

FIRE, SACRIFICE, AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE RHETORIC OF SELF IMMOLATION

By

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ABSTRACT

Self-immolation is a complex rhetorical gesture that confounds many traditional norms of analysis, because it is an act in which the rhetorical canvas is the body. In this dissertation I analyze mediated responses to self-immolation in order to account for when self-immolation is likely to influence an audience and prompt change in society. Based on my findings during this analysis, I constructed an appropriate theory based explanation to illustrate how and why self-immolation achieves widespread resonance in some cases but not in others. First, the self-immolation must be recognized as justified due to a widely perceived crisis. In other words, the audience of the self-immolation must be able to comprehend why someone would take such an extreme action. Second, the protest must resonate with the audience's values and cultural beliefs. Whether due to religion or some other factor, the mediated narratives of self-immolations must be framed in a way that generates identification. Third, the style and power of the government in charge of the self-immolator's community will have a significant influence on how the self-immolator's story is told. Following an introduction to this study and a description of the history and religious roots of self-immolation, I apply this theory to multiple cases of self-immolation. In Chapter Three I analyze self-immolations during the Vietnam War era. In Chapters Four and Five I analyze self-immolations in Tibet and the Arab Spring, respectively. Finally, in Chapter Six, I discuss the implications of this study.

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Chapter One

Introduction

On June 11, 1963, a Buddhist monk named Thich Quang Duc made international headlines for setting himself on fire in the streets of Saigon. He did so to protest South Vietnam's persecution of his people. Journalist Malcolm Browne's photographs of the incident graphically showing Quang Duc in mid-flame have become some of the most iconic images of the Vietnam War era.¹ Michelle Murray Yang explains, "Quang Duc's self-immolation was a turning point in the escalating conflict between South Vietnamese Buddhists and the American-backed Diem regime."² Michael Biggs even credited Quang Duc's immolation as "the progenitor" to most other acts of self-immolation within the four decades following his act in 1963.³ Due to its prominence, the significance of Quang Duc's immolation has been studied as a protest suicide that functioned to "set a chain of events into motion which ultimately culminated in the American-backed coup that ended the South Vietnamese leader's reign."⁴ However, Quang Duc's action is not an isolated case nor is self-immolation just a 1960s phenomenon. In fact, in the past three years alone there have been over one hundred instances of political self-immolation that have had varying degrees of influence as acts of protest. In this dissertation, I examine this wide spectrum of occurrences of self-immolation in order to build a more complete and complex theory of self-immolation as a rhetorical tool. Specifically, I analyze the media's narratization of cases of self-immolation in order to explain when self-immolation resonates.

The most famous self-immolation in the twenty-first century (so far) is that of Mohammed Bouazizi. Bouazizi was an impoverished vegetable vendor who set himself on fire in Tunisia on December 17, 2010 after a female police officer confiscated some of his products, because he "was engaged in commercial activity in an unauthorized place."⁵ Bouazizi quickly

became a symbol of resistance against the poor economic conditions produced by Tunisia's corrupt government and is widely credited as being the impetus for the Arab Spring that spread across the Middle East shortly thereafter. According to the *New York Times*, a Facebook page called "Tunisians" described Bouazizi as "the symbol of the Tunisian revolution."⁶ He was also recognized in the international community. His mother was right when she explained, "[Bouazizi] is no longer the son of Tunisia. He is the son of the whole world."⁷ The European Parliament awarded Bouazizi the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and *Time Magazine* recognized him as the catalyst for their 2011 Person of the Year, which they awarded more generally to "the protestor."⁸ Due to the great media awareness his case has received and the influence of his actions, Bouazizi is a present day equivalent of Quang Duc. However, Bouazizi is only one of many who have taken such drastic action to protest persecution in recent times. Like Quang Duc, Bouazizi's actions have inspired others throughout his region to commit similar acts, but for some reason, they have received significantly less international coverage. The *Christian Science Monitor* noted, "Such grisly displays of martyrdom are usually designed to show a person's depth of conviction for a cause and to shock others into action. Yet only one recent self-immolation has clearly brought a result."⁹ It is important to consider why this is the case.

In addition to the fiery suicides taking place in the Middle East, numerous citizens of Tibet have taken this action in order to protest religious persecution by the Chinese government such as exiling the Dalai Lama. Since February 2009, at least one hundred and twenty-five Tibetans, including both Monks and average citizens, have set themselves on fire for political reasons.¹⁰ The director of Free Tibet, Stephanie Brigden, claimed, "The unrest in Tibet is escalating and widening. The number and frequency of self-immolations is unprecedented."¹¹

However, this staggering number of, in most cases, deaths has done little to produce real change in Tibet. If anything, China has only further cracked down on the region, banning most tourism, monitoring Monasteries, and blocking communication channels. For instance, Mark MacKinnon reported that “tens of thousands of residents” had their television and Internet service cut off and were being strictly monitored by checkpoints along “roads to control who gets in and out.”¹²

In this dissertation, I seek to increase awareness that self-immolation has been and still is a form of protest used by different types of people around the world. Like others before me, this dissertation will further solidify that bodies and images serve a rhetorical function, especially in protest movements. More importantly, though, this project will acknowledge and present analyses of varying types of self-immolation in order to create a more complete and complex theory of this unusual form of protest: from the most influential to the pushed aside, from the Arab world to America, from the Buddhist to the Christian, and from the past to the present. Before I analyze specific cases in the chapters to follow, I present a justification of study and examine several different areas of protest rhetoric literature including the use of the visual, the use of the body, and the use of suicide in particular. Then, I describe my methodology, present my own theory concerning the influence of self-immolation as a rhetorical act, and finally, present a plan of study for the dissertation as a whole.

Justification of Study

My study of protest by self-immolation is significant for at least three reasons. First, I add to the rhetorical literature on body rhetoric and suicide. Body rhetoric is still a developing area. It has been established that the body can argue enthymematically when the audience understands the context, but more needs to be done to determine exactly what makes bodies function rhetorically. Literature on the rhetoric of suicide and self-immolation in particular is even rarer,

especially in rhetorical studies. So far, those who have discussed suicide as rhetoric focus mainly on cases that have been determined to be effective but tend to ignore cases in which the rhetor made little impression on his or her audience. This has led to an over-simplification of suicide as rhetoric in which we tend to think that due to the extreme nature of such acts, they always receive attention and influence ideas. In this dissertation, I explain why this is not the case by considering a variety of self-immolation cases that have occurred in different contexts.

Second, self-immolation is worthy of study because of its endurance through time. Despite its ancient religious origins, self-immolation persists and has become a more distinctly political act. Many times when people hear about those who have committed such acts, the assumption is that they must have been crazy in some way, but in fact there must be something about self-immolation as a strategy that makes it seem a viable option even in the twenty-first century. I hope to dispel the thinking that self-immolators are merely crazy people, because this attitude diminishes the rhetorical agency such protestors are enacting—in many instances, self-immolation is the refusal to give up agency by proving that one has, at least, control over his or her own body.

Third, in addition to expanding the literature already mentioned, my project also adds to literature on the influence of radical protest in bringing about democratic change. Specifically, I demonstrate that self-immolation is a phenomenon much more likely to occur in countries which are not democratic. Democratic citizens are less likely to commit such extreme acts because of the multitude of other protest strategies available to them. Furthermore, although people in democratic nations may feel sympathy for someone in a country like Tunisia who commits suicide for a cause, they are less likely to feel sympathy for someone who does so in their own nation as this course of action is viewed as unnecessary.

Literature Review

Self-immolation is a complex rhetorical gesture that confounds many traditional norms of analysis, because it is an act in which the rhetorical canvas is the body. Specifically, it is an undertaking noteworthy due to the shocking pain immolators inflict upon themselves and due to the fact that immolators know they will likely die in the process. Furthermore, the act itself is fleeting, which makes it difficult to analyze the “original text.” These barriers to studying self-immolation are in large part what have informed the areas of literature I review. I begin by examining the writings of those who have addressed the body as a site of rhetoric and more specifically, a tool to be used by protestors. Second, because self-immolations are sometimes captured and spread via images, I discuss the use of visual argument and images of people in pain in social movements. Third, I examine what has been written about the use of suicide and self-immolation itself as rhetoric.

The Body as Protest

Traditional rhetorical analyses most often focus on the use of words to produce persuasion. However, recently scholars have recognized the importance of other forms of rhetoric including the body. Gerard A. Hauser contended, “Our bodies are important and powerful sources of assertion and contention. In this, they provoke us to deepened reflection for insights we may gain into identity, power, and the character of argument itself by considering our bodies as sources and sites of argument.”¹³ Michael Schudson also took issue with a sole focus on words over other potential argumentative forms. He pointed out, “Conversation provides no magic solution to the problems of democracy.”¹⁴ Similarly, DeLuca wrote, “These political bodies constitute a nascent body rhetoric that deploys bodies as a pivotal resource for the crucial practice of public argumentation.”¹⁵ Therefore, those who would deny the body as a

site of argument are missing out on a potentially powerful political and rhetorical strategy. Current research on the use of the body as argument is focused most prominently in three areas: Michel Foucault's theory of bio-politics, Kevin DeLuca's research on protest movements, and the use of the female body to advance causes of feminism. Although this research provides a solid starting point for considering how the body functions as a rhetorical tool, my project on self-immolation expands upon this foundation by explaining how death by fire functions as a form of body protest.

Perhaps the most well-known theorist to talk about the relationship of the body to politics is Foucault, who wrote, "The body is also directly involved in a political field; Power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."¹⁶ Foucault discussed the body and power in several contexts, including the act of suicide. Historically, he noted that suicide was illegal because only the sovereign (God or the king) had the right to take someone's life.¹⁷ Therefore, as the idea of the individual having a "right to die" developed, people became fascinated with suicide. Foucault explained, "This determination to die, strange and yet so persistent and constant in its manifestations, and consequently so difficult to explain as being due to particular circumstances or individual accidents, was one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life."¹⁸ In other words, our obsession with the body and mortality has caused society to attempt to regulate and control the body both mechanistically (as in its ability to do labor) and politically. Foucault labeled the political regulation of the body "bio-politics" or "bio-power." He explained that the government is able to regulate the body because it makes decisions concerning "the problems of birthrate, longevity, public health, housing, and migration."¹⁹ For instance, Tomás F. Summers Sandoval discussed the bio-politics

of the Mexican immigrant, who is often viewed as merely a mechanistic body valued only for the cheap physical labor he provides.²⁰ Simultaneously, illegal immigrants are seen as “disobedient bodies” because their presence in the United States means they are breaking the law daily. Sandoval argued that the way to create a better life for immigrants is to see them as people rather than as merely bodies or “to humanize the illegal immigrant body.”²¹ In this way, bio-power highlights the power the government has in determining the narrative of its citizens’ bodies. Because of this, governmental style and power are an essential part of understanding different interpretations of self-immolations.

Those who choose to use their body as a resource in bio-politics often do so in a way that produces a specific rhetorical message or argument. DeLuca has highlighted the idea of body as message by discussing the use of body rhetoric by groups like Earthfirst!, Act Up, and Queer Nation. Although some may contest the idea that the body can function as argument, DeLuca asserted, “Their bodies . . . become not merely flags to attract attention for the argument but the site and substance of the argument itself.” As DeLuca said of one protestor, “Butterfly’s bodily presence is a direct response to Pacific Lumber’s practice of clearcutting old growth forests. Her body *is* a NO. Indeed, it is the only ‘no’ Pacific Lumber respects.”²²

In addition to DeLuca’s discussion, the body as rhetoric has often been discussed in research concerning feminism. Because so many feminist issues involve the body (sex, weight, abortion, etc.) some women in turn have found ways to confound sexist norms by using their body to make a point. Margaret L. Laware explained this when she wrote, “The act of re-appropriating those symbols associated with women’s bodies is a way to resist the social constraints placed on women’s behavior and to reframe and reconfigure their embodied presences.”²³ Also, Michèle Alexandre stated, “In all cultures there are women who use their

bodies to fight patriarchy and resist gender-biased laws and assumptions.”²⁴ She argued that female bodies are an important tool of protest because they can be used to “challenge gender restrictions,” allow women to “assert dominance” over their own bodies, and “facilitate one’s expression of womanhood in revolt against a patriarchal society.”²⁵ For instance, Afro-Caribbean women have used the strategy of “masquerading,” in which they “invent new social structures and/or reverse already existing ones,” by dressing up their bodies in unconventional ways.²⁶ Similarly, Barbara Sutton explained that women have used nakedness to “disrupt dominant notions that depict women’s bodies as passive, powerless, or as sexual objects for sale.”²⁷ Kathleen M. Torrens claimed that nineteenth-century women used their bodies and fashion choices as “a site for argumentation supporting women’s rights.”²⁸ Wendy Parkins provided yet another example when she described the suffragette Mary Leigh, whose body, Parkins argued, helped the suffragist cause through its “strength, agility, deportment, and dress.”²⁹ The main theme found in these essays is that strong women have been able to use their bodies as argumentative tools to call attention to and, in some cases, shift the “nature of social control.”³⁰ This theme is clearly still relevant to modern times, in which, as Nathan Stormer wrote, “contemporary feminists have insisted on greater attention to the body as a site of oppression and freedom.”³¹

By reviewing this literature on the body, two clear theses run through all three areas discussed. First, people who choose to use their body as a site of argument, tend to do so in order to reclaim their agency in determining what their body represents both personally and on a larger scale. Environmental activists put their bodies in danger to illustrate their belief that human bodies are not more important than living plants and animals in nature, and feminists use their bodies to destroy stereotypes concerning what female bodies are and should be. The difference

between these protestors and self-immolators is that most of them are not actually losing their lives in the process. Thus, self-immolation is one of the most extreme forms of body rhetoric, or, as Kenneth Burke might say, the entelechy of body rhetoric, in which the protestor not only asserts control over his or her body and its message, but also destroys his or her body in the process. Second, these scholars contend that bodies send rhetorically potent messages that resonate with others and facilitate change. In this dissertation I argue that sometimes bodies fail to resonate with their audience and that their message or argument often gets lost, especially when the rhetor has little to no recourse in shaping the meaning of their bodily act after the fact. In other words, I ask in what cases or with what audiences does the body fail to resonate? Why, in some instances, does the body, which has been shown to have such rhetorical potential, lack persuasive power?

The Visual and Pain as Protest

Bodies protesting are not seen in real time by most of the audience but rather after the fact in pictures. Like bodies, pictures of bodies may be a way of expression when other more traditional methods have failed, and thus, more researchers are thinking of pictures as sites of argument. DeLuca argued that social movements sometimes forgo using traditional eloquence in favor of practicing “an alternative image politics, performing image events designated for mass media dissemination.”³² Like bodies, images are unique in the way they argue. First, as Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites pointed out, “Because the image can show but not tell, it automatically represents both the event and the gap between the event and any pattern of interpretation.”³³ This means that image arguments are extremely context dependent and that their meaning may vary greatly over time or between viewers. Yang explained that a picture “can function as a resource for future rhetorical acts in varying contexts.”³⁴ Second, images are

thought to be especially rhetorically potent, particularly when it comes to viewing images of people in pain.

Some have argued that images are unethical because they may stir up irrational emotions to convince an audience. However, as Celeste Condit noted, this is an oversimplification of the importance of images in “public argument.” Rather, Condit argued that images are similar to narrative argument in that they help us to envision “abstract values.”³⁵ Specifically, she explained that images can be part of an argument (such as the grounds), but, “without verbal commentary, pictures DO NOT ARGUE propositions.”³⁶ DeLuca took Condit’s idea of images in public argument a step further. He stated, “We must accept that the non-linguistic can argue,” because “in an age of mixed media dominated by a televisual discourse composed of visual, aural, and verbal codes, to cling to an anachronistic definition of argumentation risks rendering it irrelevant.”³⁷ Similarly Hariman and Lucaites described some images as “moments of visual eloquence that acquire exceptional importance within public life. They are believed to provide definitive representations of political crises and to motivate public action on behalf of democratic values.”³⁸ Susan Sontag also addressed the power of photographs writing, “The photographs are a means of making ‘real’ (or ‘more real’) matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore,” and, “Something becomes real—to those elsewhere, following it as ‘news’—by being photographed.”³⁹

Images of people in pain are thought to be especially powerful because of the identification with or sympathy for the people pictured. Although Hannah Arendt stated that bodily pain is “the most private and least communicable [experience] of all,” other scholars argue the exact opposite.⁴⁰ For instance, Young Cheon Cho directly refuted Arendt’s idea that the body is “perhaps the only experience which we are unable to transform into a shape fit for

public appearance,” when he stated, “Limiting our understanding of the body to its status as a biological organism ignores the body’s symbolic significance and the numerous ways in which it is used as a form of signification. Although physical pain has no voice, it manages to speak and argue.”⁴¹ Also, Hauser asked, “But what of the power of a body in pain to form deep and powerful identification . . . ? In addition to the utterly private and unshared physical experience of the body’s own pain, there are also rhetorical and political dimensions to pain.”⁴² Thus, Hauser pointed out that the rhetorical power of a depiction of a body in pain lies within the audience’s ability to identify with that anguish and in turn, the rhetor and his or her cause. Hariman and Lucaites argued that pictures of pain can produce “moral responses” not due to the “evidence of harm, but a sympathetic connection that is most directly evoked by pain.”⁴³ Elaine Scarry presented a middle road between Arendt and those who recognized the body in pain as a powerful rhetorical mechanism. Specifically, like Arendt, Scarry explained that even though we all have bodies, so this seems shared, the body is very private.⁴⁴ However, Scarry also argued that, although it “resists verbal objectification,” pain can be represented and, furthermore, that “the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation.”⁴⁵

Barbara Zelizer discussed images of pain in which the subject is in the process of succumbing to death, which she labeled the “about to die moment.” According to Zelizer, the images evoked strong feelings in the viewer because “we are drawn into an illogical spectator position that is simultaneously naïve and all-knowing. That all-knowingness coaxes us to review what we know is about to happen and think about what might have been had things happened differently.”⁴⁶ To prove her assertion, Zelizer discussed the popularity of “about to die images” from the Vietnam War era (during which such images were “widespread” and then “reappear[ed]

in retrospectives on the Vietnam War”) and pictures of people “on the way to their death in the World Trade Center.”⁴⁷ Yang expanded upon Zelizer’s theory in her discussion of Quang Duc’s immolation, explaining, “The photograph begs the question of who *can* and *should* intervene. By doing so, it simultaneously raises questions of responsibility and blame.”⁴⁸ Like Zelizer, Yang concluded that such photos are powerful because of their “illustration of the tension between potentiality and inevitability.”⁴⁹

Similar to the literature on bodies as rhetoric, most scholars agree that images have the capability to be powerful persuasive devices, but few discuss why some pictures of people in pain evoke stronger feelings than others. Based on the research of people like Hariman, Lucaites, and Sontag, one may expect that self-immolations captured on film (rather than verbally described) and published in newspapers would be “the ‘most real’” or resonate the most with audiences. After all, as Yang has shown, the “about to die” image of Quang Duc’s self-immolation became an iconic representation of the evils of the Vietnam War. However, as I illustrate through the case studies in this dissertation, this issue is more complex.

Suicide as Protest

In addition to body rhetoric and visual rhetoric, some people have done research on the rhetoric of suicide, and in some cases, self-immolation. Although some of this research simply points out that suicide can be a powerful rhetorical act, other research has begun to reveal clues concerning why self-immolation works better in some cases than others. In this section, I discuss existing literature on what causes people to take such extreme actions, consider studies that indicate why suicide is rhetorical, and finally summarize research touching on why self-immolation in particular is powerful in some contexts but not others.

Like many confrontational acts, scholars believe that protestors use self-immolation as a last resort option to make their case. Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp contended that this type of protest is especially important to examine because the type of people who are engaging in acts like suicide “believe that they have exhausted traditional, and even nontraditional, means and are left without acceptable alternatives.”⁵⁰ Similarly, Cho pointed out that body rhetoric is a valuable tool specifically for “subaltern counterpublics” and Kevin Crosby, Joong-Oh Rhee, and Jimmie Holland wrote, “These extreme acts probably occur with greatest frequency when acceptable, rational means of changing a political condition appear absent or ineffective to the individual who places his cause as more important than his life.”⁵¹

Jorgensen-Earp argued that suicide is rhetorical because it is a form of “symbolic inducement” whose message can be clearly transmitted to the public.⁵² Specifically, “one function of protest suicide [is] to take a private feeling and to legitimize it and give it instrumental power by making it manifest in a public act.”⁵³ Biggs also noted the rhetorical nature of self-immolation when he wrote, “Self-immolation is intended to be public in at least one of two senses: performed in a public place in view of other people, or accompanied by a written letter addressed to political figures or to the general public.”⁵⁴ Slavoj Žižek argued that the rhetorical power of suicide rests in its nature as extreme sacrifice: “Every act worthy of this name [suicide] is ‘mad’ in the sense of radical *unaccountability*: by means of it, I put at stake everything, including myself, my symbolic identity. It is the utmost act of the negative, a ‘pure act’ that means ‘NO!’”⁵⁵ Žižek saw suicide as a highly notable action that no matter the specific consequences, “is a rupture after which ‘nothing remains the same.’”⁵⁶ While the recognition of suicide as a potentially powerful rhetorical tool is helpful in advancing the scope of rhetoric and the understanding of violent protest, there is still much to be uncovered about why suicide is

powerful in some cases more than others. For instance, although Žižek is correct to point out that suicide is perhaps the ultimate way of saying “no” or performing resistance, sometimes circumstances remain quite similar before and after an act of immolation or “a rupture.”

Another explanation for self-immolation’s power can be located in the fact that, in many countries, citizens have very little power to influence government and government has a great deal of power to influence citizens. In 2005, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argued that the term bio-politics may refer not only to government regulation of the body but also to the citizen’s ability to use the body to thwart such regulation.⁵⁷ Sasson-Levy and Rapoport similarly recognized, “Social analysis has expanded from studying the body as an object of social control and discipline . . . to perceiving it as a subject that creates meaning and performs social action.”⁵⁸ For instance, Hardt and Negri discussed how suicide bombers seek to reclaim control over their lives by showing that they (and not the government) possess control over their bodies. They wrote, “The suicide bomber appears . . . as a symbol of the inevitable limitation and vulnerability of sovereign power; refusing to accept a life of submission, the suicide bomber turns life itself into a horrible weapon.”⁵⁹

Although people who commit acts of self-immolation do not use their bodies as a “horrible weapon” to physically harm others, they are certainly participating in a similar type of bio-politics. Like suicide bombers, they are refusing to submit to those who attempt to control their lives by sacrificing their bodies in the hopes that the bodies of others will achieve greater freedom. As Hariman and Lucaites pointed out, part of self-immolation’s rhetorical power rests in the idea that the rhetor is rebelling against the government by taking charge of his or her own body. They wrote, “The salient fact in the photo is that someone’s resolve to resist the government could be so great that he would not only commit self-immolation, but be able to do

so without showing pain. The Saigon government was shown to be not only illegitimate, but so powerless that it could not conquer the body as it burned.”⁶⁰

Governmental authorities often recognize the potential rhetorical power of self-immolation by trying to assert further power over their citizens in order to contain the situation. Specifically, authorities in places where self-immolation becomes a popular tactic often try to re-take control of their people and their bodies by putting police on patrol to stop self-immolation attempts and punish anyone who may have aided in making a self-immolation possible. For instance, in Tibet, a man was arrested for putting up posters that described several recent acts of self-immolation in the region. Furthermore, when a protest broke out against his arrest, police fired into the crowd killing at least one person and injuring several others.⁶¹ Thus, not only did the Chinese police try to take control of the bodies of those who had died via self-immolation, but they also asserted their dominance by taking the life of another. Crosby, Rhee, and Holland noted that self-immolation may fail as a tactic when “prevailing political power determines the interpretation of such deaths” and may seek to diminish its effect by defining the protestor as a “crackpot.”⁶² Biggs even suggested that because “self-immolation is less likely to have an impact, individuals in totalitarian states are less likely to commit such an act.”⁶³

Another explanation presented for successful persuasion via self-immolation is religious and cultural in nature. As Crosby, Rhee, and Holland described, “Suicide by fire is an uncommon method of self-destruction in the western world,” but is much more common in Asia most likely due to its ties to Buddhist rituals or self-incineration.⁶⁴ This has been evidenced in several case studies. For example, in his analysis of the self-immolation of a Korean named Chun Tae-il, Cho argued that Tae-il’s death had considerable influence.⁶⁵ Specifically, Tae-il’s death resonated with many other poor workers who began their own protests after his sacrifice.⁶⁶

Foon Rhee explained that self-immolation was a powerful tool used by the Korean student movement, but not so in the American student movement. Rhee argued that the difference between the Korean reaction to self-immolation and the American reaction was rooted in religious history and culture.⁶⁷

Rhee also acknowledged the power of Quang Duc's immolation in Vietnam by crediting him as an inspiration to others who later went on to commit acts of self-incineration. Specifically, in the nine years after his death there were sixty-two political self-immolations worldwide, "about double the incidences in the previous 172 years combined."⁶⁸ Similarly, Crosby, Rhee, and Holland explained that in the one hundred and eighty-one years prior to Quang Duc's immolation, they found no reports of self-incineration for political purposes. However, the Asian explanation is by itself not enough to account for successful political change via self-immolation. First, there are two clearly influential cases of self-immolation that did not take place in Asia, the already discussed Mohamed Bouazizi and also Jan Palach, a Czech student whose self-immolation is widely seen as important in the context of the fall of the Iron Curtain.⁶⁹ Second, there are many self-immolations that have taken place in Asia, including those still happening in Tibet, that have not produced action.

Clearly the reasons for committing self-immolation and the factors explaining the rhetorical resonance of such acts are complex. Although this review of literature concerning the rhetoric of self-immolation has identified key research attempting to explain when self-immolation will influence political change, no adequate explanation has been developed. In fact, this research establishes that multiple contradictions exist on the topic. This is one major reason why studying self-immolation is so important. In other words, even though some have studied

this phenomenon, more needs to be done to sort out when this complex mode of protest resonates.

To date, most rhetorical literature concerning bodies and analyses of self-immolation in particular have focused on protests that have had considerable influence. Although it is natural to gravitate toward these cases, especially when self-immolation has received little attention in the field, such studies leave us with an incomplete picture of how self-immolation functions. For instance, by reading the current literature on self-immolation, one would probably expect that most self-immolations possess great rhetorical power. However, this is not always the case. In what follows, I describe methodology and then present three conditions that help determine the influence of self-immolation.

Method

In this dissertation I used an inductive historical approach in order to establish a more complex and complete theory of the rhetoric of self-immolation than currently exists in scholarly literature. I analyzed press coverage of multiple self-immolations in order to understand public perceptions of this extreme form of protest. In particular, examining these reactions was central to gauging when self-immolation is likely to resonate with an audience. Also, because so little exists on self-immolation in rhetorical theory, it was especially important that I developed my theory from what I found within these texts rather than based on deductive categories drawn from previous research.

The tools of descriptive and historical/contextual analysis are useful for uncovering patterns in complex rhetorical acts like self-immolation. Therefore, I used this inductive approach to perform a descriptive analysis considering foundational elements of rhetorical action that have been most clearly laid out by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Susan Schultz Huxman.

These include rhetorical factors such as the perceived purpose of the immolation, the persona of the immolator as described by the media, the strategies used to make the self-immolation as public as possible, and a consideration of who saw, heard about, and responded to the self-immolation.⁷⁰ During this descriptive analysis of mediated responses to self-immolations, I focused on how journalists and other commenters constructed specific narratives of self-immolators and their protests. By using these recorded reactions as my texts, this dissertation is primarily focused on what kind of influence the rhetorical act of self-immolation has had on audiences both domestic and international and explaining that influence (or lack of influence). Based on my findings during this analysis, I constructed an appropriate theory based explanation to illustrate how and why self-immolation achieves widespread resonance in some cases but not in others.

Theory

Malcolm Gladwell argued that as ideas and trends develop, there is often “one dramatic moment,” in which the movement can become incredibly contagious.⁷¹ In other words, it may hit a “tipping point.” Gladwell believed that the one major factor that determines whether an idea becomes a full-blown movement is its “stickiness.” He wrote, “Stickiness means that a message makes an impact. You can’t get it out of your head. It sticks in your memory.”⁷² In cases like the anti-war movement in the 1960s and the Arab Spring, self-immolations have been recognized as dramatic moments that helped movements to get off the ground. They were sticky.

Based on my analysis of multiple cases of self-immolation, I argue that the stickiness of self-immolations (and the lack of stickiness of others) can be attributed to three primary factors. First, the self-immolation must be recognized as justified due to a widely perceived crisis. In other words, the audience of the self-immolation must be able to comprehend why someone

would take such an extreme action. If the self-immolation is seen as too severe of a reaction to the circumstances, then it is likely that the self-immolator will be portrayed as unstable. Therefore, the protestor will lack credibility. Second, as has been recognized in the cases of Vietnam and Korea, the protest must resonate with the audience's values and cultural beliefs. Whether due to religion or some other factor, the mediated narratives of self-immolations must be framed in a way that generates identification. Third, the style and power of the government in charge of the self-immolator's community will have a significant influence on how the self-immolator's story is told. Typically it is hard to accept self-immolation in places like the United States, because democracy allows for so many other avenues of expression that it is hard to rationalize suicide by fire. On the other hand, in places where governments exert extreme control over people and their access to media, it may be easy for outsiders to understand these actions, but hard for them to stick.

In order to further explore this three-point theory, I apply it to a variety of self-immolation cases. Before these case studies, however, it is important to understand the religious history of the practice of self-immolation, because this will contextualize the cultural resonance it possesses in some places over others. Therefore, in Chapter Two, I outline the religious history of self-immolation. In Chapter Three I analyze self-immolations during the Vietnam War era. Specifically, I contrast the case of Thich Quang Duc with that of American self-immolator Norman Morrison. In order to do so, I apply the three criteria I have laid out to both cases. In Chapters Four and Five I analyze self-immolations in Tibet and the Arab Spring, respectively, by again applying the three points of the theory. Specifically, Chapter Four highlights Tibet's historical relation to China, the shockingly high number of self-immolations in the Tibetan region, and China's great control over its citizens and the media they produce and consume.

Chapter Five focuses on the case of Mohammed Bouazizi, because his act is the most prominent case of self-immolation since Quang Duc's in Vietnam. Finally, in Chapter Six, I summarize the conclusions drawn throughout the earlier chapters. I discuss the implications of this study, explain what this project adds to rhetorical research, and present ideas for future research.

Chapter Two

The Religious Roots and History of Self-Immolation

The term self-immolation derives from the Latin root word *immolat(us)*, which means “to make a sacrifice of grain” or “to sprinkle holy grits in the sacrificial ceremony.”¹ Therefore, although the modern usage of the word self-immolation is widely associated with sacrifice by fire (or auto-cremation), the phrase technically refers to any method of “self-sacrifice” (including drowning, starvation, etc.).² However, throughout this dissertation I use the phrase self-immolation to refer to the modern notion of the practice as auto-cremation in specific. In this chapter I trace the origins of the practice of self-immolation by explaining its religious roots, presenting historical cases of self-immolation in China, and outlining two notable cases of self-immolation in the twentieth century.

Religious Origins

When mainstream Western society thinks of Buddhism, images of people peacefully meditating, practicing yoga, and phrases like “the middle way” may come readily to mind. Most certainly, people lighting themselves on fire, feeding themselves to animals, or cutting off their own flesh is not the most immediate association that enters one’s thoughts. However, although these extreme sacrifices clearly break the Buddhist precept to not commit suicide, they also have a strong presence in Buddhist history and scripture. Therefore, in the Buddhist religion, as James A. Benn wrote, “Self-immolation . . . actually offers a bodily (or somatic) path—a way to attain awakening and, ultimately, buddhahood.”³

The origins of self-immolation are hard to pin down because throughout history it has been practiced by a variety of people from “monks and nuns” to “emperors and officials.”⁴ However, Buddhist expert Benn argued that the practice of self-immolation (and auto-cremation

in specific) was “constructed on Chinese soil and drew on a wide range of ideas such as a particular interpretation of an Indian text (the *Saddharmapundarīka*, or *Lotus Sūtra*) and indigenous traditions” (such as “burning the body to bring rain”).⁵ The *Lotus Sūtra* is a book of ancient scriptures used in the Mahayana branch of Buddhism that makes reference to self-immolation.⁶ In particular the book allows for three justifications of self-immolation: “making an offering to the Buddha, imitating bodhisattvas (enlightened ones), and protesting oppression of the Dharma (or the teachings of Buddha).”⁷ Due to this and other Buddhist textual references to self-immolation, one might expect self-immolation to have a strong presence in India where Buddhism originated. However, Indian practitioners have interpreted passages about self-immolation through the hyperbolic and metaphorical nature of the Indian literary tradition whereas Chinese Buddhists possessed a “different attitude to the writing of sages” causing them to understand the texts quite literally.⁸ As Jan Hun-Hua explained, scripture in India was to be “understood idealistically or poetically, rather than literally,” whereas the Chinese “laid more stress on practice.”⁹

Perhaps most noteworthy is the scriptural story of the Medicine King (also known as “Seen with Joy by Sentient Beings”), a lay bodhisattva who sacrificed his body by auto-cremation “as a public act of devotion to the buddhas.”¹⁰ It is believed that the Medicine King prepared himself as an offering by ingesting incense and oils for twelve hundred years. Following this, he burned for twelve hundred years, and “the light of his burning body illuminated world systems to the number of eight hundred million times the number of grains of sand in the Ganges.”¹¹ The Buddhas applauded the Medicine King’s action viewing it as greater and more pure than any material sacrifice of wealth. Therefore, after burning so long and bright, the Medicine King was “immediately reborn again in the realm of the Buddha Pure and Bright

Excellence of the Sun and Moon.”¹² Scripture stated, “This, young man of good family, is the sublimest gift, higher than the abandoning of royalty, the abandoning of beloved children and wife. Sacrificing one’s own body . . . is the most distinguished, the chiefest, the very best, the most sublime worship of the law.”¹³ Benn argued that Chinese Buddhists used this story of the auto-cremation of the Medicine King as “the literary blueprint for their acts.” For instance, some practitioners imitated the story by consuming incense and oils prior to auto-cremation. Benn also reported that burning monks sometimes “chanted the Medicine King chapter as they enacted it, thus turning the scripture into a kind of performative speech.”¹⁴ Perhaps most importantly, the story of the Medicine King illustrates that Chinese Buddhists did not view self-immolation as an act of suicide or “mere termination but as transformation.”¹⁵

Despite positive portrayals of Buddhist self-immolation in religious scripture, there is not universal agreement on whether self-immolation should be practiced.¹⁶ Karma Lekshe Tsomo wrote, “Buddhists in East Asia generally adopt the basic ethical framework established during the Buddha’s time, including the core precept to refrain from taking life.”¹⁷ Sallie B. King explained, “To take one’s own life is clearly prohibited in the Vinaya, the book of rules governing the lives of Buddhist monastics.”¹⁸ Also, Yijing, a Chinese monk living from 635–713 CE argued, “My teachers were all wise and virtuous men, they never burned their bodies, and they told me it was wrong to do so.”¹⁹

On the other hand, many Buddhists believed that self-immolation was reasonable at some times, but not at others, depending on the motivations of the immolator. For instance, prominent tenth century monk, Yanshou, concluded, “Forsaking the body, or ending one’s life, to repay the compassion of the dharma profoundly accords with the Mahayana and deeply resonates with true teaching.”²⁰ Similarly, another tenth century monk, Zanning “recognize[d] that suicide is

technically an offense, but sa[id] that this really only applies to those who commit suicide with the wrong intention of escaping *samsara* [karmic rebirth].”²¹ In fact, if the immolators actions are not completely pure, some Buddhists claim that the “pain of auto-cremation will be unbearable.”²² Some also believe that self-immolators may fail in their sacrifice if they are “not ready or not supposed to die.”²³ Benn pointed out that this means that “conversely, successful acts must have been completed because the civilization of those monks was completed.”²⁴ These opinions suggest that self-immolation could be a possible way for a Buddhist monk to become a bodhisattva or enlightened being. However, some took this a step further. They believed that the references to self-immolation in Buddhist literature were so numerous that self-sacrifice was not an optional practice but a required step in the career of a bodhisattva.²⁵

In examining Buddhist writings, I have described the presence of self-immolation in Buddhist stories and scriptures. Specifically, there are three camps of interpretation arising out of Buddhist teachings. The first believes these narratives to be more fable than guidebook, meaning that the stories teach values, but, ultimately, the book of Buddhist’s rules proscription of suicide trumps all. The second camp sees value in self-immolation and asserts that, under certain circumstances, such practices may lead to enlightenment. The third group acknowledges the numerous narratives of self-immolation as an indication that self-immolation is a necessary step to achieving buddhahood.

Chinese Cases of Buddhist Self-Immolation

History suggests that self-immolation was more frowned upon in ancient India than in China because of their differing interpretations of scripture. As mentioned, Indian Buddhists viewed stories about self-immolation as metaphorical lore rather than a roadmap for practice.²⁶ In the early seventh century two travelers in India reported that Buddhists there regarded the

practice of self-immolation as a “false custom” that “misled men to be heretics.”²⁷ Due to these beliefs, Indian Buddhist practice was primarily focused on finding “a middle way between the ‘extreme’ renunciation of other śramanic [ascetic] traditions and the priest-centered ritual path of the brahmans [divine],” whereas fanaticism was more easily justified and cultivated in China.²⁸ Shih Hu described this development: “A practical and matter-of-fact race was gradually worked up to religious enthusiasm, even to religious fanaticism. Temples and stupas were built everywhere; men and women deserted their families to become monks and nuns . . . With this sudden outburst of religious enthusiasm, there also came the worst features of Mahayana Buddhism. Extreme forms of asceticism and self-torture were commonly practiced.”²⁹ For instance, the Chinese took scripture so literally that the Tang followed scriptural writings to bring ox-drawn carts into battle rather than horses. Unsurprisingly the tactic failed resulting in forty thousand casualties.³⁰ In addition to taking scripture quite literally, the practice of self-immolation also aligned with the traditional Chinese belief that “if one dies for the defense of a virtuous principle or idea, then despite the violence involved, this action is correct.”³¹ Given their extreme belief in the words of scripture and their cultural convictions, it is perhaps unsurprising that China is the country that has the longest history of self-immolation.

The first known auto-cremation is that of a Chinese monk named Fayu. It is said that Fayu looked up to the Medicine King, which was likely his inspiration for self-sacrifice.³² In 396 AD, Fayu rejected the King’s disapproval of auto-cremation, “swallowed chips of incense, wrapped his body in cloth, recited ‘The Chapter of Abandoning the Body,’” and set himself on fire.³³ A similar self-immolation occurred in 451 when Chinese monk Huishao also ignored the wishes of the crown and burned himself to death. Huishao’s plans were widely advertised and drew a large crowd who made material donations at his pyre and watched him burn.³⁴ The

viewers did so because they believed that such gifts could provide them positive karma. Benn wrote, “A simple donation made now could accrue enormous interest over lifetimes and finally pay out handsomely in the future.”³⁵

A third self-immolation recorded in this period provides further insight into the religious psychology behind many early self-immolations. On July 3, 455, monk Sengyu prepared for his self-immolation later that day by holding a “vegetarian banquet” to bid goodbye to his community.³⁶ However, his plans were interrupted by clouds and rain, which he viewed as a sign that he should not commit the act. He supposedly stated, “If what I intended is to be fulfilled the sky should clear up. If it will not be efficacious then let the rain pour down. Thus all classes of people will know that the divine responses are unambiguous.”³⁷ At this point, the rain stopped and the clouds departed and Sengyu proceeded in his auto-cremation. The story of Sengyu illustrates that immolators were not committing suicide to escape their current lives, but acting in ways they thought to be in concord with the cosmos. Other stories of self-immolation further this idea by recounting miracles that followed incidents of self-burning. For instance, in the early sixth century Chinese monk Sengming, who was known for his constant recitations of the *Lotus Sūtra*, set himself ablaze.³⁸ After his action, people were healed, flowers instantly bloomed, and a wooden statue moved from place to place.

Clearly the self-immolations above were motivated by the objective of religious enlightenment, but the question of when self-immolations became political is a tricky one to answer. Some mistakenly contend that self-immolations did not become political until the 1960s with the famous case of Thich Quang Duc. In a 1967 article addressing immolation in Vietnam, Angus M. Fraser contended, “There is great precedent for self-immolation as a religious act; none for its function in the political arena.”³⁹ Kevin Crosby, Joong-oh Rhee, and Jimmie Holland

also argued that “the suicide of Thich Quang Duc in 1963 was the first well-documented case of self-incineration for the purpose of demonstrating political protest.”⁴⁰ However, evidence exists to show that political self-immolation was happening long before the 1960s.

In the late sixth and seventh century, Chinese Buddhists were using self-immolation for political protest.⁴¹ One Buddhist biographer in particular, Daoxuan, focused on the use of self-immolation as a form of protest against religious persecution. Benn explained, “By bringing together a number of biographies of self-immolations who were active on Mount Zhongnan during the persecution [perpetrated by Zhou Wudi], he [Daoxuan] shows how self-immolation could be deployed on occasion as a Buddhist response to government constraints on the practice of the religion.”⁴²

From the eighth to tenth century the practice of self-immolation continued, but accounts of self-sacrifices in this time revert to having a more religious than political tone. Specifically, narratives of self-immolation focused on the miracles that were said to occur following such acts.⁴³ In fact, during this time, politics and religion were sometimes unified in their support of sacrifice. For instance, when a monk named Dinglan wanted to perform auto-cremation, emperor Xuanzong asked him not to sacrifice himself. However, after Dinglan disobeyed and passed away, the emperor honored him with the name Juexing meaning “Enlightened Nature” and built him a pagoda titled “Awakened to Truth.”⁴⁴

Stories of self-immolation recorded from the fourth to the tenth centuries make clear that self-sacrifice was considered by Chinese Buddhists to be a noble practice that could cause miracles to occur. More surprisingly, even in this early period, self-immolations had political motivations and certainly conveyed rhetorical messages beyond the religious to some people. Thus, despite some claims, political self-immolation is not a twentieth century phenomenon.

Rather, even without the modern media to spread stories and images, early Buddhists may have realized the rhetorical capacity their bodies possessed when sacrificed for higher principles. Unfortunately, as I will discuss in the case of modern Tibet, a cultural understanding of this practice does not guarantee that a self-immolation will have an impact.

Modern Self-Immolation

Awareness concerning the practice of self-immolation greatly increased beginning in the 1960s. Using reports in the *New York Times*, Richard A. Bostic estimated that there were one hundred and fifteen self-immolation deaths between 1963 and 1972.⁴⁵ Of these deaths twenty-three percent took place in the United States, thirty-seven percent happened in Europe, and thirty-nine percent “occurred in non-Occidental countries.” Also, thirty-six percent of the self-immolators identified as Buddhist.⁴⁶ In the following chapter, I discuss the auto-cremation of seventy-three year-old Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, whose self-immolation is the most well-known of the twentieth century. However, below I describe two other notable self-immolators, Jan Palach and Chun Tae-il.

The second most well-known and influential self-immolation of the twentieth century is the burning of Czechoslovakian Jan Palach. At only twenty-one years old, this reportedly “well-balanced” man sacrificed himself on January 16, 1969 to protest the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.⁴⁷ He left a note stating his purposes and tried to strengthen his message by indicating that he was one of many: “Because our nations are on the brink of despair we have decided to express our protest and wake up the people of this land. If our demands are not fulfilled within five days . . . and if the people do not support us sufficiently through a strike of indefinite duration, more torches will burn.”⁴⁸ Palach was taken to the hospital where he survived for three days before passing away. He told the doctors and nurses who treated him that he did

not regret what he had done: “In history there are moments when it is necessary to do something. Now is the time for it. After half a year, after a year, it will already be too late . . . I don’t regret my action. Perhaps it will awaken a kernel of strength within the nation.”⁴⁹

Even though his hospital statements were kept a secret by an act of government suppression, Palach’s hope that he would awaken the nation to action came true as other people followed his lead by committing acts of self-immolation. A mere four days after Palach’s auto-cremation, another man burned himself and on January 26, 1969, three more were reported as attempting to set themselves on fire. By January 29 this number rose to eighteen.⁵⁰ In addition to other auto-cremations, Palach’s death brought thousands in the nation together to support his cause. Andriolo described how people gathered to show support, “On the day of the funeral, a half million people took to the street, and at the moment of its beginning, work stopped for five minutes all over the country. Palach’s grave turned into a shrine where fresh flowers were placed in abundance. Even after the secret police had exhumed and cremated his body, the now-empty site of memory drew a stream of visitors who kept renewing the fragile tokens of their presence.”⁵¹ Although it took eight more years for protesters to openly rebel and twelve more years after that for the Velvet Revolution to succeed in terminating Soviet Rule in Czechoslovakia, Jan Palach’s sacrifice was commemorated every year of the struggle, clearly showing that he influenced the movement. As Karen Andriolo wrote, “This is not to say that the suicide ‘caused’ the gathering participation of Czechs in the political changes that were ultimately accomplished. Rather, it constituted the dominant symbol aligned with a possibility working toward actualization.”⁵²

Another influential self-immolation was that of twenty-two year old Chun Tae-il in Korea. In 1970, Tae-il became the first person in the modern history of South Korea to perform

auto-cremation. Specifically, he set himself on fire in protest of extremely poor working conditions in the garment factory where he was employed making seventy-five cents a day.⁵³ The factory room where he worked was one and a half meters tall from floor to ceiling meaning that employees were always crouching and there were only three bathrooms for the two thousand workers who labored for at least fourteen to sixteen hours a day.⁵⁴ Once he became involved in the labor movement, Tae-il was fired from this job and banned from entering both his and other workplaces.⁵⁵ Tae-il came up with his own business plan to open a factory with better working conditions and even tried to gain funds for the operation by extreme measures like offering one of his eyes to a wealthy blind man for a cornea transplant.⁵⁶ After failing to get the money and several other failed attempts to get the government to enforce labor standards, Tae-il set himself ablaze in front of five hundred factory workers shouting slogans like, “Observe the Labor Standards Law,” “We are not machines,” “Let us have Sundays off.”⁵⁷ A friend of Tae-il’s used his jacket to put out the flames and Tae-il was taken to the hospital where he died that afternoon as he lacked the money to pay for treatment. After living in poverty his entire life, the last thing he said was, “I’m hungry.”⁵⁸ Based on the writings in Tae-il’s journal, Ben Park explained that Tae-il’s decision to set himself on fire was a “fully pre-meditated” and “rational” choice. Park wrote, “Given his social context and moral principles, this would enable him to ‘save face,’ to express and actualize, and to be loyal to his own moral code, despite the final and painful consequences.”⁵⁹

The death of laborers usually received no publicity, but Tae-il’s death “threw the whole society into turmoil.”⁶⁰ Young Cheon Cho credited Tae-il with the following, “Thousands of university students started protesting against the government’s labor policy and . . . 400 students at Seoul National University began an indefinite hunger strike.”⁶¹ Not only did Tae-il’s action

awaken broader passion and more protests for his cause, but also a year later a twenty-year-old restaurant worker attempted self-immolation. The protestor, who worked eighteen-hour days, was thwarted in his attempt when police doused him with water.⁶²

Tae-il's death had a significant influence on culture in Korea. More than twenty books were published in Korean and Japanese about his life and multiple documentaries were aired on major Korean television stations about his immolation.⁶³ A feature-length movie entitled *The Beautiful Life of Chun Tae-Il*, premiered in Europe in 1995. In South Korean movie theaters alone, 800,000 people bought tickets to the film. Cho noted Tae-il's presence as a contemporary cultural icon stating, "Tae-il's self-immolation was not only a significant moment of labor movement, but continues to be one of the defining cultural and political events in the modern history of South Korea."⁶⁴

Self-immolation continued to be used as a protest tactic in South Korea in the 1980s and early 1990s as university students protested governmental oppression and fought for democracy. According to Rhee between five and ten students committed acts of auto-cremation between 1980 and 1986.⁶⁵ For instance, in front of two thousand other students, Lee Dong Su yelled, "Out with U.S. imperialists," set himself on fire and then jumped from a four-story building at Seoul National University.⁶⁶ In 1991, there were six more self-immolations all within a three-week time frame. Rhee pointed out that auto-cremation was a powerful tool used by the Korean student movement but not nearly as often by the American student movement. He argued that the difference between the Korean reaction to self-immolation and the American reaction was rooted in culture: "In the Eastern tradition appear both the Buddhist ritual of self-burning to achieve Nirvana and suicide as political protest. Suicide by fire in Korea, then, combines both precedents."⁶⁷

Although the self-immolations of Palach and Tae-il were influential, most self-immolations do not have this type of impact. There is no exact record of the total number of self-immolations, but some have tried to make an estimate. For instance, Joe Ho Suk, Chang Hwan Han, and Byeong Kil Yeon studied two hospitals in Korea and found that between the years of 1980 and 1986 there were thirty-eight cases of self-incineration that came through those two facilities alone.⁶⁸ They reported that at least five of these cases had clear political motivations.⁶⁹ On a more global scale, Biggs used newspaper records from the *New York Times* and the London's *The Times* to get an idea of how many self-immolations had occurred worldwide since 1963. In 2008, he wrote that he found evidence of five hundred and thirty-three individual self-immolations, but estimated that the real numbers were likely much higher. He explained, "More comprehensive numbers are available for particular times and places, which makes it possible to guess what fraction of cases get reported by the sources I use. The real total could hardly be less than eight hundred; it seems unlikely to exceed three thousand."⁷⁰ Therefore, although certain well-known cases of self-immolation had great influence, most are largely ignored. From a rhetorical perspective, it is striking that, in a few cases, self-immolation shocks the conscience of a nation, but, in many others, citizens collectively shrug and go on with life.

Chapter Three

Self-Immolation During the Vietnam War

In June 1963, Thich Quang Duc revived the practice of self-immolation by setting himself on fire to protest the religious persecution of Buddhists in South Vietnam. Less than two years later, on March 16, 1965, eighty-two year old Alice Herz set herself on fire on the Wayne State University campus. Passersby took note of the scene and gathered coats and a fire extinguisher to douse the flames. Herz was rushed to the hospital where she painfully survived for ten more days before perishing.¹ Herz, a refugee of Nazi Germany and long-time peace activist, sent a suicide note to several friends to ensure that her reasons for committing self-immolation were made clear. In it she blamed Truman, Eisenhower, John Kennedy, and Johnson for “deceiv[ing] and misguid[ing] the American public” and asked for the people to take action: “To make myself heard I have chosen the flaming death of the Buddhists on the Wayne State University Campus for Detroit. May America’s Youth take the lead toward LIFE!”²

Approximately eight months later, on November 2nd, thirty-year old Quaker Norman Morrison also committed self-immolation in order to “express his concern over the great loss of life and human suffering caused by the war in Viet Nam.”³ Morrison brought his baby Emily with him to a space outside the window of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s office located in the Pentagon. He clutched her prior to lighting the match and put her down just before going up in flames. Luckily, Emily was unharmed, but Morrison died before even arriving at the hospital. In a letter to his wife, Morrison explained his extreme measures, “For weeks, even months, I have been praying only that I be shown what I must do. This morning with no clear warning, I was shown as clearly as I was shown that Friday night in August 1955 that you would be my wife. Know that I love thee but I must act for the children of the priest’s village.”⁴ A mere

seven days later, on November 9, twenty-two year-old Roger LaPorte set himself on fire outside of the United Nations building in New York City. LaPorte, a committed Catholic, survived the burning and was taken to the hospital where he called his protest a “religious action” and explained that he regretted breaking the church’s tenet against committing suicide.⁵ After receiving last rites from the hospital reverend, LaPorte passed away on November 10, 1965.

Unlike Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation, which has been recognized as a major turning point in the war, these self-immolations were not well received in America. In this chapter, I illustrate why the American public portrayed these acts of immolation as senseless and futile. In the introduction to this dissertation, I described three basic conditions that help to explain the rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of self-immolation as a protest strategy. First, the issue that the self-immolator is protesting must be perceived as a dire crisis in need of immediate remedy. Second, the act must resonate with the culture of the place that it is trying to influence. Third, the act must take place in a part of the world where normal protests methods have been exhausted (or are unavailable) but also not in a place of total government repression. In order to show why American self-immolations received only brief (and in some cases almost no) attention in the public sphere, I utilize these three conditions to explain the resonance of self-immolations during the Vietnam War. To begin, I apply the three conditions to the case of Thich Quang Duc using the existing literature concerning his act, the history of the Vietnam War, and responses to his self-immolation to show why his act still stands as a memorable and moving event in American and Vietnamese history. Second, I describe the circumstances of the Vietnam War to illustrate the American mindset at the time of the American self-immolations. In other words, I explain why, as it was perceived in the United States, the war was not yet seen as a crisis by the majority of the country. Third, I analyze mediated reactions to these incidents to

show how self-immolation was conceived by the public as antithetical to American culture. Fourth, I continue this analysis in order to demonstrate that Americans believed these actions were unnecessary and could have been expressed through more familiar and democratic channels. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of implications.

The Case of Thich Quang Duc

Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation was a carefully planned rhetorical act.⁶ Quang Duc asked Buddhist movement leaders for permission to burn himself as a "donation to the struggle." All of the leaders were against the idea, except for Thich Duc Ngiep, who spoke English and whose role in the movement was to correspond with foreign journalists. Michael Biggs asked, "Did [Duc Ngiep] grasp the potential impact on the American audience?"⁷ Either way, after a few days Duc Ngiep convinced the other leaders to allow Quang Duc to proceed with his sacrifice. After permission to proceed was granted, movement leaders went to work meticulously planning the event. They experimented with different fuels, hinted to the outside world that something was going to happen, and even arranged for monks and nuns to lie under the wheels of fire engines to keep the firefighters from being able to extinguish the flames.⁸ Then, on June 10, 1963, "American news correspondent Malcolm Browne received a cryptic phone call from Thich Duc Nghiep," saying, "I would advise you to come. Something very important may happen."⁹ Yang described the scene the next day as follows:

The next morning, over two hundred Buddhist monks marched through the streets of Saigon to protest the Diem regime's oppressive sanctions against Buddhist followers. Halting at the intersection of Le Van Duyet Street, the monks formed a circular barricade to thwart possible interruptions by police and fire fighters. At the center of this circle was Thich Quang Duc, an elderly monk who quietly took a seat on a small cushion that had

been placed on the street. Two younger monks poured a mixture of gasoline and diesel fuel over the man, covering his body and his long saffron robes. Suddenly, Duc struck a match and was immediately engulfed in flames.¹⁰

As he burned, a monk announced via loudspeaker that “a Buddhist priest burns himself for five requests,” and protestors handed out fliers with printed with these requests:

1. Lift its ban on flying the traditional Buddhist flag.
2. Grant Buddhism the same rights as Catholicism.
3. Stop detaining Buddhists.
4. Give Buddhist monks and nuns the right to practice and spread their religion.
5. Pay fair compensations to the victim’s families and punish those responsible for their deaths.¹¹

During the event, Browne took the iconic photograph of Quang Duc, which Yang argued had great influence on the Kennedy administration’s policies and reduced American approval of the Vietnam War.¹² In fact, only five months after his death, “the United States tacitly approved a coup against the dictator.”¹³

Several people have already recognized the power of Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation. For instance, the Founder of the Engaged Buddhist Order, Thich Nhat Hanh, stated that Quang Duc “awakened the world to the suffering of the war and the persecution of the Buddhist.”¹⁴ Sallie B. King noted that even in the present day Quang Duc is acknowledged as a heroic figure: “Thich Quang Duc's home temple has become a virtual shrine in Vietnam to which people, either religiously or politically motivated, make pilgrimage. The car in which he rode on his way to his self- immolation is on display, together with a photograph of the actual self-

immolation.”¹⁵ In what follows, I explain how Quang Duc’s case achieved such profound influence.

Application of the Three Principles to Thich Quang Duc

Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation in Vietnam meets the three conditions that I have laid out explaining when self-immolations will influence opinion. First, Vietnamese Buddhists were experiencing a clear crisis in which their fundamental religious beliefs and practices were being limited by their government. Diem was controversial amongst natives for several reasons. First, he dissolved their centuries-old political traditions including village elections and replaced elected village elders with his own appointments.¹⁶ Second, from 1955 onward he executed large numbers of people.¹⁷ Third, Buddhists were frustrated with their government following the influx of Northern Vietnamese Catholics who took refuge in Southern Vietnam. The Diem government supplied assistance to the 800,000 Catholic refugees. However, in doing so, they treated the locals, including Buddhists, as “second class citizens.”¹⁸ For instance, while the government recognized Catholicism as a religion, they considered Buddhism an “association,” meaning that Buddhists were not allowed to secure property for houses of worship or pagodas.¹⁹ These actions impacted a majority of the population, including both nominal and practicing Buddhists, roughly eighty percent of the population.²⁰ However, despite their numbers, the Diem government used religion as a tool of political control by allowing Catholics to become the most powerful members of society. Howard Jones wrote, “Although the Catholics comprised barely a tenth of the population, they counted among their members the ruling Ngo family, more than half of the National Assembly, and most landholders.”²¹

These issues escalated on May 8, 1963, which was Buddha’s 2,527th birthday. Keeping with tradition, Buddhists planned to celebrate with flags and parades. However, this day also

coincided with an important day for the Catholics and the Diem regime. The Vatican delegation was coming to visit the city to celebrate the day of the Lady of La Van and to consider the president's brother for cardinalship. In preparation for this important visit, the government enacted a law preventing the display of religious flags. However, many Buddhists protested the law by marching through the city with "multi-colored Buddhist flags, which also waved prominently above homes and pagodas."²² Somehow (the reason why is disputed) the peaceful march turned violent and nine teenagers were killed. The atmosphere only intensified the next day when 6,000 Buddhists gathered with signs encouraging people to protest non-violently and follow in the footsteps of Ghandi. Even the Kennedy administration, deep in the midst of their own civil rights issues, recognized the problem and advised Diem to make peace. However, Diem disregarded this advice denying accusations of religious persecution and labeling himself "the constitution."²³

It was only a month later that Thich Quang Duc committed the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. Clearly, Buddhists had entered a crisis of religious persecution that was seen as serious by many within Vietnam and by the American government. The idea that the Buddhists had been wronged was often presented alongside the news of Quang Duc's act in order to explain its origins. The *Los Angeles Times* reported, "The crisis had been building up for five weeks" and "started when the government declared that only the National flag should be flown."²⁴ Similarly, on August 11, 1963, David Halberstam, of the *New York Times*, wrote, "The Buddhist protests, observers say, could not have taken place unless the climate for some sort of dissent had been ripe, unless there had been deep and latent dissatisfaction."²⁵ Later that month the *New York Times* blamed the Diem government with even stronger language reporting that the "crisis in

South Vietnam [had been] spurred by the Diem regime's violent attacks on Buddhists and imposition of martial law."²⁶

Not only did Quang Duc's self-immolation take place in a time of extreme crisis, but it also meets the second condition of achieving resonance with its audience. Because Quang Duc's self-immolation took place in a predominantly Mahayana Buddhist area, self-immolation was viewed as a culturally acceptable form of protest. In this region, many people would have been familiar with these traditions and their symbolism. It is unsurprising then that other Buddhist monks followed in Quang Duc's footsteps by performing self-immolation. Biggs explained, "The impact of Quang Duc's fiery death was immense and immediate" and after his act "death by fire [became] part of the repertoire of protest in South Vietnam."²⁷ Quang Duc and the later Vietnamese monks who committed acts of auto-cremation were celebrated as enlightened beings or bodhisattvas. In concert with the religious history of self-immolation, Thich Nhat Hanh explained, "Because they had realized the insight into their ultimate nature and were no longer attached to an idea of the physical body as the self, the monks were free to use their bodies to deliver a powerful message. They transformed their bodies into torches to illuminate the suffering of the Vietnamese people. Only those who are truly free, who have seen deeply into the ultimate dimension, can make this kind of action."²⁸ Thus, Quang Duc's ability to commit such an action, "to relinquish [his] body without suffering," served as proof to believers that the Buddhists were in the midst of a legitimate crisis, because "giving up one's life and body is a kind of offering that is made only in extreme situations."²⁹ Buddhists throughout Vietnam stepped up to support the protesters. For instance, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that four thousand Buddhists came to Saigon to show their support and participate in public demonstrations.³⁰ The number of supporters increased rapidly. On August 19, 1963, Browne

wrote that an “estimated 17,000 persons sat through 12 hours of searing sun and torrential rain . . . in the most impressive Buddhist demonstration yet against the South Vietnamese government.”³¹

To some extent, the American media also recognized that these actions were part of Buddhist culture. For example, in a letter to the editor published in the *Washington Post*, A. R. Field explained, “The spectacle of a Buddhist monk turning himself into a human torch . . . both shocks and fascinates the western observer. But self-extinction has a different meaning within the concepts and traditions of certain sects of Buddhism.”³² This conception became widespread enough that a few months later Louis Cassels wrote an article in the *Washington Post* arguing that Buddhism was being incorrectly stereotyped as a religion sanctioning violence. He explained, “[Vietnamese] immolations have caused many newspapers in the West to associate Buddhism with fiery self-destruction . . . [but] Buddhism traditionally has been a gentle and unworldly religion.”³³

In addition to being portrayed as contextually and culturally warranted, self-immolations in Vietnam produced tangible results, because the Diem government failed to adequately address its anti-democratic and repressive policies. This allowed Buddhists sufficient space for dissent and influenced American policy and opinion. The tension between the non-democratic actions of the Diem government and its reception of American aid was played out in the American public sphere in the media. As already discussed, when reporting on the causes of Vietnamese self-immolation, the Diem government was framed as the cause. Although President Kennedy explained in a televised interview in September of 1963 that he did not think cuts to Diem support would be “helpful at this time,” the perception of religious persecution led to increasing public concern about America’s reputation and condemnation of the monetary and military

support they provided for the Diem regime.³⁴ For instance, on September 8, 1963, the *New York Times* ran the headline, “Setback in Vietnam: Failure of U.S. to Mold Effective Policy Deal with Diem Regime is Blow to American Prestige.”³⁵ In the article, Halberstam quoted an anonymous American source stating that Americans are “sitting here giving a million and a half a day to a Government we dislike and which we feel can’t win this war.”³⁶ Halberstam also credited the American ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, as having “no illusions about the type of people he is dealing with” and acknowledged that Lodge’s “entire civilian team is telling him that this war cannot be won under growing editorial and public criticism of blind American support for the Ngo Dinh Diem government.”³⁷ Prophetically, the *Washington Post* reported, “The time has come when President Diem needs to demonstrate his good faith and his capacity to cope with the evils that have closed in on his regime. If he fails to do so, nothing the United States could do will save him, and his once numerous friends here will have no incentive to try.”³⁸ Even some who once praised the Diem government were quickly back-peddling. For instance, Professor Wesley Fishel, who at one time had “lauded ‘democratic one-man rule,’ now found President Diem’s system to be ‘peasant-based revolutionary facism.’”³⁹

Clearly, distress about self-immolation played a role in creating public pressure in the U.S. For instance, the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* published the following: “Americans should be shocked and disgusted that weapons and money poured into South Vietnam to stem Communist aggression are being diverted to the brutal suppression of Buddhists in a church-state struggle.”⁴⁰ Similarly, the *Providence Journal* reported that there was “sharp U.S. condemnation of religious repressing in South Vietnam.”⁴¹ These media reactions demonstrate that Buddhist self-immolation quickly led to the perception that the United States was supporting a religiously repressive regime.

It is clear that the self-immolation was influential in South Vietnam and also in the United States. This occurred because while the Diem regime was repressive, it was not so repressive as to make public protest impossible. A more repressive regime would have acted to prevent self-immolation or to ban coverage of it.

Overall, the narrative about the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc and other Vietnamese Buddhist monks resonated because it met the three conditions discussed earlier. First, the justifiable cause of religious repression was well known by the people within South Vietnam and was reported in the American press. Second, the act of self-immolation was understood within the Buddhist community in Vietnam as morally acceptable. The people who chose this path were celebrated by many as martyrs. Also, although the American media was caught up in the spectacle and strangeness of such a radical act, they simultaneously recognized the religious tie between self-immolation and Buddhism. Finally, Diem's repressive policies and poor responses to the Buddhist protestors caused the American media to criticize the growing oppression of Buddhists and spread concern about the image of the U.S. government. This could occur because, while repressive, the Diem regime did not totally crush dissent as in other cases that I discuss later. Based on these three factors, it is clear why Quang Duc's self-immolation had such resonance in Vietnam and also why Americans were influenced as well.

Self-Immolation in America

Although the circumstances were ripe for Americans to make sense of Buddhist self-immolation in Vietnam, the narratives created around American self-immolation were a different story. In order to understand why this was the case, I analyze three self-immolations that took place in 1965. As noted earlier, the first recorded case of political self-immolation in America is that of Alice Herz who set herself on fire on March 16, 1965. The second and third cases

followed shortly thereafter. Norman Morrison, the most well known of the three, took his life on November 2, 1965 and Roger LaPorte followed suit a mere seven days later. I begin this analysis by discussing Americans' knowledge and opinions concerning the Vietnam War at this time in order to show that the public was unaware of information indicating the severity of the war, and thus, most were not very disturbed by it.

The American State of Mind in 1965

Even though American self-immolations took place two years after the immolations in Vietnam, citizens were not yet outraged by American involvement in the war because they generally agreed with the purpose of the war—to prevent the spread of communism. As I have shown, Americans were upset that their government was associating itself with a regime that was oppressing its people. However, this does not mean that they were against American involvement in Vietnam more generally. In other words, there was a distinction between the disapproval felt toward U.S. aid to the Diem government and the overall war. Furthermore, the American government kept much of the war secret from the American people meaning that they were not aware of the severity of the situation. The public narrative surrounding America's involvement in Vietnam was still mostly positive in the spring of 1965. Thus, when people learned about the self-immolations taking place in their own country in protest of the war, they found them hard to comprehend, because, in their minds, the war was a legitimate endeavor that did not warrant such extreme forms of dissent.

The first escalation of U.S. troops in Vietnam occurred on April 14, 1961, three days prior to the Bay of Pigs. This escalation was kept secret from the American public, which set the “pattern” for “American actions in Vietnam.”⁴² It was not until the end of that year on December 22nd that the first American soldier died in combat in South Vietnam.⁴³ As the new year began

and the American role in Vietnam expanded so did “the deception about it.”⁴⁴ For instance, Kendrick explained, “When Kennedy was asked at a news conference if American troops were ‘now in combat in Vietnam,’ his answer was ‘No.’”⁴⁵ However, by the end of 1962, forty-two Americans had been killed in Vietnam.⁴⁶

Even after the Buddhist self-immolations, President Kennedy remained “detached and matter-of-fact” when discussing Vietnam in public.⁴⁷ For instance, in September 1963, Kennedy told Walter Cronkite during the CBS evening news that “in the final analysis it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it . . . and unless great effort is made by Saigon to get popular support, it can’t be won.”⁴⁸ Furthermore after a visit to Saigon, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara predicted that America would remove a thousand troops by the end of 1963 and that the “major part of the American military task” would be over by the end of 1965.⁴⁹

Two days before his assassination on November 22, 1963, Kennedy’s “top civilian and military advisors met in Honolulu to plan increased clandestine warfare against North Vietnam.”⁵⁰ In February of 1964, President Johnson began to develop plans that “called for covert action against North Vietnam” but not even Congress knew of these proposals until May, when the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs drafted a “formal congressional resolution to wage war.”⁵¹ Three months later the resolution was passed and Johnson ordered 5,000 more soldiers to Vietnam. However, because Johnson was seeking to be re-elected as president and knew that “military involvement abroad . . . was a shaky reelection platform,” he spoke against increased involvement in the war “while proceeding with it.”⁵² However, after the Gulf of Tonkin incident when two American ships were supposedly attacked off the coast of North Vietnam, Johnson gained support from both congress and the American people to increase the war efforts. On August 10, 1964, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which gave

Johnson the authority to fully wage war against North Vietnam. Furthermore, according to Kendrick, “Support for the President’s leadership jumped after Tonkin Gulf from forty-two to seventy-two percent in the Harris poll, while eighty-five percent approved of the strikes against North Vietnam, and sixty-six percent favored taking the war into the North on the ground. Other opinion polls showed that the President had the American public’s overwhelming support for virtually any Vietnam policy he thought correct.”⁵³ This support was illustrated in newspaper articles at the time. For instance, in the *New York Times*, James Reston wrote, “The President’s action, however, has a dual purpose. The objective of his policy is not to widen the war but to convince the Communists that they cannot win the war, and, therefore, that their sensible course of action is to negotiate an honorable peace.”⁵⁴ Similarly, another *New York Times* piece contended, “The President himself has enunciated [principles] of firmness, but a firmness that will always be measured—a firmness whose mission is peace.”⁵⁵ Editorialists also wrote in detailing their support of the President. One claimed, “The great majority of Americans, we believe, heartily approve [Johnson’s plans]; and we think Congress should endorse it after adequate debate.”⁵⁶ Another argued, “Neither the United States nor any of its allies need, or will, settle for less freedom and more Communist encroachment in Southeast Asia.”⁵⁷

Johnson openly used this support to his advantage against Goldwater. For instance, his campaign ran a television ad showing “a small girl picking the petals from the daisy, in a kind of countdown that ended with a mushroom-shaped explosion. The voice of Lyndon Johnson was heard saying, ‘these are the stakes.’”⁵⁸ However, Johnson also continued to temper his plans for increasing involvement in Vietnam by denouncing those who would “supply American boys to do the job that Asian boys should do.”⁵⁹ Therefore, as Kendrick stated, Americans did not have it in their mind that when they reelected Johnson he would “send a total of 2,500,000” more

Americans to Vietnam during his second term.⁶⁰ Even after the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which basically granted him power to do whatever he wanted in Vietnam, Johnson kept his escalation decisions secret. For example, in December of 1964, Johnson “proceeded with the plans for the air war . . . but he surrounded his intentions in secrecy” by denying things to the press and refusing to make a television announcement concerning the state of the war.⁶¹ Thus, American involvement in the Vietnam War, which had technically begun back in 1955, was still being downplayed ten years later.

Although the anti-war movement began brewing around 1965, it had not yet fully taken off. For instance, Milton Viorst stated that even “in February 1965 [college] campuses were in no hurry to notice the nature of the war.”⁶² Instead, protestors at this time were more concerned with civil rights at home than war abroad. Perhaps this was because much of the war was still being kept secret. Johnson continued to mislead the American public about the state of the war, which Kendrick argued was more for political purposes (“to lull and mislead public opinion”) than tactical strategy.⁶³ For instance, the administration put a spin on the purpose for the enlarged number of troops. On March 8 1965, 3,500 marines were sent for “defensive purposes only” and were instructed that they “should not tangle with the enemy.”⁶⁴ Also, troop movements on the ground were kept secret from the public.⁶⁵ In a response to an attack on the Saigon embassy, President Johnson spoke to the press on April Fool’s Day telling them that “no great decision” was being made and that “no-far-reaching strategy [was] being suggested or promulgated.”⁶⁶ In reality, he had just ordered paratroops to be sent and within the next three weeks he “authorized a troop level of 100,000.” Kendrick noted that, in Spring of 1965, around the time of the self-immolations in America, “The popular opinion . . . seems to have been in favor of doing whatever was necessary to get the embarrassing distant involvement over with. To

many Americans it was as simple as to a marine who landed in with the First Amphibian Brigade in July. He and his companions had been taught, he said, to believe that ‘if South Vietnam fell that would be the end of Asia, and Communism would take over everywhere. We were the good guys, they were the bad guys.’”⁶⁷ This may have been because the public knew so little about the war, “the reasons for it, or the possible effects.”⁶⁸ Even the press was strongly encouraged to show only the positive side of what transpired. Although some reporters criticized the war, “virtually no debate was held in Congress on the subject as increased military appropriations were voted.”⁶⁹ In fact, it wasn’t until 1967, when the number of American troops in Vietnam climbed to nearly 400,000 that the Vietnam War really “displaced all other political issues in the mind of Lyndon Johnson and in the concern of the public.”⁷⁰

The lack of knowledge and, therefore, lack of urgency in the anti-war movement in the spring of 1965 helps to explain why the self-immolations in America were largely written off as fluke occurrences unworthy of great notice. There was especially scant attention in the media provided to Herz and LaPorte. A friend of Herz summarized this situation when she wrote, “But the marchers and demonstrators for peace are not yet ‘respectable’ in the eyes of the general public and the press . . . Alice Herz, whose life was given for the cause of PEACE, was given hardly any space at all and no TV coverage, so that comparatively few people will know of her sacrifice.”⁷¹ Out of the three cases of self-immolation performed in America in 1965, Norman Morrison received the most attention. This is most likely due to the location of his act, which took place outside of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s Pentagon office. Because most media documents discussing self-immolation in America concern Morrison, in the next two sections, where I discuss self-immolation’s lack of cultural salience and portrayal as undemocratic, I focus on responses to his action in particular.

An Act Taken by Mentally Ill Sinners

Americans rejected self-immolation on their own soil, because it conflicted with their cultural values. Specifically, the idea that suicide was sinful was prevalent due to the Christian values most Americans adopted. The ethnocentrism of many of Morrison's critics caused them to quickly create a dichotomy between Morrison, the Christian Westerner, and Buddhists in Vietnam. For instance, a commentator in the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "But however obvious the parallel, Norman Morrison was no exotic Buddhist monk, but the executive of a Quaker meeting house in Baltimore. He graduated from Wooster College in Ohio, studied at New College in Edinburgh, Scotland, and graduated from Pittsburgh Theology Seminary."⁷² Morrison's identity as an American pacifist Quaker became a main topic in the narrative surrounding his action. Reporters often noted the role of religion in his life. According to one of his friends, "Religion was the dominant force in his life. He brought a truly religious passion to the great questions in his life. It motivated everything he did and it underlay the two great concerns in his life—civil rights and the peace movement."⁷³

The topic of religion was of such interest that reporters did not hold back from asking friends and family personal and rather insensitive questions that seemed to try to trap Morrison's associates into denigrating their lost loved-one: "The five Quakers were asked if suicide is a theological crime in the Quaker faith. They refused to answer."⁷⁴ Similarly, a fellow Stony Run Quaker, Sam Legg, was quoted in the *New York Times* as stating that self-immolation was "unprecedented" in the Quaker religion, but "would not speculate on whether or not the burning was a rational act."⁷⁵ His wife Anne Morrison, was even questioned on the issue and similarly responded, "A suicide of this type is unprecedented in the Quaker Church."⁷⁶ Yet another

noncommittal statement on the issue came from an unnamed spokesperson of the Quaker church: “Each member is free to act to the measure of demand in his life which he understands.”⁷⁷

Despite insiders’ elusive responses to questions of morality and suicide, outsiders who filtered Morrison’s violence through a religious lens had a clear opinion. For instance, in an article in the *Washington Times* entitled “Torch Suicides: Sinful at Worst, Futile at Best,” the author reported interviews with religious authorities on the issue, “The nine [clergymen]—a priest, a rabbi, and ministers of seven Protestant denominations—were selected at random and asked to comment on immolation as a mean of witnessing for peace. The issue was raised by the recent deaths of Norman Morrison . . . and Roger LaPorte . . . The Clergymen were unanimous in objecting to suicide, their remarks ranging from mere disapproval to strong condemnation.”⁷⁸ Reverend John B. Birdwell was perhaps the harshest stating, “An act of utter despair or utter arrogance, or both. It is morally as indefensible as murder.”⁷⁹ Another editorialist also shared his disapproval of Morrison: “The role of the living is to take part in the action and passion of their time. To choose death even as an alternative to bearing some burden of pain or grief is a privilege forbidden us. To choose it as an alternative . . . is pathetic.”⁸⁰ In this way, the editorialist defined life in a very democratic way—life should be all about engaging the important debates of one’s time. Similarly, other objections were tied not only to the need to obey God, but also the need to obey American representative authority: “God told us to obey our government and where things are not always clear I think we have to trust our officials.”⁸¹

Morrison’s critics rejected self-inflicted violence as unnecessary sin rather than justified sacrifice due to their culture of Western values and Christian beliefs. Ironically, because these Americans could not accept an act of self-immolation on American soil as legitimate, they could not appreciate that Morrison took this action as a rhetorical stand meant to be in concert with the

immolations on Vietnam soil. In other words, rather than seeing Morrison's action as a selfless sacrifice, standing in solidarity with those he sought to save, his critics were horrified that such an uncivilized action, although acceptable in other countries, would happen in their own land by one of their own citizens.

Not only did people become interested in Morrison's religious views, but they also wanted to know more about the kind of person this man was who could go through with burning himself to death on purpose—what type of western, religious man would commit the sin of suicide to help the people of another nation, especially when so many other avenues of protest were available to him? The answer, a crazy one. In order to uncover what Morrison was really like, journalists spent time interviewing his friends. For instance, John Corry of the *New York Times* reported this description of Morrison, "He suffered from hay fever and allergies, stuffed his pockets with notes in scraps of paper and forgot to put an overcoat when he walked winter streets. He neither smoked nor drank, but allowed himself the mild idiosyncrasy of wearing a beret. He read zealously, owned a second-hand bicycle, thought the stock market was endlessly fascinating (although he owned no stock), and found pleasure in carpentry and gardening. No one suggests, however, that he was not a complex man."⁸² Anne Morrison also provided an everyday description of him that rings similar to Corry's account: "If nothing else, [Morrison] was a paradox. He was dedicated to a life of self-giving, yet fascinated by the market . . . He was socially ill at ease, at times off-putting and perplexing in his manner, yet compassionate and concerned about people . . . He was intense and serious about life, but yet had a quirky, off-handed sense of humor."⁸³ By printing information on the type of reporters created a narrative of Morrison as an idiosyncratic man who was not representative of the average American. This framing allowed Americans who were frightened by Morrison's intense actions another

justification to brush off his self-immolation as the irrational measures of a strange man at the end of his rope.

Another detail about Morrison's life that became a frequent part of the media narrative of his life was his refusal to pay taxes in protest of the war: "Morrison has for several years notified the Internal Revenue Service he was donating five dollars to the U.N. High Commission for Refugees and 'we are withholding the like payment from our final tax payment as a token of protest of the current military budget of the federal government . . . We feel our military budget is only preparing us for mutual suicide.'" ⁸⁴ Again, such descriptions made Morrison seem eccentric. Even his friends implied that he was a too obsessed with the cause of Vietnam: "'Norman was preoccupied with Vietnam,' a friend said, 'and sometimes he made people uncomfortable. You don't like being constantly reminded that your country is dropping napalm bombs on other people.' 'I felt,' said another friend, 'that over the last year Norman became more and more grave about Vietnam. He had always been helped by a wry sense of humor and that began to evaporate.'" ⁸⁵ Another friend stated, "When I heard about his death, I thought that, yes, Norman could have done something like this. He was quite capable of it." ⁸⁶ Even Morrison's own words were used against him to discredit the acceptability of his protest. As one writer explained, Morrison himself had once argued that "suicide ended one's usefulness." ⁸⁷

These descriptions of Morrison's idiosyncrasies and eccentricities played into a developing stereotype that Morrison was not just strange, but crazy. As one editorialist put it, "The crazed man gave aid and comfort to the enemy . . . there are times when war is demanded. And who are we to accept? The view of all official Washington, our elected president and his congress? Or that of a mild Quaker whose crazed action certainly does no credit to the great Creed enjoyed by men of such world prominence as Herbert Hoover." ⁸⁸ Others followed suit,

writing statements like, “Regardless of how he felt about the war, few Americans will disagree that for a man to commit suicide means he is mentally ill” and, “It might be said that Morrison . . . [was] demented. Certainly, [he] was not of sound mind at the time he decided upon this fatal course.”⁸⁹ Psychiatrist Dr. Joseph David gave extensive testimony to one reporter to try to illustrate why Morrison must have been insane. He compared Morrison’s suicide to that of non-political self-immolations like Ann Conway, who killed herself out of depression after losing her three-month-old baby. He goes on to explain why someone would kill himself in such a painful way: “A psychotic individual will not respond to pain in the way you or I do.”⁹⁰ With this statement, not only did Dr. David take the rhetorical power out of Morrison’s suicide by calling him mad, but he also diminished Morrison’s sacrifice by implying that, as a crazy person, Morrison either wouldn’t feel pain or would enjoy it.

Therefore, by labeling Morrison as insane, his critics de-politicized his actions. His self-immolation did not impress upon Americans the urgency of the violence taking hold in Vietnam, but rather turned Morrison into a freak show by which people were simultaneously fascinated and disgusted. Dr. David recognized this when he asked, “What is to be gained by setting fire to yourself . . . whatever the cause? It arouses only antagonism. It is not a *rational* way to impose your beliefs on the majority of the people. Suicide by fire is so foreign to the average person that its discussion evokes initial expressions of astonishment [emphasis added].”⁹¹ Thus, by labeling him an irrational madman rather than a martyr, Americans “render[ed] problematic any critique of the civic sphere raised by [his] actions . . .” while “underscor[ing] the apparent rationality of the public sphere as it [was].”⁹² Under the guise of rational psychology, the deliberation following Morrison’s self-immolation served as a mechanism to silence him. Many who viewed the world through a Western lens, could only conceive of such violence as an acceptable act

when it was performed outside of their borders. Ironically, there is a sense in which this means that Morrison's critics precisely illustrated the inconsistency that possibly led him to such extreme measures in the first place—the hypocrisy that many Westerners simultaneously value peace and non-violence in their own culture while participating in violent endeavors abroad.

Undemocratic and Unnecessary

In addition to arguing that Morrison was crazy, many critics condemned Morrison's actions as undemocratic. Because he lived in America, Morrison could have, without violent consequences, picketed or written a letter to the editor conveying his thoughts. Therefore, considering this context, Morrison's action was portrayed as nonsensical. Even just looking at the titles of editorials concerning his actions illustrates this disapproval: "Foolish and Dangerous," "A Distorted Act More Pointless than War," "To What Effective End?" "He's No Martyr," and "What a futile Protest!"⁹³ As one editorialist put it: "Norman Morrison . . . was a man beating his head against a wall . . . He chose violence to protest violence and distorted his noble intentions."⁹⁴ Similarly, another critic wrote, "Norman Morrison gave his life to let the world know what? That he does not approve the policy of the Eisenhower-Kennedy-Johnson administrations to try to contain communism on the war-torn continent of Asia."⁹⁵ Yet another with almost the same exact sentiment remarked, "But is an act of supreme violence really the way to protest? . . . The sad fact is that protests against American policy do not change by one whit the Communist pattern of intimidation, murder, and takeover that created this ugly war."⁹⁶ Furthermore, Phil Newsom, an United Press International Foreign News Analyst, commented, "Even death on a Vietnamese battlefield would seem to have been easier and to greater purpose."⁹⁷ This author sarcastically stumbles on the thread that strings together most critiques against Morrison—the dichotomy between the inappropriateness of violence in Western,

rational, democratic countries versus its appropriate deployment in non-Western countries.

Although Morrison's actions were not welcomed in America, the author seems to think that such violence would have been more appropriate and useful in a place like Vietnam.

Not only did some critics see Morrison's action as foolish because of its extreme nature, but they also argued that by committing suicide he prevented himself from any further deliberative engagement: "Nothing more tragic—or more foolish—could be imagined than the actions taken by these peace-loving young men [Morrison and LaPorte]. Alive, they had a chance to move public opinion as they wished to do . . . Alive they could have done useful work as conscientious objectors . . . death puts a period to constructive action."⁹⁸ Another labeled the action the "tragic irony of [his] senseless sacrifice," because "opposed to violence, [Morrison] performed the ultimate violence on [himself], leaving behind not flaming symbols of hope but only ashes of despair."⁹⁹ An article in *Life* magazine also addressed this dilemma: "At a time when men must live with their consciences and heed the hard messages they speak, he listened and then chose to die. In the fire both man and conscience perished."¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, the author in this piece frames Morrison's self-immolation as a selfish escape from the harsh realities he saw rather than a sacrifice to help stop those harsh realities. Thus, although Morrison's self-immolation did generate discussion, it was not the conversation that Morrison had hoped would take place. Rather, people characterized Morrison's self-immolation as sinful, crazy, and undemocratic. Ironically, in focusing on the non-deliberative nature of Morrison's actions Americans ended up side-stepping the real deliberative issue at hand—America's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Conclusion

While many Americans were busy diminishing the importance of Morrison's suicide, reports came in that the Vietnamese were celebrating Morrison. Just two days after his death, a North Vietnamese Press Agency released this statement: "The noble self-immolation of Norman R. Morrison symbolizes the earnest aspirations of American youth and people who do not want to shed their blood for the interests of the United States warmongers."¹⁰¹ The people of Vietnam were so excited about Morrison's act that they commemorated it by having a famous poet write a poem entitled "Emily, My Child" after his daughter, made a postage stamp of his face, and even named a street in his honor. Following a visit to North Vietnam, British reporter James Cameron also noted this jubilant atmosphere. In *New York Times* article, he wrote, "The immolation of Norman Morrison . . . was so electrifying to the Vietnamese that even now, weeks after his death, they are having public demonstrations in his honor . . . It is the case that Norman Morrison has gone into Vietnamese mythology. They consider that his gesture marks the total watershed of United States opinion. 'Now, at last, the Americans will understand.'"¹⁰² Most Americans certainly did not understand. They were blinded by terministic screens that caused them to see America as a place where problems were solved via democratic, rational deliberation not barbaric sacrifice.

However, in 1995, Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War era, Robert McNamara wrote the following in his memoirs:

Morrison's death was a tragedy not only for his family but also for me and my country. It was an outcry against the killing that was destroying the lives of so many Vietnamese and American youth. I reacted to the horror of his action by bottling up my emotions and avoided talking about them with anyone—even my family. I knew Marg and our three

children shared many of Morrison's feelings about the war, as did the wives and children of several of my cabinet colleagues. And I believed I understood and shared some of his thoughts.¹⁰³

Thus, thirty years after Morrison set himself on fire outside his office window, McNamara admitted that he sympathized with Morrison's feelings about the war. Although the public narrative surrounding Morrison's sacrifice was generally dismissive at best and hateful at worst, McNamara, one of the most informed individuals concerning America's involvement in Vietnam, was able to understand. This illustrates the utmost importance of the first standard for determining when a self-immolation will turn into a moving narrative. As discussed, in 1965, the general American population was unaware of the depth of American involvement in the war. However, because McNamara knew the severity of the situation, he could better comprehend Morrison's extreme course of action. Unfortunately for Morrison and many of the fallen soldiers of Vietnam, McNamara did not voice this opinion until much later.

Chapter Four

Torches for Tibetan Autonomy: A Stifled Narrative of Chinese Oppression

On March 16, 2011, in front of hundreds of people, Tibetan Buddhist Rigzin Phuntsog of the Kirti Monastery set himself on fire in a primarily ethnic Tibetan area of the Sichuan province in China in order to protest the government's repressive policies.¹ Chinese security officers tried to put out the fire by dousing him with water and beating him.² Officers then put the town on lock down. Phutsong did not survive the night. It was the first time in modern history that a Tibetan monk died from self-immolation in protest of Chinese rule.

Four months later on March 15, Tsewang Norbu, a twenty-nine year old monk, ingested and covered himself in gasoline and then lit himself on fire. According to the *New York Times*, Tsewang then yelled phrases like, "We Tibetan people want freedom," "Long live the Dalai Lama," and "Let the Dalai Lama return to Tibet."³ A little over one month later on September 26, two more monks, eighteen-year old Lobsang Kalsang and nineteen-year old Lobsang Konchok, also committed self-immolation.⁴ Then, in October, six more followed suit. Although their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, has promoted a non-violent "middle way," encouraging his followers to remain moderates, this extreme trend of Tibetan self-immolations still continues three years later.⁵ In fact, the type of Tibetan who self-immolates has expanded beyond devout monks to nuns and civilians both young and old. As of February 16, 2014, at least 125 Tibetans had set themselves on fire within Tibet to protest China's policies toward their culture, religion, and lifestyle.⁶

Despite the large number of people who have laid down their lives for the cause, China's response has been to crack down harder on the region. This lack of rhetorical influence is puzzling for three reasons. First, although China has tried to silence the news of these incidents,

they have failed to contain these stories from international news due to the work of activists and modern technology. In fact, major western newspapers like the *New York Times* report most incidents of Tibetan immolation. Therefore, there is an international record and awareness of the immense number of political suicides in the region. Second, many in the international community express great sympathy for Tibetans and acknowledge that China's Tibetan policies are greatly flawed; however few outsiders have taken an active role in trying to change the Tibetan situation. Third, previous scholars have indicated that self-immolation is most influential when committed by Buddhists in Asian nations, because there is a better cultural understanding of the practice. For instance, in comparing self-immolation in the Korean student movement to the American student movement, Rhee argued, "In the Eastern tradition appear both the Buddhist ritual of self-burning to achieve Nirvana and suicide as political protest. Suicide by fire in Korea, then, combines both precedents."⁷

In this chapter I explore why, even though immolations are often covered in international media and Chinese policies toward Tibet are widely criticized, the Tibetan immolation narrative has yet to inspire action within the region. In order to do so, I employ the theory I established in previous chapters to help explain this lack of resonance. After a brief history of Tibet and its relationship to China, I engage the three facets of the theory in the context of modern Tibet. First, I analyze the immediacy of the Tibetan crisis and how China works to minimize this issue. Second, I investigate the perceived cultural resonance of self-immolation both inside Tibet and within the international community. Third, I illustrate how China's place as an international superpower coupled with its repressive policies is the Tibetans biggest obstacle to obtaining influence and achieving autonomy for their region. Finally, I end by discussing implications.

China's History with Tibet

Throughout history, China has had varying control over major portions of the Tibetan region. According to Warren B. Smith, the Tibetan people and China “were in conflict from the time of the earliest records.”⁸ In fact, China had a major influence in the makeup of the Tibetan region when they persecuted shepherds on the border of the Tibetan Plateau. Hundreds of years later, in the seventh century, Buddhism was introduced to the Tibetan region and it quickly became a “center of Buddhist culture” attracting monks from “India, Nepal, East Turkestan, and China.”⁹ Around 779, the first Buddhist monastic university was founded. In the early ninth century Tibet possessed a strong army and therefore, in 821, China agreed to a peace treaty.¹⁰ However, control of Tibet fragmented approximately twenty years later when their ruler, who was known for his persecution of Buddhists, was assassinated.¹¹ A civil war, which broke out over who should be the region's next leader, caused imperial Tibet to fall. During this “Age of Disintegration,” Tibet experienced a strong Buddhist revival as their foreign relations shifted to focus on India and Nepal rather than China.

The next major shift for Tibetans came in the thirteenth century when Genghis Khan and the Mongols conquered Tibet. However, Mongolian and Tibetan leaders got along well and the Mongols respected Tibetan Buddhist traditions. In fact, under the leadership of Kublai Khan, Buddhism was established as the state religion for the eastern portion of the Mongol Empire.¹² In the fourteenth century Tibet was freed from Mongol rule and the Ming dynasty became the leaders of China. The Tibetans and the Ming emperors maintained friendly relations and traded horses and tea.¹³ At the same time, Tibetans also remained on friendly terms with the Mongols. Sam van Schaik argued that “most of the great thinkers whose work still determines the themes of Tibetan culture and religion cluster[ed] around this time” and therefore, “we might be justified

in calling [it] a golden age.”¹⁴ This is not surprising since the first Dalai Lama, Gedun Trupa, was born in 1391. The development of the title of Dalai Lama was “based on the belief that human beings who have attained a very high degree of enlightenment can reincarnate voluntarily and out of compassion, in order to help all living beings on their path to final liberation.”¹⁵ Also, whoever was named Dalai Lama was expected to be the protector of the Tibetan region.

From the fifteenth to the sixteenth century Tibetan and Mongol relationships remained stronger than those with China, especially when the fourth Dalai Lama “was discovered to have been reborn in Altan Khan’s own family, his great-grandson.”¹⁶ The fifth Dalai Lama’s rise to power in the seventeenth century marked the first time a Dalai Lama had true power over both religious and political affairs in Tibet.¹⁷ During this time, the Manchus conquered China and formed the Qing Dynasty, which established close relations with Tibet and the Dalai Lama.¹⁸ This relationship was beneficial to the Dynasty, because showing the Dalai Lama respect indicated respect for the Mongols, whom the Qing Dynasty feared.¹⁹ However, in 1720, Manchu armies entered Tibet and lost the respect of Tibetans when they exiled the sixth Dalai Lama. In 1720, the Qing emperor saved Tibetans from Dzungar Mongols and, taking advantage of their weak position, declared Tibet a tributary state of China. Tibet’s relationship as subordinate to the Qing dynasty lasted throughout the nineteenth century. However, Melvyn C. Goldstein argued, “By the mid-nineteenth century, if not earlier, Manchu Chinese influence was miniscule.”²⁰

In 1903, a new player invaded Tibet, the British. The Dalai Lama fled to Mongolia in hopes of gaining Russian assistance and Britain forced Tibetan leaders to sign a trade agreement limiting Tibet’s relationships with nations other than Britain.²¹ However, Britain’s control was short-lived and in 1906 they signed an agreement affirming China’s power in Tibet.²² China further asserted their authority by sending troops into Tibet in 1910.²³ The Dalai Lama fled

again—this time to India, and China responded by deposing him and his status as an incarnation.²⁴ Two years later, the Qing Dynasty lost power in China allowing the Dalai Lama to retake control of the Tibetan region with help from India and Great Britain.²⁵ However, even though the Dalai Lama declared his power, China's new leader (Yuan Shih-k'ai) proclaimed that Tibet was not independent from China.²⁶ The British tried to remedy the situation by holding a peace conference at which China's leader and the Dalai Lama agreed to a border.²⁷ The agreement also implied that China was responsible for Tibet when it came to international but not internal affairs.²⁸ According to van Schaik, "From now until the end of World War II, as the world's attention turned away from Tibet, the Dalai Lama had the opportunity to remake his country."²⁹

In 1935, the fourteenth Dalai Lama was born. Five years later he was enthroned in Tibet and in 1950, at the age of fifteen, he began actually ruling Tibet. Although Tibet remained neutral during World War II, their politics internally were weakened during the transition in power to the fourteenth Dalai Lama.³⁰ Also at this time, leaders in China were once again asserting that Tibet was an indivisible part of China.³¹ In 1951, Tibet and China entered into an agreement entitled "Seventeen Points for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet."³² According to Goldstein, the agreement was a "shrewd Chinese policy" that "combined diplomatic and military pressure against an ill-prepared and weak Tibetan government."³³ In 1954, India also entered into an agreement with China that recognized China's claim to Tibet.³⁴ Throughout the 1950s, Tibetan resistance intensified. The United States even air-dropped weapons and supplies to try to aid the Tibetans.³⁵ In 1959, the Tibetan National Uprising began and the Dalai Lama had to flee to safety in India. China acted mercilessly toward Tibetans including women and children. People were imprisoned, beaten, and sometimes killed.³⁶ China responded not only with force,

but also with propaganda.³⁷ During the Kennedy administration, the United States intelligence community realized that guerilla warfare would not be able to win independence for Tibet and therefore, began pulling back their support of the operation, especially as attention shifted to Vietnam.

In 1965, China officially created the “Tibetan Autonomous region.” According to John B. Roberts and Elizabeth A. Roberts, the use of the word “autonomous” was merely a propaganda technique, because the Tibetans were in no way free or autonomous.³⁸ Furthermore, China was not interested in Tibetan culture but rather its land and mineral resources.³⁹ In 1966, Chinese leader Mao Zedong began a cultural revolution, which included an attack on Tibetan Buddhism. Monks were forced out of Monasteries and temples were destroyed. After Zedong’s death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping took control and implemented more Tibetan friendly policies.⁴⁰ During the 1980s, temples were rebuilt and many monks returned to their religious practices. However, things turned sour once again after negotiations failed between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama. A Tibetan dissident movement became active in 1987 and, by 1990, China’s policies had once again hardened toward the Tibetan people.

In 2000, Chinese leadership began pouring money into the region to support economic growth. However, this mainly benefitted Chinese workers rather than Tibetans. In 2008, Tibetans rioted against Chinese oppression once again. Of course, Chinese propaganda has portrayed Tibetans as irrational aggressors. For instance, according to Jayadeva Ranade, “State-owned television sought to create a divide between Tibetans and Hans by repetitively depicting Tibetan mobs beating ordinary unarmed Han Chinese.”⁴¹ In 2009, a monk named Tapey committed the first modern self-immolation in the region. Miraculously, he survived. Self-immolation did not become a common form of Tibetan protest until the death of Phuntsog in March 2011. Since this

time, tensions have only grown stronger between the Tibetans and the Chinese. As of April 2014, the crisis has worsened.

The Oppression of Tibet Versus the Propaganda of China

The current repression of Tibet by China is quite harsh. In 2013, journalist Steven Lee Meyers reported that China was one of eight countries singled out by the U.S. State Department for “particularly egregious and systemic repression of religious rights” due to their treatment of Buddhists in Tibet.⁴² According to *The New York Times*, “These policies include replacing the Tibetan language with Chinese as the language of instruction in schools; sending some 21,000 Chinese party officials into Tibetan monasteries to keep an eye on monks; forcing monks to denounce the Dalai Lama; banning the display of the Dalai Lama's photograph; having a heavy armed police presence in Tibetan towns, villages and around monasteries; closing monasteries; and clamping down on demonstrators with arrests and shootings by police officers.”⁴³ A group of young Tibetans released a statement to a Tibetan in exile outlining the way Tibetans are forced to live: “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.”⁴⁴ The apprehension such policies have created has only increased with rising military presence in reaction to the protests. Before 2008, between 2,500 and 3,000 Tibetans were able to escape to India each year.⁴⁵ However, now only about 1,000 are able to make it across the border.

In addition to religious oppression, a study done by the Human Rights Watch explained that China has relocated “more than two-thirds of the region’s 2.7 million people” from their lives as nomadic farmers to more modern townships.⁴⁶ This policy produced a “tectonic shift that is radically altering the way of life for the vast majority of Tibetans who have no say in the design and implementation of these policies.”⁴⁷ Experts argued that the relocations, “which are

ostensibly designed to protect the ecologically fragile grasslands, are coercive, leaving nomads without the goats and yaks that sustained them.”⁴⁸ Journalist Shunsuke Tabeta wrote, “Beijing has increased its economic control of the region and eroded local identity.”⁴⁹ Tabeta also explained that even though China has poured money into Tibet, this economic boom has led to a major influx of Han Chinese moving to the region for work. Unfortunately for the Tibetans, many state-run companies only employ Han Chinese. The Tibetans are unable to compete with the Chinese workers, who possess Mandarin language skills, and therefore end up scraping by on government subsidies and the odd construction job.⁵⁰ In a statement by young Tibetans, they claimed, “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.”⁵¹ China’s repressive policies extend beyond religion to all aspects of Tibetan life. The director of the modern Tibetan studies program at Columbia University, Robert J. Barnett, summarized the issue in *The New York Times*: “The cultural cost of disrupting this nomadic life is hard to measure but the price is high.”⁵²

Due to their migration for employment, the Han Chinese now outnumber the Tibetans of the region. This is especially problematic because of the pre-existing tensions between the two groups. The *New York Times* quoted a “prominent [Han Chinese] filmmaker, speaking more candidly than usual, but only under the condition of anonymity,” who described their relations as follows, “We Han love [Tibetans’] exotic singing and dancing, but we also see them as barbarians seeking to split the nation apart.”⁵³ Furthermore, Hu Yong, a communication professor in Peking, stated, “I think the authorities have deliberately created a barrier between the two cultures.”⁵⁴ Anand Bodh summarized how China has put Tibet in a state of crisis in a

myriad of ways: “political repression, cultural assimilation, social discrimination, economic marginalization, environmental destruction, and lack of religious freedom.”⁵⁵

Many Tibetan advocates have confirmed this narrative of oppression by arguing that the Tibetan self-immolations are an understandable response to China’s oppressive policies. Penpa Tsering, a member of the exiled Tibetan Parliament simply stated, “Why do Tibetans burn themselves? Political freedom in Tibet is nonexistent.”⁵⁶ Eleanor Byrne-Rosengren, the director of an advocacy group named Free Tibet, wrote, “All the Tibetans who resort to self-immolation do so because they feel they have no other way to make China and the rest of the world listen to their country's call for freedom.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Vijay Kranti, a Tibetologist and journalist, argued, “All the self-immolations have occurred in towns where millions of Han Chinese have been systematically settled in recent decades to reduce local Tibetans into a meaningless minority in their own homeland. The spate of self-immolations reflects the Tibetan desperation, resulting from political oppression, social marginalization, lingual disadvantage and environmental destruction.”⁵⁸ Thus, Kranti and others have painted a picture of a dire crisis that justifies self-immolation.

Some have even used language suggesting that the Chinese have given Tibetans few other options. For instance, a senior monk in India, Lobsang Yeshe, contended, “The policies are against the monks' traditional ways which is why the monks get frustrated and are *compelled* to do such an act” [emphasis added].⁵⁹ Others explained that the Tibetans think they need to commit alarming actions in order to “tell the world about the suffering and denial of human rights in Tibet.”⁶⁰ As Tibetan scholar and activist Tsering Woesser wrote, “Self-immolation is the most hard-hitting thing that these isolated protesters can do while still respecting principles of nonviolence.”⁶¹

Furthermore, friends and family of self-immolators (who risked their safety by speaking to journalists) often indicated that Chinese oppression was the motivating force behind these acts. For instance, after Tenzin Sherab set himself on fire, the *BBC* reported, “Sherab had expressed discontent to friends against China’s ‘evil policies’ and had said Tibetans ‘can no longer bear to live under China’s constant torture and repression.’”⁶² After a twenty-year old student, Tsering Kyi, committed self-immolation, *The Guardian* reported that this young woman had told a close relative that “she understood why [the self-immolations] were happening. ‘No one could go on living like this,’ she said.”⁶³ Similarly, Tamdrin Tso, who self-immolated on November 17, 2012, wrote to his father, “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.”⁶⁴ The *Washington Post* noted that a friend of twenty-two year self-immolator Lobsang Jamyang was given a few messages from Jamyang before the act: “The third message was that Tibetans should be very strong to face China, that Tibetans should not be cowards and should not remain silent.”⁶⁵

There is some record for what the Tibetans themselves think self-immolators are fighting. Numerous self-immolators, such as Tsewang, Dolkar Tso, Yangdang, Gudrub, and Lhamo Kyab, were heard chanting slogans for the return of the Dalai Lama and for freedom during their self-immolations.⁶⁶ Similarly, twenty-six year old self-immolator Chagmo Kyi left a letter “wish[ing] for equality of all nationalities.”⁶⁷ Other Tibetans have indicated sympathy and understanding toward self-immolators. For instance, the International Campaign for Tibet (here on referred to as ICT) summarized the opinion of a Tibetan who wished to remain anonymous: “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 . . . there [is] no freedom for Tibetans.”⁶⁸ A Tibetan exile, who still lived in the region when Phutsong self-

immolated, also explained, “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 . . . 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.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, a Tibetan explained to an exiled Tibetan, who was urging him not to consider self-immolation, “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.”⁷⁰ These quotations indicate that many Tibetans are both aware and sympathetic to the desperation felt by those who go so far as to commit suicide by flame.

China’s Propaganda Tactics

Although Tibetans are constantly confronted with China’s oppressive practices, the Chinese government has used propaganda to distort these policies to the rest of China in order to maintain the allegiance of its citizens. When self-immolations began in the region, the Chinese state-run press first used the strategy of avoiding the issue. According to the *New York Times*, the state press “barely mentioned” them.⁷¹ Andrew Jacobs wrote, “The Chinese media has reported only a handful of the self-immolations, and people who transmit news from Tibetan areas face harsh punishment.”⁷² When they did mention incidents of self-immolation, China tried to rebrand these actions as terrorism. In October 2011, China’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman stated, “As we know, such splittist activity at the cost of human life is violence and terrorism in disguise.”⁷³

Also, reminiscent of how the media treated Norman Morrison, Chinese officials argued that people committing such acts were unstable. The secretary general of the Youth League of the Tibet Autonomous Region described self-immolators as “those leading isolated lives,

underprivileged individuals such as ‘handicapped’ and those vulnerable to provocations of some ‘who don't like the Tibet an society.’”⁷⁴ Similarly, the *International Herald Tribune* reported, “Officials have described the self-immolators as outcasts and terrorists.”⁷⁵ The Chinese state sponsored news crafted narratives in order to explain away the actions of the immolators as irrational and crazy. For instance, the official Chinese media released a statement reporting that Tsering Kyi’s self-immolation was caused by mental instability. Specifically, they said she had become unstable due to an accident in which she hit her head on a radiator. After this, they reported, her grades began to fall, “which put a lot of pressure on her and made her lose courage for life and study.”⁷⁶ Following Phutsong’s death in 2011, “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.”⁷⁷ Police have even tried to extract false information from relatives in order to shift the blame away from Chinese policy. After Kunchok Wangmo died by fire, police tried to get her husband to admit that her actions were the result of “domestic problems.” When he refused to do so, the police then accused him of being an alcoholic who murdered his wife.⁷⁸

In addition to framing self-immolators as unstable, the Chinese media has attempted to shift the blame onto the Dalai Lama for the deaths. Unlike international media, which paints China’s oppressive policies as the source of Tibetan immolation, the Chinese media claimed, “The Chinese government does not create conditions to encourage Tibetans to self-immolate. Hence it cannot be condemned.”⁷⁹ Instead, as an article in the *China Daily* asserted, “Tibetan senior officials on Friday reiterated that judicial authorities hold a ‘solid chain of evidence’ proving the 14th Dalai Lama and his followers are the driving forces behind self-immolations.”⁸⁰ The former chairman of the Tibetan Autonomous Region echoed this sentiment in a report that

also appeared in the *China Daily*, “Investigations had found that some people inciting self-immolations had contacted overseas forces and the 14th Dalai Lama and colluded with them to ‘fan the extremism’ . . . Media have reported the whole process about how they incite, plan, and prepare for others' self-immolation, and how they report and communicate overseas. That formed a complete chain of evidence.”⁸¹ China has continued to build on this story by spreading unsubstantiated evidence about the Dalai Lama’s participation in planning self-immolations. For example, the governor of Aba in southwestern China accused monks of bribery: “Authorities believed the monastery's senior clerics persuaded others to self-immolate by saying that they would be heroes and freedom fighters and by organizing monks to send money and goods to the protesters' families.”⁸² Also, the state run media wrote that the Dalai Lama and his associates published a “‘Self-Immolation Guide’ on the Internet openly inciting Tibetans within the Chinese border to ‘carry out self-immolations according to the plan and procedures.’”⁸³ The author of the news article, Yi Duo, even stated that this guide was a “slap in the face to some Western forces” who had supported the Dalai Lama and praised his non-violent approach. Western media gave little credence to these crude attempts to blame the Dalai Lama. Some Indian news outlets that did publish about the issue framed the story as an accusation, not fact, noting that the allegation was “part of a counter campaign launched by the state-run media.”⁸⁴

In addition to trying to construct an evidence-based case against him, the Chinese media also used name-calling to condemn the Dalai Lama, writing, “The remarks of the Dalai Lama remind us of the uncontrolled and cruel Nazi during the Second World War. Behind the Dalai Lama's concepts of ‘Middle Way Approach’ and ‘high-level autonomy’ is actually the idea of ethnic separation. How similar it is to the Holocaust committed by Hitler on the Jewish!”⁸⁵ In addition to comparing him to Hitler, they labeled him a “traitor” and a “serf-owner,” who sees

his people “as his slaves.”⁸⁶ Another way that Chinese propaganda has painted the Dalai Lama as the enemy is by claiming that he has voluntarily abandoned his people. Lian Xiangmin, director of Beijing’s China Tibetology Research center, asserted, “In fact, if he really wants to come back, he can make contact and communicate through the central government, and there is no need to engage in activities in foreign countries and to strive to win support from other countries’ political leaders.”⁸⁷ Chinese officials also accuse the Dalai Lama of being insincere in wanting what is best for Tibet. Qin Gang, China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesman, stated, “If the Dalai Lama really wishes to achieve progress in contact and discussions, he must reflect on his own words and deeds in a thorough way and stop all activities of separatist and destructive nature.”⁸⁸

Even China’s liberal intellectuals have gone along with the picture their government paints of the Dalai Lama and Tibetans. Tsering Wooser, who is of mixed Tibetan and Han ancestry, explained that most Chinese still see Tibetans as the “other” and that her friends often cite the following Chinese proverb when justifying their opinions: “If you are not of my ethnicity, you cannot share my heart.”⁸⁹ Wooser also noted, “The Han are obsessed with issues of sovereignty . . . They want to claim Tibet as part of China, but they are not terribly concerned with the Tibetan people or their culture.” *The New York Times* summarized the issue, “Whether it be antipathy or apathy, many Chinese have been unconsciously swayed by government propaganda.”⁹⁰

Not only has Chinese propaganda tried to demonize the Dalai Lama, but it has also attempted to paint a positive picture of modern Tibet. For instance, a former chair of the Tibetan Autonomous region, Padma Choling, “lashed out at U.S. comments” for disparaging China’s policies in Tibet. He argued, “In Tibet, people enjoy freedom to all religious beliefs and this freedom is uncompromisingly safeguarded.”⁹¹ In another newspaper article, Choling claimed that

China's policies have caused "remarkable growth in people's living standards in Tibet."

According to him, "All the Chinese people, including people from all ethnic groups in Tibet, are committed to realizing the 'Chinese dream.'"⁹² The state run news summarized this success:

"Local nomads [have begun] enjoying a new modern life in their crystal-clean new homes while all of their livestock are raised in the endless grassland under a cooperative style [system]."⁹³

In summary, the international media and the state-run Chinese media paint two different images of the current conditions in Tibet. The narrative told to those outside of China has been one of a desperate people, who are losing their religious freedom at the hands of an oppressive government. In this light, the crisis in Tibet appears both real and appalling. Within the walls of China, however, a different story has been told. According to the state news and Chinese officials, Tibetans have been thriving thanks to the money China has invested in their region. China's policies cannot possibly be the cause of self-immolations, because they have caused Tibetans no harm. Rather, it is the Dalai Lama and his associates who are manipulating Tibetans into committing such heinous actions. China has invested so much into this narrative that even most liberal intellectuals in China apparently believe it as truth. As Stephen J. Hartnett described in his rhetorical analysis of China's communist propaganda strategies, "The [Chinese Communist Party] strives to portray the Tibetans as pre-historic heathens in need of modernity."⁹⁴ Furthermore, he wrote, "What is striking about this rhetorical strategy is its refusal to acknowledge how deeply Buddhism informs Tibetan culture, or how the process of forced economic modernization has turned the Tibetans into an impoverished and second-class ethnic minority in their own homeland, thus making the [Chinese Communist Party's] arguments feel to Tibetan activists like a string of culturally insensitive impositions, if not outright lies."⁹⁵ In this regard, the Tibetan situation is reminiscent of the desperate circumstances of religiously

oppressed Vietnamese Buddhists, who drew great sympathy from the international community. However, despite our similar knowledge of the poor treatment of Tibetans, there has been far less action taken to rectify their hardship than in Vietnam.

The Cultural Resonance of Self-Immolation Committed by Tibetan Buddhists

When discussing the influence of self-immolation, observers have often noted that this practice can be best understood when committed by Buddhists. As shown in the previous chapter, this was certainly true for Thich Quang Duc, who garnered much attention from both Vietnamese citizens and Americans. Therefore, in this section I discuss how self-immolation has resonated within Tibet, how the international media has talked about self-immolation, and finally, how China's state-run media has pushed back against these interpretations.

Although it is difficult to access the opinions of Buddhist Tibetans due to the restrictions China puts on their media use, the number of self-immolations that have occurred in the region certainly provides some insight. As mentioned, at least 125 Tibetans have set themselves on fire between March 16, 2011 and February 16, 2014. According to sociologist Michael Biggs, "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."⁹⁶ Tibetans have even surpassed the number of monks who protested in Vietnam and the number who died during the pro-democracy movement in South Korea.⁹⁷ The startling number of deaths indicates that these actions have been resonating within Tibetan culture. Simon Denyer of the *Washington Post* explained, "The self-immolations spread from an important monastery in the town of Aba, on the eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau . . . Most of the initial protesters were monks or former monks, but most of the latest are laypeople, including farmers, students and a writer . . . The protests have spread across

eastern Tibet and even to Lhasa, the region's main city.”⁹⁸ For instance, at least forty-one of the sixty-five self-immolations in 2012 were committed by laypeople, not monks.⁹⁹ That so many laypeople have committed self-immolation indicates resonance of the action.

When discussed in the international media, many have noted the support self-immolations have received from the Buddhist Tibetan community. Denyer wrote, “Many Tibetans appear to view the protesters as heroes, sometimes trying to prevent the removal of their bodies by Chinese police, laying ceremonial scarves at protest sites or paying tribute to their families.”¹⁰⁰ A report published in December 2012 by the ICT noted that even though self-immolations are “deeply controversial . . . The overwhelming response from Tibetans to those who self-immolate is one of respect and the authorities’ attempts to turn people against them has been a resounding failure.”¹⁰¹ For example, ICT noted that after Nagdrol’s immolation in February 2012, “more than a thousand Tibetans came individually” to visit his family.¹⁰² In another case, there were photos of local Tibetans trying to protect the body of a self-immolator from “armed paramilitary troops . . . converging upon the body.”¹⁰³ Sharon LaFraniere of *The New York Times* argued, “The deaths suggest that self-immolation is gaining favor as a form of political protest for Tibetan clergy.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Nicholas Bequelin, a senior researcher in Hong Kong for Human Rights Watch, said in an interview, “We clearly see this form of protest is resonating within the Tibetan community . . . The government is trying to prevent these incidents by strengthening control, but too much repression and control is what provokes these acts.”¹⁰⁵ Experts also championed self-immolation by pointing out that it is a non-violent form of protest. For example, Kelsang Gyaltsen, the Tibetan Government in exile's special representative to Europe, told the press that Tibetans “are engaged in a non-violent struggle for real autonomy.”¹⁰⁶

Commentators have also addressed the moral issue of Buddhists committing acts of self-violence. Innen Parchelo, a novice Buddhist priest, who was quoted in the *Ottawa Citizen's* "Ask The Religion Experts" column, summarized the subject, "People often wonder how a pacifist faith like Buddhism . . . can lead to apparently despairing acts. For Buddhists, human life, while precious, is not unique. . . . What matters is not just this life itself, but how we live it. Thus, acts of remarkable self-sacrifice . . . can represent an ultimate statement of principle . . . Each of those Buddhist suicides understood their vow not to take lives, but did so deliberately as an ultimate expression of determination to end greater suffering and establish justice."¹⁰⁷ Most notably, the Dalai Lama has refused to condemn self-immolators. Although he certainly does not encourage it, he stated on a major Indian news channel that, according to Buddhist principles, motivation was key in determining the morality of the act: "If motivation [consists] too much of anger, hatred, then it is negative, [but] if the motivation [is] more compassionate . . . then such acts can also be positive. That is strictly speaking from [a Buddhist point of view]."¹⁰⁸ This echoes self-immolation's historical roots, because throughout time people have expressed that self-immolation can only take place if someone has pure motivations.

In an interview for Canada's *National Post*, Pinit Ratanakul, director of the College of Religious Studies at Thailand's Mahidol University and an expert in bioethics, linked the issue directly to Buddhist scripture: "In some cases . . . taking one's own life is allowed for noble ends. The giving of one's own life to save the lives of others, as a bodhisattva [enlightened] gave himself to a hungry lioness to save her from eating her own cubs, is one example of this exception."¹⁰⁹ In the same article, Buddhist scholar James Benn explained that self-immolation was a common practice in Chinese Buddhism throughout history. Furthermore, Benn explicitly used Chinese history to combat the argument that self-immolators were merely crazy: "This was

not the random act of a disturbed individual, but rather a single manifestation of a deeply rooted set of ideas and ideals in Chinese Buddhism that blossomed again and again in the history of pre-modern China.”¹¹⁰ Similarly, according to Robert Thurman, a professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, “There is a tradition within the spiritual heroes and heroines of Buddhism to offer the body out of altruism, love, and joy of freedom, never motivated by hatred or anger.”¹¹¹ Chinese commentator Hu Ping also pointed out that self-immolation is not “a product of hopelessness,” but a deed that demonstrates the “actors’ strong resolve to convey a message.”¹¹² Journalist Ajaz Ashraf specifically addressed one potential interpretation of this message explaining that killing themselves with fire is symbolic of their belief that without the Dalai Lama, “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.”¹¹³

Some journalists and experts are supportive of the Tibetan cause, but strongly discourage using self-immolation as a means of protest. The Dalai Lama in particular has both been supportive of those who have sacrificed their lives while also trying to prevent any more deaths. In a 2012 interview with Reuters, he stated, “I will not give encouragement to these acts . . . 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.”¹¹⁴ Woenser and Arjia Rinpoche, the former head of Kumbum monastery published an open letter imploring Tibetans to stay alive regardless of the great oppression with which they are faced: “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!"¹¹⁵

Some have whole-heartedly disagreed with the idea that Buddhism allows for the practice of self-immolations. Thaye Dorje, known as the "Black Hat lama," told reporters that self-immolation was against the precepts of Tibetan Buddhism. According to Michael Binyon, Dorje claimed, "It violated Buddhist principles of non-violence, and destroyed human beings as well as their surroundings."¹¹⁶ However, it is important to note that many who have claimed that self-immolation is anti-Buddhist also have ties to the Chinese government. For instance, Dinga Rinpoche Pasang Namgyal, a political adviser from Tohlung Dechen county in the regional capital of Lhasa, argued that the "Buddhist saying 'do all that is good' means that people should give, do good deeds, and refrain from actions that are harmful to the human body."¹¹⁷ Another local political advisor, Thubten Drapa, stated, "If those who believe in me injure their own bodies, they are not only hurting life, but also obstructing their practice of the Dharma."¹¹⁸ Padma Choling, who was the eighth chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region, also maintained, "Acts as gruesome and inhumane as self-immolations run counter to tenets of Tibetan Buddhism, and all true Buddhists have zero tolerance to such acts."¹¹⁹

In addition to condemning self-immolation as anti-Buddhist, officials and media in China have also questioned the authenticity of such actions. According to Chinese propaganda, the Dalai Lama encouraged self-immolations. Some go so far as to argue that he has actively manipulated Tibetans into taking such action. As mentioned, China claimed to have found a self-immolation guide published online by the Dalai Lama and his supporters. According to these reports, a member of the exiled Dalai clique, Lhamo Je, wrote the instructions. However, he has denied this.¹²⁰ The *China Daily* concluded, "The 'Self-immolation Guide' demonstrates a sober

attitude in scheming and arranging the cruel actions of self-immolations, which makes it stand out among the many propaganda of the Dalai clique.”¹²¹ In a meeting with U.S. congresspersons, a delegation of Chinese legislatures asserted, “The recent self-immolations in Tibet were criminal acts premeditated, plotted, and manipulated by overseas separatist forces.”¹²² The Chinese media printed some bizarre stories about this purported manipulation. For example, it was widely reported that “a Tibetan nun immolated herself in Sichuan because she was offered an iPod by an India-based member of the ‘Dalai Clique’ for the act.”¹²³ The implausibility of this scenario is obvious.

In addition to trying to shift the blame to the Dalai Lama, many Chinese officials have voiced their disapproval of self-immolation and also their concern for Tibetans who take such measures. For instance, in 2012, Wen Jiabo, who was the Premier of the People’s Republic of China at the time, stated, “We are opposed to the use of such radical actions to disturb and undermine social harmony. The young monks are innocent and we are deeply saddened by their actions.”¹²⁴ In other cases party officials have tried to downplay self-immolations as a norm that exists in every society. When asked how China planned to handle the self-immolations, Liang Tiangeng shifted the conversation by claiming that Tibetans were happy with their lives and that those who committed self-immolations were just like other developed countries that were also “plagued by suicides.” He concluded, “People kill themselves, they set fire to themselves, they shoot themselves every day. I think some media organizations are trying to sensationalize the very few cases of self-immolation that have happened in Tibetan area because they have ulterior motives.”¹²⁵ In order to perpetuate the idea that Tibetans are satisfied with the way they live, a Beijing media organization released a survey in which Tibet was ranked “the happiest province in the Middle Kingdom.”¹²⁶ In a more extravagant attempt to try to showcase the solidarity

between Tibetans and the Chinese, the government launched a one hundred and twenty million dollar propaganda campaign to fund the production of a play highlighting China's role in bringing harmony to the Tibetan region.¹²⁷ Buddhist blogger Woesser has condemned the play as “a project to rewrite history, to ‘wipe out’ the historical memory and culture of a people . . . This is a ‘win win’ project that can both make money and be a tool for brainwashing people with propaganda.”¹²⁸

In short, the high number of self-immolations occurring across the Tibetan region suggests that this practice has resonated within the Buddhist communities there. Even when offered large payments for information pertaining to any knowledge of future self-immolations, Tibetans have not stepped forward to claim the reward.¹²⁹ Furthermore, even though to outsiders, suicide may initially seem against the tenets of Buddhism, many scholars and religious leaders have explained in media interviews the more complex nature of the practice of self-burning. Thus, although they are not encouraging people to take these actions, they are helping international audiences to understand this as a cultural practice with a long history in the region. Almost all of the statements condemning the self-immolations as anti-Buddhist, as driven by the Dalai Lama, or as overblown by the media come from Chinese political officials. However, based on the widely sympathetic response to Tibetans from other Tibetans and the international community, these Chinese propaganda narratives ring as a false and desperate attempt to save face. Unfortunately, sympathy is not enough to change the adverse situation of Tibetans. Rather, direct action against China would be necessary, but, as I explain below, China's economic prowess has prevented international intervention.

China's Oppression of the Tibetans

Although both Tibetans and the international community seem to be in agreement that Tibetan Buddhist's are in a desperate situation in which using self-immolation is an understandable maneuver, China's power over its people and in the international community has made progress hard to achieve. In fact, the more Tibetans protest, the more the Chinese government has created harsher restrictions to limit their freedoms. In this section I outline the coverage of China's oppression of the Tibetan people (ranging from killings to jail sentences to communication and travel restrictions) in order to demonstrate that they show no plans to back down on any policies concerning Tibetan autonomy or the Dalai Lama.

The subtlest way the Chinese authorities have sought to silence the actions of Tibetans is through monitoring and limiting their access to media sources like the Internet, establishing re-education programs, and increasing security in the region. According to the ICT, multiple areas in Sichuan, where self-immolations had previously occurred, "had their internet connections severed" and lost text-messaging capabilities.¹³⁰ The state-run media admitted to this action "stating that Internet connections and mobile phone networks were cut for 50km surrounding the protest areas." Also several Tibetan blog websites were shut down with no explanation provided. According to Mark MacKinnon of *The Globe and Mail* some monks have reported, "Authorities also came to tinker with their satellite dishes so they no longer receive foreign channels such as *BBC* or *Voice of America*."¹³¹ Limiting the available media channels makes it harder for monks to organize within Tibet, keeps them from communicating their stories to the international community, and prevents their awareness of those who have been supporting their efforts.

In response to what the Chinese government has labeled "instability" in the rural areas of Tibet, they have implemented a new "patriotic education" program that has been labeled

“pervasive and systematic.”¹³² According to Dan Levin of the *New York Times*, monks in these programs have been “forced to denounce the Dalai Lama,” and many who have refused to participate, have been jailed.¹³³ One monk was quoted, “If we don't obey, it will be terrible for us.”¹³⁴ Pictures from these programs have been run in the state media and included images such as “Tibetans plowing the fields in rural areas with red Party flags on their tractors,” and “Tibetans in traditional dress bear aloft an image of the Chinese leaders Mao, Deng Xiaopeng, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao together with butter sculptures.” The Chinese news even went so far as to unabashedly call this re-education program “cultural replacement activities.”¹³⁵ In other words, Chinese propaganda has basically been advertising the government’s attempt to erase Tibetan Buddhist culture.

In addition to these measures, China has also set up systems to monitor and limit Tibetans’ ability to travel. According to a newspaper in Mumbai, even though the passport application process has recently been simplified for Chinese people, Tibetans “are subjected to a new procedures that [were] not implemented for Chinese” and, therefore, they are “virtually being denied new passports currently.”¹³⁶ Authorities have been confiscating passports from the few Tibetans who were lucky enough to already have them. Tibetans who live in neighboring Chinese provinces to the autonomous region have been blocked in their efforts to visit the region, because they were denied the necessary special permit from the Public Safety Bureau. MacKinnon labeled this a “farcical situation in which the Tibetan Autonomous Region—long sealed to many foreigners—is now also closed even to many Tibetans living in the neighbouring Chinese provinces.”¹³⁷

MacKinnon has also reported that at “a meeting point and trading post between the Tibetans who live further up the mountains and the Han Chinese who live below,” the

atmosphere has been tense due to multiple mobile police checkpoints at which officers are equipped with “riot shields and metre-long poles with U-shaped rubber endings that look designed to pin a burning person to the ground.”¹³⁸ Jayadeva Ranade, a security and intelligence expert in India, echoed MacKinnon’s report when he noted that there were “over 3,000 closed-circuit cameras reinforced by a security grid system comprising 698 police stations in Lhasa alone.”¹³⁹ Furthermore, Ranade argued that security would continue to increase: “A large percentage of the national security budget, enhanced to exceed the country’s defense budget in 2012 for the third consecutive year, is earmarked for Tibetan areas.”¹⁴⁰ Despite this increased security, China has tried to make things appear normal and upbeat for tourists who gain access and visit the region’s attractions, which include the Buddhist temples. Levin reported that Monks have characterized these efforts as including “ubiquitous surveillance cameras, paid informers, and plainclothes security agents who mingle among the busloads of tourists.”¹⁴¹ Levin summarized China’s effort with disapproving language, “Labrang presents an idyllic picture of sacred devotion that is carefully curated by the Chinese government, which hopes to convince visitors that Tibetan religion and culture are swaddled in the Communist Party’s benevolent embrace. But behind closed doors, many of the monastery’s resident monks complain about intrusive government policies, invisible to tourists that they say are strangling their culture and identity.”¹⁴² These descriptions unveil a dark narrative of what has been going on in Tibet. According to people like Levin, China has been interested in preserving Tibetan culture only insofar as it has served their economic interests and the tourist industry. Otherwise, they have devoted their resources to reprogramming Tibetan culture out of its citizens. Thus, the message of China’s policies is that Tibetan temples should stand as landmarks of the past not as markers of the present or as strongholds of Tibetan heritage for the future.

In addition to limiting Tibetans' travel within China, China has also prevented foreigners from visiting the Tibetan region. According to the *New York Times*, China has blocked Western tourists, non-Chinese researchers, and foreign reporters from entering most of the Tibet.¹⁴³ In 2010, Navi Pillay, a senior human rights official for the United Nations, advised China to admit independent human rights monitors into the region in order to assess the situation, but "a top Chinese-appointed official said that this would not happen."¹⁴⁴ In 2013, Canada's ambassador was also denied access to Tibet.¹⁴⁵

Unfortunately, cut communication lines, re-education programs, and travel barriers are almost mild in comparison to the other actions against protesting Tibetans. According to Eleanor Byrne-Rosengren, the director of Free Tibet, as of October 2013, China has been increasing "the frequency and severity of violence by the security forces."¹⁴⁶ Chinese police have arrested an alarming number of Tibetans, who they accuse of being tied to self-immolation protests. According to *The Guardian*, the China Law Yearbook recorded that in 2012 China arrested over 1,000 people for "'endangering state security,' the country's most serious political crime."¹⁴⁷ In early 2013, Chinese officials picked up and detained seventy Tibetans, who they "accused of helping organize, encourage, or publicize self-immolations."¹⁴⁸ The *New York Times* stated, "Chinese courts have so far shown little leniency toward the accused, sentencing more than a dozen ethnic Tibetans to long prison terms, and in one case in January, a suspended death sentence."¹⁴⁹ The officers and courts have remained vigilant in an attempt to intimidate those charged into providing information for a reduced sentence.¹⁵⁰

Some instances reveal just how hard police have been working to come up with crimes in order to arrest anyone associated in any way with an immolation. For example, The Chinese Human Rights Defenders reported that a monk had been arrested and sentenced to fifteen months

in jail for “disrupting traffic” and “disrupting public order,” because he “carried the ashes of a nephew who had self-immolated in a procession from a monastery to his nephew's home.”¹⁵¹ In another case, three Tibetans were convicted of “inciting state secession,” with varying sentences of four, five, and six years.¹⁵² Sentences have only gotten more severe with the passing of a new law in 2013 requiring that “people who plan, organize, incite, or help others to perform self-immolations will be tried for intentional homicide.”¹⁵³ Around this time, two Tibetans were found guilty of encouraging eight people to set themselves on fire, including three protestors who died. According *The International Herald Tribune*, “One of the defendants received a death sentence with a two-year reprieve, which almost always means the sentence will be reduced to life in jail. The other was sentenced to 10 years in prison.”¹⁵⁴

China's police have also used violence in the streets of Tibet in an attempt to deter self-immolation and maintain order. In January 2012, Chinese forces shot thirty-one demonstrators in the Sichuan Province, one of whom did not survive.¹⁵⁵ In October 2013, the police fired shots into another crowd of Tibetans. These Tibetans were protesting for the release of a person who was imprisoned for refusing to fly the Chinese flag. Free Tibet stated, “Security forces started beating the Tibetans, causing severe injuries, deployed tear gas, and fired indiscriminately into the crowd.”¹⁵⁶ Nine months later, officers opened fire on a large group of “unarmed Tibetans who were celebrating the birthday of the Dalai Lama.”¹⁵⁷ Nine people were injured, two of whom were reported as being in critical condition. The *Afternoon Voice* of Mumbai summarized conditions in Tibet based on a statement made by a top American Tibetan leader: “While people in China are enjoying comparatively more freedom, Tibet is increasingly being turned into one big prison and Tibetans are being treated as second grade citizens.” Some people have attributed the drastic measure of self-immolation as a response to these increasingly grim and dangerous

conditions. Lobsang Sangay, the Prime Minister of Tibetan's government in exile explained, "Tibetans cannot protest, they cannot peacefully gather—if you do, you might get shot. You can't have hunger strikes; you can't have rallies. Tibetans see [self-immolation] as the only or most drastic way of protesting against these repressive policies."¹⁵⁸

Chinese dissident Yang Jianli pointed out, "China is the only country in the world that detains a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Tibetans are driven to self-immolation by their continued oppression."¹⁵⁹ Despite all of this, there have not been many who have taken action on behalf of the Tibetans. This is understandable given China's authoritarian style of government and their economic power internationally. Tibetologist Vijay Kranti pointed out:

It is only a democracy, which provides sufficient scope to the rulers to commit a mistake and to then realize the error and correct it. In instances where wisdom fails to dawn upon the ruling class, inbuilt defense mechanisms like the rule of law and public opinion take over to amend the lapse in good time. But in a dictatorship, or an authoritarian system like Communism where rulers are not blessed with the option of admitting mistakes, the only alternative available for the leaders is to overshadow a mistake with yet another blunder.¹⁶⁰

In other words, according to Kranti, China's refusal to back down to Tibetan protestors is systematic. They cannot back down, because doing so would connote a weakness not permitted in the authoritarian style of leadership.

In addition to it being unlikely that change will be created from within China, the international community has been slow in their efforts to address China's Tibetan policies. According to the *Washington Post*, "Some believe that the United States cannot press China on human rights because it seeks Chinese cooperation on economic and national security issues."¹⁶¹

Although the United States released statements indicating their concern over the issue and claimed to be “keeping pressure on China,” conditions have continued to worsen in the region.¹⁶²

In 2014, China did take notice when Barack Obama met with the Dalai Lama. Before the meeting, the White House announced that Obama was meeting with the Dalai Lama only in his “capacity as a cultural and religious leader” and “reiterated that the U.S. recognized Tibet as part of China and did not support Tibetan independence.”¹⁶³ Even so, China issued a warning following the meeting that the U.S. should not interfere with China’s internal affairs in order to “avoid further impairment to China-U.S. relations.”¹⁶⁴ Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui stated that the meeting went against the United States’ promise to not “support ‘Tibet independence.’”¹⁶⁵ In 2012, the United Kingdom was more severely punished when David Cameron met with the Dalai Lama. According to *The Guardian*, “Beijing cut off high-level diplomatic ties for about a year after,” and “relations only resumed after the British prime minister said he did not plan to meet the spiritual leader again in the near future.”¹⁶⁶ Canada also placed concerns for the Tibetan people behind economic needs. In 2013, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper approved a 15.1 billion dollar deal energy deal with China. Although the deal was “widely opposed by some members of [Harper’s] cabinet and caucus, who support the Tibetan cause and find China’s human rights record distasteful . . . Canada does not have the capital necessary to develop its own resources, so overseas investment is needed.”¹⁶⁷ Even Buddhist countries have been hesitant to come forward to show their support. According to the *Bangkok Post*, “No Buddhist country has publicly condemned the alleged repression in Tibet.”¹⁶⁸

In response to this, Sangay has explained, “Generally, we believe that Buddhist countries have sympathy and a supportive mindset for Tibetan people, but they have geopolitical concerns . . .

There's a lot of pressure from China.”¹⁶⁹ Therefore, although international sympathy for the Tibetan cause exists, most governments have shied away from taking direct action against China.

Mixed feelings have been expressed concerning the likelihood of future support being given to Tibetans. In November 2013, the Dalai Lama seemed hopeful as he explained “that lately more Chinese intellectuals, retired government officials, and writers have started supporting his middle-way approach of seeing more autonomy for Tibet and therefore feels that the hardliners in China are ‘feeling isolated.’”¹⁷⁰ One country that has taken steps to pressure China to change their policies is Australia. Frances Adamson, Australia’s top diplomat in Beijing, even managed a visit to Tibet to “investigate the grievances.” Adamson reported that he clearly conveyed Australia’s concern over human rights in Tibet and stated that he wished “to see open and regular access to the Tibet Autonomous Region for the media, as well as Australian diplomats.”¹⁷¹ United States ambassador Gary Locke was also granted access to the region in June 2013. However, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Human rights groups say Tibet remained under de facto martial law and the facade of relative openness was just a diversion, and journalists risked being used for propaganda.”¹⁷² Specifically, Kate Saunders of ICT stated, “They are confident that they can control and stage-manage the visits, divert the attention [away] from self-immolations and divert the criticism from western governments.”¹⁷³

Along with visiting the region, the United States has claimed to be strongly encouraging “China to engage in an unconditional substantive dialogue with the Dalai Lama.”¹⁷⁴ To this point, such prodding has been ineffective. An October 2013 United States government commission report stated that there has been no improvement in China’s human rights record. Co-Chair of the committee, Senator Sherrod Brown, argued, “This year's report serves as an important reminder that China is no closer to granting its citizens basic human rights” than in 2001, when it joined

the World Trade Organization.¹⁷⁵ Another United States representative who has worked particularly hard on behalf of Tibetans is Diane Feinstein. In addition to working on a Senate resolution calling on “China to suspend religious control regulations, reassess its religious and security policies, and resume dialogue with Tibetan Buddhist leaders,” Feinstein has also been crafting legislation that would provide American visas to displaced Tibetans.¹⁷⁶ In May 2013, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee recommended that immigration visas should be granted to 5,000 Tibetans living in India and Nepal.¹⁷⁷ Although this is a positive step toward helping some Tibetans, the ICT pointed out, “The Committee’s action is only one step in a long process. To become law, the Tibet provision would have to be included in the final immigration bill passed by both the House and the Senate.”

Overall, the United States seems to have remained committed to positive foreign relations with China more than helping Tibetans. For example, in March 2012, the *Christian Science Monitor* pointed out, “Last month, the Obama administration rolled out the red carpet for Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping. This may be understandable given US interests in a strong US-China relationship. But this month, with the March 10 anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising and flight of the Dalai Lama, we must remember that Tibetans are giving their lives to protest the desperate conditions in Tibet under Chinese rule.”¹⁷⁸ Tibetan legal scholar Sangay poignantly summarized the issue in the *New York Times* when he stated, “The world is paying attention, but not enough.”¹⁷⁹ Activist Amrita Madhukalya expressed similar frustration as she explained what she believed to be the reasons why Tibetans receive so little attention:

I am deeply frustrated and angry that the international media has enough resources to report on the choice of clothes of celebrities, but is unable to and unwilling to investigate the causes of these self-immolations. It costs a Tibetan his life to ensure two columns or a

picture in a newspaper. Much of the media is either state owned or corporate owned, with many having direct interests in China. This makes them naturally biased . . . Even after 121 cases of immolation so far, China continues to say that this was at the instigation of exiled Tibetans.¹⁸⁰

In sum, although some people are working on behalf of Tibetans, there has been no progress in the Tibetan region. Even India, the country that contains a high number of Tibetan sympathizers and displaced Tibetans has remained surprisingly quiet. The *Kashmir Monitor* wrote, “No prominent leader, not even from the Opposition, nor even the palpably anti-China media of India—ordinarily quick to seize upon a hint of Chinese arrogance or bellicosity—has been unduly bothered by the rising number of Tibetans setting themselves on fire.”¹⁸¹ Dibyesh Anand commented that while these self-immolations may get attention, they have ultimately had little influence: “There is no powerful foreign government interested in rocking the Chinese boat . . . The victory of the Tibetan movement in terms of getting international attention will prove to be pyrrhic.”¹⁸²

Conclusion

The case of Tibetan self-immolation is rhetorically puzzling. As I have illustrated, almost all non-Chinese media has conveyed great sympathy and concern for the Tibetan people creating a narrative similar to that of the oppressed Vietnamese Buddhists. Also, the media has expressed a range of opinions on the ethicality of self-immolation in Buddhist culture in which many Buddhists scholars have been quoted informing readers of the connection this seemingly over-the-top method has to Buddhism. Even the Dalai Lama has been woven into this narrative explaining that self-immolation can be a positive act. Therefore, from a rhetorical point of view, Tibetan self-immolations have been successfully translated into messages of oppression for all

the world to hear, and clearly, the messages resonated in Tibet where, in response, the Chinese spread rhetoric and propaganda of their own. First, in contrast to the international media's narrative of oppressed Tibetans, Chinese state run media has worked to convince their own people that Tibetan self-immolators are irrational terrorists. Second, they have been sending a clear message to the international community to tread carefully or suffer consequences. Ultimately, little has been accomplished. No mass movement has arisen in Tibet, and it seems clear that any attempt to do so would meet outright repression. Nor have the one hundred plus cases galvanized international opinion producing real pressure on China

The Tibetan case illustrates how practical considerations may block moral progress. No matter what rhetorical strides Tibetans make in gaining sympathizers, China's status as a superpower and style of government has created insurmountable barriers. Andrew Lam contrasted Tibetan self-immolations to the 1960s Vietnamese self-immolations, explaining, "Self-immolation isn't what it used to be."¹⁸³ Lam argued that this was due to the fragmented nature of media in which "there are too many actors in too many theatres and their tragedies have lost their grip on the human psyche." Although the fragmented nature of modern media has perhaps contributed to our ability to move the Tibetan plight out of sight, the messages of Tibetan self-immolation are held back by a much larger problem (after all, as I will explain in the next chapter, self-immolator Mohamed Bouazizi managed to captivate this same fragmented media and its readers). Rather, the failure of China to change its policies has had less to do with a lack of media attention or the modern, arguably desensitized mind, and more to do with governments who are afraid (perhaps rightfully so) to confront China's great wall of influence, money, and power.

Chapter Five

From Self-Immolation to Arab Spring: The Narrative of Mohamed Bouazizi's Martyrdom

On December 17, 2010, twenty-six year old Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Sidi Bouziz, Tunisia. Earlier that day, Bouazizi had come into town to sell produce from his mobile vending cart. However, his day was interrupted when policewoman Faida Hamdi confiscated his goods and issued a fine, because he lacked a permit. Allegedly, Hamdi slapped Bouazizi, which led to extreme humiliation due to the gender norms in Tunisian society. Even though Hamdi denied this narrative of events, stating, "It was impossible because I am a woman" and was eventually acquitted of any wrongdoing, the moment would become known as "the slap heard around the world."¹ Following the supposed slap, Bouazizi went to the governor's office but was turned away. In a state of great desperation and a loss of dignity, Bouazizi returned to the governor's building, covered himself in paint thinner, and demanded to see an official.² Just an hour after his confrontation with Hamdi, Bouazizi lit his cigarette lighter and began to burn.

Although he suffered burns to most of his body, even burning off his lips, Bouazizi made it to the hospital and was then transferred to the burn unit in Tunisia's capital, Tunis.³ By this time riots and protests had broken out across the country and Tunisia's president, Ben Ali, was working on damage control. On December 28, Ali even made a televised visit to Bouazizi's hospital bed where he lay wrapped in gauze from head to toe. On screen, Ali made a gesture of handing Bouazizi's mother a check for around 14,000 dollars, but she later stated that Ali took the check back when the camera's stopped rolling.⁴ On January 4, three weeks after the initial incident, Bouazizi passed away. Ten days later, Ben Ali fled the country. Even more impressive, other Arab nations followed Tunisia's lead and began their own revolutions. Therefore, although he died unaware, it was Bouazizi's moment of despair and death that would be credited as the

impetus for the “Arab Spring.” As Ben Macintyre wrote, “Bouazizi has become a martyr, and his story has taken on the status of a myth.”⁵

Compared to the explicitly political suicides of Thuch Quang Duc, Norman Morrison, and numerous Tibetans, Bouazizi’s self-immolation was reported as a spontaneous decision born out of extreme personal frustration. Some even reported that his self-immolation was an accident—a threat with some drops of kerosene and a lighter that he unintentionally held too close to his body.⁶ Thus, it might seem unlikely that Bouazizi would become a political icon. However, I argue that it was, in part, the everydayness of his narrative that allowed his story to so strongly resonate across Tunisia and throughout the Middle East. It was a narrative of desperation with which the people of the Arab world were all too familiar.

Bouazizi was not the first person to commit self-immolation in Tunisia. On March 3, 2010, approximately ten months before Bouazizi set himself on fire, another street vendor, Abdesslem Trimech, committed self-immolation. According to *Al Jazeera*, Trimech was one of many cases [that] occurred without any significant media attention.”⁷ Yet, Bouazizi was the person widely recognized as “the spark” that ignited a revolution and the person who was posthumously awarded recognitions like the European Parliament Sakharov prize for freedom.⁸ Why was Bouazizi’s story of self-immolation the one that spread? In order to more fully understand the circumstances that led his narrative to circulate internationally, I present a rhetorical analysis of the media coverage and context of Bouazizi’s self-immolation. I begin with a survey of scholarly literature concerning new technology and the Arab Spring because of the significance of social media during this wave of protests. Following this, I analyze the coverage of Bouazizi’s self-immolation by engaging the three components of the theory that have been addressed throughout this study. This analysis includes an examination of the perceived crisis, in

which I explore the coverage of Bouazizi's personal plight and Tunisia's broader problems, a presentation of several reasons why Bouazizi's narrative resonated with both those around him and the international community, and a discussion of how the authoritarian regime of Tunisia differed from that of China allowing Bouazizi's narrative to thrive. Finally, I end with a discussion of Tunisia's current status and the rhetorical implications of the Bouazizi narrative.

New Technology and the Arab Spring

One of the most popular issues discussed throughout the development of the Arab Spring has been how people in places like Tunisia and Egypt utilized technology and social media to advance their cause. Several media sources have gone so far as to label these rebellions as the "Twitter revolution," the "Facebook revolution," or the "social media revolution."⁹ The issue of new technology's use during the Arab Spring has also been taken up by several scholars.

Most agree that new technology and social media played a significant role in the Arab Spring. William Lafi Youmans and Jillian C. York wrote, "Much of the initial research and analysis finds that social media played an important role in the collective actions that resulted in the overthrow of the governments of Egypt and Tunisia's revolutions."¹⁰ Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain noted, "Dissent existed long before the Internet. Yet digital media helped to turn . . . dissent into a structured movement with a collective consciousness about both shared plights and opportunities for action."¹¹ Thus, as Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos and Ioannis Chapsos argued, "The social media created unprecedented opportunities for the exchange of information outside the control of the dominant and supervised mainstream media of the Arab regimes."¹²

The possibilities implicit in this shift came into view more clearly following the death of

Bouazizi when user numbers for social media sites expanded across the Arab world. According to the Dubai School of Government's Arab Social Media Report, the total number of Facebook users in this region grew seventy-eight percent from January 2010 (pre-Bouazizi) to December 2010 (post-Bouazizi).¹³ Also according to this report, "When comparing the uptake of Facebook in Arab countries with that in some of the 'Top 20' countries (in terms of Facebook penetration worldwide), several Arab countries [including Tunisia] outpace[d] the Top 20 in terms of new users acquired throughout 2010."¹⁴ This is in keeping with the research of Gadi Wolfsfeld et al. who hypothesized that there is likely to be a "significant increase in the use of the new media" after a high amount of "protest activity."¹⁵ In their study, Wolfsfeld et al. found a statistically significant increase in social media use after Bouazizi's death.¹⁶ They attributed this increase not just to people looking for information about future protests, but also to those reading "social media contacts, blogs, and the foreign media" in order to find news that was not state propaganda.¹⁷ Citizen journalists, who have posted videos of protests and other information like updates on numbers killed, have also been recognized as instrumental in the spreading of information during the Arab Spring both to everyday citizens within these countries and international journalists reporting on events.¹⁸

Numerous other scholars have addressed the increase in the Arab world's new technology use by analyzing how social media has functioned to effect change in this region. There are three major functions discussed in the literature. First, social media allowed people the ability to identify with each other in new ways. For instance, Sarah Khamis and Katherine Vaughn noted, "Satellite television and social networking have made it easier to let each individual know that his/her views are shared by enough people to make protesting worthwhile and safe."¹⁹ One way people showed their solidarity was through Twitter hashtags like "#Bouazizi," "#tunisia," and

“#sidibouzi.”²⁰ Similarly, Howard and Hussain explained, “In their shared sympathy for the dying man, networks of family and friends came to realize that they shared common grievances too. The realization hit home as people watched YouTube videos about the abusive state, read foreign news coverage of political corruption online, and shared jokes about their aging dictator over SMS.”²¹ This, Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos claimed, allowed for the “establishment and maintenance of ‘latent’ ties that could be activated very quickly and used according to each situation and necessity.”²²

The activation of these ties is the second major function discussed in literature concerning new technology and the Arab Spring. The Internet provided a new space in which dissenters could coordinate protests with their fellow citizens. In other words, they equipped the people with what Wolfsfeld et al. referred to as “important tools for protest,” because “they allow[ed] people to organize and mobilize much more efficiently than in the past”²³ Howard and Hussain agreed when they wrote, “Communicating in ways that the state could not control, people also used digital media to arrive at strategies for action and a collective goal: the deposition of a despot.”²⁴

The third major function discussed in this research is how the Internet opened up a new space for a “vibrant” public sphere to emerge.²⁵ Furthermore, the Internet also furnished a space for these citizens to engage in a global public sphere, where their “acts of political resistance could be proliferated and supported internationally.”²⁶ Aziz Douai and Hala K. Nofai analyzed user comments on news sites in order to illustrate this public sphere engagement in action. They concluded that the ability to comment on news stories empowered these readers by providing them a place to voice their opinions and dialogue with other readers.²⁷

Although scholars agreed that social media has been a useful tool, they also pointed out that new technology and social media did not *cause* the revolutions. Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos clarified their position stating, “This is not to argue that the social media were ‘responsible’ for the uprisings.”²⁸ Wolfsfeld et al. emphasized that we should see social media as “facilitators of protest rather than causes.”²⁹ Khamis and Vaughn concurred: “Overall, it could be said that the Tunisian political activists combined their political resilience with their communication creativity to ensure the success of their uprising.”³⁰ Although scholars agreed that social media has been influential during the Arab Spring, they also pointed out that there are multiple factors that need to be taken into account when discussing these events. It is with both these sentiments in mind that I analyze the rhetoric surrounding the self-immolation of Bouazizi.

Perceived Crisis: Bouazizi as a Representative Example

Mohamed Bouazizi’s home country of Tunisia had received little international news coverage. In fact, in 2011, after journalists began to pay attention to their situation, citizens of Tunisia wanted to know where “the media had been all this time.”³¹ However, once his self-immolation narrative took hold, news outlets began to share stories about the struggles of both Bouazizi and Tunisia. In this section, I analyze how the media constructed Bouazizi as a sympathetic person who was facing a considerable crisis, which in turn, justified his drastic action. Then, I discuss how his struggle came to represent that of Tunisia and the Arab world as a whole.

Framing Bouazizi

Although Mohamed Bouazizi’s suicide was a spontaneous decision, a Tunisian activist, Ali Bouazizi (of no relation to Mohamed Bouazizi), made a quick determination that the incident needed to be framed in a particular way. This framing is likely what set Mohamed

Bouazizi apart from previous self-immolations in Tunisia. Ali Bouazizi was the first to post a video of the self-immolation to Facebook and also the first to be interviewed about what happened when *Al Jazeera* reported on the story. Ali Bouazizi told journalists that Mohamed Bouazizi was a university graduate. This information was widely reported in the news, but, in fact, Mohamed never even graduated high school.³² Even major sources like the *New York Times* originally published this information.³³ Some news outlets even referred to him as having a computer science degree.³⁴ This characterization of him as a graduate helped to make Mohammed Bouazizi's situation seem especially desperate and relatable to other Tunisians. In June 2011, Ali Bouazizi told a French paper that he made up the story in order to "move people."³⁵ This makes sense given the large number of unemployed college graduates in Tunisia.³⁶

Ali Bouazizi admitted that he also made up the story that female police officer, Faïda Hamdi, slapped Mohammed Bouazizi, because he believed it would "get the uneducated people on the streets." Ali Bouazizi knew the story would shock the people in the "rural, traditional region."³⁷ The news portrayed the slap as a key factor in the actions taken by Mohamed Bouazizi. Ben Macintyre of London's *The Times* claimed, "Had Hamdi been a man, the story would probably have ended there, just another incident of low-level, routine degradation visited by the powerful on the weak. But to be slapped by a woman in public, is the height of humiliation for an Arab man."³⁸ The story also became more exaggerated than just a slap. Macintyre wrote, "According to some reports, she also spat on Bouazizi, seized his electric weighing scales, and tipped over his barrow, while her two assistants assisted in the beating."³⁹ Even the police officer's brother, Fawzy Hamdi, was conflicted over the matter. On the one hand, he was "thrilled by the revolution" but he also denied his sister's action. He stated, "It's the

lie that toppled a dictator.”⁴⁰ After being released from prison, Faida Hamdi herself, told interviewers that she was “happy about the revolution” and had accepted her suffering as the villain in Bouazizi’s story as her “destiny.”⁴¹ Hamdi recognized the media’s rhetoric as the “root of the problem” in spreading this falsity. Specifically, she was “shocked” by the international media in particular, “because they have a reputation for honesty.”⁴²

Over time, several sources did begin to report that Mohamed Bouazizi was not a college graduate, but by this time, the Arab Spring was already in full swing. The misinformation about the slap, however, has not been retracted from news outlets and has received almost no recognition as a falsehood. Ali Bouazizi’s rhetorical choice to make Mohamed Bouazizi’s crisis one that would resonate with the people of Tunisia helps to explain why the story of previous self-immolators in Tunisia did not achieve salience. For instance, even though Abdesslem Trimech’s self-immolation was strikingly similar to Mohamed Bouazizi’s experience in that they were both street vendors who became frustrated with “bureaucratic hindrance[s],” Trimech was only mentioned in a few articles.⁴³ Rather, Trimech was reported as his “town’s fool,” and was written off as a desperate, poor, and unstable person. Had it not been for Ali Bouazizi and his fellow educated activists, the same could have happened to Mohamed Bouazizi.⁴⁴ Instead, the crisis was carefully constructed to promote identification between the audience and the protagonist, Mohamed Bouazizi.

Other details of Bouazizi’s difficult life story were also reported. Many news outlets mentioned the death of his father when Bouazizi was only three years old and how this caused Bouazizi to sacrifice his own education in order to support his mother and “to help offer his five younger siblings the chance to stay in school.”⁴⁵ Even when he did receive schooling it was reportedly in a “one-room country classroom.”⁴⁶ Quotations from his mother and sister were

used to indicate his high moral character. For instance, one of his siblings told reporters, “My sister was the one in university and he would pay for her, and I am still a student and he would spend money on me.”⁴⁷ Peter Beaumont of *The Guardian* described Bouazizi’s “tiny white-walled bedroom he shared with his younger brother, Karim,” that was “picture-less and stacked with a few cushions and bedclothes.”⁴⁸ In the *New York Times*, Kareem Fahim further indicated Bouazizi’s sad state of affairs noting that his “dream” was to own a van to make his vending work more manageable.⁴⁹

The news also detailed Bouazizi’s struggle to find employment. Reportedly, he applied for several jobs, including military service, but was turned down. Yasmine Ryan of *Al Jazeera* wrote, “By all accounts, Bouazizi . . . was honest and hardworking. Every day, he would take his wooden cart to the supermarket and load it with fruit and vegetables. Then he would walk it more than two kilometres to the local souk.”⁵⁰ Hernando de Soto of the *Financial Times* tried to put into perspective just how much Bouazizi lost on the day he burned himself. He stated that police officers took “two crates of pears (\$15), a crate of bananas (\$9), three crates of apples (\$22) and a set of electronic scales (\$179, second hand).”⁵¹ Although this 225-dollar total may not seem like an extravagant amount, de Soto explained why this would justify someone like Bouazizi to commit suicide:

Bouazizi had been summarily wiped out. Without those goods, he would not be able to feed his family for more than the next month. Since his merchandise had been bought on credit and he could not sell it to pay his creditors back, he was bankrupt. Because his working tools were confiscated, he had lost his capital. Because the customary arrangement to pay authorities for the property right to park his vendor’s cart on two

square yards of public space had been terminated, he lost his access to the market.

Without property and trade, his reputation as a reliable administrator of goods was over.⁵²

Thus, since he could no longer provide for his family, Bouazizi had little to lose by committing suicide.

In addition to his sad family story and unemployment, journalists described Bouazizi's history of trouble with Tunisia's corrupt police force. A close friend, Hajlaoui Jaafer, told reporters, "Since he was a child, they were mistreating him. He was used to it. I saw him humiliated."⁵³ For instance, six months prior to his death, police fined him 400 dinars (approximately 280 dollars), which was "the equivalent of two months of earnings."⁵⁴ *Al Jazeera* noted that this was the "type of petty bureaucratic tyranny that many in the region [knew] all too well."⁵⁵ His mother has also strived to make the point that Bouazizi killed himself not over money, but due to police disrespect, which robbed him of his dignity. She explained, "He was a decent man . . . sick of the corruption. Mohamed felt humiliated and insulted. It was far from the first time he had been asked for a bribe and he cracked."⁵⁶ She told another news outlet, "We are poor people in Sidi Bouzid. We don't have money but we have our dignity, and his dignity was taken away with that slap and those wrong words."⁵⁷ Similarly, a fellow fruit vendor stated, "He broke down crying. But it was the end of his dignity when she slapped him, when she pushed him down on the ground. He told us he was going to do something—some revenge—but we didn't know what."⁵⁸ Based on statements like these, journalists explicitly realized a connection between Bouazizi and the Arab region more broadly. Beaumont wrote, "For what the Bouazizis represent is something instantly familiar across the Arab world: poor, decent people from the hard-scrabble countryside outside the town . . . A family who moved to the town to look for

work . . . who wanted to help their family better themselves through education in a country where wealth and opportunity has been concentrated for decades in the hands of a tiny elite.”⁵⁹

By portraying Bouazizi’s life as one of constant struggle, the media showed that he faced an insurmountable crisis and that, unlike Norman Morrison’s, Bouazizi’s self-immolation was a “protest of last resort.”⁶⁰ The reactions printed from his family and friends indicate that Ali Bouazizi was correct in his assumption that adding the detail of Hamdi’s slap would enhance the outrage people in traditional areas felt. Also, just as Ali Bouazizi had hoped, Mohamed Bouazizi’s personal story quickly shone a bright light on the wider problems in Tunisia, including poverty and authoritarianism. In this regard, Mohamed Bouazizi became a paradigm case of the crisis facing working people.

Bouazizi’s World is Our World

In addition to his personal plight, the media also linked Bouazizi’s suicide to problems felt in Tunisia and the Arab region. For example, Kerim Balci credited Bouazizi with “igniting” the Arab Spring but also noted that pre-existing context was crucial to this moment. Balci wrote, “[Bouazizi’s] flames were set on the pile of decades of discrimination, suppression, and aggression against the weak. It is not Bouazizi who made the conditions ready for a revolution in Tunisia. On the contrary, it is the conditions on the ground that made Bouazizi’s self-sacrifice a turning point in the history of Arab nations.”⁶¹ Specifically, people felt angry and depressed due to their economic situation. Ruadhán Mac Cormaic reported, “The official jobless rate is 15 percent, but among the young it’s double that and conditions are particularly dire in inland towns such as Sidi Bouzid.”⁶² Journalists focused on two major issues intertwined with this high unemployment rate including youth joblessness and the need for equal opportunity between the poor and the powerful.

Perhaps because it was a very relatable problem to those in Tunisia (and since the 2007 financial crisis, people in most countries) the media featured the fact that many unemployed Tunisians were young and educated. London's *The Times* reported, "More than a quarter of Tunisians under 25 are unemployed; half the country's 60,000 graduates released onto the job market every year cannot find work."⁶³ Fahim detailed the lives of "idle young men," who were "jobless, underemployed, or just plain poor" and who "pass the time at cafes playing a card game called rami. Others get drunk on the moonshine they buy at cigarette stands and stumble around Sidi Bouzid's town center, near the mosque where Mr. Bouazizi sometimes parked his fruit cart." These unemployment problems experienced by people like Bouazizi were one of the most prominent reasons for the Arab Spring: "The regime wasn't living up to its end of the social compact it had struck with citizens, in which Tunisians would sacrifice their freedom of expression, association, and political participation in exchange for prosperity and stability."⁶⁴

The youth unemployment crisis was also a pressing problem in other countries that followed in the revolutionary footsteps of Tunisia. In 2011, *Bloomberg* reported the youth unemployment rate throughout the Middle East was twenty-five percent, which "exceed[ed] that of any other region on the world."⁶⁵ Therefore, it is unsurprising that Bouazizi's suicide resonated strongly in the Arab world at large since the Middle East was experiencing similar struggles to Tunisia. As Reuters reported, "His desperate act struck a chord with millions of Arabs living with few job prospects."⁶⁶

Perhaps most notably, Bouazizi's self-immolation and the Arab Spring were rooted in frustration with authoritarian regimes like Ben Ali's. In Pakistan's *Daily Times*, Faheem Khan wrote, "[Ali's] rule was marked by severe violations of human rights, gagging the national press, rank nepotism, and crass corruption."⁶⁷ Ali created an environment in which the only way to

succeed was through bribing officials. Worse, Ali and his wife moved much of this money out of Tunisia. *Huffington Post* reported, “Some analysts have suggested that Mr. Ben Ali could have hidden up to \$17 billion in illicit assets abroad.”⁶⁸

In order to amass his wealth, Ali depended heavily on the Tunisian police force. Pakistan’s *The Daily Times* reported that Ali employed a “bloated police force” that was “six times that of France which has six times the population of Tunisia.”⁶⁹ Thus, Tunisians were used to encountering “ubiquitous police at every corner of the street,” who would “accost every citizen, stop every vehicle, demand documents, and would extort bribes on false pretexts.”⁷⁰ Specifically, “Ordinary Tunisians often [found] that they [had] to pay a bribe, maybe 2,000 to 5,000 dinar (\$1,400 to \$3,500), to the right connection in order to find work.”⁷¹ If the people did not follow instructions they faced “retribution” in the form of “public beating and insult.”⁷² Therefore, most Tunisians were familiar with the circumstances Bouazizi faced on the day of his suicide when he refused to pay a bribe. *The Daily Times* made this connection writing, “This is exactly what happened to Muhammad Bouazizi.”⁷³ Similarly, London’s *Financial Times* reported, “Millions of Bouazizis, unable to find a job in a state-controlled labour market and powerless to start a business without the proper connections, found it impossible to be productive members of society.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, even educated and employed people could not speak up against Ali’s policies, because in Ali’s “tightly controlled society,” human rights activists and journalists were “beaten up and imprisoned, websites [were] blocked, and state surveillance [was] extensive.”⁷⁵ This type of repression created fertile ground for even the more elite people in Tunisian society find resonance in Bouazizi’s story.

Journalists also added a personal touch to their coverage of the authoritarian crisis in Tunisia by providing more specific examples and quotes from everyday Tunisians. For instance,

in an article about Bouazizi's story, the *New York Times* relayed how Ali and local politicians attempted to cover up the dilapidation of Bouazizi's town of Sidi Bouzid by "planting of fully-grown trees to hide their neglect."⁷⁶ A male student related to Bouazizi's desperation by describing his own humiliating circumstance: "Every day I ask my father to give me one dinar [70 cents], and I'm thirty years old."⁷⁷ Quoted in *The Observer*, one of Bouazizi's sisters also placed direct blame on Ali's policies: "What kind of repression do you imagine it takes for a young man to do this . . . In Sidi Bouzid, those with no connections and no money for bribes are humiliated and insulted and not allowed to live."⁷⁸ Like youth unemployment, these repressive conditions in Tunisia also existed throughout the Arab world. Thus, Bouazizi became a hero for repressed people in places like Egypt and Syria as well. In the *National Post*, Peter Goodspeed explained, "Overnight, Mr. Bouazizi's gruesome suicide bid became a symbol of the humiliations to which the Arab world's authoritarian states subjected their citizens."⁷⁹

The media painted a clear picture of Bouazizi's crisis in Tunisia. Not only had he lost all of his money, he had also lost his dignity. At the root of these losses was Ben Ali's regime, which corruptly controlled the economy and encouraged police officers like Faida Hamdi to seek out bribes. As exemplified by Twitter hashtags like "#Bouazizi" and the statements everyday citizens made to journalists, it is clear that people in Tunisia and the Arab region at large felt Bouazizi's self-immolation was an understandable reaction to problems they too experienced in their own lives. More broadly, international media stimulated the world's interest and understanding by spreading this narrative.

Narrative Resonance: "We are all Mohamed Bouazizi"

The events following Bouazizi's self-immolation indicate how much his death resonated with Tunisians. His act immediately "set off rare public unrest in Tunisia."⁸⁰ Throughout the

country angry mobs formed including people who directly confronted Ali by throwing rocks and tomatoes at him when he came speak.⁸¹ *Al Jazeera* reported, “Within a week after Bouazizi's act, protests had spread and two more protesters had died.”⁸² Bouazizi’s suicide not only inspired poor, unemployed citizens to mobilize but also “doctors, bankers, and lawyers.”⁸³ In fact, “lawyers and students” often led the “demonstrations against the government throughout the country.”⁸⁴ Bone, a journalist for London’s *The Times*, noted that even the army sided with the protestors: “Unlike the police, considered agents of the regime, the army is viewed as being on the people's side.” A Tunisian explained, “The army has not intervened in politics. They just try to safeguard the country . . . During the demonstrations, the army refused to fire.”⁸⁵ Ali’s decision to flee the country clearly showed that he recognized that the message of Bouazizi’s self-immolation had permeated society to such a strong degree that he could not regain control. As India’s *Kashmir Monitor* wrote, “Then-President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's decision to step down on January 14, 2011, was in a sense a rational assessment on his part if one is to consider the impossibility of confronting a nation that had in its grasp a true popular revolution.”⁸⁶

Protests spread far beyond Tunisia. Revolutions began in other countries including Egypt and Lybia, whose citizens also successfully pushed out authoritarian leaders. There have also been civil uprisings in Bahrain and Yemen and “major protests in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Oman.”⁸⁷ Bouazizi was even credited with inspiring uprisings beyond the Arab region including large protests in Ukraine and in Brazil.⁸⁸ Juan Gonzalez explained that this domino effect was unusual. He argued, “You would have to go back to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, or the urban riots and European labor strikes of 1968, to find so many nations engulfed in anti-government protest at the same time. This time, it all started in Tunisia, with a peddler desperate to support his [family].”⁸⁹ In the *Financial Times*, Khalaf detailed how

Bouazizi's story resonated with others, because they too experienced corruption, poverty, and "a denial of dignity." Khalaf explained, "Every young Arab has become a Bouazizi . . . He is the young Egyptian who occupied Tahrir Square, and awakened a sleepy population. She is the young Libyan defying the madness and brutality of Muammer Gaddafi. He is the empowered Bahraini and Yemeni youth raising his voice in a resolute call on governments to listen to their people instead of oppressing them. Each revolt has drawn in swaths of its own society, but it is the young Arab who is the driving force; the unassuming leader."⁹⁰ Thus, Bouzizi was credited with not only starting a revolution in his own country, but throughout the entire Arab world. As Donu Kogbara wrote, "Thanks to Bouazizi, the dormant fury of millions of oppressed North African and Middle Eastern citizens was awakened. Thanks to him, three dictators were unceremoniously thrown out of their presidential palaces. Thanks to him, other klepto psychos . . . no longer sit comfortably on their thrones and are battling for survival."⁹¹

Bouazizi's Life is Our Life

Journalists focused on the strong resonance Bouazizi's narrative had within Tunisia, the Arab world, and internationally. Martin Chulov of *The Guardian* wrote, "The resonance of Bouazizi's story was enormous and the means of telling it electrifying."⁹² In the *Tulsa World*, Joel Brinkley claimed, "His death resonated in a way that none of the previous abuses ever had. The reason: More than anything else, the ordinary people of the Middle East want dignity, greater prosperity and then, perhaps, more freedom."⁹³ Similarly, Kim Sengupta stated, "What made Mr. Bouazizi's desperation and sense of hopelessness so real to those who were to rise up afterwards was that it mirrored many of their own experiences."⁹⁴ Anthony Ham echoed these sentiments as well, explaining, "[Bouazizi's] act of supreme desperation struck a chord with Arabs across the region . . . perhaps it was because here was a man of no great status in life—he

was a street vendor, a seller of oranges—in a town of no great importance, a man who struggled daily to make a living, a man with no voice.⁹⁵ Rick Salutin expressed this opinion yet again arguing, “The remarkable thing about this inciting incident is that it is utterly common. You can find thousands of humiliations like it every hour of every day anywhere in the world . . . That’s surely why it reverberated. Its complete normalcy made it an instant symbol.”⁹⁶ Even Barack Obama shared this interpretation of Bouazizi’s resonance. In a May 2011 speech concerning the Middle East and North Africa, he told viewers, “This was not unique. It is the same kind of humiliation that takes place every day in many parts of the world . . . Only this time, something different happened . . . Sometimes, in the course of history, the actions of ordinary citizens spark movements for change because they speak to a longing for freedom that has built up for years.”⁹⁷ In other words, people identified with the narrative of Bouazizi’s struggle, because they could see themselves in him. Mehdi Belli, “a university IT graduate working as a merchant in L’Ariana market in Tunis,” clearly expressed this idea when he told reporters, “We are all Mohamed Bouazizi.”⁹⁸

Unlike other cases of self-immolation, most agree that Bouazizi’s motivations were more personal than political. Many tied this into another reason why he was an easy person with whom to identify. Macintyre claimed, “It began with Mohamed Bouazizi, who had no desire to start a revolution. He just wanted to sell some fruit.”⁹⁹ *Time Magazine* reiterated this idea, “He is now famous throughout Tunisia and the Arab world—a legend, in fact. But Mohammed Bouazizi never set out to be a byword.”¹⁰⁰ Even his mother stated that “her son didn’t intend to kill himself nor cause a revolution.”¹⁰¹

Especially given the corruption in Tunisian politics, people were eager to relate to the fruit vender who had not possessed a grand motive. Taylor Luck of the *Jordan Times* explained

that Bouazizi's lack of political involvement made him a more universal figure: "But Mohamed Bouazizi doesn't belong to one party or one social group; Mohamed Bouazizi belongs to all of Tunisia and the entire Arab world."¹⁰² The media emphasized this idea that Bouazizi was an everyman. Larbi Sadiki of *Al Jazeera* stressed Bouazizi's ordinariness reporting, "Theoretically, Bouazizi lacked the kind of pedigree that qualifies one entry into history books. He had no wider horizon beyond being a street vendor. He was not elite."¹⁰³ Claire Aiken wrote, "The difference with Mohammed Bouazizi was that he was not an exceptional man. He was a 26-year-old street vendor."¹⁰⁴ His ordinariness is one reason that when Bouazizi set himself on fire in "the provincial Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid . . . he changed the Middle East forever."¹⁰⁵

Reporters quoted from those who knew Bouazizi to further their characterization of him as a simple and ordinary man just trying to make a living. Similar to journalists who interviewed Norman Morrison's friends and family to get to know what he was like, reporters conversed with Bouazizi's inner circle. However, this time, the information was used to build Bouazizi up as a symbol of oppression rather than to discredit him as strange or insane. His mother described him as a simple person. She stated, "It is strange to think that my little Mohamed should grow up to become this person," and "He never knew how huge the impact would be . . . He was just a smiley, happy boy."¹⁰⁶ A childhood friend also characterized him this way: "People have difficulty believing that the entire Arab Spring was started by a very simple man, but he was the simplest person you will ever meet, and that is the power behind the Tunisian revolution and the Arab revolution."¹⁰⁷ Specifically, Bouazizi was described as "a man of good faith, who was "very well-known and popular" and "gave fruits and vegetables to poor families."¹⁰⁸ Another childhood companion and youth activist, Naafil Harshani, explained, "What was important to Mohamed was putting food on the table and football . . . He had nothing to do with politics and

wanted nothing to do with politics.”¹⁰⁹ Although Bouazizi was described as apolitical in his life, his mother argued that he would be happy with the political outcome of his death: “I think if my son was here he would have been very satisfied with the result. He opened the door, and it is a new era for Tunisia and the whole Arab world.”¹¹⁰

Unlike Norman Morrison, people did not label Bouazizi as insane. In fact, the few times that columnists touched on Bouazizi’s mental state, it was not to discredit his actions. Rather, they argued that his despair reflected his hopeless position. India’s *Kashmir Monitor* noted, “His excruciating death had given birth to a notion that the psychological expanses between despair and hope, death and rebirth and between submissiveness and revolutions are ultimately connected. His act, regardless of what adjective one may use to describe it, was the very key that Tunisians used to unlock their ample reserve of collective power.”¹¹¹ Similarly, Aiken wrote, “Whether his was an act of selflessness, desperation, madness or all three is up for debate but it was undoubtedly the straw that broke the camel's back . . . ultimately setting in motion a series of events that resulted in the ‘Arab Spring’ and everything that would follow it.”¹¹²

In Death, Bouazizi Lives

In addition to the media’s formation of Bouazizi’s narrative arc of poor man to revolutionary symbol, they reported on Tunisian reactions to Bouazizi and the revolution. Multiple journalists reported that Tunisians were eager to tell them their own stories that were similar to Bouazizi’s. They wanted the world to know of their suffering. *Al Jazeera* explained, “Everywhere we went, crowds gathered rapidly as locals clambered to share their personal struggles with *Al Jazeera*. And all of them had stories that deserve to be told.”¹¹³ Similarly, Kristen Chick wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor*, “I was quickly overwhelmed by the crush of people. I’ve never before in my work experienced such a phenomenon, where crowds

appeared every time I opened my notebook. And it happened each time I tried to interview someone on the street in Sidi Bouzid. Clearly, people were ready to finally have their say.”¹¹⁴ Bouazizi’s mother claimed that her son’s sacrifice caused people to step forward: “My son is lost, but look what is happening, how many people are now getting involved.”¹¹⁵ Most agreed with her that Bouazizi was the inspiration for revolutionary action in Tunisia. For instance, Pakistan’s *Daily Times* argued that “Mr. Bouazizi became a symbol of resistance in Tunisia” as evidenced by people at his funeral who shouted, “Farewell. We weep for you today; we will make those who caused your death weep.”¹¹⁶

Other evidence of Bouazizi’s resonance included the creation of physical memorials and celebrations of his heroism. Montreal’s *The Gazette* reported, “An evocative larger-than life sculpture of Bouazizi’s cart dominates the main street of the city flanked by broken chairs, symbolizing the crash of former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.”¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Day of *The Guardian* noted that Bouazizi’s “likeness is everywhere.”¹¹⁸ According to Harriet Alexander of the *Sunday Telegraph*, “Mohammed’s photograph adorned every building” and “children wore T-shirts of his image.”¹¹⁹ Graffiti artists had also tagged several buildings with phrases like, “Martyr Bouazizi” and “Mohamed Bouazizi Square.”¹²⁰ There was even a pizza restaurant with “a full-color reproduction of Mohamed’s face in the window to advertise a special ‘Revolutionary Menu.’”¹²¹ The government that replaced Ben Ali’s regime “honored him with a postage stamp that bears his image.”¹²² Perhaps most striking were quotes from students at a local elementary school, who celebrated Bouazizi by linking arms and chanting his name. One ten-year old student stated, “He gave us our freedom, he taught us how to stand up for our rights.”¹²³ Another ten-year old held up his drawing of Bouazizi’s self-immolation and proclaimed, “I want to be a martyr for freedom like Mohamed.”¹²⁴

Bouazizi had achieved mythic status. As Tunisian film director Mohamed Zran stated, “For me he's more important than Mandela or Gandhi or Martin Luther King. Because with his act we are seeing, watching everywhere revolution.”¹²⁵ A columnist from a Saudi newspaper, Hussein Shobokshi, contended that Bouazizi had ushered in a new, more hopeful era: “I think now we have clearly passed the Osama bin Laden era, and we are firmly into the Bouazizi era.”¹²⁶ For them, Bouazizi was viewed as the founder of democracy in the Arab world—a modern George Washington.

Bouazizi was also explicitly praised in the West. The European Parliament awarded him the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. *The Times* newspaper in the United Kingdom named him the 2011 person of the year and wrote on the front page, “Bouazizi was no revolutionary, yet his lonely protest served as the catalyst for a wave of revolts that have transformed the Middle East.”¹²⁷ *Time Magazine* recognized “the protestor” as their 2011 person of the year and named Bouazizi as “an ordinary citizen,” whose suicide “incite[d] protests that would topple dictators and start a global wave of dissent.”¹²⁸

As in the case of Tibetan self-immolations, the number of people who followed Bouazizi’s example by committing suicide is another indication of the resonance of his actions. One article stated, “Bouazizi has become a popular symbol among Arabs. He is being emulated as well. There have been almost a dozen copycat self-immolations in several Arab capitals including Cairo and Algiers.”¹²⁹ In June 2011, the *New York Times* printed the findings of a French-language newspaper, *Le Temps*, that claimed there had been sixty-nine self-immolations since January [2011], a large number of which were committed by people aged 15 to 25.¹³⁰ *The National* focused specifically on Tunisian self-immolations stating that as of April 2013, “more than 150 Tunisians [had] followed the same course.”¹³¹ The *Wall Street Journal* also published

immolation statistics (sixty-three people in the Arab region within sixty days of Bouazizi's death) and included information gathered from those who survived. Specifically, according to researcher and columnist, de Soto, "Every survivor without exception has told us it was about desperation over property."¹³²

There was not a lot of personal information in the media concerning other self-immolators, because, as is often the case with copycat cases of self-immolations, their actions did not achieve the same salience as Bouazizi's. However, some cases were mentioned. For instance, an Algerian man died "after setting himself on fire at a government building." This was one of four "attempted public suicides in Algeria" that week.¹³³ On January 18, 2011, Reuters reported the self-immolation of lawyer Mohamed Farouk Hassan in Cairo. Hassan was said to have yelled "slogans against rising prices before setting himself on fire."¹³⁴ A fellow Egyptian lawyer, who visited Hassan in the hospital, stated, "I am going to call Hassan the 'Egyptian Bouazizi,' for he is a cocktail of oppression."¹³⁵ In Tunisia, a twenty-seven year old cigarette vendor named Adel Khadhri, who some labeled "another Bouazizi" reportedly shouted, "This is the youth selling cigarettes, this is unemployment" before setting himself on fire.¹³⁶ Ironically, Khadhri was taken to a new burn unit that had been aptly named the Mohammed Bouazizi Burn and Trauma Centre.¹³⁷

In the cases of self-immolation during the Vietnam War era and in modern Tibet, religion was a major factor in determining resonance. However, what is notable about religious and moral debates surrounding Bouazizi's case, is their absence. Robert F. Worth of the *New York Times* wrote, "One striking feature of the passionate discussion about Mr. Bouazizi and his imitators—at least for Westerners—is the relative absence of religion."¹³⁸ The few who have engaged in this discussion drew different conclusions. For instance, "Al Azhar, the Cairo university that is the

oldest and most prestigious center of learning in the Sunni Muslim world” released an official statement that despite recent events “suicide violated Islam even when carried out as a social or political protest.”¹³⁹ Moroccan political analyst, Tarik Tlaty sidestepped the issue of immolation and religion by arguing, “People call these men brave, and mostly they don't use the word ‘suicide’ in describing them. They don't use the word ‘martyrs’ either. They call them ‘sacrificers,’ and they speak of an ‘uprising.’ It is not a religious language.”¹⁴⁰ Yousef al-Qaradawi, “a prominent and influential Egyptian cleric” expressed sympathy over Bouazizi and others who committed suicide. He described Bouazizi as a man driven to despair by the corrupt society in which he lived and attributed the responsibility of his death to authoritarian rulers.¹⁴¹ The lack of discussion of Islam and suicide is especially surprising considering the debate over Islam and suicide following the events of 9/11. As Worth wrote, “Most Americans are used to hearing about Muslim suicide bombers who are impelled in part by the promise of salvation.”¹⁴² Instead, Bouazizi’s story resonated so strongly that it transcended religious concerns. In the case of the Buddhists self-immolations, many could grasp why these people felt driven to sacrifice themselves, especially considering their religious history, but, in Bouazizi’s case, their reactions directly related to his personal narrative—a hard-working, simple man (possibly with a college degree) driven to extreme measures due to economic hardship and a loss of dignity.

Governmental Oppression: “Amateur” Authoritarians

One major reason protests inspired by Bouazizi thrived was because many of the authoritarian regimes in North African and Middle Eastern countries were weaker than they appeared. This was especially true in Tunisia, which made it an ideal location for the Arab Spring to begin. Unlike in China, where self-immolation protests have been quickly dismissed as Dalai Lama propaganda, many authoritarians in the Arab world were not prepared to deal with

an act like Bouazizi's and the protests that followed. In this section, I illustrate the weaknesses in Arab authoritarian rule that made it possible for the people to successfully revolt.

Ben Ali's Rhetoric

In contrast to China where the government has complete control of military power and the media, Ali's regime failed to maintain authority over the public unrest that erupted in response to Bouazizi's suicide. Although Ben Ali quickly recognized the danger of this public unrest and addressed the people throughout the development of the revolution, ultimately, his rhetoric only made the situation worse. First, he attempted to reframe the issue by giving a presentation on "state television on December 28 to denounce the protesters as 'a minority of extremists' and promised the law would be applied 'in all firmness' to punish them."¹⁴³ Also on December 28, in a move that seemed contradictory to his televised statement, Ali broadcasted a visit to Bouazizi's hospital bed. The visit turned out to be a public relations nightmare. As Khadija Patel pointed out, "The contrast between the street vendor's bandages [which covered his entire body] and the dictator's suit further enraged Tunisians."¹⁴⁴ Ali sent more mixed signals when he tried to "placate the demonstrators" by doing things like "remov[ing] three ministers and two governors from their positions and promis[ing] a \$5 billion state jobs program."¹⁴⁵ However, rather than calming the protests, concessions like these only proved to protestors that they could affect change.

Once Ali felt power slipping through his hands, "he decided to deliver a lesson in terror" by ordering snipers to kill protestors in the town of Kasserine.¹⁴⁶ However, Tunisia's lawyers, clad in black robes, encouraged people to continue protesting by telling them that Ali was weakening. Furthermore, although the snipers killed at least twenty-one people in Kasserine and injured many others, Ali's plan backfired when images of the attack spread online.¹⁴⁷ The attack

on Kasserine was especially damning because of the perception that Ali “always hated” the town and therefore, “deliberately wanted a massacre” there.¹⁴⁸

Following the massacre, Ali tried to shift the blame by “admit[ing] that mistakes had been made, but not by him.”¹⁴⁹ He also promised to punish the people who were responsible. However, as protests continued across the country, he ordered the army “to shoot to kill.”¹⁵⁰ The army chief, General Rachid Ammar, refused to carry out these orders and insisted that the 40,000 members of the army remain neutral.¹⁵¹ Demonstrations continued to spread including riots on the streets of the capital city of Tunis where twenty-eight people died in the span of two days.¹⁵² It was then, Oluwafunmiyi described, “without the support of the army” that “even Ben Ali understood that personal concessions needed to be made.”¹⁵³ Ali “promised to create 300,000 jobs by the end of next year,” but this still did not quell the protests.¹⁵⁴ By January 13, he more clearly revealed his desperation by promising to step down from office in 2014 and pledging widespread reforms, including greater freedom.¹⁵⁵ When this did not satisfy the mobs, he addressed Tunisia again the next morning. Like a person who has realized they have no leverage in a negotiation, Ali made his final offer, to resign in just six months. Again, even this was not enough for the protestors and Ali cowardly admitted defeat by fleeing Tunisia that afternoon.¹⁵⁶ As blogger Slim Amamou explained, “In the end, everyone seized the opportunity, even those close to him. Tunisia was united against Ben Ali.”¹⁵⁷ Amazingly, after the inspiration of Bouazizi’s self-immolation, it took Tunisians less than a month to oust their leader of twenty-three years.

Immediately after Ali fled Tunisia, other Arab dictators had to address the uprisings beginning in their own counties. Bouazizi was “the spark that set off the revolutions of the Arab Spring,” which ultimately brought down several other authoritarian leaders.¹⁵⁸ For instance, on

January 15, Lybia's leader, Muammar Gaddafi, gave a speech "condemn[ing] the uprising in neighbouring Tunisia amid reports of unrest on the streets of Lybia."¹⁵⁹ Protests were also brewing in Egypt. On January 16, Hossam Bahgat, a human rights activist, stated, "I feel like we are a giant step closer to our own liberation . . . What's significant about Tunisia is that literally days ago the regime seemed unshakable, and then eventually democracy prevailed without a single western state lifting a finger."¹⁶⁰ Less than a month later, Egypt's leader, Hosni Mubarak, resigned. Later that year, on October 20, Gaddafi's reign officially came to a close when he was assassinated. On February 27, 2012, Yemen's dictator resigned after massive protests, including an assassination attempt, forced him out of power. Even in 2014, years after Bouazizi's death, his self-immolation is still credited as the source of this multi-country movement.¹⁶¹

"#Bouazizi"

In addition to the physical perseverance of the Tunisian people in the face of sniper bullets and tear gas, their fight to use social media allowed them to spread the news of Bouazizi's act and their subsequent protests. Sengupta noted that it was "thanks to Facebook, Twitter, and blogs outside the regime's control" that Bouazizi's act "became the catalyst for anger which led to the overthrow of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali."¹⁶² Mustapha Tlili, a Tunisian novelist, stated, "Thanks to Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, images of those first protests went around the world instantly, and everyone knew about it."¹⁶³ John Timpane of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* agreed that Bouazizi "became an image of resistance" after his picture "went out in thousands of tweets, e-mails, and Facebook posts."¹⁶⁴

Even when Ali's regime tried to "interfere with electronic communication," the protestors found ways to "post photos and videos online showing police shooting tear gas and bullets at mobs armed with rocks and sticks."¹⁶⁵ One activist characterized protestors as having "a rock in

one hand and a cell phone in the other.”¹⁶⁶ Blogger, Mounir Chelbi explained how citizens worked to overcome government attempts at censorship: “When the government cut the Internet, we used the phones to send the clips. Every two minutes of video would take three hours to transmit.”¹⁶⁷ The well-known hacktivist group, “Anonymous,” also helped stop censorship by attacking government websites and issuing a warning that “attacks at the freedom of speech and information of [Tunisian] citizens [would] not be tolerated.”¹⁶⁸

In addition to providing information to journalists in other countries, access to the Internet also allowed Tunisians to become their own reporters. As Rageh Omaar of *Al Jazeera* described, “Ben Ali may have had complete control of the state media but broadband Internet and the ability of its users to share images online had created an insurmountable problem for his regime. Newspapers and television could be controlled, international satellite channels could be discredited but citizen journalists could neither be monitored nor effectively censored. Most mobile phones now had cameras. Many had video. Added to this, social networking sites meant that images could be spread to thousands with the click of a button.”¹⁶⁹ Chelbi was an example of one citizen journalist, who blogged about the revolution, posted pictures on Facebook, and distributed photos to *Al Jazeera*. Another Tunisian blogger, Slim Amamou, who was arrested during the revolution, achieved such popularity and respect that he was appointed the deputy minister for youth in the interim government established after Ali fled.¹⁷⁰ These citizen journalists were especially key to the revolution in Tunisia, because traditional journalists remained censored by the Ali regime. Therefore, they were often forced to characterize the protestors as vandals and terrorists.¹⁷¹

At first glance, the authoritarianism of the Chinese government and the Tunisian government would seem similar. However, upon deeper analysis clear differences rise to the

surface. First, Ben Ali's rhetoric differed greatly from the controlled propaganda tactics of China. Ali's mere acknowledgment of Bouazizi's self-immolation and the subsequent protests was more credence than China has given to the self-immolators in Tibet. Furthermore, Ali's rhetoric, which, depending on the time of day, consisted of threats, concessions, and promises to step down from office, signaled to protestors that their actions were influential and likely encouraged them to continue their efforts. Second, the support given to the protestors by wealthy citizens like lawyers and the army's refusal to carry out Ali's orders are also key factors explaining why Tunisian responses to Bouazizi's self-immolation succeeded in ousting Ali while Tibetans have made little to no progress in altering their situation. Finally, control over social media is another difference between these countries. Online mediums like Twitter and Facebook helped Tunisian protest rhetoric to spread while Tibetans generally lack such opportunities. L. Gordon Crovitz of the *Wall Street Journal* summarized, "They do things differently in China. In contrast to more amateur authoritarians, Beijing is so sensitive to protests against similar abuses of power that it controls access to the Internet almost totally."¹⁷²

Conclusion

In January 2011, Tunisians experienced a drastic shift as they pushed their leader of twenty-three years out of power and achieved greater freedom of expression. Unfortunately, by December 2011, many felt disheartened, because the economy had shown no improvement. Activist, Naafil Harshani, stated, "Mohammed [Bouazizi] would be happy to see Ben Ali gone—anybody who is a Tunisian is proud to see him gone—but I think that he would be disappointed to see that many of his peers are still facing the tough economic conditions."¹⁷³ In 2014, Tunisia's poor remain marginalized, desperate for money, and still in danger of "arbitrary harassment."¹⁷⁴ The same is true for the Arab region at large. In January 2013, Seth G. Jones, the

Associate Director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation, summarized the lack of improvement: “The prospects for further democratization, however, have dimmed. Most countries in the Arab world have not jumped political tracks, and those that did begin to liberalize are now struggling to maintain order . . . The region's economic growth has been sluggish—which is particularly worrisome.”¹⁷⁵

Therefore, it is understandable that Bouazizi's narrative has lost resonance for many. Just one year after his death, Ryan of *Al Jazeera* described how during a trip to Tunisia, a cab driver “refused to accept that one of the main arteries of the capital had been renamed Boulevard Mohammed Bouazizi” and eventually became so enraged over the issue that he kicked her out of his vehicle.¹⁷⁶ In August 2011, the *New York Times* reported that Bouazizi's portrait, which once sat on the spot of his self-immolation, had been removed.¹⁷⁷ These expressions of frustration are especially telling since, in September 2013, Middle Eastern expert Shadi Hamid told *NPR* that Tunisia was considered the “last bright spot of the Arab Spring.”¹⁷⁸ Bouazizi's heroic status was further eroded by reports that his family benefitted financially from the media coverage of his death. People in the impoverished town of Sidi Bouzid were especially angered due to rumors that the Bouazizi family moved away to a flat in a seaside resort town, La Marsa.¹⁷⁹

In this regard, the case of Bouazizi is illustrative of what happens when rhetoric meets reality. The people in the Arab region shocked and inspired the world with their drive to dethrone decades old authoritarian rulers. However, as united as they were to force out these longtime leaders, they were not united on how to move forward. As Kenneth Burke has made clear, a common enemy can do wonders at generating identification among large and diverse groups of people.¹⁸⁰ But, protest and revolution were not sufficient to solve pressing problems of poverty and unemployment. Regardless, the rhetorical power of the Bouazizi narrative seems to

have staying power for many. News outlets have continued to frame Arab events through Bouazizi's eyes. In 2014, reporters still ask questions like, "What did Bouazizi want?" and use phrases such as "Bouazizi's vision for freedom."¹⁸¹ Thus, Mohamed Bouazizi, who was a rhetorical symbol for Tunisians in death and, to some, a disappointing reminder of reality in afterlife, remains an international martyr in the media's passion play of Arab oppression.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

In the introduction of this dissertation, I discussed why a study of self-immolation was needed and laid out a theory explaining when self-immolation is likely to achieve significant resonance. As discussed, the scholarly work on self-immolation focuses on the potential rhetorical power of aspects of self-immolation such as the potency of the “about to die moment.”¹ However, by analyzing a variety of self-immolations, including those that have resonated and those that have not, I have developed a more holistic interpretation of self-immolation as a method of protest. Based on analysis of the extensive media coverage of these incidents, I created a three-part theory explaining when self-immolation resonates. First, in order for a self-immolation to resonate, the audience must be able to comprehend why suicide was a necessary or reasonable action in that particular case. This comprehension is based on the perception that a significant crisis prompted the self-immolation. Second, cultural factors often strongly influence or limit the potential resonance of self-immolation. For example, Buddhist self-immolation is often seen as acceptable because of the historical acceptance of self-immolation. Third, for self-immolation to resonate there must be space for criticism of the government, but not so much space that other forms of protest seem a more reasonable approach to facilitating change. In the case of Norman Morrison, his suicide was seen as a violent waste of life that was outside the norms of democratic deliberation. In the case of Tibetan self-immolation, China’s authoritarian grip and international status have (at least so far) served as an insurmountable barrier. In contrast, even though Arab leaders like Ben Ali also ruled in an authoritarian manner, policy decisions on issues like social media availability opened a window for protestors to succeed.

In chapter two I contextualized self-immolation by discussing its religious origins and history. Specifically, the practice of self-immolation has origins in Mayahana Buddhism. Of particular importance, such writing suggested that self-immolation was considered an acceptable way to protest religious oppression. These writings have taken hold most strongly in Chinese Buddhist culture (as opposed to Indian culture), because Chinese followers interpreted the religious texts quite literally. This has not prevented Chinese oppression of those in Tibet who support the practice. In addition to the proper context, self-immolation was only considered acceptable when actors had pure motivations. Furthermore, this belief is illustrated throughout Chinese history with stories of Buddhists monks who committed self-immolation. These stories prove that political self-immolation existed long before Thich Quang Duc's suicide in 1963. That said, Quang Duc's death did spur a modern awareness and subsequent enactments of this protest method. Other prominent cases of twentieth century self-immolations include Czechoslovakia's Jan Palach, who set himself on fire in 1969 to express opposition of the Soviet occupation, and South Korea's Chun Tae-il, who did so in 1970 to protest poverty and substandard working conditions. Both Palach and Tae-il are credited as helping to mobilize people for their respective movements. However, these cases of influential self-immolations are in the minority, as most are quickly forgotten or go unnoticed from the outset.

In chapter three, I analyzed cases of self-immolation during the Vietnam War era including an in-depth discussion of Thich Quang Duc's 1963 protest against Buddhist oppression in South Vietnam and Norman Morrison's protest against America's involvement in the war in 1965. Most notably, I applied my theory concerning self-immolation rhetoric to both cases in order to illuminate why Quang Duc's self-immolation resonated so strongly while Morrison's suicide was portrayed as pointless sacrifice. In the case of Quang Duc, his audience (of both

Americans and citizens of South Vietnam) recognized the Diem's oppressive policies as a legitimate crisis of religious persecution. Due to self-immolation's scriptural and historical roots in Buddhism, people were able to rationalize his extreme actions. His method was seen as fitting his particular cause. Furthermore, as a result of the American government's alliance with the Diem regime, Quang Duc's death was relevant to American citizens. In this regard, Quang Duc's protest contributed to the Diem government's downfall, because his self-immolation shocked the American conscious. However, the same cannot be said for Morrison's self-immolation.

Americans did not perceive the urgency of his cause, because much of the American involvement in the war was kept secret at that time. Also, unlike the oppressed Buddhists monks, people did not understand why Morrison chose to die when he had the freedom of speech to express himself while remaining alive. Instead, people reasoned that he must have been insane.

In chapter four, I analyzed the ever-rising number of self-immolations in modern Tibet. After discussing China's long history of power struggles with the people of the Tibetan region, I described current conditions in Tibet. International media and the Chinese state-supported media present two different narratives concerning the well being of Tibetans. International news outlets have explained that Tibetans self-immolate in response to China's repressive policies that limit Buddhist practice and cause many Tibetans to live in poverty. China's government, on the other hand, has manufactured a narrative of self-immolators as fringe extremists, who are either insane or indoctrinated by the Dalai Lama. The government continues to purport that Tibetans have high-standards of living and complete religious freedom. Internationally, the media has identified these claims as mere propaganda. The sheer number of self-immolations performed by Tibetans underscores the falsity of the government's narrative. One by one, over one hundred Tibetans have made the judgment that they may affect more change in death than in life. While the

international community understands what drives Tibetans to self-immolate and even sympathizes with their circumstances, the strength of the Chinese government remains an insurmountable barrier.

In chapter five, I applied my theory to Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, which is widely credited as the starting point of the Arab Spring. First, I reviewed literature concerning new technology's role in the Arab Spring. Overall, scholars agree that access to new media allowed Arab Spring protestors to spread messages more efficiently, but they also emphasize that technology was only a facilitating factor in the protest movement. Second, I discussed how perceptions of the oppressive conditions in Tunisia and the Arab world created fertile soil for self-immolation to be an acceptable form of protest. Although Mohamed Bouazizi was not the first self-immolator in the region, activist Ali Bouazizi carefully framed his narrative to appeal to both traditional Tunisians living in rural towns and to more elite and educated Tunisians. International coverage of corrupt authoritarian regimes like Ben Ali's allowed people worldwide to understand why a citizen of the Arab world might go to such extremes. Third, I presented evidence illustrating the resonance of the Bouazizi self-immolation narrative. Not only was Bouazizi memorialized on t-shirts and worshipped by school children, but, also, he was posthumously awarded prestigious honors like the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and compared to the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. Most indicative of his resonance, however, was the quickness and intensity of the massive protests his self-immolation inspired throughout Tunisia and the Arab world. Finally, I addressed how Arab regimes like Ben Ali's were unprepared to deal with these unexpected and powerful uprisings. Unlike China, Ali revealed his weaknesses through poor rhetorical choices and lost control of his army in the process. Also, his

government lacked the capability to stop messages from spreading via new technology, which further quickened his regime's demise.

This study has several important implications and some limitations that open up possibilities for future research. First, this dissertation has laid groundwork for future studies of self-immolation. One limitation of my study is the lack of analysis of foreign media texts written in languages other than English. In the future, I plan to collaborate with a scholar who possesses the skills necessary to analyze such texts. Another area for future study is the analysis of the images of self-immolation that have been transmitted internationally via new technology like cellular telephones. Similar to previous research on the power of images to fuel American anti-war sentiments in the 1960s, a study of images from Arab Spring protests would be instructive and add to the literature on images as rhetoric and argument.² Finally, future research on self-immolation could delve into the violent nature of this form of protest. Traditionally, we think of violence as wholly negative. However, as I have illustrated, in some cases of self-immolation one person's voluntary sacrifice has helped produce massive change for many. Especially as rhetoricians who value rational deliberation, how can these two ideas be reconciled?

Second, this dissertation illustrates that self-immolation is rhetorical and thus, lends itself to analysis from a rhetorical perspective. Self-immolations have many of the same markers as more traditional rhetorical texts. For instance, like a speech, self-immolation can have varying levels of persuasive influence depending on variables such as perceived exigency and authenticity. The motive behind self-immolation assumes the centrality of audience in rhetoric. That said, an analysis of a persuasive act like self-immolation necessarily requires a different method of examination than a speech, because the critic cannot read the text in a traditional sense. Instead, the study of self-immolation is a good example of the value of studying what

Michael Calvin McGee termed textual “fragments.”³ McGee argued that even when studying speeches one could not separate text and context. The speech itself is only a fragment of the rhetorical text, because “discourse ceases to be what it is whenever parts of it are taken ‘out of context.’”⁴ This is certainly the case when studying body rhetoric, especially in a mediated age. In the study of self-immolation the context is quite literally the text. In this respect, I have used media fragments to piece together multiple narratives of self-immolation. As McGee wrote, “With regard to the object of criticism, [professional critics] will be perceived as respondents and interpreters responsible for providing in a formal way the missing fragments of the object of criticism, its influence.”⁵

Third, this focus on creating text out of contextual fragments, illuminates the limited power of rhetoric to produce social change. Obviously, rhetoric can be a powerful tool in effecting change and useful in creating policies that help improve the realities in which people live their daily lives. However, sometimes rhetoric faces insurmountable barriers. Ultimately, no rhetorical symbol, even martyrdom, could instantly undo the lack of food and employment in places like Tunisia or overcome oppressive policies in China. Furthermore, Norman Morrison could not overcome America’s lack of knowledge of what was actually happening in the Vietnam War. Moreover, in the Arab Spring, the immense resonance of the message created the perception that change could be rapid. This optimism was crushed when new governments suddenly had to confront endemic social problems.

Fourth, my analysis demonstrates the limitations of previous studies of self-immolation. For example, most previous works regarding self-immolation have focused primarily on acts of self-immolation that have clearly been influential. Specifically, the suicides of Thich Quang Duc, Chun Tae-il, and Jan Palach have received the most attention. This is problematic because it

creates a false conception that, by its very nature, self-immolation will be rhetorically powerful. Instead, by covering self-immolations like Norman Morrison's, my dissertation shows that determining a self-immolation's influence is more complex. This reminds rhetorical critics that sometimes we can learn just as much from forgotten or ignored texts as we can from those with staying power. Lack of resonance is quite revealing about the rhetorical potency (or lack thereof) of self-immolation.

Fifth, by focusing on the stories of copycat self-immolators who acted after Bouazizi and Quang Duc, my analysis illustrates the lack of influence that copycat self-immolations achieve. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the importance of authenticity and perceived purity of motivation. For example, based on the way descriptions of Bouazizi's act emphasized its spontaneity, it may be that other self-immolators are seen as committing suicide in the hope that they too will achieve a place in history. Another possible explanation is that because part of self-immolation's influence rests in its shock factor, it loses rhetorical power in replication. This potentiality will come into view more clearly as history plays out in Tibet. Is there a threshold at which people will finally become disturbed by their suicidal measures enough to take action and create meaningful change in the region? Or, does a larger number of self-immolations equate to ever-decreasing resonance, because we are no longer shocked to read about them in the news? The second possibility is especially disturbing. If mass Tibetan martyrdom does not inspire people to take action, what will?

Sixth, this dissertation reinforces and expands scholarship on the power of bodies to persuade. Previous studies have focused on the body as a site of rhetoric in arenas like feminism and environmentalism. Stephen DeLuca in particular has shown that, in addition to our vocal chords, the body can produce clear argument. As he wrote, "These political bodies constitute a

nascent body rhetoric that deploys bodies as a pivotal resource for the crucial practice of public argumentation.”⁶ This is especially true in cases where the protestor lacks access to more traditional forms of rhetoric, because he or she lives in a place that denies freedom of expression.

Perhaps with the exception of suicide bombing, self-immolation is the entelechy of body rhetoric. It is the ultimate declaration of ownership of one’s body, and, oftentimes, the only rhetorical weapon a person experiencing desperation may feel they have at their disposal. However, this reclamation of the body only lasts momentarily. After the fact, the self-immolator’s body belongs to all those who try to wield it as their own rhetorical device. For example, Tunisian activist Ali Bouazizi framed Mohamed Bouazizi’s death in a particular way to help turn him into the symbol for a political movement despite the fact that those closest to him described Mohamed’s life as quite apolitical. Rhetoricians herald our ability of symbol-creation as one of the most important parts of our humanity, but, in committing suicide, the self-immolator quickly transforms from rhetorical actor to rhetorical subject.

In conclusion, I have explored the media’s influence in constructing stories about self-immolations and self-immolators. These rhetorical narratives have helped shape the public’s understanding and opinions of self-immolation as a protest form. Ultimately, however, these opinions are of little value to those suffering injustice if people who have the means to do so do not act. Particularly, we must not allow the ashes of Mohamed Bouazizi or those of sacrificed Tibetans to turn to dust.

NOTES

Chapter One

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Chapter Six

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⁵ Ibid, 282.

⁶ Kevin DeLuca, "Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36, no. 1 (1999): 10, <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ592788>.

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