

TIBETAN SACRIFICE

CRISLY DEFIANCE:
Kalkyi, 30, set herself
afire in front of a
Tibetan monastery
in March – one of 117
self-immolations in
Tibetan regions of
China since 2009.
REUTERS/HANDOUT/
VOICE OF TIBET CHINA

As a wave of self-immolations in Tibetan China spreads, at least 10 mothers have joined in. The death of Kalkyi suggests why.

The mother who martyred herself

BY SUI-LEE WEE

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TIBETAN SACRIFICE THE MOTHER WHO MARTYRED HERSELF

In March, a young Tibetan woman named Kalkyi began making frequent visits to a monastery in Barma, a township in China's Sichuan Province.

The slim, rosy-cheeked mother of four was a devout Tibetan Buddhist, a close relative says. But her visits to the Dzamthang Jonang monastery this spring were out of character. So too were the spiritual mantras Kalkyi had begun to chant several times a day, and the way she had taken to prostrating herself in the monastery at least twice a day.

On the chilly afternoon of March 24, Kalkyi – who like some Tibetans went by just one name – stood outside the monastery gates with about 200 to 300 other worshippers. She doused herself with gasoline and lit a match. Flames instantly engulfed her, and as they did, she shouted words that no one could make out.

Witnesses say it took less than 15 minutes for the blaze to kill Kalkyi. She was 30 years old.

It was the ninth time in just over a year that a Tibetan mother had set herself on fire, an especially startling statistic to emerge from a grisly campaign of suicidal political defiance that shows no sign of ending.

Since 2009, at least 117 Tibetans have died by self-immolation in China, in protest against Beijing's policies in Tibet and nearby regions with large Tibetan populations.

More than 90 have perished as a result, with the latest fatality coming on May 29 in Qinghai province. Kalkyi's death was the 39th immolation in Ngaba prefecture, the corner of Sichuan Province where Barma township sits. This majority-Tibetan prefecture is the geographic focal point of the immolation wave, which increased dramatically in 2012.

The ultimate impact of the Tibetan suicides is uncertain. In 2010, one fruit seller's self-immolation in Tunisia sparked a revolution that would become known as the Arab Spring. But the Chinese government's restrictions on the domestic and international media have limited awareness of the growing number of immolations both inside and outside the country.



RITUAL BURNING: A Tibetan boy-monk is enshrouded in smoke during a morning ritual outside the Dzamthang Jonang monastery in Barma, China, where Kalkyi set herself on fire on March 24.

REUTERS/KIM KYUNG-HOON

Kalkyi's story nonetheless underscores how the movement has reached a desperate new stage, with the suicides moving beyond the Buddhist clerics who launched them and into the lay community. The deaths in the restive Tibet Autonomous Region and other Tibetan parts of China pose a particular challenge to two men: new Chinese President Xi Jinping, and the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. Some Tibetan scholars have criticized the Dalai Lama for not calling for an end to the burnings.

Kalkyi didn't belong to a religious order, long a source of dissent against Chinese rule; nor did she appear to have suffered specific acts of abuse. She was not, in other

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a Tibetan writer who tracks the self-immolations

words, anyone the authorities would have expected trouble from.

An examination of her life provides possible clues to why she set herself on fire. Among them: an emerging fervor among some lay Buddhists for imitating the monks who began the series of self-immolations.

A Reuters correspondent was able to verify Kalkyi's suicide and piece together the first account of her final days by visiting Barma, about 550 kilometers (310 miles) northwest of Sichuan's capital of Chengdu. No foreign journalist had been in Barma before this trip.

Some Tibet experts say the January 2012 shooting of a 20-year-old student named Urgen may have instigated the suicides in the Barma region. Urgen was killed when Chinese security forces fired on protesters in Barma trying to prevent the arrest of another youth, who had published leaflets declaring the self-immolations to be in support of a free Tibet and the return of the Dalai Lama,

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Tibetan self-immolations

As of now 122 Tibetans, five in exile, are known to have set themselves on fire since February 2009, with most of them dying.



Number of cases, as of Apr. 26 ● 1-4 ● 5-10 ● Over 10

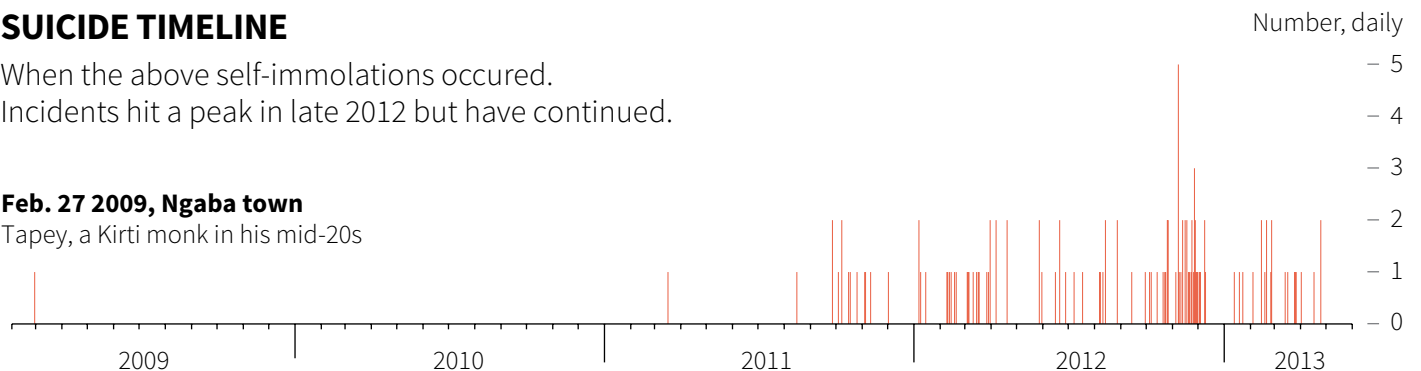


SUICIDE TIMELINE

When the above self-immolations occurred. Incidents hit a peak in late 2012 but have continued.

Feb. 27 2009, Ngaba town

Tapey, a Kirti monk in his mid-20s



Source: International Campaign for Tibet

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according to Tibetan advocacy groups.

Tsering Woeser, a Tibetan writer who tracks the self-immolations, considers the shooting a turning point. Since then, six people have killed themselves in Barma alone.

“There is no calm in these Tibetan areas. Each place is a dynamite package with a fuse,” she said. “Once that’s ignited, the anger in these places will explode.”

Officials in Barma could not be reached for comment.

TROUBLED REGION

Violence has flared in Tibet since 1950, when Beijing claims it “peacefully liberated” the region. Many Tibetans say Chinese rule has eroded their culture and religion. They are agitating for the Dalai Lama’s return from exile in India, and genuine autonomy for their homeland. The Chinese government denies trampling Tibetan rights and boasts of having brought development and prosperity to the region.

In 2008, months before the Olympic Games in Beijing, demonstrations about the perceived lack of freedoms for Tibetans broke out across the region, eliciting a brutal crackdown.

The first series of self-immolations began three years later, in 2011. They started with monks, nuns or former clergy and

continued for about a year.

As shocking as the first suicides were, the people who chose to burn themselves did so, Tibetan scholars say, in reaction to specific instances of abuse at particular monasteries. Tibetan Buddhist monasteries are often under surveillance and subject to raids by Chinese security forces.

The dynamic began to change in 2012. Of the more than 100 Tibetans to self-immolate in 2012 and 2013, about two-thirds were lay people, according to Tibetan activists and scholars who track the phenomenon.

One of them, a woman named Rikyo, traveled in May of last year to the Dzamthang Jonang monastery, where she set herself ablaze. Word of the suicide note she left traveled far and wide. Rikyo, 33, a mother of one child, wrote that she wanted

“I am willing to bear the suffering of everyone in despair. If I fall into the hands of the communists, please do not fight back.”

Rikyo

mother of one, who killed herself in a self-immolation in May 2012



PRAYERFUL PROTEST: Tibetans stage a prayer vigil with posters showing those who have committed acts of self-immolation at a protest at the U.N. headquarters in New York in December. REUTERS/ LUCAS JACKSON

the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet - a near-universal request from the self-immolators.

“I am willing to bear the suffering of everyone in despair,” Rikyo wrote in her note. “If I fall into the hands of the communists, please do not fight back.”

Beijing intensified its crackdown. It called the self-immolators “terrorists” and arrested people it accuses of inciting the acts. Chinese authorities have detained at least 75 people in Tibetan regions this year. In Barma today, a notice stuck on a pole in the village offers a 100,000 yuan (\$16,310) reward for any information on those “masterminding, supporting, abetting and coercing others to self-immolate.”

Chinese officials have specifically accused the Dalai Lama, who the government calls a “wolf in monk’s robes,” of providing money to the families of those who set themselves on fire. The Tibetan government in exile, based in Dharamsala, India, says it “categorically rejects” these allegations.

FINE LINES

The escalating suicide toll has put the Dalai Lama in a bind. He has called the acts “understandable,” even as he says he does not encourage them.

Several Tibet scholars have criticized his stance, saying his reluctance to tell his people to stop has strengthened their resolve to continue the fiery protests.

“I am puzzled by the Dalai Lama’s failure to act decisively in this situation, and by his decision not to advise people to consider their dependents before killing themselves,” said Robbie Barnett, director of modern Tibet studies at Columbia University.

The Dalai Lama did not respond to requests for comment.

In an interview, Khedroob Thondup, the Dalai Lama’s nephew, said his uncle is in a “very difficult position.” Even an appeal from the Dalai Lama couldn’t stop the self-immolations, he said. “This is not something started by him and this is not something he can end.”

“He feels these people are protesting because there are no alternatives, that they are desperate,” said Khedroob Thondup. “When they self-immolate, they are asking him to return.”

Lobsang Sangay, prime minister of the government in exile, said in an interview the self-immolations are a political issue. The response should come not from the Dalai Lama but from Sangay’s government, which discourages the suicides. The blame lies with Beijing - and so does the solution, he says.

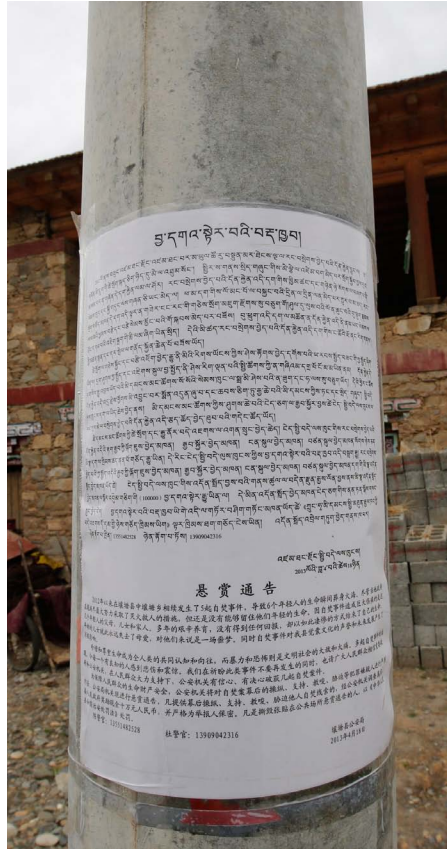
“All they need to do is reform their repressive policies, and introduce liberal policies towards the Tibetan people, and solve the issue of Tibet peacefully through dialogue,” Sangay said.

That approach, called the “Middle Way” by the Tibetans, seeks a Hong Kong-style autonomy for the region. But years of autonomy talks between the two sides broke down in 2010. And the growing carnage has added to the frustration some Tibetan activists have with the Middle Way. They seek independence, not just autonomy, and advocate non-violent ways of protest.

Xi, the new president, has said very little publicly about Tibet since taking office in March. His late father, a liberal-minded former vice premier, was close to the Dalai Lama. The Tibetan leader once gave the elder Xi an expensive watch in the 1950s, a gift the senior party official still wore decades later.

The younger Xi has shown no such warmth. During a trip to Tibet last July, Xi vowed to crack down on separatist forces that he said were led by the Dalai Lama.

State broadcaster CCTV aired a documentary in mid-May that blamed the “Dalai Lama clique” for publishing a guidebook teaching Tibetans how to set themselves on fire. The accusation was a reference to a blog post by a former member of Tibet’s parliament-in-exile, who advised would-be suicides to maximize the impact through “military-like” planning, such as having friends film the act. The Tibetan government-in-exile denounced the post as “irresponsible”.



REWARD OFFERED: A notice on a pole in the township of Barma offers a reward of 100,000 yuan (\$16,300) for information about the wave of self-immolations there.

REUTERS/KIM KYUNG-HOON

HONOR THE COMMUNITY

Political stalemate and a suffocating crack-down are the standard reasons given to explain the rising number of fiery suicides. But some scholars and Tibetans say there may be more to the death of a woman like Kalkyi than that.

Tibetans in China practice what some scholars call an “honor-based” politics. “Many people see themselves as socially insignificant, particularly younger women, so it seems to them more reasonable that they should sacrifice themselves for the honor of the community as a whole - as the community leaders, the monks, had already done,”

said Columbia’s Barnett.

As such, the second wave of self-immolations - mostly involving lay Tibetans - has been a way to honor the 2011 deaths among the clergy and give meaning to their sacrifice. What’s worrying, Barnett said, is that they are spreading rapidly among people - such as young mothers like Kalkyi - who had not previously been drawn to overt defiance.

The township of Barma, called Zhongrangtang in Chinese, is remote, poor and sparsely populated, with only 4,000 inhabitants. Women clad in sheepskin garments hack at rocks with construction tools to make gravel. Few speak Chinese.

One main road runs through the township, which sits 3,560 meters (11,680 feet) above sea level and is surrounded by mountains dotted with pine trees. About 96 percent of the people who live there are herders, according to 2009 data from the website of the local county government.

Kalkyi’s husband, Truppe, was one of them. A relative of Kalkyi described the family as middle-class for the region. Truppe made some money selling his animals. He also built houses. They had sold one home and were living in a second, a traditional, two-story mud-brick structure. A month before she died, according to a relative, Kalkyi said they had just finished work on a third, a modern stone building, but had not yet furnished it.

In the summer Kalkyi and Truppe would climb the mountains to gather herbs and fungi to sell. Many Tibetan nomads are skilled at harvesting “caterpillar fungi”, a prized ingredient in traditional Chinese medicine, which sells for 225,000 yuan (\$36,700) per kilogram.

The couple had four children, who range in age from one to 10. In the yard of their brick house, Tibetan prayer flags on a long pole now flutter in the wind. A stone carving on the wall in front of her house is inscribed with the Tibetan words: “Om mani padme hum,” a traditional Buddhist mantra that is also chanted as a prayer to the Dalai Lama.

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Kalkyi was uneducated. The Chinese government shut down Tibetan-language schools in the 1990s, so she never learned how to write, and she never attended the Chinese-language schools the government opened in their place. When she got married at 20, she wanted to learn Tibetan so she could pray, say those who know her. She began going to the Dzamthang Jonang, an imposing structure that consists of three different monasteries, surrounded by large courtyards and smaller buildings.

Her friends and a family member who lived with her for two years describe her as easygoing, a woman who liked chatting with the elderly folk in her village. According to the relative and to Tsangyang Gyatso, an India-based Tibetan who has contacts with Kalkyi's family and friends, her family life was stable and she had no financial problems.

In the weeks and months before she took her life, Kalkyi grew more openly devout, those closest to her say, but she displayed no signs of political radicalism.

"I never had any idea she would set herself on fire," the close relative told Reuters on condition of anonymity. According to neighbors, her husband Truype was also caught off guard.

Reuters was unable to speak to Truype. Police stopped Reuters reporters en route to his home and detained them for six hours before ordering them to leave for Chengdu, the provincial capital.

In the immediate aftermath of Kalkyi's death on March 24th, monks from the Dzamthang Jonang monastery carried her body into the main hall, as Chinese security forces and military locked down the area.

Tibetan culture requires a body be kept until an astrologer determines the most auspicious date for a cremation ceremony. But Chinese authorities ordered that Kalkyi's ceremony be completed by midnight, witnesses say. Even so, despite a large military



EPICENTER: Barma township (population 4,000) in the Sichuan province of China has been the site of six of the Tibetan self-immolations since the beginning of 2012. REUTERS/ KIM KYUNG-HOON

presence, that evening some 4,000 people gathered on the monastery's grounds for the ceremony, according to local residents.

The close relative has come to believe that Kalkyi's decision to sacrifice her life was meant to honor the Tibetan community. "She might have thought that since she didn't go to school, this was the only way she could do something for her country."

"Right after her fiery protest," he said, "I was very sad, but then I was really, really happy, because even a young woman can sacrifice her life for such a big cause, a nation's cause."

To the Chinese government's alarm, they continue to do so.

Less than a month after Kalkyi killed herself, a 20-year-old woman named

Chugtso trekked from her home to the Dzamthang Jonang monastery. On April 16, at around 3 p.m., she set herself ablaze, dying in almost the same spot as Kalkyi.

Chugtso was the mother of a three-year-old boy.

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