

Stigmata: The Passion of Tenzin Tsundue, the Tibetan Uprising and China

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Tenzin Tsundue

On June 21, the Chinese government was able to claim a victory of sorts, at least in terms of the semiotics of state power, by orchestrating an incident-free, albeit truncated Olympic torch relay through Lhasa.

Almost contemporaneously, a 1300-kilometer,

ninety day march through India to the Tibetan border organized by the Tibetan People's Uprising Movement (hereafter TPUM) fizzled to a miserable conclusion as its last few dozen members were arrested as they tried to peacefully shoulder their way past a blockade of 200 Indian police in the remote border town of Dharchula. The marchers were released—and subsequently dispersed—amid international indifference.

The Tibetan People's Uprising Movement

A key to understanding TPUM, its long march—and its possible role in the unrest that roiled ethnic Tibetan regions of the People's Republic of China in March 2008—may be found in the personality of Tenzin Tsundue, the charismatic author and activist who is trying to remake the Tibetan exile movement, seemingly by force of his individual will.



Tenzin Tsundue, left, shouts slogans after burning a 200 square meter Chinese flag which was dragged through the streets in a procession led by Tsundue, in Dharmasala, India, Nov. 22, 2006. Hundreds of exiles took part in the procession shouting 'Hu Jintao

Go Back' and 'Free Tibet' protesting the Chinese president's visit to India. AP Photo/Ashwini Bhatia

In March of this year, as riots spread across the Tibetan areas, Tsundue languished in an Indian prison, burning his hands with cigarettes--in frustration? in expiation?--as the movement he had struggled to create careened out of control, and the grand gesture he hoped to orchestrate was crushed by geopolitical realities.

Tsundue midwifed TPUM. His energy, ideas, and prestige were apparently indispensable in helping conceive TPUM, create its underlying coalition, and define its mission.

If bulletin board chatter is to be believed, he was also instrumental in securing his ally Tsewang Rigzin's election as president of the Tibetan Youth Congress late last year—mounting what one poster characterized as “a giant campaign”—thereby securing the commitment of that group's resources and prestige to TPUM:

TPUM is a coalition of five leading NGOs in the Tibetan exile movement: the Tibetan Youth Congress, a relatively militant Tibetan independence advocacy group; the National Democracy Party of Tibet, its political arm; the Tibetan Women's Association; Gu-Chu-Sam, an organization of monks who were ex-political prisoners inside the PRC; and Students for a Free Tibet (India). Tsundue was at one time the General Secretary of Students for a Free Tibet (India).

TPUM was established in November of last year in an atmosphere of great urgency. The PRC was responding to the aging Dalai Lama's overtures with cynical temporizing. The 2008 Olympics looked to be a showcase for China's economic and political progress, and a chance to assert its leading role throughout Asia at the expense of Tibetan aspirations. The opening of the railroad to Lhasa presaged the further

integration of Tibetan areas into the PRC and dilution of Tibetan identity and nationalist fervor.

TPUM, while professing to respect the Dalai Lama's stature as the embodiment of Tibetan culture, repudiated his political concessions (he had abandoned calls for Tibetan independence in favor of autonomy) and his conciliatory tactics (he supported the Beijing Olympics and discouraged confrontational anti-PRC positions and statements).

Early this year, TPUM issued a defiant [manifesto](#) and video appeal calling for Tibetan independence and the stripping of the Olympics away from Beijing. It announced a march of activists “to Tibet” from India.

And, most problematically—and ambiguously—TPUM seemed to call for corresponding direct action from sympathizers inside Tibet.

TPUM and the Lhasa Uprising

The manifesto called for a “global movement of Tibetans inside and outside of Tibet taking control of our political destiny by engaging in direct action”.

The video appeal included the statement “we must rise up and resist and bring about an even greater Uprising. An Uprising that will shake the Chinese government to its core.”

And somehow, on May 10, in Lhasa, on the 49th anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising Day, something happened.

A large group of monks emerged from their monasteries that evening and appeared in Lhasa's central square to engage in a silent protest.

Then, somebody on the monk side or the public security side lost their cool, arrests were made,

and the situation deteriorated into a nasty car-burning, store-torching, people-beating riot conducted by Tibetan citizens of Lhasa against the detested Chinese interlopers.



Rioters burn vehicles and shops in a street in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region March 14, 2008

Sympathetic demonstrations and actions spread to multiple locations inside the PRC Tibetan areas and triggered a crackdown, a disputed number of deaths, a slew of arrests and—in response to an avalanche of negative press, opinion, and demonstrations in the West that threw the Olympic torch relay into chaos—a stream of vociferously nationalistic and abusive articles in the Chinese press concerning the role of TPUM and the Tibetan Youth Congress in fomenting the disturbances.

Western media outlets—apparently loath to abet China's crude play of the “outside agitator” card when widespread domestic discontent against PRC rule was patent in the Tibetan areas—[didn't take the bait](#).

And on the one occasion I could find in which a Western outlet solicited a comment from TPUM, Tsewang Rigzin—the leader of the Tibetan Youth Congress and TPUM’s main organizational muscle—denied any role in the protests inside China.

However, I don't think it's necessarily that

simple.

As a matter of self-preservation, TPUM has to be coy about organizing or encouraging any activities inside Tibet.

Currently, India is a lot more interested in managing relations with China than accommodating the dreams of the Tibetan exile community. If there's a whiff of suspicion that Tibetan groups inside India are working to destabilize PRC rule in its ethnic Tibetan regions, arrest, prohibition, or even deportation are the likely fates awaiting TPUM and its members.

Even if TPUM had gone beyond hoping and wishing to actively planning or encouraging a manifestation in Lhasa on May 11, either directly or through cut-outs, plausible deniability would have to be maintained if the organization were to continue to enjoy its safe haven in India.

To gain a better understanding of the goals and activities of TPUM, it might be revealing to take a look at TPUM's guiding light.

That's apparently not Tsewang Rigzin of the relatively large (30,000 member) and high profile Tibetan Youth Congress, who is the public face of the Tibetan independence movement.

Tenzin Tsundue

It's Tenzin Tsundue, who lives the life of an impoverished, itinerant Tibetan independence activist, currently holding no position as far as I can tell in TPUM or its constituent NGOs.

Tenzin Tsundue is a prolific author of poetry and prose who has earned his place as the spokesman for the younger generation of Tibetan exiles, born outside their homeland, frustrated and radicalized by their eroding identity and the political impotence of their

elders.

He won an Indian literary [prize](#) for a piece of anguished non-fiction written in English, *My Kind of Exile*, describing the profound alienation of young Tibetan exiles.

One passage provides an interesting perspective on his remarkably strong feelings about the Olympics—and perhaps provides an insight into TPUM's passionate desire to strip the Games from Beijing:

In October 2000 the world was tuned in to the Sydney Olympics. In the hostel, on D-day we were all glued to the TV set eager for the opening ceremony to begin. Halfway into the event I realised that I couldn't see clearly anymore and my face felt wet. I was crying. No, it wasn't the fact that I dearly wished I was in Sydney or the splendour of the atmosphere or the spirit of the games. I tried hard to explain to those around me. But they couldn't understand, couldn't even begin to understand...how could they? They belong to a nation. They have never had to conceive of its loss, they have never had to cry for their country. They belonged and had a space of their own not only on the world map but also in the Olympic games. Their countrymen could march proudly, confident of their nationality, in their national dress and with their national flag flying high. I was so happy for them.

'Night comes down, but your stars are missing'

Neruda spoke for me when I was

silent, drowned in tears. Quietly watching the rest of the show I was heavy and breathless. They talked about borderlessness and building brotherhood through the spirit of games. From the comfort of home they talked about coming together for one humanity and defying borders. What can I, a refugee, talk about except the wish to go back home?

Tsundue cemented his renown by two high-profile actions targeting high Chinese officials visiting India, which started with daring climbs up skyscrapers to unfurl pro-independence banners, and concluded with his arrest and triumphant release.

He credits the pusillanimous response of the Tibetan government in exile to his harassment by the Indian authorities for catalyzing the five NGOs to come together to form TPUM.

Tsundue cultivates the air of an ascetic—a restless wanderer, owning little more than the clothes on his back, supporting himself by selling books of his poetry from a rucksack—whose holy cause is Tibetan independence.

His signature affectation is a red headscarf bandana that he has vowed not to remove until Tibet is free. He's worn it for eight years now, raising interesting questions of hygiene, mechanics, and textile engineering. The smooth-pated and tidy Dalai Lama apparently greeted him by asking, "Don't you feel hot and sweaty on your forehead?"

The picture is of a lone warrior. However, as a recent [interview](#) in the Indian magazine *Tehelka* reveals, Tsundue moved beyond individual action to organizing.

The March to Tibet

Tsundue was interviewed in the context of the march to Tibet, which sputtered along ignominiously until it ended at the Indian border on June 18, continuously harassed by the Indian authorities but not in a manner heavy-handed enough to attract international attention and sympathy.

Describing his central role in the formation of TPUM, Tsundue said:

His Holiness and the Tibetan government-in-exile don't want confrontation, so some of us began to work on creating internal unity. We worked on bringing the five key Tibetan NGOs together. There has never been a common programme between them. The Youth Congress, which is the largest outfit, is committed to total freedom, while the Women's Association, which is the second largest, is closer to His Holiness' 'middle way' position and wants only autonomy. It took months of discussion before we presented an idea which brought people together. The idea was to march back to Tibet. We were going back to our own country. ...So on January 4 this year, we announced the Tibetan People's Uprising Movement and the march to Tibet. Right up to February, the government said it was disassociating itself from the NGOs. But there was such a swell in public mood they were forced to say they are willing to work with us. This is a major turn of events.

As noted above, Tsundue apparently took a proactive role to ensure that Tsewang Rigzin, who is sympathetic to his strategy, was elected head

of the Tibetan Youth Congress.

Tsundue and Non-Violence

In the article, Tsundue repeatedly affirms his commitment to non-violence, stating that this is one point on which he and the Dalai Lama are in agreement.

However, in a 2005 New York Times Sunday Magazine profile, *The Restless Children of the Dalai Lama*, (which also notes in passing his already strong preoccupation with the Beijing Olympics) he indicated to a sympathetic interviewer that he did not consider nonviolence as a Buddhist imperative that he was bound to honor under all circumstances. His commitment to non-violence is less than absolute and, in a certain light, looks rather situational:

One evening at the Peace Cafe, [Tsundue] told me that he could not rule out violence as a last resort. "Seeking Buddhahood," he said, "is one thing, and freedom for a country is another. We are fighting for freedom in the world and not freedom from the world."

...

Tsundue ...said that he could not identify Tibetan culture exclusively with Buddhism and that the preference for nonviolent politics could also become an excuse for passivity and inaction. "Our leaders quote Gandhi," Tsundue said. "But Gandhi saw British rule in India as an act of violence and said that resistance to it was a duty. I see the Chinese railway to Lhasa as a similar act of violence. What's wrong with blowing up a few bridges? How can such

resistance be termed wrong and immoral?"

In the 2008 Tehelka article, he returns to the issue of non-violence, drawing a distinction between the Dalai Lama's commitment to non-violence and non-confrontation with Gandhi's willingness to confront the British.

And Tsundue went a step beyond Gandhi.

Asked to name his influences, he cited Gandhi...and Bhagat Singh.

A scramble to Wikipedia reveals that Bhagat Singh was a fire-eating advocate of Indian independence martyred by the British at the age of 24 in 1931, entitled to the title of Shaheed, and a posthumous hero to militant pro-independence Indian youth.

Singh, an atheist-anarchist-socialist, had rather shaky non-violent credentials. He threw a bomb into the Indian assembly, apparently to attract attention but not wanting to hurt anybody.

However, after arrest he was tried and executed by the British when they discovered Singh's culpability for an assassination he had botched, botched unfortunately not in the way of not succeeding, but in killing the wrong police administrator in trying to avenge the beating death of a leading activist during a non-violent protest.



Bhagat Singh in jail

The waters are further muddied by apparently unsubstantiated allegations by militants that Gandhi didn't employ his enormous influence with the British Raj to commute Singh's sentence, instead allowing him to go to his death.

Readers are welcome to unpack the parallels: Singh/Tsundue vs. Gandhi/Dalai Lama as they see fit. One author went the distance and spiked the metaphorical ball in the end zone, declaring Tsundue the Tibetan independence movement's "Che Guerva [sic]/Gandhi love child."

The TPUM and Non-Violence

An injudicious interview by the TYC's Tsewang Rigzin with Corriere della Serra in March reinforces a sense of TPUM's ambivalence about non-violence, describing pacifism as "a

blind alley”, international sympathy as useless, and an alternate future in which Tibetan emigres turn to Palestinian-style violence.

It appears that Tsundue's doctrine does not involve simple non-violence. It involves non-violent confrontation with the option for righteous violence in self-defence if the opponent escalates the situation.

Would that fit in with a risky maneuver to encourage Buddhist monks in Lhasa to stage a courageous, non-violent, silent protest that would perhaps trigger a confrontation and widespread unrest throughout the Tibetan areas of the PRC—and provide an electrifying context, perhaps including a flood of refugees surging toward India, for the appearance of a brave band of Tibetan independence activists marching toward their homeland just as the eyes of the world are on China and its painstakingly choreographed Olympic torch photo-op in Lhasa?

I'm just speculating, of course. TPUM never announced objectives for the March to Tibet, preferring to respond ad hoc to the facts on the ground.



The march to Tibet in Dharamsala. March 10, 2008.
Photo Manana Vatsyana

In the event, the situation inside the PRC descended into violence so quickly—and with enough enthusiastic participation by anti-PRC Tibetans—to utterly obscure any potential

narrative of a courageous, non-violent confrontation by the monks of Lhasa.

And the Chinese swept aside any political agenda for the confrontation, framing the unrest in terms of riot, sedition, and terrorism, and undoubtedly putting irresistible pressure on the Indian government to rein in Dharmasala and let TPUM and its march wither on the vine.

Tsundue and the March

A question from Tehelka's reporter prompts an interesting revelation from Tsundue concerning his state of mind during the march:

How did you get these burns on both your hands?

Cigarettes. I did it to myself in jail a few weeks ago. I had a very troubling time. We had started on our march from Dharamsala, we were arrested on the fourth day. ... What was most frustrating was that while we were hearing that the whole of Tibet was rising up and the Chinese police was butchering them, I was supposed to be in a free country but I was in jail and couldn't do anything. We were in jail for 14 days; all 14 days, people were being killed in Tibet. It was a most frustrating time. I urged our leaders to call a hunger strike so things would go out of hand and the police would have to release us. But they thought this would further aggravate the situation and create tension. I said, this is the time to create tension, but they said it would lead to more problems. So it was a very difficult time.

But why burn yourself? Was that to

internalise the anger?
Yes, I think so (Long silence). It's not just anger but also how to maintain peace (Laughs).

In addition to anger and peace, there is a third possibility: despair.

The despair of a man who has tried to will a viable independence movement into existence by the force of his intellect, energy, and personality...but who now finds himself humiliatingly incarcerated in an Indian jail while a longed-for confrontation inside Lhasa, instead of yielding catharsis, unity, and triumph, quickly descended (no doubt with a helpful shove from the Chinese) into chaos and bloodshed.

I wonder how Tsundue felt on June 21, after the PRC government was able to conduct its Olympic torch run through Lhasa.

Three days earlier, the Long Marchers, shrunk to a core of 57 people, tried to enter the Indian border town of Darchula opposite Tibet. Surrounded by Indian police, the marchers broke into groups of four and tried to enter the town.

They were arrested by Indian police and subsequently released. The March to Tibet was over.

Tsundue was apparently not there. He was embroiled in legal proceedings in the city of Dehra pertaining to his arrest in the early stage of the march.

Despite brave talk of the value of the March to Tibet as a consciousness-raising exercise, it looks more like a demoralizing defeat, whose most dire consequences will be felt by the Tibetan exiles themselves, and not the PRC.

It turns out the Dalai Lama had asked the

marchers to abandon their action and they rebuffed him, exacerbating the existing division between young militants and older moderates, no doubt to Beijing's delight.

One can probably add to that problem fresh fissures within the pro-independence coalition itself as the costs of the quixotic exercise are tallied up, and the strategy, tactics, and judgment of the movement's leaders are called into question, perhaps even by the leaders themselves.

TPUM and the Olymics

Another test of TPUM's continued viability and relevance will come this August, as the Olympic Games commence in Beijing and the Tibetan independence movement strives for a meaningful public relations and political triumph.

With the Chinese capital under tight control and TPUM's effectiveness open to question, it's unclear what August will bring.

Will we see high profile unrest in the PRC's Tibetan areas that triggers calls for a boycott of the opening ceremonies or more? A denunciation of China's Tibet policy by a medal-winning athlete? Or just hastily unfurled and brusquely confiscated flags and banners, and more mental and physical anguish for Tenzin Tsundue?

Or will we see something new and disturbing as Tsundue and the younger generation of Tibetans strive to articulate a political doctrine beyond pure non-violence and TPUM tries to lead the exile movement into its post-Dalai Lama future?

We may have an answer before the end of August.

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website *China Matters*.

This article was written for Japan Focus and posted on July 8, 2008.

For other Japan Focus articles on Tibet and

China, see:

Ben Hillman, [Rethinking China's Tibet Policy](#).

Susan Brownell, [America's and Japan's Olympic Debuts: Lessons for Beijing 2008 \(and the Tibet Controversy\)](#)