

Burning for a Cause: Four Factors in Successful Political (and Religious) Self-Immolation Examined in Relation to Alleged Falun Gong “Fanatics” in Tiananmen Square

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Abstract: This article theorizes the self-immolation of alleged Falun Gong practitioners in Tiananmen Square in 2001 in relation to literature on martyrdom, self-immolation, and political protest. It explores the cultural context in relation to Buddhist traditions of self-immolation, Chinese political protest, and other uses of self-immolation as political protest. It will seek to expand the analysis of why these self-immolations may be said to have “failed” as a form of protest, and present a set of four key factors. Issues of legitimation and authority in the events and their representation will be raised, especially the contested nature of whether the self-immolations were “religious,” looking at the different meanings of this term in Chinese and Western contexts. It is argued that both secular and religious self-immolation can be seen as legitimate in the public sphere.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that the tradition of self-immolation as political protest in the modern period begins in 1963 with the death of Thich Quang Doc (Michelson 2015, 86). This self-immolation on the streets of Saigon was in protest against the Vietnamese War and the oppression suffered by the Buddhist majority under Diem’s Catholic regime supported by the United States (Hanh 1967). The international publicity and political effectiveness of this event led to a succession of further

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self-immolations, especially in Vietnam and the United States, as a continuation of this protest, but also inspired other protests in such places as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Scotland, and France in the 1970s (see Biggs 2005; and Michelson 2015, 86). The 21st century has seen something of a revival, with images of human self-immolation, understood as political acts, being recorded around the world. Among the most recent that of Mohammad Bouazizi is seen as a catalyst for others across North Africa and the Middle East, while others have occurred recently in Tibet (Westcott 2011; and Gouin 2014). However, among these self-immolations, one event seems to have been largely ignored, or side-lined, in terms of academic analysis. That is those, widely witnessed and reported in the world's press at the time, which occurred in Tiananmen Square, Beijing in 2001. For instance, a recent study outlines the lineage from Thich Quang Doc to Bouazizi but entirely omits these (Michelsen 2015), while in studies of Falun Gong the events receive either passing mention or no mention at all, except for one recent study (Farley 2014).¹ This is, perhaps, not entirely surprising given that the Tiananmen Square self-immolations remain shrouded in controversy. This article will examine the Tiananmen Square self-immolations in relation to the discourses of authority and legitimation in their representation. It will not attempt to unravel the events themselves, but will discuss what light the analysis can shed upon them, focusing instead on the way the self-immolations were represented and used in the public sphere, examining why they may be seen to have "failed" as a form of political protest, especially in the context where such acts have been so potent. This will be done in relation to Chinese conceptions of public life and political dissent, and with particular attention to the question of "religion." What wider theoretical implications and lessons can be learnt from it will be explored as it seems to be a significant exception.

POLITICAL AND PUBLIC SELF-IMMOLATION: SOME THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

I will draw from various examples of political self-immolation as well as existing theorizations of these which I will critically interrogate to develop four aspects which seem important to understanding how and why such events take place and are effective as public events. This will help us explore the Tiananmen self-immolations in relation to the Chinese government's and Falun Gong's representation of them.

First, for just over 50 years, self-immolation has played a part in political protest movements globally as part of what may be termed media-led events. The pictures we have of Thich Quang Doc come from the fact that an American journalist, Malcolm Browne, was tipped off that something would happen (Browne 2003). However, not all events have been clearly done for the media, for instance, Bouazizi's self-immolation appeared to be a personal protest before a magistrate's office (Michelsen 2015, 87–88). Nevertheless, attempts by the local media to block it saw it spread by social media resulting in a mass media event (Schraeder and Redissi 2011). Indeed, it is often not the “intentions standing behind” the specific “self-incineration” that become important, which “play little role in determining political consequences” (Michelsen 2015, 87). Rather, what becomes significant is the way that the events are interpreted in the public sphere. Certainly, in the case explored here, we have no clear access to the underlying motives, as we will see there are contradictory sources and stories, and so the discursive representation of both the events and the motives explaining the events become significant (Yang 2011). Therefore, the “sacrifice” (discussed in the following paragraph) of the self-immolation becomes a “ritual or mythical” act, where we see the “formation of myth and narrative” (Michelsen 2015, 89, referring to Andriolo 2006, 109). As Fierke (2012, 220) puts it in relation to Bouazizi, “it is less the intentions ... than the effect of his act, and how it was given meaning, that are of interest.”

Second, Durkheim's (2006) classic study of suicide speaks of “altruistic suicide” as one form. Although many commentators find his analysis limited as it does not address the specific motivations in particular cases (e.g., Park 2004, 85), nevertheless, it provides a basis for understanding the terminology of “self-immolation.” Originally, “immolation” referred to a sacrifice, but has become synonymous in usage with burning, and the sense of offering oneself for others, as a sacrifice (Park 2004, 82; and Michelson 2015, 84). Importantly, the act must be understood as altruistic sacrifice, with scholars arguing the modern political sphere has no room for “suicide” but “self-sacrifice” is a noble and honorable act within the discourse that shapes the modern state and conceptions of it (see Fierke 2012; and Toscano 2010). In this sense, the sacrifice becomes legitimate, as opposed to the act of a “fanatic:” someone anti-modern and self-destructive (Toscano 2010, 43, 251) — generally seen as “religious.” Toscano (2010, 43) argues the fanatic is seen as opposed to the “cultural and political advance under the banner of secularism,” which elides with Rapaport's well-known conclusions that religion

allows people to engage in acts which are “self-destructive” even when they are ineffective or counter-productive (Rapaport 1984, 674). Such theorists suggest that in the contemporary context religiously motivated suicide is fanatical and therefore deemed illegitimate, while political self-sacrifice appears legitimate. Certainly, part of the Chinese government’s response to the Tiananmen self-immolations was that the perpetrators were “religious” fanatics, which seemed an effective condemnation. Nevertheless, this divide of legitimate secular sacrifice and illegitimate religious fanaticism is too simplistic. As discussed further below, for Thich Quang Doc and others, the justification for their actions came, partly, through the Buddhist traditions of self-immolation. Certainly, despite the fact that much public discourse splits the world between “secular” and “religious” realms there are reasons to doubt the legitimacy of such a division as natural or sustainable (see Fitzgerald 2007). As such, whether self-immolation is deemed sacrificial and altruistic is key. For example, in defining the terms of her study on political self-immolations, Park suggests the following definition: “I shall also use the term *self-immolation* in the broader sense of any act of sacrificial suicide, especially in public, that is motivated by political or social, as opposed to just a personal cause” (Park 2004, 82); however, this definition would capture Thich Quang Doc’s “Buddhist” self-immolation, but exclude Bouazizi’s “secular” self-immolation. I develop this further in the analysis below.

A third aspect is the reason why self-immolation is undertaken. Park (2004), looking at Vietnam and South Korea, argues several reasons for self-immolation happening in those countries. She argues that factors such as a lack of forms of legitimate protest, a history of colonial oppression, and the involvement of an external governmental and military force led to this being seen as necessary and legitimate (Park 2004, 82–84). While concurring with Park that extreme forms of protest occur in situations where no other form of legitimate protest are seen as possible,² it does not explain occurrences in places like the USA, France, or Scotland. Certainly, as King shows, sympathy with the Vietnamese war played a part in spreading self-immolation as a form of political protest (King 2000). Although in the USA other forms of protest were possible, nevertheless in that specific context self-immolation became seen as a legitimate form of protest. Notably, while Park’s analysis bears some similarities with the Chinese context, aspects of what she sees as essential to explaining self-immolation, like the presence of a foreign military-political power in the governing structure, are not present. Therefore, we need to

look at the particular context of each case to explain local justifications and factors.

The fourth aspect is identification with the sacrifice. In Michelsen's (2015, 90) words: "Self-sacrificing subjects acquire political content by being interpretively folded into an imaginary/ mythic totality, and thereby immortalised as martyrs." We should see this as related to the points raised above. So the intention of the self-immolator is not necessarily the principle issue, instead, we need to analyze the way it becomes a media event, or public spectacle, and part of myth-making. However, simply by being a media event it does not become widely efficacious. As has been argued, whereas Jan Palach's self-immolation in Prague contributed only to national mourning, Thich Quang Doc's self-immolation had a wider international effect (Michelsen 2015, 86). Again, Bouazizi's self-immolation clearly touched a nerve with many in Egypt and beyond and so became an event with wider political resonances being associated as a touch stone for the Arab Spring (Abouzeid 2011). We need to understand how others identify with the event. Thus, it relates the second issue about self-immolation as an altruistic or vicarious sacrifice, such that it becomes an event which others see as a sacrifice on their behalf, or somehow representing a cause which they can identify with or espouse. Thich Quang Doc is the paradigmatic example, making Vietnam turn from a regional dispute into a major factor of protest and dissatisfaction not just there but also in the USA and globally (King 2000). Likewise, Bouazizi's "act was retrospectively understood as having taken place 'on behalf of' a wider community" (Michelson 2015, 90). We therefore need to consider the third point above, the reasons why self-immolation is undertaken which will relate to the local context: what does it mean within a specific nation or region? As such can it be seen as a part of legitimate political protest or as signifying neurosis or psychological trauma (many studies of self-immolation occur in psychological or suicide research, e.g., Park 2004; Crosby, Rhee, and Holland 1976; and Khushkadamova 2010; for Durkheim, only altruistic suicide lacked such connotations, 2006).

I have above suggested four principle aspects for understanding self-immolation as a political act, based upon an analysis of the existing literature. These are not entirely separate and interlink in various ways, while the fourth aspect can be seen as an integrating focal point in relation to the others. These four aspects are: first, the event needs to become a media event, which allows a mythic narrative, independent of the intention of the self-immolator (whether it elides with this or not); second, it needs

to be understood as a legitimated self-sacrifice rather than fanatical self-destruction, justifiable through secular or religious narratives; third, what legitimates the event, commonly this may be because other protest are restricted, but this is not the only reason, so sensitivity to local context is required; and fourth, it requires self-identification between those receiving or creating the mythic narrative and the actor.

CONTESTED FACTS, CONTESTED MYTHS

To analyze the Tiananmen self-immolations I first introduce Falun Gong and the surrounding events. Falun Gong (later known as Falun Dafa) is one of a number of Qi Gong movements that developed since 1976 as part of what was termed “Qi Gong fever” by the Chinese press (Ownby 2008a). Its founder, Li Hongzhi, had been in the army, but started teaching Qi Gong and over time developed a moral and “religious” basis for it, using Buddhism, Daoism, Qi Gong theory, and other sources (Penny 2012; and Li 2014). Alongside a code of morality, there was a cosmological worldview in which Buddhas and other transcendent beings played a part, with Li Hongzhi being seen as the highest “spiritual” teacher. As a movement it was one of the, if not the, most successful Qi Gong group with membership in the hundreds of thousands (Rahn 2002, 51).

The path that led to the tragic events in Tiananmen are told differently by each side, but central was Falun Gong’s arranging for around 10 to 15 thousand of its members coming to Beijing on April 25, 1999 to stage a seated meditation protest, and raising placards stating their aim, outside the Communist Party headquarters at Zhongnanhai — this is adjacent to Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City (Adams 2014, 146–147). The background to this relates to the massive rise and popularity of Qi Gong movements in China in the 1980s and the regime’s attempts to criticize and control it (see Palmer 2008; and Ownby 2008b). Increasing pressure on Qi Gong groups, which had initially been backed by the government and research groups, saw many criticisms in the press and by intellectuals. Often after protests, media companies would apologize to the Qi Gong group concerned, but a protest by Falun Gong in Tianjin saw police using strong arm tactics. Complaints led, it seems, to the protestors being told to take their grievances directly to Beijing leading to the fateful demonstration (for a fuller account see Ownby 2008b, 165–174; and Li 2014, 193–195).

While a peaceful protest, it shocked the Communist authorities. The Communist government line is that the protestors simply left, however, it is likely that Falun Gong leaders discussed their complaints with Premier Zhu Rongji who reassured them these would be looked into sympathetically (on Zhu's role and sympathies, see Penny 2012, 59–67; and Li 2014, 190–191). Nevertheless, Jiang Zemin, the President, took a hard line view condemning the group and a crackdown started, although it was only on July 21 that the group was declared an “evil cult” (Adams 2014, 147). We discuss this term below.

It is worth mentioning some context to this crackdown, which helps explain what led to the self-immolations. Several scholars relate it to a series of, what are understood to be, religiously inspired uprisings and rebellions, from the Yellow Turban Rebellion that hastened the demise of the Han Dynasty, to rebellions against the foreign Mongol (Yuan) Dynasty resulting in the establishment of the Ming Dynasty, and the devastating Great Peace (Heavenly Kingdom) rebellion during the final (Qing) dynasty (ter Haar 2002). It has been suggested though that this historical explanation is scholarly fantasy, and not the way a government would respond to a peaceful protest, suggesting it was simply a show of power against Qi Gong (Lemish 2008; and Palmer 2008). However, this overlooks the Chinese context, with an inbuilt fear of potential rebellion, while it is noted that Falun Gong had more members than the Communist Party, including high placed followers in the party, the army, and universities (see Ownby 2008b, 171; and Li 2014, 191). Indeed, the argument that the Communist Party was posturing against Qi Gong is not incompatible with it also putting down a potentially revolutionary enemy.

The details of the suppression need not concern us, however, again we see claims and counter-claims: Falun Gong alleges torture and other Human Rights violations, which are denied by the Chinese government (for discussions see Chang 2004; and Farley 2014). Whatever the situation, escalating tension led to further confrontations.

We come, therefore, to the Tiananmen Square self-immolations of January 23, 2001,³ which I will briefly outline, including some of the contestations and counter-claims.⁴ Notably, our lack of knowledge of the events does not distract from the analysis, for it is the media-event/mythic narrative that is important. On the morning of the Chinese New Year, seven people arrived in Tiananmen Square in the heart of Beijing and attempted to self-immolate. The security services quickly extinguished the flames but four people had died directly and of those taken

to hospital one died soon after. According to the Chinese government these people were Falun Gong “fanatics,” although the movement itself claimed to have no knowledge or affiliation to these people. Their counter-claim was that this act was staged by the Chinese government to discredit them (Minghui n.d.). In its support, the Chinese government showed interviews with alleged survivors in hospital who claimed it led to salvation and was ordered by Li Hongzhi (Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China 2002). Falun Gong countered with allegations that the videos were faked or staged, and certainly given the heavily bandaged state of the interviewees and some discrepancies in the film footage their claims are not without potential credence (ter Haar 2002). The truth is shrouded in claim and counter-claim, with both sides producing narratives of the event and videos which show, they claim, that they are right. While we do not know whether the self-immolators were inspired by being Falun Gong practitioners, external sources suggest that, except the child, all were known Falun Gong activists, with the Hong Kong-based Information Center for Human Rights and Democracy being the main source for this, although one investigative journalist has cast doubts on this (Pan 2001). However, it seems doubtful that an order to self-immolate came from the Falun Gong hierarchy; no substantive evidence has been put forward, while clear directives and regulations against suicide or any form of self-harm have always been part of the teachings of the movement (see Ownby 2008b, 216–217). However, Helen Farley (2014) argues there are elements which may have led some to see self-immolation as a legitimate act in the situation when considered against the backdrop of the movement’s increasingly apocalyptic teachings, while she also suggests directives not to seek medical help can also be seen as a form of suicide promotion.

We enter, therefore, into a deeply contested set of narratives, and despite the fact that these events occurred very recently and in the media spotlight, many facts and interpretations are far from clear. The truth — assuming there is a single truth — may be known, but we have no way of ascertaining this. Nevertheless, in terms of the myths surrounding the event, the Chinese government has quite successfully created a narrative that asserts those who committed these acts were fanatics. Yet, a strong case could be made for seeing this act as a legitimate form of protest, especially within an East Asian religious context. To proceed, I address three contextual factors: first, the Chinese government’s criticisms of Falun Gong and understanding “religion” in China; second, the Buddhist tradition of self-immolation; third, political protest in the Chinese context. Bringing these

strands together alongside the previous theory on the politics of self-immolation, I will argue that the act of self-immolation could have been, if conducted as a form of protest by Falun Gong members, a legitimate and successful form of protest within this cultural context. Nevertheless, it proved a turning point in both the Chinese public and wider international sympathy for Falun Gong, and so can be said to have “failed” as an act of political protest.

CRITICISM OF FALUN GONG AS AN “EVIL CULT:” RELIGIOUS OR SECULAR NARRATIVE?

For over a thousand years, the Chinese government (imperial and now Communist, for a discussion on Chinese Communist thought on religion, see Weller 2013) has claimed a right to legislate concerning “religious orthodoxy.” From the Ministry of Rites in Tang Dynasty China overseeing the number of temples and the ordination of monks through its “all-seeing register” (Wright 1959, 83–84), Chinese tradition accords government legitimacy to ban groups which are seen as detrimental to the public good, harmful to society, or otherwise erroneous (Yao and Zhao 2010, 124–126). Therefore, determining “legitimate” religion lay in government hands, with the term *xiejiao*, or heterodox tradition, being applied to sects and groups deemed “illegitimate” (see Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 336–42). It is this term, translated as “evil cult” that the Chinese government today applies to Falun Gong; this is the preferred translation found in Chinese government sources. A full account of how this relates to “religion” is beyond the scope of this article, however, we must address this issue.

The Chinese government’s condemnations of Falun Gong make a wide number of points: Li’s lack of credentials as a Qi Gong teacher, in particular his army background; Li’s motives, where he has been criticized for self-aggrandizing and exploiting members for financial and personal gain; the health claims, where it is suggested that Falun Gong is, at best, irresponsible in claiming that it can cure diseases, and, at worst, criminally responsible for encouraging its members to practice it rather than seek medical cures; further criticisms focus on the absurdity of its cosmological teachings (e.g., Shuning 2000). As with other aspects of the debate, we see counter-claims from Falun Gong, perhaps most notably stressing what may be termed Li’s revelations which give him teaching authority, and arguing that while it suggests practice will have health benefits it often

claims it never encouraged members not to also seek professional medical advice, although the teachings do seem to imply there is no need (see the discussions in Farley 2014; and Kavan 2008, 10). Regardless of what we make of the claims by either side, we can see that rather than being a doctrinal suppression of wrong belief, Falun Gong is suppressed as a *xiejiao* on the grounds that it is harmful to people's life and well-being, and not conducive to the public good (for a discussion around religion and morality in China, see Xie 2006, 98–101). Criticisms of its cosmological/religious teachings as absurd are arguably a by-product of the social criticism. This draws us to ask to what extent the debate is religious?

Falun Gong has never claimed to be a religion, asking to be registered as a non-religious Qi Gong organization, although it did accept an International Religious Freedom Award (Penny 2012, 26). In the Chinese context, although the constitution provides Freedom of Religion this only covers the five recognized religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Christianity (i.e., Protestantism), Daoism, and Islam). As such any claim to be a “religion” would result in it being, by default, an illegal movement, it would make it *xiejiao*, a heterodox, or unrecognized, tradition. How far this plays out in it portraying itself as not a religion is unclear.

It is important here to discuss what the term “religion” means in the Chinese context. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1978 [1969]) recognized many years ago, most cultures and languages do not have a term that equates to the modern English usage of “religion,” and China is no exception so the equivalent term “*zongjiao*” is a modern coinage borrowed from Japan. It is distinguished both from another modern coinage “*mixin*,” superstition, and *xiejiao*. *Zongjiao* has connotations of ancestral tradition, a systematic structure, and while often linked to notions of superstition denotes a legitimate tradition (see Penny 2012, 22; and Nedostup 2013). Therefore, in Chinese terms, if something is seen as *xiejiao* — a heterodox tradition it is by definition not a *zongjiao* — religion, even if it appears so in Western terms (see Li 2014; and Penny 2012). In contemporary English language terminology, however, *xiejiao* has a religious aspect, as can be seen in its usage relating to White Lotus groups (ter Haar 1999, 123–130, 236–237, 253–255, 257–259), and also the 18th century decree that Christianity was a *xiejiao* (see Bays 2012, 30). Indeed, we should not sharply demarcate in the Chinese context too, because the term *xiejiao* clearly intersects with what would be seen as “religious markers,” with the Chinese government's translation of “evil cult” invoking religious language.⁵ This context is important, because part of the contestation is whether the Falun Gong self-immolations were a religious or a

political act; although, the scholar of religion Russell McCutcheon (1997, 167–177) has warned us about using these terms as a dichotomy whereby we can characterize self-immolation into terms of religious justification. As I argued above, the characterization that there is a legitimate realm of secular self-sacrifice and a fanatical realm of religious self-destruction does not seem legitimate.

BUDDHIST TRADITIONS OF SELF-IMMOLATION

The concept of self-immolation exists primarily, or only, within the Mahayana tradition, and only within the Chinese cultural sphere (see, Benn 2007).⁶ Such practices are seen within a context not just of self-immolation but of other practices known as “abandoning the body,” such as drowning, starvation, and being fed to animals (Benn 2007, 8–9). The practice of self-immolation is first found in the *Lotus Sutra* where the Medicine King Bodhisattva states that he would show his devotion even if it involved burning himself alive, and proceeds to wrap himself in an oil-soaked robe and set fire as an act to achieve perfection (Benn 2007, 58–61). The reference appears to be a rhetorical statement in its original Indian context, and such a practice only becomes actualized centuries later in China (Benn 2007, 19–53). Notably, it is not an adaptation of an indigenous tradition and in many ways is quite counter-cultural. Confucian tradition specifically forbids any form of self-mutilation, with the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*xiaojing*) explicitly stating that because the body is a gift from one’s parents it should not be harmed, not even one hair of your body (Liu and Lin 1998). To do otherwise is to break the fundamental taboo of being unfilial. There is a fascinating history around how such counter-cultural traditions were actually indigenized in relation to norms of Filial Piety (*xiao*), which involve stories of monks seeking to save their mothers and self-immolating bodhisattvas, however, it would side track us from the central focus of this article (for an account, see Cole 1998; and Dudbridge 2004). Nevertheless, these cultural narratives embedding self-immolation in the Chinese context are important because they allow such practices to become legitimate forms of Buddhist (religious) expression in China.

Full self-immolation is first narrated in the late fourth or early fifth century, with the first identifiable instance being that of the monk Daodu in 527CE accompanied by auspicious signs, which help legitimate the practice (Benn 2007, 1–7). Notably many such instances are

auto-immolations (Benn 2007, 8–10, 33–45). While never a common occurrence, Benn notes it has become part of Sinitic Buddhism. Moreover, others forms of burning have been common practice as a part of shramana (monastic) initiation; incense sticks are burnt on the head of prospective novices as part of the initiation ceremony which leaves the distinctive triple mark found of the heads of monks and nuns within the Chinese cultural world. This practice is seen as legitimated by the *Lotus Sutra* as well by the cultural narratives noted. There have also been other burning practices as a sign of a person's spiritual devotion and meditational power, or as a form of expunging bad karma, where a part of the body such as the arm or fingers are burnt (Benn 2007, 85–86).

While some questioned its legitimacy within the Chinese context (Benn 2007, chap. 4), it is not a complete aberration as one indigenous tale reports a legend of self-immolation as a way to bring rain in a drought (Biggs 2005, 10), and became justified as a legitimate practice. Certainly, the first major study of the practice (Jan 1965) was in response to Thich Quang Doc's self-immolation arguing the Buddhist cultural context made it, as ter Harr (2002) says, "respectable." Therefore, far from religion being seen as a realm of fanaticism, it actually helped provide a legitimate context for this paradigmatic self-immolation.

POLITICAL PROTEST IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

For most of Chinese history political rule has been by imperial control, however, the system was not utterly totalitarian, with a mainly Confucian civil service providing advice and guidance to the emperor. This, however, could be dangerous and it was not unknown for advisors to be killed, yet it was seen as a moral duty to tell the emperor if it was believed he was in the wrong. Hence, being prepared to die is a part of the representation of political opposition (Yao 2000, 178–189). Indeed there is a famous story concerning the first Ming Emperor who was particularly brutal, nevertheless one Confucian scholar felt he must berate him so had his audience carry his coffin which he climbed into afterward. The emperor was apparently so struck by the man's bravery that he spared him (Gutenberg 2015). There is also the famous story of the scholar Qū Yuan (340–278 BCE), who throws himself into the Miluo River, and whose act is commemorated in a Chinese festival until this day. While not self-immolation our concern is with suicide as political protest.

Leaving the political elite, one ongoing tradition is for citizens to come to the capital to present petitions in the hope that they would find the ear of an honest official. This would not always be successful, and therefore one further act was seen as permissible: suicide in front of the home or office of the offending official (Lee and Kleinmann 2000, 291, 295). By this means, those who lacked the voice or power to be heard could make a public statement against oppressors. It was considered that the disgrace this would bring to the culprit would allow justice to be served. These instances are not simply historical and recent examples are observed (Lee and Kleinmann 2000, 297ff), which include self-immolation (Yu 2014). Therefore, political protest by public suicide, including self-immolation, is part of the Chinese political landscape as a legitimate form of protest, and has a considerable history and current usage in China (Farley 2014).

DISCUSSION

These explorations suggest that for an organization, or individual, who perceives themselves to be faced with unfair and unjust persecution with no legal means to respond, that self-immolation is legitimate within the Chinese context. Moreover, the Buddhist tradition allows this to be seen within a religious framework, recognizing the problematic of distinguishing cultural, political, and religious realms especially within a Chinese context. Certainly, examples from Thich Quang Doc onward shows that such protest can be used as a positive form of propaganda to raise awareness of a situation in which other forms of protest may lack effectiveness. However, the Tiananmen event ended as a major publicity coup for the Chinese government. Before and up to this event it was clear that the world press was on Falun Gong's side and it was widely reporting against the repression (see e.g., Biggs 2005; and CNN 2001). Moreover, it appears to be the case that the Chinese people considered the government's oppressive response to be an over-reaction, yet, over the following six months there was a complete change of public opinion in China (Farley 2014),⁷ and arguably the oppression becomes less visible in terms of global media reporting (Biggs 2005, 206).⁸ As such, Biggs suggests that this is possibly the only self-immolation protest that failed (Biggs 2005, 202).

In terms of analyzing the event as a political protest, and the reasons for its failure, Biggs (2005, 206) offers us three reasons. First, it was a mistake

by Falun Gong to disown the event. Second, another mistake was the involvement of children — one protestor allegedly set fire to her 12 year old daughter who subsequently died. Third, the unclear motives of those involved were a problem. I believe that Biggs' analysis points us in the right direction, but his analysis does not dig deep enough.

I will deal with Biggs' points out of order. First, in relation to his second point we should note that the involvement of children is not unique to this event. After Thich Quang Doc's self-immolation a number of American Quakers self-immolated in protest, and one of these was a mother and her daughter outside the Pentagon (King 2000). As such, the involvement of children does not of itself prevent the act being "successful" in political terms as a protest. It may be suggested that it further shows the desperation of the immolators. Nevertheless, images of the girl, Liu Siying, writhing in agony was employed by the Chinese government in its portrayal of the horrors of Falun Gong; a video showing the girl writhing in agony and calling for her (dead) mother was played repeatedly on Chinese state television for months following (Farley 2014). Just to note a further aspect of the contestation, Falun Gong accounts suggest that the initial reports indicate no children were involved.

Second, in relation to his third point, as discussed in the previous analysis the intention of the perpetrator is not key to the mythic narrative. That many did not know Bouazizi's motives, nor that they seem personal, did not stop his death from being seen as an act against a regime which inspired many.

Third, this leaves us with Biggs' first claim that the failure was Falun Gong's disowning of the event. This, I believe is correct, but for reasons which need more unpacking. I will discuss this now in relation to the four-fold analysis.

As Biggs' notes, the Falun Gong disowning of the self-immolation gave the Chinese government free reign to draw its own narrative of events, which he says was in terms of "cultic suicide rather than political protest" (Biggs 2005, 206). However, painting such events in religious terms is not, as Biggs seems to suggest, something that makes them fail. The mythic narrative around Thich Quang Doc's self-immolation saw the Buddhist context employed both by Thich Nhat Hanh (1967) and Jan (1965) for justification, making it in ter Haar's (2002) words "respectable." Rather, if we relate this to the four aspects of political suicides, we can see that one side got to control the myth, which in any case goes beyond the motives of the individual actors and becomes a media event.

Importantly, though, this myth allowed the Chinese government to portray, in relation to the second aspect, the act not as legitimate self-sacrifice but as fanatical self-destruction. While Falun Gong pointed out that their teachings forbade taking life, including suicide, and so distanced themselves from the narrative, the Chinese government showed video footage which claimed that the survivors believed that their death would take them to heaven. As such it became a story about a personal spiritual undertaking, not an altruistic death. Notably, Thich Quang Doc has become seen as a bodhisattva for his act, and so while clearly a political demonstration he has, in the myth of the event attained spiritual fulfilment through it (Tuoitrenews 2013). Therefore, it is not that we must divorce self-immolation from religion for it to be legitimate, nor even deny that Awakening/ heaven/salvation (howsoever conceived by the tradition concerned) may lie as the outcome for the immolator, rather the myth has to show that it becomes a death for others, or some cause, not for the self, which is deemed, our analysis suggests, fanatical self-destruction.

The third aspect is the legitimacy for such protest. As noted, in the Chinese context as both a form of political protest, and as a Buddhist practice to show altruistic devotion (whether this be as filial piety or otherwise), there are at least two existing narratives legitimating self-immolation. However, neither of these became part of the narrative. Rather it was a watershed in terms of Chinese popular perception of the government's suppression of Falun Gong, from unjustified persecution to legitimate protection of public interest. Indeed, there may have been a wider international perception that it was not legitimate, seen as Biggs' argument that it "failed." Certainly self-immolation itself remains an accepted form of political protest, with the self-immolation of Tibetan monks also occurring within a wider Chinese cultural sphere (Gouin 2014). It is worthwhile briefly digressing to discuss these contemporary self-immolations in Tibet which have clearly not had the huge impact of Thich Quang Doc's and so asks if they have also "failed." I would suggest that they have not as Western media reporting — it would require a separate study to assess the extent and type of coverage in China or elsewhere — has been largely sympathetic, seeing these as linked to what is seen as Tibet's "legitimate" demands for independence (see, for example, Westcott 2001; and Gouin 2014). That they have not gained wider traction in terms of political change is surely related to the context of Chinese control where either pressure from Western media, protestors, or even governments can only be minimal, and little sympathy exists within China itself for these demands, on top of which the

government there can control the “media event.” The repeated nature of self-immolations clearly shows though that it is seen as important and a legitimate protest within Tibetan circles as Gouin (2014) notes. Finally, I may also suggest two further points, the first somewhat speculative. First, part of the power of Thich Quang Doc’s self-immolation was the images that came from it, and due to their context in Chinese controlled areas we have not generally seen such powerful images coming from Tibet (see Yang 2011, who describes Thich Quang Doc’s image as “iconic”). Second, self-immolation is far from being a sure-fire way to success and publicity, but is tied into a whole range of factors about how the media event is handled, how people relate to it, and so on (that is, the four aspects I have set out here); some such as Jan Palach’s may be localized or national only, others may raise little concern even on this level (such as those reported by Yu 2014), while only a few became sparks igniting a wider debate or protest such as Thich Quang Doc and Bouazizi.

The fourth aspect is that the myth must be able to establish a connection with those receiving it linking them with the actor. Extending Bigg’s recognition of disowning as a problem, we can see two issues. First, the disowning of the event meant any potential sympathy these events could have produced could not be connected to the movement. Their narrative is that the actors were not Falun Gong members and that these actions did not represent them. Second, the Chinese government’s controlling myth was that these people were deluded fanatics who believed this act would take them to heaven, which could not provide a compelling story with which the public could relate, whether this be in China or elsewhere. This shows the interconnection of the aspects: the connection of actor and receiver (aspect four) did not occur because the actors were seen in the mythic narrative (aspect one) to be engaged in fanatical self-destruction and not altruistic self-sacrifice (aspect two), indeed, this portrayal moved the event from being a legitimate self-immolation to one that was not culturally grounded (aspect three).

Having assessed the self-immolations, we may briefly suggest whether it throws any light on the contested facts. Do we accept the Chinese government’s claim that this is the work of Falun Gong fanatics? If the Chinese government had organized the event as propaganda, it is unclear why they seemed to try and prevent the story appearing at first. While it is not clear that all those involved were Falun Gong practitioners, it is likely they were; if not, how the government found willing volunteers to self-immolate is not easy to explain. Yet, if it was a Falun Gong protest,

it is unclear why it was immediately disowned by the movement. When the act first happened, initial news reports were not hostile to what had happened, but could have fitted into a known narrative around political protests. As such, even if not ordered by the leaders it would have made sense to claim the event, arguing that even if not ordered the event shows how desperate the situation is and therefore employing it for propaganda. As such, it was probably a localized act by Falun Gong activists, possibly desperate for many reasons (Pan 2001). This accord with Farley's (2014) analysis. The area that remains most contested, though, is whether the witnesses who appeared in testimonies after the event were the self-immolators. As Falun Gong has argued, the statements do not fit with their teachings, nor does the idea that they went to Tiananmen Square to get to heaven rather than protest against suppression seem credible; here I am not convinced by Farley's argument that simply having eschatological teachings made them think this would ensure salvation. Further ter Haar (2002) has pointed out that discrepancies in the videos give credence to Falun Gong's arguments that they were staged. As such, even if it was a Falun Gong protest, we do not know what motivated the self-immolators.

CONCLUSION

We have looked at the context and event of the 2001 Tiananmen Square self-immolations and examined the existing literature and primary claims surrounding the event. We must conclude that little clear light can be shed on the motives of those involved, nor on the claims and counter-claims of both the Chinese Government and Falun Gong. However, taking into account both the Buddhist tradition of self-immolation, and the Chinese tradition of suicide as political protest, the most plausible suggestion would be that this was an act of protest. However, this is complicated by the evidence as we have it. We can, though, analyze this failed act of political protest (which it seems to have been I suggest) through four aspects, drawn from previous examples and the surrounding literature, which will help explain the failure, and thereby better theorize such events more widely. These four aspects are: first, the event needs to become a media event which becomes the basis of a mythic narrative, independent of the intention of the self-immolator (how far it elides with this is another matter); second, it needs to be understood as a legitimated self-sacrifice rather than an act of fanatical self-destruction, and

may be justified through secular or religious narratives; third, it is necessary to see why the event is undertaken, commonly this may be as a protest when other means of legitimate open protest are restricted but this is not the only option so a sensitivity to the local context is required; and fourth, it must be an act where self-identification takes place between the actor and those receiving or creating the mythic narrative of the spectacle. A further issue is the problem of talking about self-immolations as either “religious” or “political” events, whether this be in the Chinese or Western context. These terms carry different connotations in different languages, while the separation of these two areas relies upon a contested approach. Assumptions that “religion” as a factor makes self-immolation events illegitimate in a secular public space seem unfounded. While the overtly religious myth that dominated the discussions of the 2001 Tiananmen self-immolations seemed a decisive factor in why they “failed” the problem was not that it was religious *per se* but the type of religious claims and legitimations that founded the mythic narrative of the media event.

NOTES

1. Studies of political self-sacrifice or self-immolation either ignore it (e.g., Andriolo 2008; Fierke 2012; and Michelsen 2015), or discuss it briefly (Biggs 2005). Similarly it is not discussed in many studies on Falun Gong (e.g., Adams 2014; Li 2014; and Penny 2012) or given passing mention e.g. (Chang 2004, 104; ter Haar 2002, 2 paragraphs; the lengthiest analysis is Ownby 2008b, 216–219).

2. The example of women’s self-immolation in Tajikistan is a case in point (Khushkadamova 2010).

3. Further self-immolations occurred in subsequent months and in 2011 but I do not deal with these, see Farley (2014) for a brief account.

4. See, e.g., Clearwisdom (n.d.), Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China (2002). Many resources exist of which I only reference a limited number herein as exemplars, however, as well as reviews of the literature I have checked a wider range of sources and spoken to supporters and opponents of Falun Gong (I do not cite any dates or places due to reasons of confidentiality).

5. Nevertheless, we must be very wary of the terminology employed because some recent scholarship contests whether it is legitimate to use the term “religion” cross-culturally, if at all. Speaking of a “religious” sphere in China may suggest we can universalize Euro-American/Christian categories. Nevertheless, it has been cogently argued that such criticism cannot avoid employing some marker for what we would otherwise term “religious” and that the term remains useful if employed strategically. For a recent overview, see King and Hedges (2014), for the wider literature see Fitzgerald (2007), Hedges (2010; 2014), Masuzawa (2005), McCutcheon (1997), and Schilibrack (2012). On some particularly Chinese aspects of doing “religion” see Chau (2013).

6. There has been at least one case of self-immolation in a Theravada context in Sri Lanka, however, it appears marginal (BBC 2013). Outside Sinitic Buddhism, especially in Theravada, acts of self-immolation have been argued to be antithetical to the precept of non-harm (*ahimsa*) (Rahula 1978, 111–114).

7. At the time of the incident the author was working in China and found a strong antipathy against the group following the reporting which was not there before. Practitioners of Falun Gong whom the author was able to be in contact with reported that they regarded the event as staged, following the outlines found in online literature, e.g., Clearwisdom (n.d.).

8. This is hard to substantiate globally, but a survey of the BBC news website shows heavy coverage of Falun Gong in 1999, substantial coverage in 2000, a spike in early 2001 which falls off despite another spike in July, then less coverage in 2002, but still heavy coverage related to certain types of events, notably action taken against foreign followers of Falun Gong and events in Hong Kong. Coverage thereafter is very sparse.

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