

Self-immolation in South Korea

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Protesters use various tactics to draw attention to their demands. When conventional forms of action don't seem to work, they can devise new tactics or resort to more drastic forms of action. There is a wide range of options from which one can choose. Protesters can dress themselves in the most unusual costumes, or simply go naked. Using imagination, they can display artistic work or create a public theater. When necessary, political challengers may choose to occupy buildings, street intersections, or trees to show their determination. Faced with dire situations, protesters can inflict pain upon themselves by hunger striking, sowing their mouths, or cutting body parts. Some even use violence to kill or injure others. Among the many means of protest lies the most horrifying means of political expression carried out by an individual: self-immolation, protest by setting oneself in fire.

An act of self-immolation affects all five senses: dark smoke generated by a moving body engulfed in flames, the screams by self-immolator and spectators alike, the ominous smell of gasoline and burning flesh, crisped up smoking body you dare not touch after the flames are gone, and a taste of immeasurable bitterness that accompanies utter shock and bleakness. The gruesomeness goes beyond description. To many, it is hardly imaginable. To others, the gruesomeness that an act of self-immolation generates is exactly what is needed to transmit a desperate message: attention to one's plight, frustration, despair, the underlying sense of betrayal and injustice, and a call to action.

From the Arab Spring to the ongoing Tibetan struggle for political freedom, recent events have drawn greater attention to the use of self-immolation as a protest form. Despite its political implications, however, the topic has evaded many social scientists, leaving the study of self-immolation largely to physicians and psychiatrists. It was only in the wake of 9/11 that Western social scientists started to pay more attention to self-immolation as a political phenomenon (Gambetta 2004). However, the main effort was to shed light on the causes and motives of terrorist tactics (e.g., suicide bombing) rather than to examine self-immolation as an action form in itself. Our knowledge concerning the causes, dynamics, and outcomes of self-immolation remains limited.

In this paper, I intend to help better understand self-immolation as a socio-political phenomenon by looking into South Korean examples. Against the backdrop of long history of oppressive authoritarian rule, the history of South Korean popular contention has been punctuated by acts of self-immolation that many consider having contributed to the democratization of the nation. Even with democratization, however, self-immolation continued. This makes South Korea an attractive case for examining the dynamics of self-immolation, and its relationship to the broader flows of popular contention. Drawing on two

data sources and building on the framework of cycle of protest and contentious repertoires, the paper develops hypotheses concerning when self-immolation is more likely to be accepted as part of the contentious repertoire. The observation the South Korean case shows that: 1) the diffusion of self-immolation coincided with the ascending phase of a protest cycle, with a high peak overlapping with the cycle's declining phase; 2) self-immolation has been used on a regular basis after the protest cycle, despite with diminished frequency; 3) politically motivated self-immolation and self-immolation for non-political purposes co-vary in a consistent manner; and 4) a positive feedback loop connecting high-profile political deaths, activist self-immolation, and self-immolation by ordinary citizens is present. Based on these observations, the paper submits that the acceptance of self-immolation as a routine action form in South Korea can only be understood in relation to the changes in the broader political environment that constrain its diffusion process.

What We Know about Self-Immolation, and What We Need to Know More

Though limited, previous research has offered a insights into the self-immolation phenomenon. We now know for sure that self-immolation as a political means is a relatively recent phenomenon. Kevin Crosby and his colleagues (1977) examined reports of self-immolation in the London Times and the New Yorks Times from 1790 to 1972, and found out that only 29% of the cases occurred in the period between 1790 and 1962, while 71% occurred in the nine-year period between 1963 and 1972. 1963 was the year in which the Vietnamese monk, Thic Quang Duc, carried out a high-profile self-immolation in protest of the Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem government's suppression of Buddhists. Likewise, Michael Biggs (2005, 2008) traces the origin of contemporary self-immolation back to 1963.

We also know that that self-immolation tends to cluster in time and space. On the one hand, self-immolation, partly due to the dramatic act that attracts attention, often invites others to imitate. As a result, an act of self-immolation may trigger a chain of self-immolation (Coleman 2006, chapter 6; Biggs 2005). On the other hand, self-immolation is found with greater frequency in some countries than in others. Among the 533 cases in Michael Biggs' (2005, 2008) study of self-immolation between 1963 and 2002, nearly 80% of all cases took place in India (255), Vietnam (92), South Korea (43), and the United States (29). An easy explanation for this variation can be found in culture. According to Biggs (2008: 25), the only statistically significant correlation was found with religion. However, as Biggs discusses, there is no necessary reason to believe that religious beliefs cause self-immolation. The decision to self-immolate, after all, may be "ephemeral, artefacts of the situation rather than [reflecting] stable features" (Elster 2005: 256).

A significant part of the study on self-immolation has been put on the motives driving the act, and most studies have stressed strategic calculation on the part of the individual. Biggs argues that "appealing to bystanders and inciting sympathizers" are the two most prominent motives driving the extreme act. Likewise, Hyojoung Kim (2002, 2008) suggests that activists may choose to self-immolate in order to maximize the emotional reaction of potential sympathizers in ways that facilitate their stronger commitment to activism. B.C.

Ben Park (2004), after examining self-immolations in Vietnam and South Korea, also concludes that, "self-immolators were guided, and compelled to act, by [...] intended contributions to larger ends" (96). True, the political message that a self-immolator sends out to the public is a somber appeal for attention and action. The method itself, the theatricality that an act of self-immolation displays and the extreme pain (and/or horror) that it conjures up in the minds of the living, seems to carry a justifiable claim on people's attention (Andriolo 2006).

Previous studies highlight what we need to know more. We do not know for sure, for example, how exactly it is that self-immolation spreads, or how it gets to cluster in certain time and place. Having a high-profile precedent and exposure to a media environment that transmits the news (usually accompanied by vivid image), as in the impact of Thic Quang Duc's self-immolation, may be necessary conditions but they hardly exhaust explanation. Is diffusion of self-immolation outcome of a random copycat effect, or are there underlying mechanisms that spur the process? What accounts for the clustering of self-immolation in time and space? Are there certain conditions and processes that facilitate its clustering that we can observe?

The exclusive stress on individual motives deserves rethinking as well. It is clear that, while terrorist tactics are mostly planned and carried out by organizations (Gambetta 2005), the great majority of self-immolations are done on the individual level (with few exceptions, like Thic Quang Duc). However, looking into individual motives to find explanation has come at the cost of understanding their connections to the broader political context. Biggs' data may have shown "no association with the frequency of protest" (2008: 24), but then the only conclusion one can arrive at is that self-immolation clusters occur in random. But there is ample evidence that speaks to the contrary: The chain of three self-immolations by Americans in 1965 took place amidst a rising tide of anti-war protest. The chain of at least seven self-immolations triggered by Jan Palach in January 1969 came in the wake of a military intervention by the Soviets in the Spring of Prague. As long as self-immolations are found in clusters, it goes against common sense that they happen in a political vacuum.

Data and Method

In this paper, I use data drawn from two sources of information. The first dataset was extracted from South Korean newspaper reports on self-immolation. Using the search word "self-immolation" (*bunshin*), I searched 10 major national daily newspapers via the Korean Integrated News Database System (KINDS) that provides newspaper contents in digitized format since 1990¹. The search yielded over 800 relevant articles, out of which 233 cases of self-immolation were identified between the years 1990 and 2010. This data include both political and non-political use of self-immolation, as well as attempted self-immolations. The biases inherent in newspaper coverage are obvious. Some events are covered with greater

¹ The Korean Integrated News Database System (KINDS; www.kinds.or.kr) is managed by the Korea Press Foundation, the most comprehensive inter-medium network in South Korea. KINDS carries in digitized form contents from practically all printed news providers, including national and local daily newspapers, weeklies, and monthlies from 1990.

details than others (e.g., circumstances leading up to self-immolation, or whether the self-immolator died or not), and some media outlets were more diligent in covering self-immolation events than others. Moreover, many articles tend to simplify the cause of the act and cover self-immolation as a neutral event by eliminating political meanings. As a result, plenty of self-immolation cases are buried unknown, and many cases may be classified as non-political when some are. Nonetheless, given the lack of alternative sources², data based on newspaper coverage present the most comprehensive source.

Because KINDS provides digital service only from 1990 and onward, I had to draw on an additional source for complementation. The second dataset was constructed from a list of martyrs identified on the homepage of the Council for the Commemoration of National Democratic Martyrs (CCNDM; *minjok minju yolsa huisaengja ch'umo danch'ae yondae hoiu*)³. The CCNDM honors 442 "martyrs" whose lives were sacrificed in their fight for democracy, from 1959 to 2008. The list encompasses a broad spectrum of martyred deaths, ranging from tortured death, suspicious death (corpses found without known cause), death caused by suicidal protest, to those who even died of illness during action. From the population of CCNDM martyrs I was able to identify 133 cases of political suicide, among which 81 was due to self-immolation, 14 by leaping off high buildings, 6 by poisoning, 5 by hanging, 2 through hunger strike, 1 by stabbing, and 23 unidentified political suicides⁴. The biases in CCNDM's data are also apparent. The CCNDM is itself a coalition of political groups ranging from small groups commemorating martyrs (mostly friendship-based) to national associations including the Yugayup (organization of bereaved families). The list of martyrs is likely biased towards the shared goals of participating organizations and would reflect interests pertaining to the issue of compensation. Nonetheless, CCNDM's list provides greatest approximation of systematic data of self-immolations in the 1980s when it started to spread with the South Korean activist communities. Among the 133 cases of suicidal protests culled from the CCNDM's list, I only use self-immolation cases to make data more consistent with newspaper data.

An overlap exists in the period between 1990 and 2008 in the two datasets. Understandably, the KINDS data are more comprehensive because they include cases of self-immolation used for non-political purposes and cases where self-immolation did not result in death. The pattern of fluctuation shown in the two datasets is highly compatible,

² Official statistics would be the most comprehensive source. However, the National Statistics Office of South Korea does not have self-immolation as a registered category for the cause of death.

³ Formed in 1992, the CCNDM is a coalition of over 70 groups commemorating political activists who had fallen in the course of the South Korean pro-democracy struggle. According to its homepage (yolsa.org), CCNDM's goal is to build bridges among scattered commemorative groups in order to better remember and "inherit the spirit" of martyrs who had fought for "independence, democracy, and reunification." Its activities include awareness-raising, investigating suspicious deaths during authoritarian rule, re-evaluation of martyrs, compensation, supporting survivor families, organizing national commemorative events, research, etc.

⁴ My suspicion is that many of the unidentified political suicides were through stabbing. Lee Kyung Hae's cause of death was identified only as "suicide" in the list, yet he famously stabbed himself to death during an anti-WTO protest in Cancun, Mexico. Stabbing oneself to death, in the tradition of seppuku, or hara-kiri, has many precedents in Korean history where historical figures stabbed themselves as a means to uphold one's honor or to protest.

as we will see later in this paper. As such, the combination of two datasets offers a rare picture of the varying patterns of self-immolation over time in South Korea. To add contextual insights and to explain the puzzles derived from data, I take advantage of prior research that examined suicide notes left by self-immolators (Park 1994, 2004; Kim 2002, 2008) and draw on existing studies on South Korean contentious politics.

Authoritarian Politics, Protest, and Self-immolation in South Korea

Ever since the establishment of its government in 1948, South Korea (or Republic of Korea) has functioned as a bulwark against communist expansion in East Asia. Despite the introduction of nominal democracy, the anti-communist political system that took place had been by nature autocratic and was sustainable only through the extensive use of coercive apparatus. A brief moment of democracy arrived in 1960 when thousands protesting the rigged presidential election results forced the political leader to leave the country. In less than a year, however, the military under the leadership of Park Chung Hee staged a *coup d'état* that initiated 18-years of Park's rule. Park at first kept the democratic procedures alive, but, in 1972, after he barely won the presidential election of 1971, declared state of emergency and suspended the constitution and all existing democratic mechanisms.

This signified the advent of the Yushin system, which has been seen as the darkest period in South Korean political history (Ogle 1977; Cumings 1989). Basic human rights were severely curtailed, including the freedom of speech and assembly. By the mid-1970s, South Korea was ruled through various emergency decrees, including the notorious Emergency Decree No. 4 that allowed dissidents to be arrested without warrant, and No. 9 that banned the spread of "rumors," effectively muffling South Koreans to silence. Partly due to increasing protests against the Yushin system that aggravated elite division, Park was assassinated by his right-hand man, the head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, in 1979. This brought about another brief moment of democratic hope to many South Koreans, only to be suppressed again by another military strongman, Chun Doo Hwan, who came to power after a bloody massacre in the city Kwangju in May 1980 (Shin and Hwang 2003). As one of the student leaders uttered, "All roads led to Kwangju in the 1980s" (Lee 2007: 44). The mobilization of Kwangju citizens and its violent suppression became a turning point, coming to define the political consciousness of many South Koreans.

The decades of authoritarian rule was also a period of rapid economic growth engineered by the government that had the capacity to discipline and mobilize its citizenry toward a national goal (Amsden 1989; Woo-Cumings 1999). By the early 1980s, South Korean economy had grown enough to aspire hosting the Summer Olympics. Highly confident of its successful rule, the Chun regime initiated a process of gradual liberalization measures in 1984 that included lifting of political bans on opposition politicians and allowing limited freedom in university campuses. The policy of political liberalization became the backdrop out of which a fiery opposition movement grew. Using the electoral success in the 1985 National Assembly elections, the opposition started a petition campaign to collect 10-million signatures in 1986. Tense political stalemate forced the regime to take risky actions, and

the revelation of a chain of torture cases, including tortured death of a student activist, pushed Chun's government against the wall.

After weeks of nationwide demonstration in June 1987, Chun was forced to concede to protesters' demand for democracy. However, the pro-democracy movement failed to face the presidential election with a unified candidate, and the candidate representing the authoritarian incumbents won the presidency. This left many activists disenchanted with the new democracy they had fought for. With the newfound political space, activist groups expanded their organizational base and challenged the government in militant protests. As a result, movement politics remained on alarming levels years into the introduction of electoral of democracy (Shim 1989; Aleman 2005; Nam 2006). It was only after the inauguration of a civilian president in 1993 that militant tactics started to taper off. Nonetheless, violent clashes between political challengers and police have been a staple in the South Korean protest scenes.

In the vicissitudes of South Korea's popular contention, victims of state violence and acts of political self-sacrifice attained symbolic significance, occupying an important place in the culture of South Korean protest. A good example is found in the self-immolation of Chun Tae Il, to whom many scholars and activists trace back the origin of the South Korean pro-democracy movement (Koo 1993, 2000). Chun Tae Il was a textile worker who, in 1970, after exhausting all means available to rectify the dire labor conditions, set himself on fire at a marketplace in central Seoul, calling for humane treatment of workers (Cho 2003). As his flesh got engulfed in flames, he shouted, "We are not machines," "Let us rest on Sundays," and "Observe the Labor Standard Laws!" In his deathbed he uttered in his mother's presence, "Don't let my death go in vain." His mother followed his words, becoming an activist, eventually earning the nickname, "mother of all Korean workers." Chun's death also provided an awakening moment for many university students, who came to see the plight of workers as a burning task. Ever since, Chun Tae Il's self-immolation has been looked up to as a heroic act that changed the course of history, and has come to symbolize the spirit of the pro-democracy movement and labor movement in South Korea to this day.

In the following years, many young activists followed in his footsteps, drawing attention to political issues among the general public and galvanizing fellow activists. By the mid-1980s, already having plenty of martyrs that could inspire the expanding activist communities amidst political change, South Korean society started to be saturated with acts of self-immolations. However, there is a puzzle to be explained.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 shows the fluctuations in self-immolation between the years 1980 and 2008, based on CCNDM data. A wave of self-immolation slowly emerges in the early-1980s, sharply peaking between 1986 and 1991. The number of self-immolations drops abruptly in 1992, and then slows down with the involvement of a number of small peaks into the 2000s. There had been no reported case of self-immolation since Chun Tae Il until 1980, when a worker named Kim Jong Tae self-immolated renouncing the Kwangju killings and

demanding labor rights. And then again there were three years of abeyance until, in 1984, a taxi worker self-immolated in protest of his company's threat of laying off all union members participating in collective action. Two self-immolations followed in 1985, and six in 1986 that jumpstarted the wave. According to the CCNDM, there were 49 self-immolations during the period of 1986-1991, with 16 others committing political suicide by leaping or poisoning—making the total number of protest suicide 65.

A striking observation is how the emergence of the self-immolation wave coincides with moment of political liberalization, as indicated by the Freedom House ratings of South Korean civil and political freedom⁵. This poses a puzzle. While the South Korean scholarship has stressed the overwhelming extent of state violence and the lack of alternative means as the cause driving self-immolation (Choi 1993; Cho 2000), the figure suggests that self-immolation was not a response to increasing state oppression but a response to increasing political space. Despite the precedent of Chun Tae Il, and the history of state violence, killings, and martyrs, South Koreans were not self-immolating. During the entire 1970s when the political climate was the most oppressive, CCNDM chronicles 30 martyrs who fell victim to state violence but there was only one case of political suicide by stabbing in 1975. By contrast, both the number of political suicide and self-immolation starts to peak at a time when the political climate was starting to thaw.

This strongly indicates that the emergence of self-immolation, or protest suicide more broadly, as a repertoire can only be understood in relation to the broader political context within which it took place. In the South Korean case, as I will argue, it was the cycle of protest that developed out of new political opportunities that provided the crucible out of which self-immolation emerged as an established protest form. Within this protest cycle spiraled out a recurring pattern of violent encounters between political challengers and the state, which was a combined product of the memories of past struggles that found expression in an ideological form, organizational characteristics within activist communities, and a highly politicized activist culture nurtured within these communities.

Mid-80s Protest Cycle and the Spiral of Violence

In the midst of authoritarian oppression, a new ideology developed out of the South Korean dissident intellectual community. Grafting Latin American liberation theory and dependence theory onto Korean popular memories and unofficial narratives, dissident intellectuals articulated the idea of minjung and elevated it to a potent ideology. Literally meaning the people or the masses, the term minjung came to represent the economically marginalized and politically oppressed "as the true subject of historical development, capable of social change and therefore the rightful owner of a future democratic society" (Lee 2007: 24). Idealized and romanticized under authoritarian rule, many pro-democracy activists started to anticipate the rectification of history and settlement of justice through the rise of the

⁵ The Freedom House rates civil and political liberties in each country with a measure ranging from 1-7, 1 representing the freest and 7 the least free. The line represents the combined value of political and civil liberties in a reverse order, that is, the higher the number, the freer the state of society. The Freedom House ratings have been used as a proxy to measure the degree of democracy (Tilly 2006).

minjung. Connecting academic work, cultural production, and political activism, the minjung ideology quickly acquired a strong sense of historic mission. However, it was with the events in Kwangju in May 1980 that "the political culture of the democratization movement became altered" (Lee 2007: 49). The struggle of Kwangju citizens and the bloody massacre became a source of "overwhelming sense of guilt and self-reproach" to many activists (Lee 2007: 19). A sense of indebtedness and obligation so obvious to student activists was added to the minjung ideology, with in turn renewed the sense of political urgency.

The regime's policy of political liberalization was initiated at this point in the early 1980s, and its impact on activist communities was immediate. Although many agents remained on campus in plain clothes, the nominal retreat of the security force from university campuses gave breathing room to student activists who were forced underground. Open student organizations mushroomed, and soon autonomous student councils started to replace the government-run Student Self-Defense Corps. By 1985, a national federation of student associations was in place, and with it, "student activists completed the regional and national networking of their organizations" (Dong 1987: 242). How student groups were organized deserves special attention.

Student associations were organized on the levels of university, college, department, and even in each cohort within a department. A number of student groups for reading and cultural activities would be organized within a department, in addition to diverse student groups on the college or university level. Because freshmen came with their majors decided dictated by the South Korean university system, strong solidarity grew among cohort members within a department. Following precedents and established routines, an incoming freshmen cohort would hold a meeting and elect their representative. Representatives of each cohort, along with representatives of other groups within a department, constituted the core of the departmental student association. In the same way, student associations were built up to the college and university levels, and eventually to the regional and national levels. Alongside the open student associations were cross-campus underground political organizations that often had ties to labor activist groups. Members of these political organizations were responsible for strategizing and organizing political events on higher levels, but another important task was to penetrate the student associations to exercise leadership and recruit new members. Representatives of student associations in reputable universities were mostly recruited into these political organizations, who in turn carried out organizational policies within the student associations. This way, the student association structure provided the perfect organizational form through which to inject the minjung ideal to the majority of students.

The tightly-knit organizational structure, fuelled by minjung ideology, became a breeding ground for a highly politicized culture of protest. In order to fulfill the "need for intellectuals to actively insert themselves into the process of constructing the minjung's revolutionary subjectivity, and the need to efface this active presence at the same time" (Lee 2007: 12), the minjung mission required self-abnegation. Instead of the rosy college life that many had anticipated, the daily lives of the students were extensions of the political intensity found in demonstrations and street protests. Reading and discussing leftist materials, debating political strategies, and exchanging thoughts on each other's commitment were an

important part of an activist's life. Mainstream popular culture was a taboo in the activist communities. Instead, students immersed in revolutionary minjung songs, dances, art and literature. Drinking was an important part in the daily routines. Heated debates dominated bar tables and, once intoxicated, conversations quickly switched to confessional reflection and self-criticism of one's commitment, which would usually end with collective singing of protest songs and screaming of political slogans the way one would in a demonstration. In short, the South Korean culture of student activism "[subsumed] individuality in the all-encompassing, even totalizing notion of minjung" to the extent that "one's self-identity became closely linked with the demand of the movement" (Lee 2002: 154).

Outside campuses, minjung activists also began renewing and strengthening their organizational base. In March 1985, the broadest pro-democracy minjung coalition, the Minjung Coalition for Democracy and Reunification (MCDR) was formed. In June the same year, under the leadership of student-turned-workers, workers from several companies at Seoul's Kuro industrial district tested the waters by staging a solidarity strike, which was the first political strike against arrests of union leaders and first industrial strike coordinated across factory walls. In the wake of the Kuro Strike, leaders of the burgeoning labor movement formed the Seoul Labor Movement Council (Koo 2001: 109-123; Lee 2005: 927-929). In institutionalized politics, the opposition was making gains in electoral politics.

[Table 1 about here]

Expansion in the organizational base of the student movement, the rising tide of minjung mobilization evidenced by increasing workers' strikes, and prospects for change in electoral politics all contributed to heightened expectation of activists. Taking advantage of new opportunities, student activists started to fight back. Government statistics on protest events⁶ in Table 1 shows how, among others, student protests started to pick up steam with the Campus Liberalization Measures that took effect in 1984. In doing so, students countered state violence with their own violent tactics. By the mid-1980s, items such as wooden sticks, steel pipes, rocks and Molotov cocktail were indispensable weapons in any student demonstration. A "vicious circle of intensified government suppression after the heightened level of student activism" (Dong 1987: 255) was apparent.

In the process, clashes between student protesters and the police started to take a highly scripted form. A typical in-campus demonstration would always be followed by a march toward the campus gate, where rows of riot police greeted student protesters. After a few chants of slogans, students and police would exchange Molotov cocktail and teargas, during which the two sides create a near-urban battle scene. After a few rounds of violent clashes, the student body returns to the campus plaza where they had started the day's rally, leaving the injured and the arrested behind. An astute Australian anthropologist took note of the "repetitive and ritualized" pattern of violence engagement and how they construct each other through the "mutual performance of protesting and policing" (Grinker 1998: 187):

⁶ Not unlike the Chinese statistics, protests were usually termed, "collective disturbances" in government records.

“It seemed as if without the students the police would have fewer chances to enhance the authority of the state and to make the argument that strong government and national security state are necessary; without the police, students would likely become simply another voice struggling to be heard in the national assembly, with no need to use firebombs, rocks, or steel pipes. The police and students continuously construct each other as opposed forces. [...] Demonstrations are organized against the police as symbols of the state, with the knowledge that the police will arrive as expected.”

The nominal purpose of protester violence was to defend the main body of students vulnerable to police violence. However, student violence often went beyond the defensive role it ought to play. As early as in 1982, a group of student activists set fire to the American Cultural Center in Pusan, South Korea’s second largest city, accusing the U.S. of its involvement in the Kwangju massacre. In May 1986, a street rally in the city of Incheon went amuck as violent clashes lasted long into the night, leaving several buildings and vehicles in flames. In protests outside campuses, police stations were frequently targets of firebomb attacks. Beatings of riot police by students occurred as frequently as beatings of student protesters by the police. In the spiral of violence that grew out of tense interaction, little scruple was to be found in exacting violence on the symbols of the immoral state.

Self-immolation’s Positive Feedback within Protest Cycle

The perception of political urgency defined by the minjung mission, the dense networks that commanded the daily lives of activists, the culture of activism that such networks harbored, and the pattern of violent interaction with the symbols of state power generated a mutually reinforcing circle between political conviction and real-life experience. Political conviction of the urgency for action drove activists to act more militantly. The corporeal experience confronting the police in violent clashes, the arrests, injuries, and deaths of fellow activists, were shared within activist networks. This reaffirmed their prior beliefs of the historic mission of the minjung, which further reinforced their perception of political urgency and the motivation to strengthen their political commitment. A loop of positive feedback was established. And it was into this loop that self-immolation was inserted, and gained acceptance as a legitimate form of protest in the height of the 80s protest cycle.

This pattern of positive feedback is apparent in what the self-immolators were trying to communicate to their fellow activists. The messages that the forerunners of self-immolation carried in the 1970s and early 1980s underscored the historic mission and the urgency for action. The first of its kind took place in April 1975, during a public student assembly at Seoul National University, the most prestigious institution in South Korea. Kim Sang-Jin took the stage and read his “Declaration of Conscience.” Toward the end, he pulled out a knife and stabbed his stomach. He was the first to commit protest suicide since Chun Tae Il’s self-immolation in 1970. Part of his declaration read,

"The tree of democracy lives for blood. Listen, comrades! Do you feel scruples about the courage that will make the tree of our fatherland grow full with green leaves.... Democracy is not the product of knowledge, but the fruit of struggle." (Park 1994: 71)

The next protest suicide took place in 1980 in the wake of the brutal killings in Kwangju. Kim Ui-Ki, a student at Sogang University, leaped off the rooftop of the Christian Center after leaving a letter entitled, "A Note to My Compatriots."

"Today we hear the sound of combat boots penetrating our bedroom that trample our chest and head. What are we doing? [...] What are we doing when the merciless killings by the heirs of the Yushin system are imposing control over the media, covering up and distorting the insurgency that ended up in the splashing of blood of numerous innocent citizens beneath the sky of the hot May? [...] We will win. We will surely win. [...] Wake up, wake up my compatriots!"⁷

In another personal note, Kim Ui-Ki made clear where his consciousness was coming from.

"The oppressed, deprived, starving, and threatened *minjung* have never said a single word of what they should have said; they have simply played dead. Let's show that they can turn into a fearsome force." (Park 1994: 71)

In the mid-1980s, South Korea was being swept in a swirl of popular contention. As we've examined earlier, the electoral success in 1985 emboldened the opposition party to embark on a petition campaign aimed at collecting ten million signatures to press for constitutional revision at the dawn of 1986. Demonstrations were everywhere, and in major cities hardly a day passed without passing by a violent clashes between protesters and the police, or the smell of teargas. It was a time of renewed opportunity, and it was at this point that the number of self-immolators started to swell. The messages left by self-immolators in the mid-1980s strongly suggests this renewed perception of political urgency, as well as the imprints of their predecessors and the *minjung* cause. One aspect that stands out is how self-immolators saw the indifference and inaction of others as deplorable.

Hong Ki-Il, a construction worker, self-immolated on the 40th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese rule, in August 1985. His act took place in front of the province administration building where the rebel forces fought to their final deaths during the Kwangju uprising. He had participated in the Kwangju struggle and carried a gunshot wound. As he went in flames, he urged his fellow citizens to "wake up from silence." His suicide note implies his intention to draw public attention and urge fellow citizens to take part in the ongoing struggle. In doing so, his lamentation of inaction emerges clear.

⁷ <http://www.minjuroad.or.kr/map/spot/332/> accessed Oct 19, 2012.

"We have to be awakened and penitent. [...] The loss of our masterhood is what we should fear more. In a state of anesthesia, with all kinds of false consciousness, pleasure, ignorance, and fear of the truncheon, we no longer feel the pain of the democratic forces and the nation, the divided nation.... We should wake up from silence, from the anesthesia. We should be emboldened and united." (Kim 2008: 568)

After failing the college entrance exam, Lee Kyung-Hwan was attending a prep-school. His last diary tells a story of how a teacher in his ethics class made fun of self-immolators: "Why would people self-immolate? Democracy will come anyways." Lee is deeply disturbed by the comment, and convinces himself that no progress comes for free. At the end of the same diary, he shows he had made up his mind.

"The whole world is in darkness. There is a thin light from far away, but it is too small. [...] We need to search for brighter lights. No, we need to be the light. Numerous tiger moths are sacrificing themselves to light up. It is not out of stupidity. They are not fling into the light because they are stupid. They are throwing themselves in order to prevent more sacrifices. [...] For the minjung, which is the bigger 'me.' I am afraid. My heart had never beaten this hard. I can now understand the strength of the will of the martyrs who preceded me."⁸

Lee self-immolated atop a department building in Seoul the next day, on June 5, 1986. Deploing indifference, cynicism, or inaction often took expression in chastising other students, as was the case of Jin Seong-II, who was a student activist at a university whose history of activism was not strong.

"[W]hen our fellow students in Seoul and Pusan—especially those at Kunkuk University, Pusan National University and Dong-A University—were in fierce protest for the sake of democracy and the people, we, students of Kyungsung University were in ecstasy in celebration of the annual campus festival. My fellow students, we are all college students of the Republic of Korea. We should not turn our faces away from the truth." (Kim 2008: 563)

The student protest at Kunkuk University refers to a relatively peaceful student rally that ended up with 1500 arrests, among which 1288 got indicted for inciting communism in October 1986. About 2000 students were taking part in the rally, when they were kettled into a building by the police. Being forced into the building, students inadvertently started a three-day occupation that ended with violent police crackdown and numerous injuries. The authoritarian regime used this as a showcase to paint student protesters as communist North Korean sympathizers, but it also showed the extent to which the regime was in a defensive position vis-à-vis rising tides of political challenges. This event was proof for the urgent need for action in the eyes of Jin Seong-II, who self-immolated four days after the

⁸ <http://www.kdemo.or.kr/site/notification/event/830> (accessed Oct 19, 2012). The reference to the image of tiger moths dashing into fire comes from a very popular minjung song at the time, Tiger Moth (*bulnabang*). The lyrics point to the indefatigable spirit of struggle toward freedom and democracy.

police crackdown on students at Kunkuk. However, his fellow students were apathetic. He had to alarm them through extreme action.

Similar notes lamenting or chastising the “cowardice and apathy” of fellow students abound (Kim 2008: 563-5). Hyojoung Kim’s (2002) study of 407 notes left by visitors to the grave of a self-immolator, Park Sung Hee, shows how the act of self-immolation can help strengthen political commitments by conjuring up emotional responses of guilt and shame, among others. In a similar vein, we can assume that exhortation through self-immolation did make some impacts on the minds of the students. This is especially true given the context of strong solidarity in activist communities and their cultural hegemony in major campuses, along with heightening expectation of democracy apparent in the political environment. The group-oriented nature of social ties in Korea, as well as the hierarchical nature of relations between older and younger cohorts where older cohorts exercise greater authority, may have likely contributed to the moral exhortation or chastise⁹. How the feeling of guilt or shame can be a source for one’s heightened commitment, even in the form of self-immolation, can be found in Park Hye-Jeong’s suicide note.

“The present reality with its series of self-immolations gets beyond my control. A coward who has lost courage to live in pain deserves to die with shame. My lack of confidence—in taking part in a life of pain—is not only shame but sin. I have kept being an onlooker of have-nots, the oppressed, and the unjustly deprived. Even more, I have participated in the sinful deed of taking things away from them. I can no longer be fit for this immoral debt any more. (Park 2004: 90)

The signs of moral obligation, feeling of shame, generated by past self-immolations, and amplified by the culture of protest in activist communities are apparent in another note, left by Nam Tae-Hyun who self-immolated in 1989.

“Numerous patriotic predecessors and Kwang Ju call us for democracy, and the brutally oppressed *minjung* in this land moan for their liberation. We can by no means avoid their cries. When the perpetrators of dictatorship aim their swords at the freedom of the *minjung*, and when the culprit monopolistic capitalism demands *minjung*’s blood in this land... What does it mean to be conscious? What am I supposed to do?” (Park 1994: 71)

An observable pattern in the death notes is one in which a call for action by early self-immolators was received positively by other activists and future self-immolators. One

⁹ According to Namhee Lee who examined the internal dynamics of the South Korean student movement, the ties between senior activists (sonbae) and their juniors (hubae) assumed a special place, which indicates the sticky nature of ties that connected individual students. A sonbae was “the moral guide, counselor, and a model to be emulated” by their juniors (hubae), to whom “sonbae feels responsible for. [...] If it is sonbae who guided numerous seminars through which hubae’s previous ambiguous position with respect to the movement was clarified and his or her commitment solidified, then it might be because of the commitment towards hubae that sonbae was likely to engage in an act that he or she might not have otherwise engaged in” (141).

obvious mechanism was through moving “the hearts and minds” of fellow activists and bystanders (Kim 2008). The impacts were multiple. One of the direct effects of self-immolation was providing new protest opportunities and heightening tension through funerals. Other effects were indirect. As self-immolators set the bar high, many sympathizers had to suffer from the feelings of indebtedness, guilt, and shame, which often translated into stronger resolve to emulate the commitment the self-immolators had exemplified. This not only provided the context out of which more self-immolations followed, but also had the effect of escalating both the emotional and physical levels of popular contention. At the same time, the early risers offered important symbolic resources in the form of martyrdom. Their acts were inscribed into the memory of later generations of activists in near-mythologized form through word-of-mouth, publication, songs, literature, theater and cinema. More than a hundred organizations were erected with the purpose of commemorating martyrs. Annual events of commemoration started to punctuate the activist calendar.

The net effect was the reproduction/escalation of violent encounters on the streets and further politicization of activists in their daily lives. As heightened political tension was sustained, this in turn became a fertile ground inviting more self-immolations. As if a self-fulfilling prophecy, the positive feedback loop kicked off by self-immolation helped contribute to bringing about democracy in South Korea in 1987 by raising the awareness of political issues and broadening participation among the public. However, this was not the work of activist communities assisted by a chain of self-immolators alone.

The wave of self-immolation lasted past 1987 when South Korea finally adopted electoral democracy, peaking in 1991. The 1991 wave was triggered by a student activist who was beaten to death in the batons of riot police. More than a dozen self-immolations followed, but political challengers failed to generate a political momentum comparable to that found in 1986-1987. Although self-immolations in 1991 generated the same kind of emotional responses from fellow activists and escalated the level of contention on the streets, positive feedback was confined within activist communities. Whereas the appeals of the self-immolators resonated with the broader public who were disgusted with decades of authoritarian rule prior to 1987, the perception that many South Koreans had in 1991 was significantly different from that of the political challenger's. Another former military general was in the presidential office, but South Korea had already achieved formal democracy. In addition, the economy was going strong thanks to favorable conditions of low oil price, low exchange rate that kept Korean products cheap in the international market, and low interest rate that allowed for stronger incentives to invest. Opposition parties who stood together in the pro-democracy struggle began to distance themselves from radical minjung activists. In short, by 1991, the political opportunities that were available during the 1985-1987 pro-democracy struggle were all but gone.

Nonetheless, emboldened by greater political space granted by democratization activist groups continued with their minjung mission using the same tactics and shouting the same slogans. This had a lot to do with the nature of the activist networks that were able to create strong in-group bonding at the expense of reaching out to the general public. As Byeong-chul Park (1994) observes, “these suicidal youths seldom created supportive

networks outside their own groups. Though their notes signify an effort to communicate with an outside audience, their only meaningful relationships are within the movement circle" (74). The result was increasing isolation of minjung activists from the broader South Korean public. As a correspondent points out as he observed the protest wave of 1991,

"A similar wave of demonstrations in 1987 which involved a much wider spectrum of society, virtually brought down Chun's government, forcing the military to accept democratic elections. This time, however, the majority have stood on the sidelines, watching but not participating, with many people expressing irritation over the senseless student violence" (Shim 1991: 31).

This partly explains the high peak of 1991 self-immolation coming to an abrupt decline, to no self-immolation in 1992. However, South Koreans continued to use self-immolation into the recent days. This can be seen as one of the consequences of the hot wave of self-immolation that struck the country in 1986-1991. At the same time, an identifiable pattern of positive feedback was at work that allowed South Koreans to use self-immolation as an available form not only for political protest, but also for suicide in general.

Recurring Diffusion Pattern

A protest form may show diffusion in a concentrated period, but it does not necessarily mean it becomes widely accepted beyond that point. In 1965, there were three cases of self-immolations in the U.S. in protest of the War in Vietnam, but they didn't really stick. The 1969 Czechoslovakian chain of self-immolations that came in the wake of the crackdown on the Spring of Prague was triggered by Jan Palach and involved at least six more, but it did not lead to usage of self-immolation as a widely accepted action form. According to author Loren Coleman (2004), there was a wave of self-immolation in France in 1970 in which sixteen killed themselves by fire; and in Britain 82 people committed self-immolation between the October 1978 and October 1979. On the other hand, to young wives in Afghanistan who get involved in unwanted marriage to older men who subject them to constant abuse and violence, self-immolation seem to be a common way for escape. The causes that explain the emergence of a new action form are often different from the causes that make it stick. In order to understand how self-immolation became accepted as a shared cultural form in South Korea, we need to zoom into how the positive feedback mechanism was at work beyond the hectic period of high political zeal.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 shows the fluctuation of South Korean self-immolations over time between the period of 1990 and 2010, based on newspaper coverage. In order to focus on the meaning of self-immolation as a socially accepted form, the numbers include both politically motivated self-immolations and those that were not. On average, there were nine reported cases of self-immolation per year. With the exception of the years 1990 and 1991, which were part of the self-immolation wave that coincided with the 1986-1991 protest cycle, we observe how South Koreans have been using self-immolation on a constant basis, on

average 7-8 cases per year. The darker area represents the number of self-immolations regardless of their political orientation, whereas the lighter area shows the number of self-immolation specifically driven by political motives. As we move toward the recent years, we see a change towards the direction in which the proportion of politically motivated self-immolations is in a slight increase. The most striking picture that emerges from the figure is the pattern of co-variation between political and non-political use of self-immolation. Though with minor variations, increase or decrease in the number of political self-immolations is invariably met with increase or decrease of non-political self-immolations. This pattern of co-variation implies strong continuity between self-immolations of seemingly different stripes.

In order to investigate their possible connections, I looked more deeply into each peak in pursuit of identifying self-immolation clusters. In doing so, I followed Michael Biggs' template for identifying a cluster: sequence of at least three events of politically motivated self-immolation, each separated by ten days or less¹⁰. This led to the discovery of six self-immolation clusters, and a near-cluster in 2010. The first three clusters took place during the 1986-1991 wave: one in 1990 involving seven between May 26 and June 16; and another two in 1991 that involved three (March 19-27) and twenty-four (April 30-July 10). The other three took place in 1996 (eight between April 4 and May 7, 2003), 2003 (three between October 24 and November 1), and 2007 (three between October 20 and November 1). In 2010, there were six self-immolations between September and November whose connections are apparent but with more than ten days of separation.

[Figure 3 about here]

In the majority of the clusters I found (1991 II, 1996, 2003, 2007, and 2010), an identifiable diffusion pattern is observable, as visualized in Figure 3. A high-profile political death, either suicidal protest or death by police during protest) always preceded each cluster, which was triggered by self-immolation by an activist, followed by self-immolation of ordinary citizens. This pattern implies a strong continuity between political and non-political self-immolations in cementing self-immolation as a shared action, and a positive feedback chain between political and non-political self-immolations.

The second self-immolation wave in 1991 was triggered by the battered death of Kang Kyung-Dae, a freshmen at Myungji University, on April 26. Four days on April 30, Park Seung-Hee self-immolated urging students to rise up in action. This was followed by at least five more activists in flames. The messages that these activists left clearly show how their acts were motivated by Kang Kyung-Dae's death¹¹.

- Kim Young Kyun (May 2): "Kang Kyung Dae was brutally killed by the steel pipe of the regime and there was a female student who protested martyr Kang's death. Let us fight until we overthrow the Roh regime that represses the democracy forces."

¹⁰ Biggs justifies this method based on a prior study that estimates "a television news story about a suicide has a discernable effect on the suicide rate over the subsequent ten days." (2005: 357, fn. 30)

¹¹ The messages in this section are extracted from the newspaper reports.

- Chun Sae Yong (May 4): "What have we done when our friends were beaten to death and were setting themselves aflame? Let us shake off our sorrow and stand up against this regime and fight!"
- Kim Ki Seol (May 8): "After long thoughts about what I can do for the pains of the minjung, I have decided to dedicate myself. ... The DLP must fall and the Roh regime must go."
- Yoon Yong Ha (May 11): "The regime couldn't stop after killing Kang Kyung-Dae with brutal violence, and had to kill Park Seung-Hee."

The early phase of the May 1991 self-immolation chain was predominantly occupied by activists, but the latter half of the cycle had more citizens who didn't seem to have any ties to activism. However, their perception of political urgency didn't seem that different from those of the minjung activists. The accumulated impact of activist self-immolations in the early phase seems evident.

- A 39 year-old woman, divorced with 4 children being brought up by her ex-husband, who worked at a street stall, Lee Jung Soon set herself on fire on the day of Kang Kyung-Dae's street funeral, on May 18. Before she committed the act, she had left a letter to a priest of her church. In it, she wrote: "Where do our politicians leave their conscience? [...] I am dedicating myself to our country and nation. Disband Baekgoldan [the notorious arrest unit of the police force], Down with military dictatorship! ... May the light and love [of God] bring peaceful reunification. In the name of our savior, Jesus Christ, Amen."
- Cha Tae Kwon, a public transit bus driver in his thirties, set himself afire after watching news of a high-school student's self-immolation earlier that day, on May 18. According to a co-worker, the last words left by Cha Tae Kwon before he ran out and set himself on fire was, "What is the meaning of life at a time when even high-schoolers are self-immolating?"
- In a note Chung Sang Sun, an unemployed man in his late 20s, left before his death on May 23, he wrote, "I am sacrificing my youth following Seung-Hee and Cheol-Soo. I am aware we need more fighters than martyrs, but I am dedicating my youth so as to convey my burning heart to the fighters." According to his father, he didn't have any connection to activism and had lost touch with his family after asking for money to start off a new business a few days before the accident.
- A clearer case of a copycat effect can be found in the self-immolation of Cho Eun Yong, a 65 year-old man who had been suffering from illness after a severe stroke. His family survivors testified that he would repeatedly utter that "he had found a good way to go" while watching news on TV.

1991 was an extreme case, but other clusters of self-immolation show similar diffusion patterns. In 1996, three college students took the lead by self-immolating in protest of the government within a two weeks period, only to be followed by another chain of self-immolation. A total of 8 self-immolated in a month's span from April to May, most of which were politically motivated. Interesting is the fact that just a week before the first self-immolation on April 7, Roh Soo Seok, a Yonsei University student activist, was found dead during a street demonstration with strong evidence of teargas causing his death. Roh Soo

Seok's death was received as a shock to many students, many of whom had no experience of the highly politicized atmosphere and the tense clashes that characterized the 1980s protest cycle. As such, Roh's death became a hotly debated issue within the declining student movement, generating an opportunity to mobilize the otherwise increasingly indifferent student masses. The impact of his death on the self-immolators was apparent. In a note left by Oh Young Kwon who self-immolated on April 20 in protest of the government, he wrote a poem remembering Roh Soo Seok and Hwang Hye In who had self-immolated three days before he did. The causal link between Roh's death and the cluster of self-immolation that followed is hard to prove, but there is reason to suspect that the high-profile death of Roh Soo Seok had something to do with the 8 self-immolations that followed. This suspicion gets stronger as we observe other self-immolation clusters.

A small cluster of 3 in the late October of 2003 was triggered by Lee Hae Won, a trade union leader of Saewon Tech, who self-immolated in protest of government and employer repression on union activities. However, a close look offers a more complicated yet identifiable pattern of this self-immolation chain. Like the chains we have examined, this cluster was preceded by two high-profile political deaths. In June 2003, Kim Joo Ik, a highly respected union activist and head of the large trade union at Hanjin Heavy Industry climbed up a 100-foot crane to stage a one-man protest on the top, in hopes to initiate a talk with the company over increasing lay-offs and other issues. He had stayed there more than four months, but without any positive response from his employer. On the 128th day of his protest on top of the crane, on October 17, he hanged himself, dangling from atop the crane tower. Among the notes he left: "Crane #85 is my grave. If it is my life that it takes, I will willingly offer." Because Kim was one of the top labor leaders, and because he was trying to force his company to engage in a talk like many other trade unionist, the impact of his protest suicide was strongly felt within the labor movement.

On the day Kim Joo Ik hanged himself, Lee Hae Won left a post on his union homepage: "I think it will be my turn this time." A week later, he self-immolated. In a letter directed to the president, he asked "How many workers have to die more in order for the labor policies in this country to change? I ought to be the last to die." Three days later, a laid-off worker who had been working as a daily laborer self-immolated during a labor rally in Seoul, calling for change in the policies governing irregular labor. Ten more self-immolation followed into the spring of 2004. Preceding the 2003 wave was another high-profile political death by a farmer activist Lee Kyung Hae against WTO agricultural policies. During a WTO ministerial conference in Cancun, Mexico, on September 10, the day of Chuseok, the biggest Korean holiday, he stabbed himself on top of a police fence erected to protect the conference site. He was wearing a sign that read, "WTO kills farmers." 9 days later during Lee's memorial service in Seoul, another farmer set himself on fire as he shouted, "I love you, martyr Lee Kyung Hae. I will follow your will."

Although in smaller scales, and probably with lesser impact, a similar pattern of high-profile political suicides preceding chains of self-immolation can also be found in 2007 and 2010. In October 2007, three politically motivated self-immolations occurred within less than a two-week period. Earlier in April, there was a high-profile self-immolation by Heo Sae Wook, taxi driver and member of the progressive Democratic Labor Party, in front of the

main gate of the Seoul Hyatt Hotel where delegates from South Korea and the U.S. were holding a Free Trade Agreement talk. In 2010, three workers self-immolated in a month's period between October and November. Earlier that year in June, there had been a self-immolation of a Buddhist monk in protest of the governments construction project that had attracted significant public attention.

In most cases, the path of contagion invariably started with a political death that attracted much public attention. Not long after a high-profile political death, members of activist communities took over the torch by using self-immolation as a means of protest. Their acts are used as symbolic, emotional resources by fellow activists for movement purposes. But it does not stop there. Significant waves of self-immolation almost always induced ordinary citizens to use fire for suicidal purposes. Herein lies a difficult question. Because of the sacrificial dimension evident in the act, which all cultures approve of, it is almost impossible to receive a self-immolation negatively—at least in public. One is forced to sympathize with the self-immolator when processing the meaning of the extreme act. The ways self-immolators are remembered in funerals, anniversary commemorations, and in popular culture confirm this fact. Despite the horror it evokes, a positive image is layered onto this grueling choice socially and culturally, which creates an inviting environment for more self-immolations. One of the inadvertent consequences of self-immolation may be a culture that implicitly encourages self-immolation.

In Lieu of Conclusion

Into the 2000s, we detect important changes. Although self-immolation is still being used continuously in South Korea, the diminishing gap between political and non-political self-immolation indicates that the use of self-immolation by ordinary citizens has slowed down. This is confirmed by the changes in the organizational affiliation of self-immolators. Less than 30% of all self-immolators had organizational affiliations in the early 1990s. By the 2000s, close to two-thirds were members of an organization—mostly trade unions. At the same time, students who had dominated the self-immolation scene all but disappeared in the 2000s. There was only one case in 2004. Workers have been the category that produced the largest number of self-immolators throughout the period of study, and they remained so into the recent years¹². When a worker self-immolates, however, it was less to incite broader participation, and more out of frustration and despair. This indicates the complicated impact of the 1986-1991 protest cycle/self-immolation wave twenty years after. On the one hand, the forceful effects it had once unleashed are in decay. At the same time, the new action form that grew out of the moment of madness continues to give shape to those who are in desperate search of political expression.

¹² Among the 233 counts of self-immolations between 1990 and 2010, 89 were workers.

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1 Self-immolations, 1980-2008 (CCNDM data)

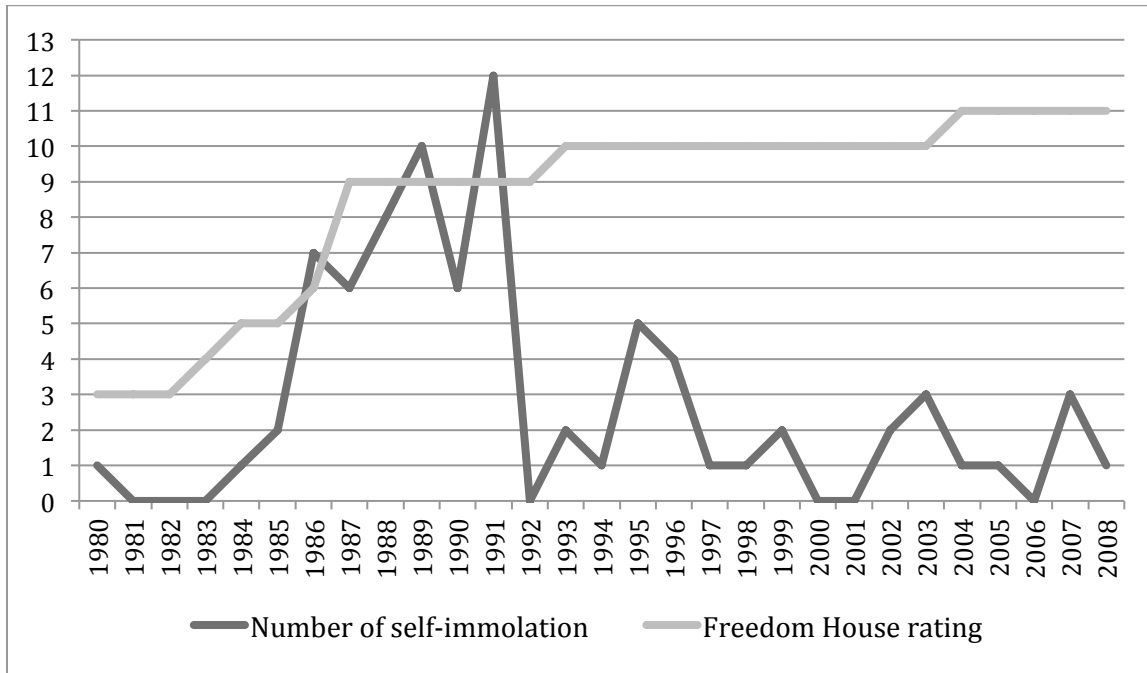


Figure 2 Self-immolation, 1990-2010 (Newspaper data)

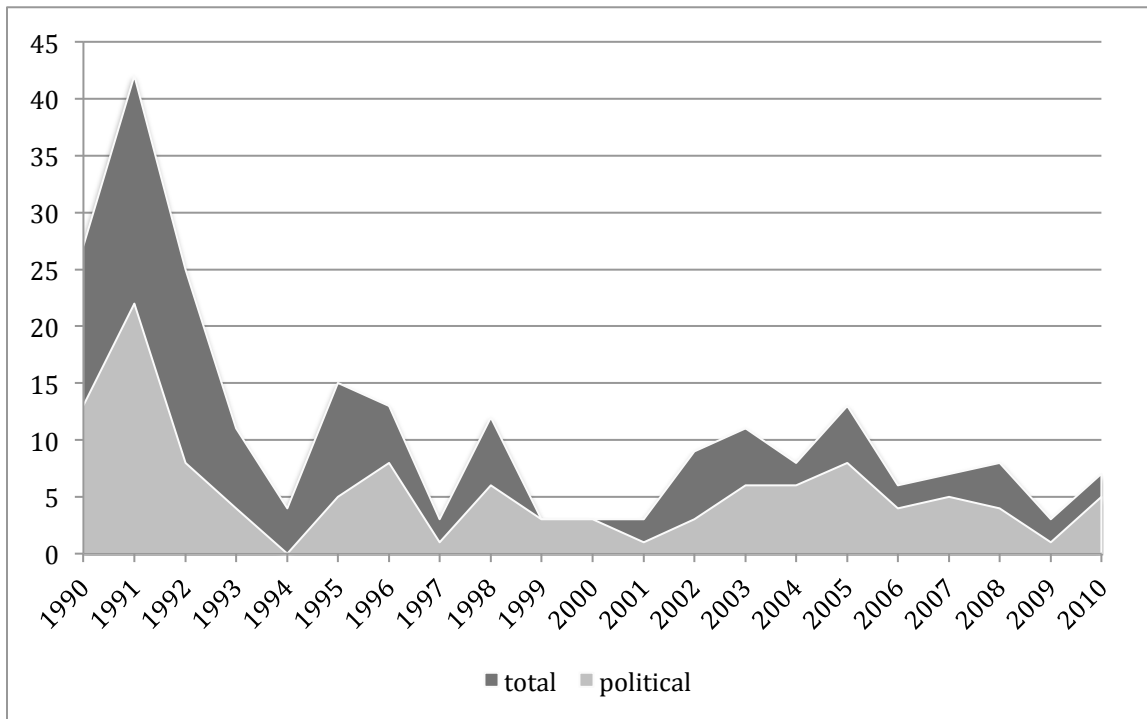


Figure 3 Diffusion Pattern of Self-immolation



Table 1 Protest Activities, 1982-1991

	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
Students	61	143	1499	2138	2001	*	4300	4375	7551	7852
Workers	218	185	184	332	397	4676	1998	1703	*	*
Others	*	139	199	226	195	304	591	660	1342	1721

Source: *Police Annual Commentary (Chi-an Ilji)*, various issues. Headquarter of National Security. (* denotes missing data)

Bonus Figure: Why People Self-immolate

