



# Tibetan Self-Immolations

## Understanding “Why” This New Form of Political Protest Exists

### Background

March 10 is an important date in the Tibetan people’s psyche. Since 1959, people gather from all corners of the world on this day to publicly protest against the forced occupation of Tibet by China, and to raise greater awareness of the ongoing disenfranchisement of freedom and justice experienced by Tibetans currently living on the plateau. A few months before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, during the month of March, a strong wave of public protests, first led by the monastic communities of Lhasa in Tibet’s capital and later joined by laypeople from across various ethnic Tibetan regions in China, took place. Observing no foreseeable changes to the Chinese government’s oppressive treatment of Tibetan people and their culture, a call for action, urging people to stand up and resist, surfaced across communities in Tibet. The unrest was met with harsh crackdowns, thus creating further resentment among Tibetans for how the Chinese government treats them.

On February 27, 2009 which was the third day of Losar (Tibetan New Year), Tapey became the first person to self-immolate in Tibet. Hailing from Kirti monastery in the Ngaba region of Sichuan, the young monk was only in his mid-twenties when the incident occurred. Since then, the world has witnessed a total of 153 Tibetans in Tibet (including one in Beijing) who have lit their bodies on fire. In the process of immolating themselves, many people have called for the return of the exiled Tibetan leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, back to his homeland and also for Tibetans in Tibet to enjoy greater freedom of being. Furthermore, some self-immolators have directly rallied for the existence of an independent Tibet.

For the most part, this contemporary act of political protest has been led by monks, nuns and former members of the monastic community. Regionally, the province of Sichuan proves to be the hotspot for self-immolations, constituting around 50% of the total self-immolations. Within Sichuan, these acts are mostly based in the two Tibetan autonomous prefectures of Aba and Ganzi. Although the Chinese government currently recognizes only the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) as Tibet, Tibetan people emphasize that the three regions of Tibet (Utsang, Kham and Amdo) constitute TAR and parts of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan. This explains why I chose to spatially map these five aforementioned provinces for my project.



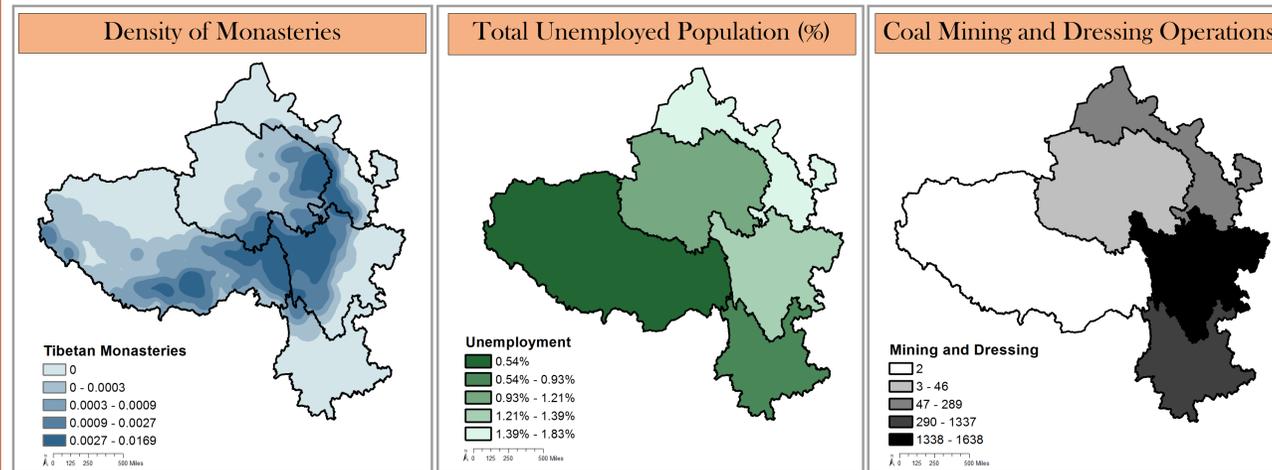
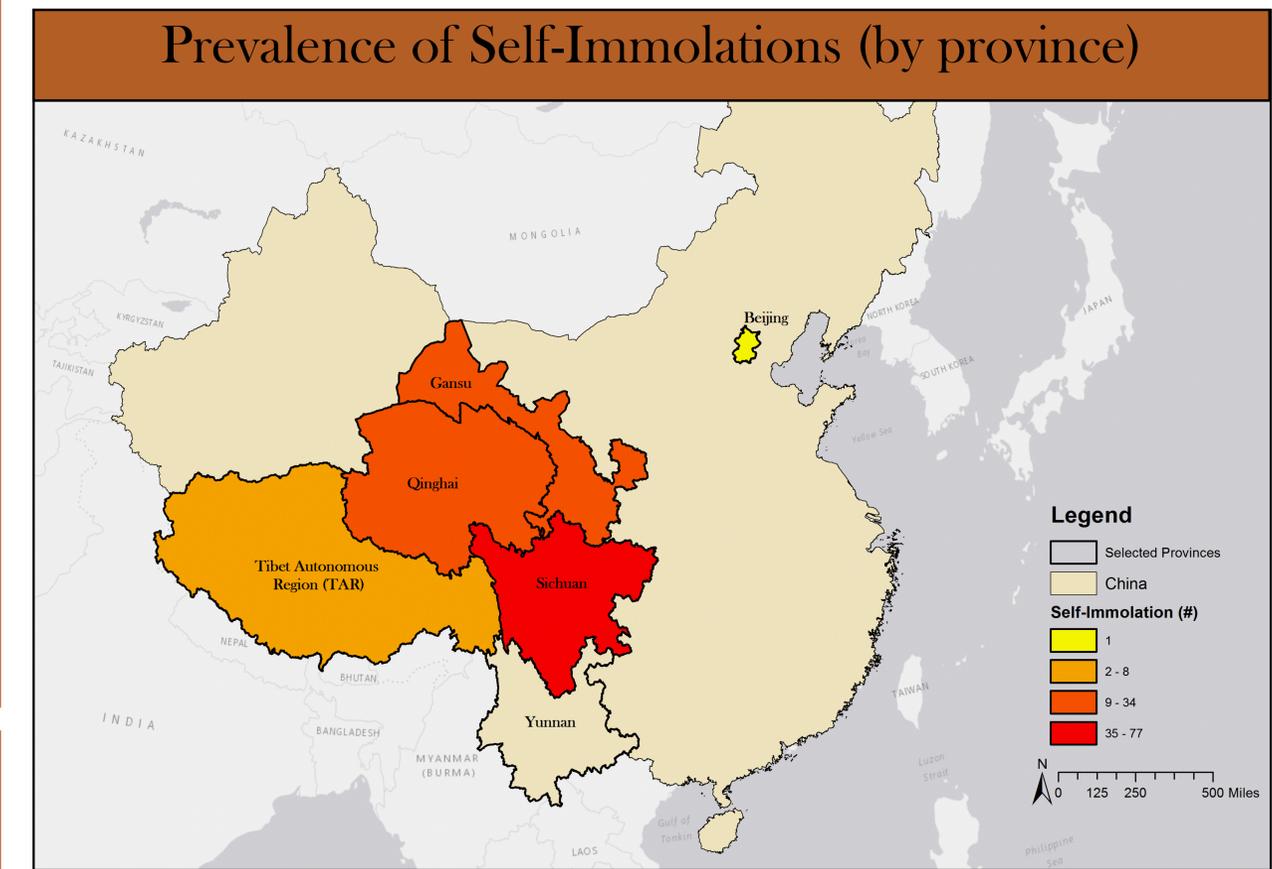
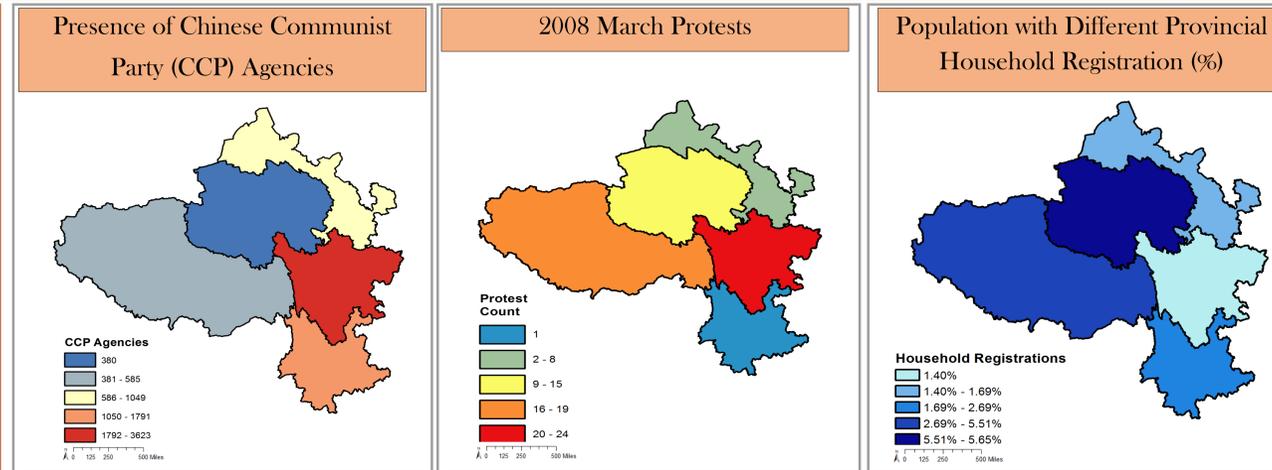
Map of Traditional Tibet, covering current TAR and parts of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan (credit to Free Tibet organization)

My hope for this project is to use spatial data to first highlight the grave presence of Tibetan self-immolations because knowledge on this particular situation inside Tibet still lacks everyday awareness around the globe to this day. Additionally, I hope that the basic spatial analysis work done for this project can help direct us in better understanding “why” (factors) these acts of political protest are taking place in Tibet.

### Methodology

To create the main map showing the prevalence of self-immolations in Tibet, I first made an excel datasheet with self-immolation data by person’s name, year of action, province, and also by county and occupation when that type of extensive data was available. Once this datasheet was transferred to ArcMap, I summarized the count of self-immolations by each province and performed an attribute join between the count per province table and the selected provinces shapefile. After changing the symbology of the shapefile, the resulting map came about. This prevalence map simply shows “where” and “how many” of the self-immolations are happening across Tibet (with an exception to Beijing where a Tibetan woman self-immolated in 2012).

Beside the main map lie six smaller maps, each representing a “why factor” that can help us better understand why self-immolations are occurring given these spatial circumstances. To create the factor maps, I gathered data in the form of tables and shapefiles from the Harvard Dataverse (for monastery density map) and China Data Online (for all other maps). The six factors being discussed in this project are 1) Presence of CCP Agencies; 2) March 2008 Protest Counts; 3) Percent of Population with Different Provincial Household Registration; 4) Density of Tibetan Monasteries; 5) Total Percentage of Unemployed Population; 6) Presence of Coal Mining and Dressing Operations. Since all data in these six maps and the main map were based per province, the spatial unit for my project is province.



### Result & Discussion

Although my data is not conducive to helping us construct claims about correlations between the “why factors” and the prevalence of the self-immolations, nonetheless, we can still make various statements that can help us better understand the current spatial organization of the prevalence map. As indicated in that map, self-immolations are mostly prevalent in the province of Sichuan (77), followed by Qinghai (34), Gansu (33), and then TAR (8). While Beijing observed one self-immolation case in 2012, there have been zero cases in Yunnan.

Inferring from the factor maps, we notice that Sichuan, where more than half of the Tibetan self-immolations have occurred, also has the largest presence of CCP agencies and coal mining and dressing operations, in comparison with the other selected provinces. Additionally, as previously said in the introduction, when widespread protests broke out in March of 2008, Sichuan had the highest count of protest, with 20-24 separate protest events (not counting for recurring protest at similar sites) in a given month. The already existing air of tension and resentment for the ways Tibetan people are continuously treated in China, fueled further by environmental factors such as strong governmental influence and degradation of natural resources, enable us to make sense as to why most self-immolations have happened in the province of Sichuan.

Even if the other factor maps don’t speak directly to the spatial inquiry, we can still come to an agreement that total percent of unemployed population and density of monasteries play some role in shaping the spatial organization of the prevalence map. My hope was to work around these various “why factors” that could potentially leave us more aware of why these events are occurring in Tibet and what we might be able to do to help prevent people from sacrificing themselves in the name of political protest. The public health lens I have taken to frame this issue, with a prevalence map and thinking about prevention steps, has been key to my personal studies at Tufts. I believe this approach can present a viable opportunity for building healthy Tibetan communities in Tibet, benefiting both the Tibetan people and the Chinese government.

### Limitations

The biggest limitation for this project is the inability for these maps to speak further and directly on the causes and influences of self-immolations in Tibet. This is because the current data used for the project wasn’t as detailed and desegregated as I would have preferred it to be. Given the time frame of the project, it wasn’t possible for me to do extensive research and dig deeper. Several other potential “why factors” that interested me during my research included 1) Educational Attainment of Youth Population; 2) Presence/Deployment of PLA (Chinese government troops); 3) Construction of Damming Operations; 4) Destruction of Tibetan Monasteries; 5) Tibetan-Language vs. Chinese-Language Educational Instruction and so on. However, the research process showed that many such data were nonexistent or required far extensive research digging, collecting, cleaning, and organizing skills that I have yet to build in myself as a GIS first-timer.

Likewise, I came upon several roadblocks with not finding any data on certain topics of interest. For this, we must keep the Chinese government accountable for their disregard and minor prioritization for data on topics such as self-immolations. To the CCP, self-immolations are national sores that delegitimize China’s notion of “a great united nation” made up of 56 different ethnic groups. Clearly, that is not the case since people are voluntarily giving up their lives shouting for the government to respect their right to being their genuine selves. Still, given the aspirations I had for this project, I feel confident in my ability to tell this brief story about the Tibetan self-immolations. May the spirits of the deceased and those who live today continue to resist and persist for a more equitable future for all.

Design and Cartography: Tenzin Chokki

Projection: Asia North Albers Equal Area Conic

Data Sources: China Data Online, Esri, Harvard Dataverse, International Campaign for Tibet, Uprising Archive, Tufts M Drive, Tashi Norbu (top two paintings)

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