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## **The Rhetorical Power of Photography: How Photographs of Self-Immolation Impact Social Movements**

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**The Rhetorical Power of Photography-  
How Photographs of Self-Immolation Impact Social Movements**

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## Table of Contents

<b>1.Introduction</b>	3
<b>2.Literature Review</b>	4
Photography and Social Movements	4
Rhetorics of Social Movements	5
The Body in Flames as a Form of Protest	6
<b>3. Theoretical Framework</b>	8
Photography’s Subjunctive Voice	8
Emotional Engagement	9
Rhetoric of the Body in Pain	9
The Collective Dimension of Self-Sacrifice	10
Theoretical Assumptions	10
<b>4. Hypothesis</b>	11
<b>4.Methodology:</b>	12
Definitions	14
Data Collection	14
<b>5. Analysis</b>	15
<b>Case 1: Tibet</b>	15
First Mechanism: Rhetorical Message of the Photograph	17
Second Mechanism: Mobilisation	20
Third Mechanism: Public Pressure on China	210
<b>Case 2 Vietnam - Thích Quảng Đức</b>	22
First Mechanism: Rhetorical Message of the Photograph	24
Second Mechanism - Mobilisation	25
Third Mechanism - Pressure on U.S. and Diem Government	25
Discussion	27
<b>Conclusion</b>	28
<b>References</b>	29

## **1.Introduction**

The year 1963 marked the public emergence of self-immolation - as seven Buddhist monks burned to death in a form of rebellion against Ngo Dinh Diem's South Vietnamese government (Yün-hua, 1965). The photograph<sup>1</sup> became a worldwide icon for the form of protest and a symbol of the South Vietnamese resistance. The tragic form of protest became a pillar for the rhetorical formation of the Buddhist movement in Vietnam (Harding, 2016).

Fifty years later, a series of events now labelled as the Tibetan self-immolation movement began. Although the act was not new, the the image is still relevant in the context of the Tibetan movement. This research project will maintain that the story of self-immolation as a form of protest and powerful public rhetoric cannot exist without the medium of photography. Furthermore, it will argue that photos of self-immolation impact the success of social movements through the creation of a rhetoric of state violence.

The interaction of photography with the act of self-immolation leads to the magnification of the rhetorical function inherent to the form of protest. Recent studies on visual representation of social movements have shed light on the importance of images in the expression and representation of protests. Images in the form of photography, art, posters, campaign flyers etc. contribute massively to the narrative of a social movement. However, the majority of research on social movements is almost exclusively preoccupied with texts, leaving the power of visuals largely unexplored (Doerr, 2010).

The justifications for this research are multiple. Firstly, it will further the understanding of the impact of photography in social movements, a topic that is under-researched and requires development (Doerr, 2010). Secondly, this research will contribute to the study of rhetorical agency in social movements, and how it is enhanced by photography. More specifically, the rhetorics of self-immolation have been studied by very few scholars; in the cases where it is placed as the focus of analysis, self immolation is seldom considered as a potential determinant for mobilization. Lastly, despite its focus on two case studies, this thesis will contribute to the broader knowledge of photography's rhetorical function in social movements. This posits a few questions

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Figure 4

for this research more generally: How do photographs of a protest become global political icons? And in what way do they shape rhetorical messages of a movement. This begs the research question: **How do photographs of self-immolation impact mobilisation?**

## **2.Literature Review**

### **Photography and Social Movements**

Scholarly material is increasingly attentive to the intersection between the spheres of activism, protest movement and culture (Memou, 2017). Although this advancement is unquestionably important towards understanding the role of visual phenomena in political contexts, there is a gap in literature regarding the role of photography in social movements. The aim of this thesis will be to bridge this gap, by assessing the role of photography in magnifying the rhetoric of social movements, and how this ultimately affects mobilization.

Scholarly literature does not sufficiently assess the relationship between visual phenomena and mobilization, leading to the success or failure of a movement (McLaren, 2010). In digital times, literature on the topic of the relevance of imagery in the context of collective identity also emphasised the power of images as magnified by social media platforms (Rovisco, 2017, p. 337). This branch of literature focuses more on the novel channel of mass distribution while neglecting the image itself (Rovisco, 2017). Present research does not sufficiently analyse individual images and their role in specific movements (“The Activist Lense”, 2009).

The term “images” is generally used in reference to a broad frame which encompasses the visual aspect of the world. Gamson et al. (1992) attribute two definitions to the term: the first being a form of reproduction, the second being a substitution of reality, hence a depiction of something that is not necessarily present (p. 374). Photography falls in this definition because, as a medium, it nears towards the objective representation of a situation. However, several authors, including Flick et al. (2004), argue that “no camera sees exactly as does the eye”; even the simple process of taking a photo involves a conscious or unconscious decision to interpret a scenario in one out a myriad of other ways (p. 234).

Although the history of photography is relatively short-lived, it has a strong impact on social movements. Memou (2017) relates its unique role in political turmoils resulting from the camera's capacity to instantly capture an image. Photography is able to "freeze" a moment in time. This quality may be conflated to other mediums, like motion pictures - but photography's uniqueness is its representation of a moment without being "suppressed [by] further moments" (p. 2). This is similar to Gibson's prior definition of an "image" that can manipulate and be manipulated easily, since it is neither anticipated nor resumed by any other moment in time (Memou, 2017, p. 2). Johnson's (2011) affirms that photography is often used to craft an intensified version of reality. It is supposed to arouse strong emotions in viewers, often aimed at the "exploitation of sentiment" (p. 634).

### **Rhetorics of Social Movements**

This section will present existing research on the rhetorics of social movements, and the way photography captures and emphasises this rhetoric.

Many authors have explored the relationship between images and their rhetorical impact. Smith (2012) explores Dorothea Lange's photography in producing discourses of nationalism (2012, p. 83). Corrigan-Brown (2011) underscores the emotional capacity of visual images as having more longevity than that of texts, and that visual framing of a movement can greatly impact its mobilisation and success. Skow and Dionisopolus' (1997) research is valuable for studying the rhetorical aspect of photography, also studying Browne's photograph. However, their findings focus more on its impact on self-immolations in the U.S., rather than the image's rhetorical framing of the state as violent. Other studies exploring self-immolation in the image include Sallie King, whose findings add to research on the power of visual images, but do not focus on the link between photography and its rhetorical power (2000).

Research from scholars like Lancioni (1996) was groundbreaking for their newfound understanding of rhetorics in photography. The discussion clarifies the change in conceptualization of rhetoric in the 20th century from being only associated to language into other domains, including the visual (p.111). In fact, scholars like Kenney and Scott (2003) underscore the importance of

visual rhetoric by suggesting that the process of making and viewing photos is a cultural practice, just as writing and reading (p. 20).

The Burkean analysis of rhetoric suggests that photographs are a “symbolic action” that create a narrative (Lancioni, 1996, p. 111) by summarizing or replacing it. Bouse (1991, p. 17) argues that the aesthetic quality of images also has a rhetorical function that persuade for or against an issue, even triggering direct action and mobilisation. (1991, p. 17) This research project will analyze photos capturing self-immolation, or the rhetorical power of the *about to die moment*, a concept that will be expanded on further (Yang, 2011, p. 2).

### **The Body in Flames as a Form of Protest**

As Crosby et al. predicted, self-immolation would be a more extreme act of protest than other popular methods already in existence. Goff (2013) notes that the study of self-immolation as a cause for mobilization has been under researched in political science (p. 3). He adds more generally that extra-institutional political activity is still underestimated in comparison to politics studied of more conventional - or institutional - processes (p. 23). Another way in which studies misjudge the act is by inherently associating it to a psychological context, rather than instances of systematic political protests (Goff, 2013, p. 23). Self-immolating is often causally linked to suicide or mental illness, and although that may be the unfortunate nature of certain cases, this thesis exclusively considers it as a political act.

The study of self-immolation is a study of activists using their body as a site of argument to convey the urgency of the subject of protest. Self-immolation is an extreme body rhetoric, where subjects assert complete control of the body and sacrifice it in the process (Neville-Shepard, 2014, p. 1). DeLuca (1999) suggests that the body becomes a powerful substance and site to convey a rhetorical message. He maintains that social movements may prefer alternatives to traditional means of protest, employing image politics to build rhetoric. This often deliberately includes the images of “vulnerable bodies [...], ludicrous bodies, transfigured bodies” to constitute an argument (DeLuca, 1999, p. 10).

Since the body in protest is not seen in “real time” by audiences, photography becomes a key factor in conveying a rhetorical message. DeLuca (1999) describes the photos of the bodies as a potentially separate site of argument (p. 9). Hence, a photo of an event such as a protest can convey an argument, allowing images to be context-dependents (p. 9). Hariman and Lucaites (2004) second this, claiming that photographs’ meanings are “established slowly” and can change in context and use (p. 38). Goldberg (1991) agrees, implying that certain photographs still remain “iconic” despite being removed from their context (p. 125). Hariman and Lucaites (2004) argue that a single photograph holds the power to build a rhetorical culture (p. 38). Additionally, they affirm the link between the images’ potential to represent political crises or public life, with their ability to motivate public action and mobilization (p. 38).

Most scholars unanimously agree that photography magnifies rhetoric in a strong, convincing way. However, there is less research on the mechanisms through which certain images trigger stronger emotions and reactions than others. Barbie Zelizer’s (2010) work is fundamental for understanding the way images work to represent a historical event, and - most importantly - the potency of images to “move” the public into action (p. 15).

As Biggs (2005) contends, the body in pain is a largely unexplored topic compared to its other protest-counterparts (p. 205). Self immolation is thus useful in bridging the gap regarding how extreme forms of protest lead to political changes. The research that is present on political suicide in the form of self-immolation frequently frames the study as a one-off incident that places a lot of attention on exogenous variables (Goff, 2013). Hence, studying the process of self immolation leading to mobilization are needed. Furthermore, there is a demand for research on photography and its impact on social movements- specifically- how images can induce mobilization, and how they can lead to the success of a social movement.



### 3. Theoretical Framework

The term “self-immolation” retains a wide variety of definitions; the most commonly known action associated with the term is setting afire one’s own body, as performed by monk Thích Quảng Đức in June of 1963 (Nagle, 2018, p. 10). This thesis will conceptualize self-immolation as being the political act of self-burning, as a form of protest, most commonly strategized as a form of protest against government oppression to encourage direct action (Plank, 2013).

The theories supporting the impact of visual materials like photographs on activism emphasise the intersection of the emotional dimension to the images. McLaren (2009) explores the use of gruesome photography employed by pro-life activists, which confirm the crucial use of emotion to instil a sense of urgency to the issue (McLaren, 2009, p. 112). Other scholars focus on the unique role that imagery has in strengthening the process of memory; Raiford discusses the pivotal role of visual language in narrating black critical memory, and photography’s assertion of the truth as a “mirror with a memory” (2009, p.112). This dimension of visual images as a memory site is important for activists to unify against the oppressor or the “other”. For instance, Raiford suggests that photographs were the primary component of anti-lynching campaigns due to their reframing of black critical memory (2009, p, 118). Similarly, Marita Sturken develops the theory of photography as a site for constructing cultural memory: crucial in representing the narrative or identity of a social movement.

#### Photography’s Subjunctive Voice

Barbie Zelizer (2010) defines images of individuals’ moments before their death as the *about-to-die moment* (p, 15). This theory is described as the *subjunctive voice* of photography used to describe “what could be” instead of the “what is” (Zelizer, 2010, p. 14). The *subjunctive voice* and the *about to die moment* are relevant to analyze photographs of self-immolation, whereby death “suspended in time” (Yang, 2011, p. 12). Usually described in verbal language through terms such as “might”, the subjunctive voice adds contingency and conditionality to the otherwise objectivity of visual language (Zelizer, 2010, p. 14). This is what Zelizer (2010) calls the “as if” moment in photographs, activating the imagination of viewers (p. 14). Yang (2011) contends that the space between contingency and certainty in images of the *about-to-die* moment are those that trigger the response of viewers (p. 12) . This process happens when viewers’ envision alternate outcomes to

the inevitable death of the subject (Nagle, 2018, p. 86). The *subjunctive voice* can be employed to understand how photographs of self-immolation lead to mobilization by stirring up the imagination of viewers and leading them to act.

### **Emotional Engagement**

Hariman and Lucaites (2009) explore the way images can engage and emotional responses in viewers. Oftentimes, these can foster feelings of collective identity and facilitate civic action. This explores how photographs can lead to increased mobilization. Photographs which are understood to be more striking, or “iconic”, engage with the “structures of feeling” of the audience (p. 5). They connect the audience, the represented subject and a social context by either creating positive emotions - such as satisfaction - or negative ones, such as blockages. Photographs of the *about-to-die-moment* bond with the audience through the negative emotional scheme. Furthermore, emotional engagement does not only engage the individual-level but triggers “complex social forms” that produce cohesion and persuasive outcomes on a group dynamic (p. 5). The emotional dimension that a photograph can produce on a collective level may also increase mobilisation.

The salience of the emotional dimension of photographs is reiterated in studies where iconic photos in relation to people’s interest towards a crisis or their willingness to take action. Veneti et al. (2019) underline that photos of self-immolation cause a particular emotional reaction because they represent a final act of protest (p. 5). Their findings suggest that images depicting violence create a heightened emotional experience, connecting viewer and subject through empathic processes (Veneti et al., 2019, p. 46). This further strengthens how it could enforce public action in the form of mobilization.

### **Rhetoric of the Body in Pain**

The act of self immolation is often regarded as the highest form violence as the sacrifice of one’s own life. The act violates Walter Benjamin’s widely appraised principle that “existence is [...] nothing other than mere life” in the *Critique of Violence* (Fassin, 2011, p. 283). Yang (2011) argues

that photographs of self immolation magnify a poignant rhetorical act whereby self-inflicted violence becomes a visual embodiment of violence performed by the “other” (p. 2). In the case of political self-immolation, the role of the “other” is assumed by the oppressive regime. Photographs of self-immolation translate the violence of the “other” into violence at the hand of the oppressive state. Arendt argues that the body in pain is the most extreme human emotion, while also being the most private. Privacy is challenged, however, when the body in pain is given a public outlet, like the one provided through the photographic medium. Images of the body in pain are considered a powerful resource for subverting the oppressive state (Chambers et al., 2000, p. 139).

### **The Collective Dimension of Self-Sacrifice**

Self-immolation is unlike other forms of political suicide because it does not involve harming others. It also differs from other self-destructive acts by sacrificing one’s own body for a greater cause. The body becomes a “gift” for others, engaging with a collective cause (Plank, 2013, p. 343). The public aspect of the self-immolation becomes significant in this context, because the act inherently has a rhetorical message that needs to be witnessed by a group. Photography provides a structure where the act of self-immolation is met by an audience or viewer, who can witness the message of the immolator. Due to the performative element of the act, it cannot happen in a vacuum, since the premise of the act is its political effect on others (Uzzell, 2012, p. 4). The specific collective dimension of self-immolation distinguishes it from other acts of violence even among Buddhist practices (Plank, 2013). Self-immolation as a public practice is an act of sacrifice with the intent of bringing political change. It bears similarities to other acts of self-sacrifice, such as hunger strikes, but is more extreme in the way it is more visceral and violent, and is done with the premise of death as a certainty. Photography interacts with the practice requiring a public outlet, or a collective dimension, but providing an audience and public dissemination through its medium.

### **Theoretical Assumptions**

This thesis will use the theories developed from the case of self-immolation in Tunisia, and apply them to the two new cases of Tibet and Vietnam. This will contribute to the developments and adaptations of the theories exploring the link between photography and mobilisation in social movements. The photographs of the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi seen in *figure 1* are

deemed as the catalyst of mobilization and subsequent un-doing of the status quo in Tunisia (Merrick, 2018; Mabrouk, 2011) The case is thus a strong example of the presence of causal mechanisms behind the success of a social movement (or the effective altering of the status quo) as being the photography of self-immolation. The theories discussed in the theoretical framework expand on the rhetorical power of photography creating an anti-government narrative. The same theories will be developed in two new case studies, as will be clarified in the research design.



*Figure 1:* Photograph depicting the self immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi.  
Photographer Unknown. Date: March 3, 2010. (Aljazeera News)

#### **4. Hypothesis**

Upon consideration of the theoretical explanations for the impact of photographs of immolation, the following hypothesis emerges:

*H<sub>1</sub>:* Photography as a medium of representation for self-immolation advances mobilisation and public action by creating an anti-government rhetoric.

#### ***4. Methodology:***

##### **Case Selection**

Photography is relevant in capturing rhetorical acts meant to evoke an intense reaction from the audience, and shock the viewer. Self-immolation with or without the assistance of the photography holds a strong rhetorical meaning. This will be explored through an evaluation of the process in which photographs of self-immolation can increase mobilisation, and the success of social movements.

Zelizer's (2010) subjunctive voice in the *about-to-die* moment and the emotional engagement on the collective level may lead to a positive effect on mobilization and political change. Images of self-immolation convey a compelling vision of the atrocity of oppression at the hands of the state, and a human's sacrifice to stand against the highest form of pain to overcome it. This thesis will use the case of Tunisia as an example of a successful advancement of mobilization through a photograph of self-immolation. The image of a street vendor produced a rhetorical message of oppression at the hands of the state, effectively promoting mobilization and the undoing of the status quo. The photograph also became a symbol of the Tunisian and Arab uprisings (Yang, 2011). The theories developed were largely based on this case and will hereby be adapted and applied to two new cases.

Upon noting the success of the photograph in the Tunisian revolution, two other cases will investigate the impact of photographs of self-immolation of social movements and mobilization. A small-n comparison will be performed to achieve a comprehensive analysis through a description of the mechanisms in each case. Halperin & Heath (2012) will be used as a template for the case selection and research design. The cases were selected specifically because they will apply the theories outlines in the framework to two new case studies (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 206). Hence, by studying these cases, this thesis will aim to achieve a descriptive comparison of the phenomenon outlined above (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 206). Furthermore, the cases will be revelatory in nature, with the intent of elucidating mechanisms leading photographs to impact mobilization (Halperin & Health, 2012, p. 206).

The two cases will be Vietnam and Tibet; they are chosen in a *purposive* fashion, since the phenomenon of self-immolation has occurred in both (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 246). Their regime types are similar and the photographs both depict self-immolation. However, the outcome is different; Vietnam has successful political change, while Tibet does not. The selection will be useful to decipher the mechanisms impacting mobilization, and ultimately the outcome of a social movement. Finally, and most importantly, the photos analyzed will be “The Burning Monk” by Malcolm Browne, taken in Saigon - Vietnam - and the immolation of a Tibetan man, Jampel Yeshe by Manish Swarup, taken in New Delhi.

Since the cases are not deviant, and this thesis predicts that they follow a certain trend, they act as representative cases. As defended by Barakso et. al (2014) typical cases are the most appropriate to explore causal mechanisms between the independent variable and outcome (p. 95). Moreover, the significant time gap between the two photographs, taken decades apart, reinforces the salience of visual phenomena in social movements.

### **Research Design**

This thesis examine the impact of between of photography of self-immolation and mobilisation. The most suitable way to explore causal mechanisms between the independent and dependent variable in a qualitative analysis is through process-tracing (Halperin & Heath, 2012). As explained by Beach & Pedersen (2013), process-tracing is ideal when aiming to surpass simply identifying a correlation between independent variables (X) and outcomes (Y) (p. 2) By instruction of Beach & Pedersen (2013), the process-tracing will be of the *theory-testing* variant (p. 21). The thesis will thereby explore a plausible causal mechanism linking the two variables based on evidence that suggests so (p. 21). To explore the causal path between X & Y, there will be a causal chart to clarify the in-between steps for each of the cases. Although this method decreases the generalisability of the two cases, it preserves a sturdy analysis of each case that will be beneficial to the research on causes of social movement mobilizations, successes or failures (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). Furthermore, it will contribute to the knowledge of photography and rhetoric in contributing to the aforementioned mobilisation.

**Cause (X)**

Photographs of self-immolation

**Causal Mechanism (1)**

development of anti-government rhetoric

**Causal Mechanism (2)**

Mobilisation

**Causal Mechanism (3)**

political coercion on government

**Outcome (Y)**

Undoing of status quo - success

*Figure 2: Chart of Causal Mechanisms*

### *Definitions*

The definition of mobilisation for this research project will resonate with Goff's (2013) conceptualization: an increase in direct participation, such as increased protest activity, and indirect participation, such as surfacing of propaganda or shifts in political support (p. 29). Additionally, the definition used for political change will be any transformation in institutional politics that aligns with the self-burner's objective (Goff, 2013). This could also manifest itself as a shift in political structure, namely the altering of a status quo (or any change in the regime) (Goff, 2013).

The first mechanism that will be outlined is the rhetorical function that photographs exercise. In other words, the research design will highlight the impact of the photographs on the development of anti-government rhetoric. This will be the first of three intermediate steps of the causal path. The second causal mechanism discussed will be the predicted effect on mobilization, as visualized in *figure 2*. The third mechanism outlines how mobilization will subsequently affect political coercion. As a final step, the assessment to follow will analyze the influence of the political coercion towards the undoing of the original status quo of a regime, namely, the effective success of the movement (Nagle, 2018, p. 144).

### **Data Collection**

Each causal mechanism is to be analyzed by either proving or disproving its effective relationship with the prior mechanism (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 152). To deepen the scope of the analysis, each causal mechanism will be respectively divided in the categories outlined in the theoretical

framework. Namely, the first causal mechanism: the link between the images and the rhetorical function, will be studied by looking at the subjunctive voice in the about-to-die moment. The second causal mechanism will be scrutinised through a historical analysis, clarifying whether mobilization increased temporally: post the release of the photographs (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 61). The third causal mechanism, namely, civic action towards altering government behavior, will be indicated through political pressure of civilians towards the government. Lastly, the undoing of the status quo is defined as political change or the alteration of the status quo.

## **5. Analysis**

### **Case 1: Tibet**





*Figure 2:* Photograph depicting the self immolation of Jamphel Yeshe.  
Photographer: Manish Swarup. Date: March 26, 2012 (National Geographic)

### **Historical Background of the Case**

March 2008 marked a period of intense Tibetan uprisings, rapidly becoming the biggest provocation to Chinese rule since 1959 (Topgyal, 2011). The coinciding Beijing Olympics drew international attention to the domestic conflicts within China, garnering worldwide support for the Tibetan struggle.

Resistance to Chinese rule occurred numerous times since the original invasion of Tibet in 1950 (Schwartz, 1992). Although the majority of Tibetan protests have been non-violent in nature, Chinese press would falsely paint events as being “violent and seditious” (Whalen-Bridge, 2015, p. 19). Particularly, Western coverage of events was often misconstrued and biased. In 2008, forms

of protest such as hunger strikes and self-immolations became more frequent, following the instances of blocked speech and Tibetans' unwillingness to compromise their freedom (Whalen-Bridge, 2015). This rotation of "protest, suppression and protest-of-suppression" continued in autonomous Tibet, as well as majority-Tibetan regions that were fused into Chinese territory (p. 22). In 2013, journalist Lee Meyers relayed details of China's oppressive rule of Tibetans, especially those in Buddhist circles, claiming that China was one of eight countries targeted by the U.S. State Department in light of "systematic repression of religious rights" towards Tibetan Buddhists (Neville-Shepard, 2014, p. 63)

The unique aspect of the Tibet movement is its multiple connections globally which make it a transnational movement. In fact, *Figure 2* was taken in New Delhi, outside of China's borders, arguably shifting the gaze of international media to pay more attention to the issues of self-immolation as a form of protest in China (Nagle, 2018, p. 166). The day the photo of Jemphel Yeshe was taken, Chinese President Hu Jintao had planned a visit in New Delhi (Nagle, 2018). Demonstrators assembled in solidarity of Tibet's struggle in response to China's restrictive policies (Nagle, 2018, p. 166). Since 2008, there have been over 155 self-immolators, not counting those like Jemphel Yeshe who find themselves outside of Tibetan borders, protesting for Tibetan freedom and the repatriation of the Dalai Lama (Vehaba, 2019).

### **Analysis of Causal Mechanisms**

The causal mechanisms that will be detailed are the same as those that were outlined in the research design. Hence, they are as follows: (1) the development of a rhetorical message (ideally one that is anti-government), (2) mobilisation and (3) exertion of public pressure on the government. Although these are not the words used in the chart verbatim, the meaning remains the same.

### **First Mechanism: Rhetorical Message of the Photograph**

Tibetan Buddhism can be considered the most important part of Buddhist identity and culture, often being the first facet Tibetans introduce to non-Tibetans (Vehaba, 2019). Buddhism is intrinsically connected to Tibetan society, despite there being other religions and minorities (Vehaba, 2019). The first prime minister went so far as to describe Tibetan demeanor as being generally empathetic, tolerant. John Whalen Bridge (2015) argues that Buddhism is an inherent

part of Tibetan rhetoric, and often leaks into other areas such as Tibetan identity and nationalism. With this information in mind, the photograph taken by Manish Swarup on March 2012 was likely received with startled and shocked responses by audiences. Although, according to Whalen-Bridge (2015), only a few Tibetan self-immolators clearly linked their act with premeditated religious beliefs (or as a “religious offer”), a large amount of self-immolations were implicitly connected to Buddhism, by either occurring outside of monasteries, subjects sitting in lotus position or even forming an altar at the location of protest (p. 94).

Although the word immolation means “sacrifice”, and Buddhist tradition generally commends self-sacrifice for a greater cause, the response of the Chinese state will stir the narrative in a different direction (Morrison, p. 4). Despite the photograph effectively portraying the immolation to create a narrative of government oppression and violence, it was subsequently stifled by China. This will be further discussed successively in the analysis.

#### *The Body in Pain and The Subjunctive voice*

The rhetoric of the body in pain is strongly portrayed in the photograph. The subject is running with his body engulfed by flames, and his facial expressions and gestures enhance the agony of what Barbei Zelizer (2010) calls the ‘about-to-die’ moment. The moment is fraught with intensity, as the crowd surrounding the subject is shown either staring at the sight or capturing it with cameras, as shown by two men both immortalizing the moment. Both the image itself being portrayed through the photographic medium, and the cameras depicted within it creating a dramatic “spectacle of pain” of the immolator (Nagle, 2018, p. 168). Another man is shown chasing the immolator at the far right of the photograph, adding to the emotional intensity and chaos of the image.

The photograph activates the *subjunctive voice of the visual*, not only portraying the objective content of the event, but its possible contingencies (Nagle, 2018, p. 85). It is undeniable that the image displays a man at the brink of death, but the power of Zelizer’s *about-to-die* moment is that the other imagined outcomes are not only limited to the immolator’s fatal destiny (Nagle, 2018, p. 85). The immolator is depicted running ablaze, but his face is contorted in extreme emotion. Although this activates the “structures of feeling”, creating empathy and shock in the viewer, the

sight of pain in the image is overwhelming. This should lead to a direct or indirect increase in participation (Yang, 2011). However, the rhetoric of pain is so overbearing that it may undermine the subjunctive voice. In other words, the moment is so chaotic and intense that audiences may not find any contingent outcome in which the tragic death could be avoided (Neville-Shepard, 2018).

The photograph definitely magnifies the rhetoric of a body in pain, which simultaneously creates a sense of urgency in the issue of the movement and suggests a form of violence of the “other” (in this case, the Chinese state). However, the political context under which it is placed stifles the rhetorical message of state violence, because the immolator’s cause is already predetermined. The photograph holds the power to move the audience and instigate mobilization, but this capacity is minimized by the negative framing of the rhetoric by Chinese press and authorities (Nagle, 2018)

### *Collective Dimension of Self-Sacrifice*

A significant characteristic of self-immolation for political goals, as conceptualized in this thesis, is their occurrence in a crowd or cluster (Plank, 2013). The act is unlike suicide terrorism or any other form of protest that may lead to harming anyone other than the immolator, making it completely non-violent (Plank, 2013). The immolation of subjects in the Buddhist community is a complex subject, but in regards to the photograph of Jemphel Yeshe, the act itself does not breach any tenet of the religion, as it implies self-sacrifice for the collective cause of the free Tibet movement (Plank, 2013). Immolations affected in public communicate the commitment of an individual to sacrifice their life for a collective cause. Jamphel Yeshe’s tragic death is depicted in a public area, sacrificing the highest good, for a political cause. Furthermore, by choosing to self-immolate in a public setting with bystanders and the reality of being photographed he sacrifices the privacy of his death for a collective cause (Chambers et. al, 2000). The image depicting the frailty of his life in the ‘about-to-die’ moment promotes the narrative of state oppression that led him into sacrificing his life in public, for the public (Chambers et al., 2000).

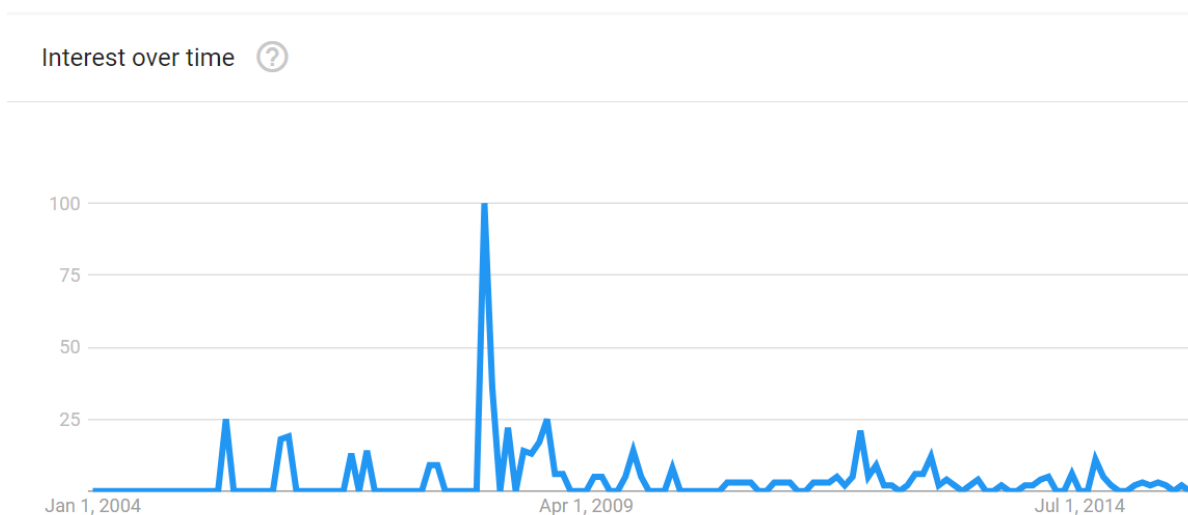
### **Second Mechanism: Mobilisation**

The immolation of Jemphel Yeshi in Tibet, together with the photograph depicting the act, creates a paradoxical rhetoric (Nagle, 2018) His immolation and the photo become symbolic of Tibetan struggle under Chinese oppression. However, the Chinese government used the photographs as a way to criticize self immolation, constructing their own argument at the expense of Tibetans' own anti-Chinese rule rhetoric (Vehaba, 2019). After the photographs of immolation like Jamphel Yeshi, *The New York Times* underlined that people were paying more attention to the issue, but not enough to affect change (Neville-Shephard, 2014). The photograph and the immolation itself particularly served to incite others in the community to follow self-immolation, including several nuns from his hometown. The months following the release of the photograph saw “thousands of supporters of the Tibetan cause gather” for his memorial. The funeral addressed the need for the international community “[.] to act on their aspirations for freedom and the return [...] of the Dalai Lama “and call on China to solve the issue of Tibet (“The Tibet Post”, 2012). By 2013, there had been 26 task force negotiation meetings to discuss the impending issue of self-immolations (Dhondup, 2013). However, Tibetans still hoped international media would pay more attention to the issue, with a monk even referring to the public outrage sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi's immolation in Tunisia: stating “nothing like that ever happens in Tibet” (Bartholet, 2012).

### **Third Mechanism: Public Pressure on China**

Two months following the release of the photograph, two envoys of the Dalai Lama (representing the People's Republic of China) resigned at a special task force meeting in Dharamsala, in solidarity of the rapid increase of self-immolations in Tibet (Dhondup, 2013). This was one of the few acts of pressure that citizens could exercise on China, without being met by violent backlash (Neville-Shephard, 2014). Despite the numerous people who sacrificed their life publicly for the cause of Tibetan freedom, the extent of the reactions the immolations trigger are largely local, and not international (Neville-Shephard, 2014). A key factor in the lack of rhetorical influence of the photograph is China's relentless effort to silence or twist the news to international media outlets that would otherwise pressure the government for political change. Protests occurring in the period of the self-immolations were met with armed police, shootings and arrests (Neville-Shephard, 2014) *Figure 3* depicts the spike in the internet search of the Tibetan uprisings in 2008, rather

than in 2012, when monks were self-immolating on the daily (Whalen-Bridge, 2015). A likely reason for this could be “the dissemination of false information” by Chinese media outlets, portraying Tibetan monks as overtly violent (Whalen-Bridge, 15). This is a symptom of the wider phenomenon of Chinese control of Tibetan rhetoric, to maintain its status quo.



*Figure 3:*Google trend search for “Tibetan Protest.” May 2021.

### **Outcome - Political Change and Status Quo**

More than 150 Tibetans (both monks and common citizens) have self-immolated since 2009, with the last documented one being in 2019. Today, the Chinese government still has plans to appoint the new Dalai Lama, instead of granting the decision to Tibetans (“International Campaign for Tibet”, 2021). Hence, Tibetan political autonomy, religious freedom and the return of the Dalai Lama from Dharamsala have not been achieved (Campbell, 2019). As described by Campbell (2019) “four decades of conversations between China and exiled Tibetan leadership have led nowhere”.

**Case 2 Vietnam - Thích Quảng Đức**



*Figure 3:* Photograph depicting Thích Quảng Đức's Immolation. Photographer Michael Browne.

Date: June 11th, 1963 (Time,100Photos)

## **Historical Background of the Case**

The period between the end of 1963 to the beginning of July 1965 is the most discussed timeline of the Vietnam War, because President Johnson was authorized to initiate ground battle (Moyar 2004). Needless to say, tensions transcended this period, insofar as the Diem regime came to power in the South of Vietnam in a period where crisis was already present, due to the aftermath of the Indochina war of anti-French resistance. Diem began his time in office in 1954, right before the Geneva agreement created further problems, by temporarily dividing Vietnam at the 17th parallel, and requiring the evacuation of anti-communist troops from the North and the South (Crozier, 1955). This created the first major problem in the newfound Diem regime, the refugee problem, which created massive economic and social hardships among majorly Catholic, but also Buddhist and other refugees (Crozier, 1955). This marked the beginning of the Buddhist plight with the Diem government.

To international media, the Buddhist movement emerged on the 8th of May 1963. In response to the government's imposed restrictions on the flying of the Buddhist flag during Wesak Celebrations,<sup>2</sup> Buddhist opposition gathered in the name of religious freedom. To the Buddhist community, it was the final straw and outcome of the years of systematic oppression at the hands of Ngo Dinh Diem. The incident further proved that the pro-Catholic regime endangered their own religion, as already demonstrated by legislations which favoured Catholicism over Buddhist then-called "associations" (Roberts, 1965).

Following the Hue Shootings<sup>3</sup>, Buddhist leaders formed a manifesto listing demands that would foreshadow their ongoing struggle with the regime. Within six months from its release, Buddhist campaigns would attract attention that was unprecedented for the short span of time they were in action. The campaign tactics pledged non-violent tactics, most notoriously including death by fire-suicide—self-immolation—which deeply moved Vietnamese and international viewers (Roberts, 1965, p. 244).

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<sup>2</sup> Wesak is the anniversary of the birth of Buddha. Thich Tri Quang - made a speech listing reasonable demands. Voice of Vietnam's refusal to broadcast the speech sparked anger in crowds, triggering the government's response of initiating violent shootings

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Footnote 1.



### **First Mechanism: Rhetorical Message of the Photograph**

Thích Quảng Đức's immolation was a carefully planned rhetorical act, whereby the monk asked the movement leaders for permission to proceed, which they allowed (Neville-Shephard, 2014). A group of monks organized the event thereafter, to the extent of calling photographer Michael Browne and ensuring the immortalisation of the moment. In the *about-to-die* moment, the requests of the movement were evidenced through fliers: these included the grant of equal rights to Buddhist, religious freedom, and removing the ban on the Buddhist flag. It is important to note that the rhetoric of pain conveyed in the photograph of the monk was not criticized by the terms of Buddhist beliefs. This is because the site of the self-immolation was in an area predominated by Mahayana Buddhism, where self-immolation was understood as an act of the enlightened (Neville-Shephard, 2014).

#### *The Body in Pain and The Subjunctive Voice*

The stark contrast between Thích Quảng Đức's body overrun by flames, and his seemingly calm, seated demeanor has a strong rhetorical function. The subject appears to have control of his body, arranged in a lotus position, which in a sense regains the control of the narrative intended with the act. Despite this relative composure of the body, the exposure of his face from the flames activates the emotional response and the "structure of feeling" of the viewer. Contrarily to the photo of Jamphel Yeshi, this image displays the subject in what appears to be a tolerable, somewhat unreadable emotion. This triggers the imagination of the viewer, who is subsequently able to consider the possibility of outcomes other than death. As noted by Yang (2011) the photograph poses the question "who can and who should intervene?" (p. 12) While the body in pain creates a rhetoric of government violence (leading the subject to extreme death), the subjunctive voice of the image creates a sense of responsibility in the viewer, increasing chances of mobilization (Yang, 2011).

#### *Collective Dimension of Sacrifice*

Similarly to the case of Jamphel Yeshi, the photograph of Thích Quảng Đức depicts a wall of bystanders witnessing the *about to die moment*. In this case, the crowd appears less shocked,

silently witnessing the tragedy. The quality of “silence” exuded by the monk and the crowd creates space for the audience to process the cause of death (Yang, 2011). The representation of his death as an individual, suffering the injustice of the collective, promotes the rhetoric of “violence done by the *other*” (Yang, 2011, p. 12). The photograph ultimately translates into an anti-government rhetoric directed towards the oppression of the Diem regime. This rhetoric is aided by both the composure of the monk, and the contextual acceptance of self-immolation as a form of bodhisattvas - i.e. enlightened being (Neville-Shephard, 2014).

### **Second Mechanism - Mobilisation**

In Biggs’ (2005) words, “The impact of Quang Duc’s death was immense and immediate”, leading to popular discontentment toward the regime in cities and a drastic incrementation of protests (p. 180). Aside from traditional repertoires of protest, the photograph led to an integration of self-immolations as a form of protest in South Vietnam and beyond (Biggs, 2005). Four subjects self-immolated before Diem was overturned by a coup just six months from Quang Duc’s death (Yang, 2011). Direct action was taken in the form of Michael Browne’s photograph being used in demonstrations as a blown up image in protests to show Buddhist solidarity (Zelizer, 2010). Similarly, the photo was used in ads pages in both the *New York Times* for and *Washington Post* with accompanying text saying “We too, Protest”. It was also reprinted and distributed in Southeast Asia (Zelizer, 2010). The condemnation of the Diem regime grew in both Vietnam and America. The temporal increment in protests after the image is evident. Even just a few months after the immolation, four thousand Buddhists around Vietnam came to Saigon to demonstrate for the cause. In August 1963, 17,000 protesters had a sit-in through meagre weather conditions, in “the most impressive Buddhist demonstration yet” (Neville-Shephard, 2014, p. 39).

### **Third Mechanism - Pressure on U.S. and Diem Government**

The photograph of the self-immolation of Quang Duc was crucial in exerting public pressure, especially in the United States. For instance, the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* announced that the American populations should feel remorse that their money was going toward the oppression of

Buddhists in a “church-state struggle” (Neville-Shephard, 2014, p. 86). The same reprimanding narrative was present in the *Providence Journal*. This pattern in U.S. media confirms the lasting impact that the photograph had on perceptions of both the American and Diem regime as religiously oppressive (Neville-Shephard, 2014). Skepticism of the Diem regime grew in both the U.S. and Vietnam, in August 1963 Diem officials raided a pagoda in Saigon, arresting numerous priests (Zelizer, 2010). This led to the replacement of the US ambassador to Saigon; Henry Cabot Lodge, who disliked Diem (Zelizer, 2010). In turn, the Kennedy administration began the search to replace Diem. Less than two years after Quang Duc’s immolation, two Americans self-immolated to protest the death and suffering in Vietnam. Alice Herz, who publicly immolated at Wayne State University, left a letter denouncing Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson for deceiving Americans and begged for action. Several articles in 1963 bashed the U.S. government for supporting the Diem regime at the expense of American prestige. The *New York Times* showed support for the civilian team at the embassy claiming that pressure was growing due to America’s “blind support of the Diem regime”. This was one of many public reprovals of Diem’s rule, even by those who once supported him.

### **Outcome - Political change**

As we know, the war in Vietnam ended in 1975, after the Paris Peace Accord was signed in 1973 (Toong, 2008). Although that was 10 years since the release of the photo of Quang Duc’s immolation, the impact it had on the media coverage of the Buddhist movement was crucial in exerting public pressure which ultimately led to the effective political change. By contributing to the fact that the image had a crucial impact on the Kennedy Administration’s decision to support a coup against Diem, by massively contributing to the public reproval of the Diem regime and America’s support towards it. After the fall of the Diem regime, Kennedy would comment that “no picture in history generated so much emotion around the world as that one”. Michael Browne’s photo had a clear impact on the fall of Diem regime, and the success of the Buddhist movement in Vietnam.

### **Limitations of Research**

Despite the power that photography may have on social movements, it may be excessive to claim that a single photograph has the power to mobilise and lead to successful outcomes. Although

process-tracing was the most suited research design to draw a connection between the photographs, mobilisation and any political outcomes, the analysis of more photographs for each case (perhaps over time) would have granted a more holistic understanding of the impact of photography in one specific social movement. This is not strictly applicable to Michael Browne's image, because the Diem regime collapsed shortly after its release, but it is applicable for the several images of Tibetan self-immolations in the Free Tibet Movement. Furthermore, because of the importance of contextual factors in both cases, it would be interesting to conduct a quantitative research controlling for exogenous factors (contextual warranting of self-immolation before the photograph release).

## **Discussion**

Photographs have a unique power of evocation of history and meaning. Both photographs of self-immolation are indisputably poignant. Yet, the image of Quang Duc taken in Saigon had an immense impact on the Buddhist movement and the collapse of the Diem regime, while the image of Jamphel Yeshe did not resonate enough to successfully mobilize civilians, or pressure the public enough to overturn Chinese oppression.

There are a few reasons to explain this difference in political outcome. Quang Duc immolated in Vietnam, where the act of sacrificing one's own life was "culturally and contextually warranted" (Neville-Shephard, 2014). Self-immolations were considered *bodhisattvas*, enlightened beings. This meant that the collective dimension of self-sacrifice and *subjunctive voice* of the image were particularly resonant to the public. It also meant that the Buddhist movement could control the rhetorical function of the photograph, because less people disputed or questioned the act. Conversely, self-immolation was more debated in Tibet. Although the act is inherently non-violent, some questioned its "validity" as a form of sacrifice. This lack of consensus meant the image of Jamphel Yeshe had a weaker rhetorical function. Furthermore, it allowed the Chinese authorities and press to appropriate the rhetorical message, using it at the expense of the Tibetan movement which it was intended for. The rhetoric of photography became more representative of the Sino-Tibetan conflict, rather than the Tibetan struggle for freedom at the hands of the violent "other" (China).

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative analysis sought to expand on the impact of photography on social movements, and the ultimate success of a social movement. The rhetorical function of photography has been a particular emphasis throughout the investigation, and has been regarded as a causal mechanism for the research design. Particularly, the *subjunctive voice* of the photograph, the rhetoric of the body in pain and the collective dimension of self-sacrifice were significant in creating an anti-state narrative (of violence at the hands of the “other”- the oppressive government). By investigating the impact of photography on social movements in two case studies, with similar regime types but different outcomes, it is evident that the rhetorical function of photographs is a complex phenomenon that is subject to exogenous circumstances. Furthermore, although the research project added to the knowledge of the rhetorical messages of photography, and how these affect mobilization and the success of a social movement, it is clear that contextual factors are to be considered. As outlined in the discussion, the contextual warranting of self-immolation prior to the release of the photograph had an effect on its impact on mobilisation.

## **Further research**

Studying the impact of photography on social movements and, more generally, politics is extremely relevant in current times. Investigating the photograph of Quang Duc’s immolation was paramount to understanding its profound impact, however, there is a dire need for more research on the impact of visuals and their rhetorical function in current movements. Especially with the prevalence of social media, the analysis of the impact of photography on mobilisation (and political change) is fundamental in more recent case studies. For example, valuable research would study photographs and visual media from the Free Palestine Movement and how that impacts mobilization. Goodridge (2016) studies social media taken in Black Lives Matter protests and how they spark activism, a phenomenon that could be studied in other cases.

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