

Book Review



***Tibet on Fire: Buddhism, Protest, and the Rhetoric of Self-Immolation***

By John Whalen-Bridge. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, xxiii + 216 pages, ISBN 9781137373731 (hardback), \$89.99; 9781137370358 (eBook), \$69.99

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**T***ibet on Fire* by John Whalen-Bridge considers the series of self-immolations undertaken by Tibetans beginning in 2011—referred to collectively by the author as the “Tibetan self-immolation movement” (37). The book follows a recent wave of studies on the phenomenon, including special editions of *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* (vol. 25, December 2012) and *Cultural Anthropology Online* (April 2012), as well as Tsering Woesser’s book *Immolations au Tibet: La Honte du monde* (2013, translated into English in 2016 as *Tibet on Fire: Self-Immolations Against Chinese Rule*), in addition to numerous other article-length studies. The contribution this new *Tibet on Fire* brings to these studies lies in its emphasis on the performative, rhetorical aspects of the immolations, contextualized within broader musings on the past and future of Tibetan protest, nationalism, religion, and politics.

Whalen-Bridge, an English literature professor whose research broadly considers “the interfaces between imaginative expression and either political or religious identity” (xix), joins an already diverse group of writers—from manifold disciplines including history, anthropology, and religious studies—who struggle to understand this very complicated and alarming trend. Like other writers before him, Whalen-Bridge expresses his apprehensions, for instance in the book’s preface, on the dangers inherent in presenting unambiguous explanations—particularly Buddhist ones—for the self-immolations. He opts instead to take a multivalent approach by looking at a spectrum of possible causes, conditions, motivations, and interpretative contexts for the acts.

Whalen-Bridge presents the Tibetan self-immolations against the backdrop of the “the various other ways in which Tibetan issues manifest in western news media” (xviii), resulting in a revelatory juxtaposition “between the rather startling developments within Tibetan protest movements and the general situation of Tibetan culture in the world today” (xviii–xix).

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*Tibet on Fire* not only considers the significance of self-immolation acts themselves in a performative and rhetorical context, but also ways in which the acts are perpetuated thus through “secondary agency” (45). Whalen-Bridge writes that “the death of a self-immolator is not the end of the action, since it continues beyond the death of the actor” (63).

The author employs American theorist Kenneth Burke’s (1897–1993) interpretive method of dramatism—“a way to open up the diversity of motivations within complex expressions” (xix)—as the book’s theoretical framework for evaluating the self-immolations. Chapter one considers how the self-immolations may fulfill the Burkean hermeneutic pentad of act, agent/actor, agency, scene, and purpose. Here, the author introduces the possible intended audiences of the self-immolators: Chinese, Western, and Tibetan.

The rest of the study explores multiple interpretations of the Tibetan self-immolation phenomenon, such as the ways in which self-immolations may be interpreted as responses to PRC (People’s Republic of China) censorship and the blocking of Tibetan speech (chapters two and three). Chapter four examines the significance of the locations chosen for the self-immolations and the rhetorical and political meanings behind various attempts by the Tibet-in-exile and PRC governments to sculpt the self-immolation narrative. Chapter five looks at complications in linking the self-immolations to Buddhist doctrine, statements left behind by the self-immolators, and self-immolations in the context of (primarily Tibetan exile community) debates over what degree of political autonomy (full versus partial) should be sought for Tibet within the PRC. This chapter also examines conflicting opinions over what the Dalai Lama’s position is (or should be) vis-à-vis the self-immolations. Chapter six considers various aspects of the Tibet-China conflict from global and political perspectives, and chapter seven deals with speculations on the current Dalai Lama’s future succession amid a historical analysis of Tibet’s incarnate lama (*tulku*) tradition. The book ends with an appendix of the Tibetan self-immolators between 1998–2015.

A strength of the book is its close rhetorical analyses of its sources covering the self-immolations, particularly in chapter four. The book makes use of a wide range of Tibetan, Western, and Chinese newspapers, blogs, and websites, and considers various political, ethical, and religious positions among Tibetan, Chinese, and Western media outlets, religious leaders, intellectuals, academics, and politicians. Still, Whalen-Bridge relies chiefly on English-language materials (xvi), and the book may have taken different directions had the author also examined Tibetan and Chinese writings that are unavailable in English. With such an ambitious scope of examined issues—from international politics to Buddhist ethics and scripture to Tibetan religious sectarianism, among many others—it is not surprising to encounter a superior command in some subjects over others (the treatment of Buddhist literature in chapter five, for instance, could be more precise and nuanced).

Aside from its particular focus on performance and rhetoric—which may interest those already familiar with the self-immolations—*Tibet on Fire* also serves as a general introduction to the Tibetan self-immolation phenomenon, and provides comprehensive,

introductory-level background on Tibet-China history, Tibetan Buddhism, and international politics vis-à-vis the Tibet-China conflict. *Tibet on Fire* may thus also be of interest to those seeking a general introduction to the self-immolations themselves as well as the Tibet-China conflict in general.