 2009, although she said Ma had earlier spoken out in public about the issue during his 2008 presidential election campaign.

Since China is adept at propaganda and appears to be controlling the media conversation worldwide, the 107 suicides in Tibet have had very little impact on those Western powers

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doing “business” with China.

Is that the West’s response this time? What a difference 50 years can make.

Outside of Tibet and in the Tibetan protest community worldwide, the hundreds of self-immolation acts seem hardly to have registered in Washington or London — or Tokyo or Taipei. Have these suicides been in vain?

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