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## **Portraying Self-Immolation in the Tibetan Diaspora**

As of January 2013, nearly 100 Tibetans have committed self-immolation as an expression of their perception of the lack of religious and political freedom among Tibetans living in the People's Republic of China. The majority of the attempts at suicide by fire have occurred in Tibetan areas of China in 2012. The frequency of recent self-immolations and their relative geographic concentration in a particularly restive area of Eastern Tibet appears in Western media as a coordinated and desperate protest movement. Some facets of the Tibetan diaspora have capitalized upon these men and women as martyrs in their campaign for a politically independent Tibet.

Aware of the power of Malcolm Brown's iconic image of Thích Quảng c (1897-1963), Tibetans and their supporters have utilized social media and traditional media outlets to spread portraits and videos of the recently deceased. Concomitant with the visual impact of a burning or burned human being, the Tibetan diaspora has come to refer to self-immolators as "heroes/heroines" along with the date of the event. It is as if their perception of the progress of inevitable cultural apocalypse in Tibet is reckoned with each self-immolation. In this paper I will analyze how activists within the Tibetan diaspora utilize the portrayal of self-immolators for their own political goals through focusing on two types of media: the exchange of iconic images and videos on

Facebook and Youtube, and posters produced for political rallies in exile. The analysis of the primary sources for this paper will build upon previous research into the development of "Tibetan uncivil religion," a theoretical framework for understanding the intersection between religion and politics among the global Tibetan community, in which Free Tibet activists and the government of the People's Republic of China force Tibetans into a dichotomous choice between either fealty to the Dalai Lama and disloyalty to the Chinese state, or else blasphemy to Buddhism and loyalty to China.