Monkey kings make havoc: iconoclasm and murder in the Chinese cultural revolution

Eric Reinders

Department of Religion, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA

Abstract

This article explores the interplay between destruction of material icons and people during China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when authority figures—teachers, landlords, monks and nuns, bosses, intellectuals, doctors, Party leaders—were ‘struggled against’ by gangs of teenage revolutionaries called Red Guards. There is striking continuity in the rhetoric and the symbolic practices of the Red Guards as they destroyed statues and to a lesser extent, signs, buildings, and books, and as they killed people. Through techniques of demonisation—the affixing of negative iconic values—the rhetoric of destruction moved all too easily from image to body and from body to image. Yet just as iconoclasm is not always the utter annihilation of an iconic object but, more crucially, an attack on its iconicity, the violence against living people which tends to accompany iconoclastic movements often seems to be about stripping away the external signs of identity and then redefining the boundaries between categories of bodies. After a brief survey of four phases of Communist iconoclasm in China, I explore a number of aspects of Chinese iconoclasm which blur the distinctions between icons and bodies, related to conceptions of icons as living, the production of iconic bodies, and the ‘iconoclasm of the habitus.’ These themes are explored in commentary on two products of Cultural Revolution iconoclasm: Born Red, a memoir by Gao Yuan, and Qiao Dianyun’s short story ‘The Blank Stele.’

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During ‘Red August’, a forty-day period early in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the death toll has been estimated at 1700 for Beijing alone (see Wang, 1999). The death toll for the ten years of chaos (1966–1976) is unclear, and many speak vaguely of ‘hundreds of thousands,’ or ‘millions.’ In some cases, the killing was indirect—caused by cumulative neglect, starvation, stress and overwork—but in many cases the communal tribunals and struggle sessions ended with
deliberate death. Authority figures—teachers, landlords, monks and nuns, bosses, intellectuals, doctors, Party leaders—were ‘struggled against’ by gangs of teenage revolutionaries called Red Guards. These ‘self-criticism’ sessions often involved the victim being bound, beaten, labeled, shaved and painted; and they were forced to squat down in uncomfortable and vulnerable postures for long periods of time. Many were finally starved, shot or beaten to death. Here is a description from Holmes Welch:

Then the Red Guards would bind them with ropes and put them up on a platform where they would be struggled against like any other counterrevolutionaries. People were encouraged to curse them and vent their indignation and anger. After this they had paper dunce-caps put on their heads, placards hung around their necks, and were pulled through the streets to the beating of gongs and drums—sometimes for several days on end. Finally a meeting would be held to announce the verdicts: they would be sentenced to be ‘shot to death’. (Welch, 1972: pp. 348–349)

Variations of this story appear with a numbing regularity in autobiographies of Red Guards and their victims. The physically restrained body became the target of escalating abuse. The meaning of the victim was fixed through loud declarations (curses) and placards, defining and confessing their crimes: supporting the old feudal hierarchy, deluding the masses, resisting the transformative power of Mao Zedong thought. The abuse escalated to outright torture, ending in many cases with execution.

But I’m ‘deluding the masses’ a bit here myself: I have very slightly adjusted the wording in the quotation to obscure the fact that in this particular case, Welch was not talking about human victims at all but was describing how Buddhist and other images were treated.¹ There is striking continuity in the rhetoric and the symbolic practices of the Red Guards as they destroyed statues and to a lesser extent, signs, buildings, and books, and as they killed people. In terms of technique and rhetoric, the destruction of images paralleled the widespread destruction of people. Through processes of demonisation—the affixing of negative iconic values—the rhetoric of destruction moved all too easily from image to body and from body to image.

Hence it is useful to think of iconoclasm as the destruction not only of material, manufactured objects but also of certain kinds of bodies. It is worth considering the relationship of beheading an image and beheading a living human being. In terms of their emotional effects and moral status, iconoclasm and murder should be treated as distinct events, but the continuity of the objectifying rhetoric serves to obscure those differences and therefore facilitates violence.

The study of iconoclasm has focused almost entirely on two specific movements—in Byzantine church history and the Protestant Reformation. There is also a scholarly literature in the field of art history, where ‘iconoclasm’ means any destruction of art, sacred or otherwise. Clearly,

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¹ The actual quotation, with corrected words in italics, is: ‘Then the Red Guards would bind the images with ropes and put them up on a platform where they would be struggled against like any other counterrevolutionaries. People were encouraged to curse them and vent their indignation and anger. After this the images had paper dunce-caps put on their heads, placards hung around their necks, and were pulled through the streets to the beating of gongs and drums—sometimes for several days on end. Finally a meeting would be held to announce the verdicts: this or that bodhisattva would be sentenced to be “shot to death”’. 
however, the intentional destruction of sacred objects was not restricted to those two periods or to the West. All religious traditions, especially in their encounters with other traditions and in periods of internal reform, have experienced one form or another of iconoclasm. Iconoclasm is diffuse and widespread in time and place, a permanent background (or at times foreground) for cultural and religious activity.

While the concept of iconoclasm gravitates around attacks on sacred icons, it is arbitrary to restrict the term to attacks on images of human bodies. The study of iconoclasm has in fact already begun to broaden beyond attacks on icons. In his study of sixteenth-century Western Europe, L. P. Wandel gives us an initial definition which is quite narrow: ‘Iconoclasm is defined by its objects, its “victims”, the focus of its violence … [it is] an attack, violence, either verbal or physical, usually physical, often combined with violent words, against Christian “images,” predominantly, but not exclusively in churches’ (Wandel, 1995 p. 26). However, his excellent study makes clear that iconoclasts destroyed not only the material image (statue or picture) but also the eucharistic host, altars, and indeed all kinds of church property. Wandel clearly expands the meaning of ‘icons’ to include ritual implements and more generally all kinds of objects associated with religious institutions and practices. This definition represents a significant move beyond received treatments of iconoclasm as a theological problem towards an approach to the destruction of religious objects as a more general and pervasive cultural phenomenon. In other words, this move is from theology to cultural history.

After a brief survey of the phases of Communist iconoclasm in China, I explore a number of aspects of Chinese iconoclasm which blur the distinctions between icons and bodies, related to conceptions of icons as living, the production of iconic bodies, and the ‘iconoclasm of the habitus.’ These themes are explored in commentaries on two products of Cultural Revolution iconoclasm: a memoir by Gao Yuan and a short story by Qiao Dianyun.

Phases of Communist iconoclasm in China

In general, Mao Zedong and other Party leaders accepted the Marxist line on religion. Religion was on the one hand destined to a powerful tool of the oppressing classes, and therefore deserved to be attacked, but on the other hand the expression of the misplaced wishes of the oppressed, and would thus vanish naturally soon after the oppression ended. Apart from the specifically Marxist anti-religion, the notion of religion spontaneously vanishing (with a little push, perhaps) made sense in the early twentieth-century climate of elite hostility towards China’s indigenous religions. Religion in general was considered anti-scientific and anti-modern. China’s indigenous religions were remnants of a feudal past which had failed China, and Christianity was tainted by its association with Western imperialism. Mao’s vision of peasants spontaneously destroying temples undoubtedly had a basis in fact, though there were also protests against Communist iconoclasm. Over the years, Party policy has fluctuated widely, between direct attacks on religion and the more patronising hands-off approach.

The periodisation of Communist-inspired iconoclasm roughly follows the major stages of their regime. In a first stage, roughly from the founding of the first soviets in the 1930s to 1949, acts of iconoclasm, confiscation of temple property and attacks on religious professionals were sporadic.
The attacks on religious institutions were usually driven by the need to redistribute land to peasants and to acquire various forms of capital (grain, buildings, weapons) found in religious sites.

A second, overlapping stage in the late 1940s and 1950s, was characterised by widespread and more systematic redistribution of capital, especially land, and by the increased persecution of landlords and other groups deemed ‘counter-revolutionary.’ In these circumstances many temples and churches lost their land, buildings and personnel. An example of the 1950s iconoclasm is the Dongyue miao (Temple of the Eastern Marchmount) in Xi’an, founded in 1116 but taken over in the 1950s. At present the front half is the Changrenli primary school. There are some dwellings in the middle, and an iron welding yard at the back. Two of the three remaining halls are completely surrounded by ten-foot brick walls, each with a single padlocked door. In the 1940s and 1950s a good deal, if not all, of the destruction and land confiscation was economically motivated. Hence, the government, People’s Liberation Army (PLA), or local collectives occupied the compounds and/or redistributed the land to farmers or workers. Monasteries were classed as rich landlords. In addition to occupation of land, some pagodas and temple buildings were dismantled to build new buildings and roads (see Bush, 1970 pp. 324–328). The worst hit religious group was undoubtedly Christians. By the time of the Cultural Revolution, there was little left in the Churches to destroy. Any surviving small images in corners were ferreted out and destroyed, hidden away, or locked out of public view. Christianity ‘simply stopped for twenty years,’ as one former Red Guard told me.

Still, for many people in China, the early and mid-1950s is remembered as a time of relative peace. The wars had subsided, and economic conditions improved. As in the post-war years in America, there was a baby boom. This generation, raised on the rhetoric of revolution, but with no obvious external enemy to revolt against, hit puberty in the 1960s and took at face value Mao’s provocative and self-serving slogans: Bomb the Party headquarters! It is right to revolt! A third stage of iconoclasm reached its peak in the mid-1960s but continued throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Particularly interesting was a mass campaign to eliminate the ‘Four Olds’ (old ideology or ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits), in which the Red Guards destroyed schools, temples and churches, signs, books, and art objects—anything that struck them as antique or nostalgic. Though the frenzy of destruction had tapered by 1970 or so, the political terror could not be resolved until the death of the senile Chairman in 1976.

The iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution was not primarily economic but symbolic. It was, after all, a cultural revolution, not an economic or military one. By that time, however, very few temples were functioning. Many older people confirmed this to me. The villages used to have lots of small temples, but the religious practices ended in the 1950s rather than in the Cultural Revolution. Nonetheless, the buildings usually remained. A history professor named Zhang recalled a church in his home town that had been taken over for use as a stable in the 1950s. It didn’t matter as much if people could still see that the building used to be a church. There were no sacred objects or religious services inside. ‘We weren’t allowed even to talk about religion,’ he said. Then in the 1960s the building itself was torn down because it still had the distinctive

2 The least effected religion was probably Islam, thanks in part to a special policy against antagonising the Hui, a large and mostly Muslim ethnic minority.
architectural form of a church. In the first case the issue was to break the perceived power of the church as an institution, absorb its capital and redistribute it to loyal peasants. In the second case the iconoclasm was economically self-defeating but symbolically compelled.

A fourth stage started in the early 1980s. State policy on religion was changed to allow for the ordination of monks and nuns and for the construction of temples. As the political economy shifted towards a free market model, many city and provincial governments supplied funds for temples to be ‘restored,’ at least superficially, in order to create tourist attractions and public parks. Such restorations have not been without their price, as for example when an old (wooden) temple is torn down in order that a new (concrete) replica of the same temple can be built, or when the commercial aspects entirely erase any religious atmosphere.

Iconoclasm as killing the living icon

What issues does this Chinese history of iconoclasm raise for the student of religion? Iconoclasm was never a single voice or a single mode of destruction, even within the bounds of the ‘Protestant Reformation’. Once we move out of Christian theology, what kinds of ideologies inform the destruction of sacred objects? In traditional religious practice, how were images created, and what did iconoclasm mean? These questions require a full study in their own right and are only briefly noted here. Recent scholarship has come a long way to enrich our present understanding of Buddha images, by focusing on their symbolic and ritual production, how they were created and how they were maintained. Images were often treated as conscious, organic beings. They ate, they spoke, they flew in the air. They were spoken of, and ritually treated, as living presences. After its material production, a statue had to be animated, had to be ritually produced as a living presence. This animation was performed in the ceremony of ‘dotting (or opening) the eyes’ (dian yan), a final act which marked the animation of the object. Relics—the organic matter of particularly holy monks—were placed inside images as a further mechanism of animation. Conversely, the Chan dictum of ‘just sitting’ in a lotus posture ‘without a single thought’ might be seen as a way of becoming more like a Buddha image, an apparently inanimate body deep in a meditative trance-state. Recent scholarship has also underlined the performative aspects of the attainment of Buddhahood, as the production of a ritualised body (see Sharf, 1995; Faure, 1991; Faure, 1996). Scholastic treatises systematically negated the apparent distinctions between Buddha and Buddha-image, between Buddha and monks, and between Buddha images and monks. In a variety of such discursive and practical ways, Buddha images functioned as intermediates between Buddha and his followers.

With these ideas in the background, we may ask: if images were alive, what did it mean to chop the image’s head off? Attacks on images did not necessarily mean an iconclast disbelieves in the possibility of a powerful presence in the icon. At least some acts of violence on images were implicitly premised on belief in the living presence in the image for example, flogging icons or dragging the image around town tied to a horse—ritual humiliation (see Gernet, 1985: 1983). Such cases of iconoclasm ironically confirm the power of images, distinct from the entity

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3 For example, Takakusu et al. (1924: vol. 45, no. 1896, p. 865a–b).
which is represented, and also highlight icons as objects of power (not only symbols of power) (see Brown, 1998).

Chan Buddhism is often considered an iconoclastic tradition. A famous Chan case of iconoclasm involves Danxia Tianran (739–824): At Huilin Monastery, during a very cold winter, he ‘set fire to a wooden Buddha image in order to counteract [the cold].’ When asked about it, he replied that the image contained no sarira (relic), so ‘why are you reprimanding me?’ In this case an image was destroyed not because images were wrong or powerless but because this particular image had no presence in it, hence it really was just a chunk of wood. This anecdote thus confirms conventional icon practices. Despite the proliferation of images in their monasteries, Chan and Zen came to be regarded as iconoclastic movements. Iconoclasm in Chan literature should be read primarily for its rhetorical effects, not as a description of real practice.

Given the traditional discourse of icons as living presences, iconoclasm is ambiguous: possibly a demonstration of the lack of life in the targeted image, which leaves open the possibility of life in other images, or possibly an execution which kills off the life within the image but may still re-confirm the animation of other images. Of course, the denial of living presence in images was possible even in medieval times, and many anti-Buddhists emphasised the inanimation of images. According to a Buddhist source, the anti-Buddhist Fu Yi, for example, ‘did not by nature believe in Buddhism, invariably treating monks and nuns with disrespect, and even going so far as to treat stone images of the Buddha as if they were bricks or tiles’ (Tang, 1989, p. 264). The differences between ‘bricks or tiles’ and Buddha images were multiple, but one distinction stands out: a brick is not particularly iconic. What shocked the Buddhist biographer about Fu Yi’s attitude was not the physical destruction of images but the refusal to acknowledge their iconic values.

Notwithstanding Fu Yi’s irreverence, iconoclastic rhetoric often appears agonistic, suggesting an inner struggle against pernicious phobias. In other words, it was not enough to decide to end one’s ‘idolatry,’ because cleaning out the ingrained habits and fears sometimes required an ongoing process of ruthless introspection. Even the Reformation radical iconoclast Andreas Karlstadt admitted to a lingering sense of the power of the object and the extreme difficulty of freeing himself from their power. He confessed: ‘a harmful fear has been bred into me from which I would gladly deliver myself and cannot. As a consequence, I stand in fear that I might not be able to burn idols. I would fear that some devil’s block of wood would do me injury’ (Mangrum and Scavizzi, 1991, p. 36). This and other examples from the Protestant Reformation at least suggest the possibility of a continued iconophobia even among active iconoclasts. But how much were the Red Guards aware of traditional ideas of icons as living forces? Chinese teenagers in the 1960s were unlikely to have been aware of the traditional religious practices surrounding icons, or of their doctrinal articulation. Can we trace any residual power inherent in images of faces and bodies—reflections of ourselves—that inclined Red Guards to attribute agency to the images, even as they attacked them?

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5 Zanning, p. 773b.
Monkey Kings make havoc

An episode from Gao Yuan’s memoir *Born Red* reveals some of the issues surrounding the destruction of Buddhist images during the Cultural Revolution:

The next morning, we set out for Dafo Temple like an army of Monkey Kings eager to make havoc under heaven. We found that a company of People’s Liberation Army men had moved in during the night to protect the temple. As the Red Guards in my class approached the front hall, which housed a smiling, big-bellied Buddha and four Celestial Kings, one of the soldiers came up as if to greet us. The four pockets on his jacket indicated he was an officer. He held a little red book in one hand. ‘Little revolutionary generals,’ he said, ‘this temple is on the national register of cultural relics. It does not belong to the category of the Four Olds. Please leave and find your Four Olds elsewhere.’

Monitor Caolan, who also clutched a little red book, answered him, ‘Comrade Soldier, how can you say this place doesn’t belong to the Four Olds? Don’t you see those superstitious monsters?’ She gestured toward the Celestial Kings, who indeed looked monstrous, especially the one with a green face and protruding teeth.

‘These statues are the work of ancient artisans,’ said the officer. ‘They are the wealth of the people. We should not destroy them.’ (Gao, 1987, pp. 93–94).

It is a significant detail that the officer holds the ‘Little Red Book,’ the Quotations of Chairman Mao, in his hand. The book functions here as a marker of loyalty to Mao, of Communist orthodoxy and proletarian legitimacy, during the soldier’s negotiation with the Red Guards. Hence we see that in meeting the Soldier’s argument, Monitor Caolan also displays her Little Red Book. A number of scholars have noted the talismanic or quasi-talismanic uses of the Little Red Book and more generally the religious dimensions of the Cultural Revolution (see Yang, 1994, 245–286; MacInnes, 1972, 286–287). Mao badges—many of them heart-shaped—were pinned closest to peoples’ hearts, sometimes directly onto the skin. A series of interlocking images—Mao, the Sun, one’s own heart, redness, blood—located Mao within the center of the subject (see Yang, 1994, 260–264). Reverence for the physical image of Mao extended to punishing anyone who tore a magazine photograph of Mao, even in order to remove the disgraced Liu Shaoqi from the picture (see Liang and Shapiro, 1983, p. 59). A ritual was practiced in front of images of Mao, called *zaqingshi, wanhuibao* (‘Asking for instruction in the morning, making a report at night’). Though the Red Guards were iconoclastic, they did not destroy all icons; rather they opposed certain icons with their own (or perhaps more precisely, they defined certain icons in opposition to their own). When images of Mao were accidentally damaged or destroyed, the perpetrators had

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6 This collection was originally published in 1965 for army use and was reproduced (and sometimes altered) by Red Guards soon after. The editor, Lin Biao, included portraits of Mao and of himself and wrote the preface. After Lin Biao died in disgrace, millions followed Party instruction to tear out his portrait and preface, perhaps the most synchronised moment of mass iconoclasm in history. While the use of the term yulu (‘recorded sayings’) in the title, Mao zhuxi yulu, has brought up analogies to Buddhist hagiographic literature (the Chan yulu), another analogy would be the popular almanacs or calendar books filled with disjointed practical advice.
cause to fear. Mayfair Yang cites cases of workers punished for damaging images of Mao (see Yang, 1994, p. 255).

The Dafo (‘Great Buddha’) Temple is on the ‘national register of cultural relics’ and ‘does not belong to the category of the Four Olds.’ The soldier is repeating here a strategy of redefinition which both protected the material objects in temples and redefined them as ‘cultural’ rather than ‘religious.’ Caolan challenges this categorisation, pointing out the ‘superstitious monsters’—i.e., statues of deva kings customary in the first hall of Chinese temples. The soldier persists in defining the statues as public capital, and as manifestations of the craft of working people:

‘Can’t you see that they oppress the ordinary working people?’ Little Mihu said, pointing to a small figure writhing in agony under the foot of one of the fiendish kings.

‘These are figures of legend and have nothing to do with reality,’ the officer said.

The vanquished demon-figures under the feet of the deva kings represent the enemies of the Dharma in Buddhist iconography. Mihu identifies them with the ‘ordinary working people’. The soldier brushes aside the suggestion.

The strategy of redefinition of temples as ‘cultural’ rather than ‘religious’ was a widespread practice which gave some temples state protection and, since the 1980s, economic profitability. Modern secular museums and art history reproduce a similar move from religious icon to cultural statue. Here, however, we see competing secular conceptions of the images: as valued cultural objects comparable perhaps with the Great Wall or folk art, versus a cultural object which unspecified ‘ordinary working people’ fail to recognize as merely cultural. The dispute over its categorisation echoes the anxiety over signification in that period felt by so many Chinese who had some ‘skeleton in the closet’ such as a landlord ancestor or a relative in Taiwan. A crucial element in this anxiety was the ease with which labels could extend in a viral manner, beyond their initial application. As we will see, children and spouses of ‘Rightists’ shared the stigma of unorthodoxy. ‘Rightist’ became, like ‘Catholic’ among the Puritans or ‘Hinayana’ among Mahayana Buddhists, a ‘floating sign’ (Kibbey, 1986, p. 145).

Note that Little Mihu does not quite say the ‘ordinary working people’ are so stupid as to think these statues have power. The monsters are superstitious, not the people. One of the contradictions of the time was the simultaneous depiction of the peasant as ignorantly superstitious yet the source of legitimacy for Communist power. The soldier seizes this contradiction to argue that the statues represent objects of proletarian pride. His efforts to persuade the students focus initially on anti-Japanese sentiment:

Students from other classes had drifted over to hear the debate. The officer seized the initiative. ‘Come with me,’ he told the growing audience. ‘I’ll tell you a true story.’

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7 A more recent example is the sad case of Yu Dongyue, who in May 1989 threw ink- and paint-filled eggs at the portrait of Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square. Yu was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment in August 1989 for counter-revolutionary sabotage.

8 Kibbey notes how ‘Catholic’ came to be used for ‘Indians, Jews, and Pagans’ (142), and ‘even to Puritans’ (145). Cf. Liang’s grandmother, who ‘was frightened to see how easily the Rightist label could spread from one member of the family to another’ (Liang and Shapiro, 1983, pp. 11–12).
Intrigued, we followed him across the temple compound to the hall of the Goddess of Mercy. He led us inside. ‘You all know that the great Goddess of Mercy has forty-two arms,’ he said ‘But do you know that only the two big arms in front are real bronze? The Japanese aggressors sawed off the other forty arms and melted them down to make bullets to kill the Chinese people. Japan has a long Buddhist tradition, but they didn’t care about that when they needed ammunition. They wanted to destroy the whole statue, but they couldn’t uproot it. They finally gave up when the temple elders told them that black water would run out and flood the whole city if the goddess was removed.’

‘Damn those Japanese devils! Death to the Japanese devils!’ several Red Guards cursed.

Here the idea of the image as miraculously preventing a flood of ‘black water’—or as capable of causing such a flood if provoked—passes by without Red Guard comment. Likewise the acts of destruction meted out on the image by the Japanese are the cause for cursing the Japanese, not praising them for their iconoclasm. In many Cultural Revolution memoirs one finds that the right to perform iconoclastic acts is denied to certain ‘Black’ category members. For example, a stigmatised ‘ultra leftist’ teacher, Eclectic Zhu, who leaps up on an old gate with a pickaxe and starts chopping, is immediately called down by Red Guards, who themselves bring down the gate. ‘Only revolutionaries can take part in this!’ (Gao, 1987, p. 98). The perceived position of the iconoclast determines the meaning of the act. Hence I emphasise iconoclasm not as a generic elimination of certain objects but as an act or performance which is itself symbolic.

The Red Guards, of course, claimed to follow a Marxist atheism, and the PLA soldier’s attachment to the images is also apparently atheistic and aesthetic. The restored image becomes a sign of China’s dogged survival in the face of Japanese aggression. We do see a glimpse of the image as an object of power when the soldier reports that the Japanese had ceased their attempts to destroy the image only after ‘the temple elders told them that black water would run out and flood the whole city if the goddess was moved’. Even the Red Guards seem to attribute agency of a sort to the images: ‘Can’t you see that they oppress the ordinary working people?’ Vestigial though they may be, these references hint at the traditional conception of images as organic beings.

The officer then describes the process of making such a big statue: the heaping mounds of earth and the collective effort of bronze smelting. Focusing on the skill of the artisans rather than esoteric knowledge of design or ritual use, he and the image begin to impress the Red Guards. The awed students ‘looked at the Goddess of Mercy with new admiration’ as the officer asks: ‘Do you still think we should smash these cultural relics?’

Just then, we heard a series of crashing sounds. The officer’s face fell. He rushed outside, and we ran after him. While he had been holding some of us spellbound before the Goddess of Mercy, other students had regrouped by the four Celestial Kings, tied ropes to them, and pulled them down all at once. The painted clay figures had smashed into pieces.

The officer looked at the wreckage with tears in his eyes. ‘You—You—What kind of Red Guards are you?’ he stammered. He barked a command and a platoon of soldiers ran over. They linked arms to blockade the hall entrance. The demolitionists retreated. Nobody wanted to clash with the People’s Liberation Army. We marched off, waving our red flags, singing the Red Guard song, and exulting in our latest victory over the Four Olds.

This incident notwithstanding, a great number of religious objects were saved from destruction by the PLA, whether by posting guards, boarding up temples, or by removing the objects for
hidden storage elsewhere. The Dongyue miao is typical of many that were occupied in the 1950s by various organs of state, or PLA (see Bush, 1970, pp. 302, 387). Here we encounter once again the irony that so frequently attends iconoclasm: these occupations effectively ended these sites as religious sites, but the presence of troops often preserved at least some parts of the sites. In the 1980s, when government policy grew more flexible and the economy changed, many temples were reopened, restored or rebuilt. Some of this restoration was sponsored by local governments for touristic reasons, but the majority of the material reconstruction of religion in the 1980s and 1990s was driven by popular support.

In Gao Yuan’s narrative, we see a residual sense of agency in the icons and the talismanic use of new icons. We see iconoclasm as a ritual, wherein the goal is not necessarily the destruction of objects per se but the performance of such destruction—by certain people at certain times. The shift of definitions from ‘religious’ to ‘cultural’ was an important strategy in justifying the protection of icons, though this strategy was nonetheless iconoclastic in its emptying of religious meaning.

**Iconoclasm as erasing the identity of bodies**

Iconoclasm is not always the utter annihilation of an icon-as-object but, more crucially, an attack on its iconicity, it’s ‘icon-ness.’ The destruction of an image is not merely the destruction of a piece of wood; it is the destruction of the iconic properties of the piece of wood. They might overlap—one destroys the icon by destroying the piece of wood—but iconoclasm is just as often a defacing, whereby the ‘piece of wood’ remains more or less intact, but the object is no longer recognisable or treated as a sacred image. Or, most potently, the object is recognisable as formerly sacred, as sacred to others but not to ‘us’. Only a hierophany can be turned into a profanophany, to use Bruce Lincoln’s term—a revelation of the profanity, temporality, and corruption inherent to someone or something (Lincoln, 1989, p. 125).

The bodily parallel is when, for example, a monk is not killed but the surface features which define this body as a monk are removed. The monk is defrocked, disrobed, defaced. Historically, iconoclasm has rarely focused only on the icon. Iconoclasts have also attacked the keepers of icons—not always by killing monks, but also by attacking the habitus of the monk, his habitus and his habit.

Habitus is a useful term here because of its elaboration by Pierre Bourdieu as the produced or cultivated body, the ‘natural’ enactment of distinctions which order our experience. To discuss this non-discursive embodied ‘meaning’, Bourdieu describes habitus as ‘the durable and transposable systems of schemata of perception, appreciation, and action that result from the institution of the social in the body’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 126–127). It is ‘the system of structured, structuring dispositions’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 52). Those whose habitus (their ‘air’ of ‘feel for the game’ as manifested in their clothes, postures, manners of speech) marked them as counter-revolutionary or belonging to a ‘Black category’ were forcibly rehabilitated. Targets were formed, re-formed and performed in various ways, most dramatically in highly ritualised struggle sessions.

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9 In Wacquant’s words, Habitus results from ‘the internalization of external structures’ and is ‘the collective individuated through embodiment or the biological individual’ collectivized ‘by socialization’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 18).
Ritual may be the most important method of instituting distinctions between bodies because it works directly upon the active body, but there are certainly other methods, such as arrangements of space, physical boundaries and discursive strategies. By merit of the signs attached to the body, certain bodies can sit here, but not there; can go through this door, but not that; can be called by titles not applied to others. In struggle sessions, certain faces could look up, and others had a face down. The term habitus is important for thinking about the relations of iconoclasm and murder because in many cases the real target of violence was not simply bodies but bodies-as-icons, culturally produced bodies. When bodies did not clearly manifest the signs of their meaning, or where the signs were ambiguous, iconoclasts were willing to assist the process by directly inscribing bodies, thereby creating a new demonized habitus.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault described the habitus of the modern soldier as a systematic product:

> the soldier has become something that can be made; out of formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has ‘got rid of the peasant’ and given him ‘the air of a soldier’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 135).

Inspired by Foucault, much attention has been given to ‘given him the air’ but much less to ‘got rid of’. One can kill a monk, or—more crucially—one can destroy the means of producing and maintaining the distinctions that made that body iconic. Such an iconoclasm of the habitus implies not only cases of murder but also forced disrobing, forced transgression of monastic vows, and prohibitions or controls on ordinations. Forced disrobing may be considered a kind of iconoclasm because it erases certain kinds of iconic bodies; it makes invisible a certain kind of symbolic body. Prohibitions on ordination and the destruction of icons are in some ways not in the same class as actually killing monks—certainly not morally speaking—but each of these cases is an attack on the re-production of an iconic habitus. Like icons, bodies are produced objects. Bodies—‘the monastic body’, ‘the royal body’, ‘the athlete’s body’, ‘the soldier’s body’, ‘the gendered body’ and so on—are all, in their different ways, products of cultural labor. Harpham remarks: ‘The ascetic body is in this sense an exemplary artifact’ (Harpham, 1987, p. xv). In Foucault’s terms, the individual is ‘fabricated’ by discipline (Foucault, 1979, pp.194, 217).

The economic rather than iconic value of these ‘fabricated artifacts’ was repeatedly emphasised by iconoclasts and anti-clerics. For example, the anti-Buddhist Fu Yi urged the extirpation of this harmful alien hocus-pocus called Buddhism precisely to recover bodies for the taxable economy. He memorialised:

> If the Emperor takes that mass of a million [monks and nuns] and [makes them become] each others’ husbands and wives, after ten years for them to nourish offspring, and ten years of

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10 This ‘air’ is very similar to Bourdieu’s habitus, I think. As Foucault remarks, ‘the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 25).
instruction and training, both soldiers and farmers will be sufficient—could there be greater benefit?\textsuperscript{11}

The bodies of monks and nuns are raw material, but produced as monks and nuns, they are wasted and expensive to maintain, and better utilised in more productive ways. Fu Yi implicitly rejected the iconic values produced by Buddhist clothing, hair style and ritual. The Japanese monk Ennin records the anecdote that the Chinese emperor Wuzong (r. 839–846), overseeing construction of a Daoist Terrace of the Immortals and seeing the pit dug for construction material was so big (and bad fengshui), wanted to fill the pit with the severed heads of thousands of monks and nuns. Perhaps with Fu Yi’s earlier comments in mind—and perhaps with some horror—his advisors responded with economic arguments: ‘if they are returned to lay life and each makes his own living, it will benefit the land’ (Ennin, 1955, p. 359). The very recyclability of their bodies saved their lives.

The shape and surface details which make a piece of wood look like Buddha are susceptible to attack, and disfiguring images changes their communicative value. Iconoclasm is also the removal of the surface evidence, the cosmetic markers that enabled a body to be recognisable as a distinct category of bodies. To spare the life but destroy its signs of difference is the bodily equivalent of scraping off a sacred fresco. The fresco has become only a wall; the monk has become only another body. Iconoclasm often seems to be about erasing and then redefining the boundaries between categories of bodies; iconoclasm attacks the systems of distinction between bodies.

Conversely, the ritual specialist’s recovery from such bodily iconoclasm and persecution requires the re-institution of the old habitus, the old ‘air’ of the performance—even when the texts are lost and the memories fragmented. In the 1980s in rural China, when State persecution of the descendents of Confucius eased off, many of the Kongs were interested in re-creating the ritual bodies of Confucius and his descendants (see Jun, 1996). Texts had been destroyed, and many of the last performers were very old. Jun Jing describes how the liturgy for renewed sacrifices was reconstructed communally from fragmented texts, oral memory and habitual memory in what he calls ‘memory rehearsals’ (Jun, 1996, p. 103), eventually producing a new coherent ritual guide in 1991. In order ‘to achieve such interpretive unity, these temple managers rehearsed their accounts of the temple’s past much as if performers preparing for a play’, a play that had not been performed for decades (Jun, 1996, p. 62). Jun discusses the retrieval of ritual forms through ‘habitual memory’ (Jun, 1996, p. 101), ‘embodied memories’ (Jun, 1996, p. 112),or ‘bodily sedimented memories’ (Jun, 1996, p. 112). But if such bodily memories had remained un-performed, if the ritual had gone extinct, we might call it bodily amnesia. Such amnesia can be random, accidental, just like some breakage of images; but some such amnesia is systematic, intentional and imposed. Iconoclasm and (a certain sense of) murder are related here, through the erasure of the traces of identity, the evidence of bodily difference.

During the Cultural Revolution the destruction of images paralleled the widespread destruction of people: teachers, elders, monks—‘authority figures’ of all kinds (except Chairman Mao). Violent teenage Red Guards forced their teachers and elders into ‘self-criticism’ sessions. These displays, and numerous other activities of the Red Guards, involved the erasure of previous identity and the re-inscription of a new, imposed identity.

\textsuperscript{11}Ou-yang 1976, p. 107: 2a. See also Guanghongmingji, T. 52, no. 2103, 134a–135b.
In practice, erasure meant the cutting of hair, removal of jewelry and adornment, and the homogenisation of clothing. During the Cultural Revolution Zhai remarks, ‘Dress also changed. For the next ten years the Chinese wore monotonous dark clothing’ (Zhai, 1992, p. 91). Just as a censor takes black ink to colorful prose, so homogenous clothing ‘blackened out’ the differences of bodies. Sometimes the test of orthodoxy in clothing was simple: if you couldn’t get a beer bottle up your trouser leg, it was bourgeois (Jiang, 1997, pp. 30–33). As they slashed a young man’s pants open and cut open his shoes, one boy said:

tight pants and pointed shoes are what the Western bourgeoisie admire. For us proletarians they are neither good-looking nor comfortable. What’s more, they are detrimental to the revolution, so we must oppose them resolutely. (Jiang, 1997, p. 30; see also Wen, 1995, p. 704)

A whole field of bodily display was suppressed in ways which recall Foucault’s ‘microphysics of power’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 28). Among the list of things the Beijing No. 26 Middle School Red Guards objected to were scents and perfumes, blue jeans, slick hairdos, rocket shoes, tight pants, Hong Kong-style suits, ‘weird women’s outfits’, Western clothes, children’s watches, actors dressed in strange clothes, bracelets, earrings, longevity chains, and gold pens, along with an assortment of other manifestations of individuality and leisure such as private enterprise, fences around gardens, profile photos, resplendent weddings, crickets as pets, restaurants serving bourgeois delicacies, finger-guessing games, ‘social youth who loaf around,’ amusement parks, dirty jokes, nicknames, job titles, personal names with ‘feudal bourgeois overtones,’ and the listing of the names of authors and actors in the credits for movies and plays (Beijing No. 26 Middle School Red Guards, 1996, pp. 212–222).

Dead bodies too were homogenised through display and deliberately impersonal disposal. In Wen Jieruo’s memoir, the ‘red armbands’ surrounded her and lashed at her with belts, while saying they were being lenient in comparison: ‘Go look at all the piles of corpses at the No. 1 Middle School. Their eyeballs were gouged out!’ (Wen, 1995, p. 708). The bodies of loved ones became a mere substance, heaped in a pile. Wen also recalled the trucks used to remove her mother’s body, ‘piled high with a dozen other corpses … lying where it fell when it was heaved up onto the back’ (Wen, 1995, p. 709).12

After a denial or erasure of previous identity, the public redefinition of a body as an icon was effected through labels painted on or attached to the victims. In order to ‘make the labels stick’ (i.e., be persuasive), the Red Guards made them stick with glue, or by painting them on, or by hanging wooden plaques around the victims’ necks. In Jiang Jili’s account, the father of a student was wearing a tall dunce cap covered with red X’s, the sign for a criminal. His wrists were tied together behind his back, and his arms were lifted high behind him. His face had been forced down so that we could not see his face. Around his neck was a heavy wooden sign: CAPITALIST EXECUTIONER SHAN YI-DAN. The name had been written in black ink and crossed out in red paint. (Jiang, 1997, pp. 150–151)

12 In Jun Jing’s account of forced relocation, villagers were unable to remove their ancestors’ remains systematically, and many tombs were hauled away in trucks by construction workers. These remains were described as part of the ‘twenty tons of garbage, human waste, and material detrimental to people’s health’ (Jun, 1996, p. 80). The bones that were removed, in used cement bags, got jumbled together.
The Red Guard’s words of abuse—appearing sometimes as the ‘reactionary’s confession’—served to fix the label, the iconic value, more clearly. These practices show continuity with traditional methods of inscribing criminal bodies, including tattoos, cutting off feet, the use of cangues, public parades, and the affixing of confessions to the body.

We can see also that the iconoclastic intention was embodied: ‘head lowered,’ ‘face was forced down,’ ‘standing on a stool, her head lowered to her chest’ (Jiang, 1997, p. 144). Throughout all accounts of Cultural Revolution struggle sessions, there is a persistent postural logic. ‘We ordered her to lower her head and confess her crimes. She said she hadn’t committed any crimes and refused to lower her head. So I pushed her head down’ (Gao, 1987, p. 70). In Jiang’s account one victim resists his persecution solely by his posture: ‘At first Old Qian knelt on the washboard with defiant erectness’ (Jiang, 1997, p. 110). In Gao Yuan’s account, the Thought Guards bring the author’s father to be criticised. They ordered him to kneel down. Papa refused, saying that he had never knelt down in front of anybody, not even his parents, and that he did not know how. The Thought Guards kicked him behind the knees and pulled his hair to force him down. He was held in a jet-plane position for two hours. The rebels took turns holding his arms up like wings and planting their feet on his back. Qin Mao and other rebel leaders made speeches denouncing him as Lingzhi county’s biggest capitalist-roader. Finally, they put a feudal-style official’s black cap from a Beijing opera costume on Papa’s head and then took it off to symbolize his removal from office. (Gao, 1987, p. 183)

They bring him down and render him immobile, silencing him with threats of violence, the better to make him an icon rather than a person. Finding or making a ‘feudal-style official’s black cap’ to symbolise a feudal authority figure was necessary in order to be able to remove it. Thus we sometimes find iconoclasts involved in the production of the very objects of their venom. In a 1974 case cited by Jun Jing, villagers (mostly of the Kong clan, claiming descent from Confucius) heard that local Communist officials were coming to tear down the Confucius temple, and pre-emptively dismantled it themselves (Jun, 1996, pp. 54–55). The officials thereby

had lost an opportunity to dismantle the temple in dramatic fashion to highlight their devotion to the campaign. In retaliation, they brought a selected group of middle-school students to the site of the ruined temple and instructed them to build a gravelike mound from rubble. The children were then led in the shouting of political slogans directed against this makeshift symbol of Confucianism, in a public ritual of humiliation. (Jun, 1996, p. 55)

The preservers of religious tradition (the Kongs) tore down the temple; the would-be iconoclasts were angry at its destruction and re-constructed it (in part) in order to curse it.13 The labour of the Red Guards looking for targets was sometimes to make a label stick (to decisively define a body), and sometimes to find something tangible (destroyable) to stick the label on. As Michael Taussig has written, ‘defacement and sacrilege thrive on bringing dead and apparently insignificant matter to life’ (Taussig, 1999, p. 43).

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13 As Gao remarks, one problem for Red Guards was the intangibility of the targets: ‘We looked around for something tangible to overthrow’ (Gao, 1987, p. 92).
Strategies of redefinition have been endemic to the Confucian-Imperial and the Maoist traditions. Throughout many Cultural Revolution memoirs one sees a constant anxiety and contestation over labels. In a literal sense signs were among the first targets of the 1966 campaign to criticise the ‘Four Olds’—streets signs, shop signs, placards of all kinds. Young people renamed themselves with revolutionary symbolism. However, inevitably the violence of renaming turned to other people. Crucial turning points in these narratives come when someone’s class status is changed, for example, from ‘lower-middle peasant’ to ‘rich peasant’. The Five Red Categories were worker, poor and lower-middle peasant, revolutionary soldier, revolutionary cadre, and revolutionary martyr. The ‘black’ categories shifted over time, starting with Four Black Categories: landlord, rich peasant, counterrevolutionary, and bad element. They were later amended to the Seven Black Categories: landlord, rich peasant, reactionary, bad element, rightist, traitor, and spy. Other variations included capitalist roader, cow or ox demon, snake spirit, and intellectual.

A violent ‘nature versus nurture’ debate raged over the nature of such classifications: whether they are indelible and transmitted by heredity, or can be reformed through own willpower. The children of Party cadres, who had the ‘best’ background, who started the violence and dominated the early Red Guard groups, emphasised redness as hereditary. They were opposed by Red Guard groups of children with mixed backgrounds who formed in defense, later in 1966 and after, who emphasised redness as self-willed.

John Hersey expressed this erasure of personal identity in his novel *The Call*. The central character is an American missionary who becomes the object of a Communist struggle session. In the audience crying out his guilt are some people he knows well, who like and even love him. But ‘his crime was that of being an abstraction’ (Hersey, 1985, p. 677). ‘After the trial, I was no longer abstract’ (Hersey, 1985, p. 677). This ability to make certain people embody abstractions (such as ‘imperialism’ and ‘feudalism’) is precisely the iconic definition of the body. As we have seen, the physical practices of the struggle session served to make sure the victim remained abstract, made no eye contact, and bore an entirely new set of signs.

Still, in the end, renaming, ritual humiliation and forced disrobing are not yet murder. Sometimes there is a more direct connection between iconoclasm and murder. The rhetoric and the symbolic practices of the Red Guards as they destroyed statues and as they killed people shows a striking continuity, which served to obscure the different moral status and emotional effects of iconoclasm and murder.

**The Blank Stele**

During this period of chaos many lives were saved through innumerable acts of courage, by those who hid or defended the ‘black’ categories and thereby risked the viral spread of targeted

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14 Old thought, old customs, old culture, old habits; or, as one young Red Guard says, ‘That includes everything old’ (Liang and Shapiro, 1983, p. 71).
15 Jiang describes the scene: ‘Everyone cheered. People rushed forward to stamp on what remained of the sign. … Although what we had smashed was no more than a piece of wood, we felt we had won a victory in a real battle’ (Jiang, 1997, p. 24; see also, Liang and Shapiro, 1983, pp. 68–69).
16 For example, the verse: ‘A dragon begets only dragons, / A phoenix begets only phoenixes, / A rat’s descendants know only how to dig holes, / A hero’s child is a brave man, / A reactionary’s child is a bastard’ (Gao, 1987, p. 113).
categories. People also risked their lives to save images, with similar risks. Although possession of an icon was a gamble, people placed their own lives on a balance with images, and judged it worth a roll of the dice. In this sense iconoclasm and (the negotiable possibility of one’s own) murder were commensurate. A caustic commentary on the destruction of the signs of the past and on the interrelations of attacks on objects and on bodies is Qiao Dianyun’s short story ‘The Blank Stele’, originally published in 1987.

By a stream near a Chinese village, there is an old grave mound with an unknown occupant. First, we see unintentional, natural causes of destruction at work on the memorial stele: ‘A thousand years of wind and rain had worn away the words’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 285). Then, as if revolution was also a weather system, there was ‘a spell of revolution’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 285). The first targets were human, and there were constant mutual attacks: ‘You attack me, I attack you’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 285). Qiao mocks the interchangability of subject positions, attacker and attacked. But at least, the narrator claims, it was entertaining. Iconoclasm as entertainment is a theme throughout the story. However, when they ran out of living victims, they had to turn to the grave. ‘Dig up the grave! Knock down the stele!’ ‘Tramp on him a million times over!’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 286). Having turned the stele into a profanophany, it becomes rubbish, until someone thinks of a new use for the slab: they lay the stele across the stream to use as a bridge. Here we see intentional disfiguring, combined with dismantling and using the parts for secular purposes. While the symbolic aspect is clear—stamping on this precious object—the practical re-use is more prominent.

The material object was easily anthropomorphised. Qiao moves in the narrative from stone to flesh, homologising the gravestone and the person it commemorated: ‘The revolution was great! Commoners got to tramp on the body of a great official from a thousand years past!’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 286, emphasis added). They stamped on it, chipped at it, and urinated on it—disfiguring and humiliating a sacred object, conceived of as the humiliation of a formerly powerful human body. At the same time they fantasise about the dead man, especially his many supposed concubines. The joys of this iconoclasm lie in the release of tensions and as a symbolic compensation for powerlessness:

Just to be able to knock something down that had been standing and tramp on it and stamp and piss on it to your heart’s desire—this was triumph, this was power, so we vented our hatred and felt gratified, and it was beautiful and we were happy. Why ask why? (Qiao, 1995, p. 286)

The stele, however, endured this damage and abuse. ‘It bore all silently, not speaking and without the slightest resistance’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 287). The reader is almost invited to feel sorry for it. However, like so many victims of attacks in the miracle stories of popular religion, the stele finds an uncanny way to respond. As if manifesting the ‘strange surplus of negative energy [which] is likely to be aroused from within the defaced thing itself’ (Taussig, 1999, p. 1), ‘faint, black marks’ appear on it, and so: ‘Everyone suddenly thought it was a ghost or an apparition’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 287). Fearing the dead man’s retribution, and seeing apparitions of celestial soldiers, they start kowtowing to Heaven, blaming their hubris on the authorities. Qiao depicts the villagers as the shallowest of Marxists, willing to abuse a gravestone momentarily, while their beliefs in spirits remains unchanged. In response, the authorities ‘blew up’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 287) and sent an investigator, scaring everyone into more mutual incriminations. The villagers settle on a culprit,
the old schoolteacher Xu Shuge, noting that he had seemed upset to see the grave dug up, and labeling him ‘Filial descendant of the landlord class, traitor to the poor and lower-middle peasants, sworn enemy of the revolution, one of Liu Shaoqi’s little reptiles’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 288).

The silent endurance of the gravestone has foreshadowed Xu’s fate. Xu also says nothing. Instead, they interrogate and use psychological torture on Xu’s grandson, who says Xu had made a rubbing of the stele before it had been abused. Why? The villagers surmise: ‘He figures on seeking a reward from that dead official after he dies and conspiring with the officials of the netherworld to return to the world and settle old scores’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 288). They cannot find the rubbing, and Xu refuses to talk, just laughs, even during three days of bullying and disfiguring humiliation. They pull out the hairs of his beard. The narrator says this is all like a play—merely entertaining—which adds relish to stepping on the stele.

Years of walking on the stone polish it featureless (wear and tear, along with neglect). So too the villagers forget its origin and the whole story: ‘We forgot everything about everything, and we no longer laughed’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 290). The meaning of these events had ‘died’ and ‘been buried’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 290). However, these events ‘were to be dug up again’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 290). A car arrives, with soldiers and an old ‘important official’ who goes to the mound and sighs ‘as though it had been his family’s ancestral grave’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 290). The soldiers recover a few ‘potsherds’ from the grave, and clean up the bridge ‘as if they were washing the face of a new bride’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 291) (the first of a sequence of bridal images). The official examines it closely but cries when he sees no detail is left. The villagers laugh at all this.

The official pays them to return the stele to the mound. For money, they enthusiastically comply, ‘as though we were carrying the sedan chair of a bride’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 291). They reflect, ‘Lucky for us we dug up the grave that year’—otherwise they couldn’t get this money putting it back. However, Xu Shuge comes forward and gives the official the rubbing. The official is so happy he bows; they both bow ‘like a bride and groom at a wedding’; and Xu also cries (Qiao, 1995, p. 292). The official says Xu has saved a national treasure, gives him $500, making him ‘the richest man in the village’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 292). The villagers are now resentful. ‘If we hadn’t obliterated the words on the stele, that piece of paper of his wouldn’t be worth a damn!’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 292). They try pressing Xu for a share of the money, with threats and harassment. Suddenly, Xu disappears, and panic sets in—people think someone has killed him (In the Cultural Revolution, the unexplained disappearance of teachers was reasonable grounds for at least suspecting their death.) Finally, Xu returns with workmen, who build a good bridge there to replace the stele. The villagers regret not making rubbings themselves so they’d have gotten rich too, and have had ten wives. They hate Xu for not letting them into his scam.

By the end of the story, like the words on the stele inscription, these various emotions in time pass away forgotten, while the bridge would ‘stand for a thousand years’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 295). The stele inscription however had gone forever. The ‘stele that was originally blank, was later inscribed, and now, after a thousand years, is no longer inscribed’ (Qiao, 1995, p. 295).

Much of the emotional power of this grimly satiric story derives from the lack of any sense of inherent value or identity among the villagers, who move their target freely as political trends, cash or whims dictate. For the villagers, categories and targets are fluid. Only Xu and the old official see the object as valuable in itself. They grow intimate with it, as with a bride on a wedding night. The object is given human agency and subjectivity through the fear of its retribution, its appearance as a ghost or warrior, and in the way that it stands for the dead man. The villagers feel they have
actually abused the long-dead man memorialised by the stele. They are unable to disassociate the stele from the spirit. In this regard they reproduce traditional attitudes towards ancestral tablets and other ‘seats’ of spirits such as images. By contrast, the schoolteacher Xu’s interest in the stele seems more aesthetic, romantic, historical. The tears he sheds seem to mourn not the dead man but the Chinese intellectual’s past severed by the iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution.

Conclusion

Attacks on icons did not always obliterate the objects, and violence against people-as-icons did not always lead to death, but both cases involved stripping away the external signs of identity. Victims were forced into the ‘jet plane’ posture, which meant no one could make eye contact with the victim. (Avoidance of eye contact is a technique associated with many kinds of violence.) Outward signs of personal identity such as jewelry were removed, and even hair styles were ruined. Words were written on the bodies and faces of victims, to clarify their sins, and the relentless accusations went on and on until the confession of sin came from the exhausted victim’s mouth. Struggle sessions were extended labours of erasure and re-inscription.

For iconoclasm to be meaningful, however, such an erasure of identity had to be accompanied by the inscription of new signs. We find iconoclasts involved in the production of icons in a number of ways: first, they created icons to oppose other icons: the face of Mao was undoubtedly a ‘religious’ icon, albeit an icon of iconoclasm. Second, iconoclasts sometimes physically constructed icons in order to destroy them, such as piling a heap of rubble to make a ‘grave’ of Confucius. The creation of the victim-icon may involve putting on an official’s hat (in order to remove it), dunce caps, cut hair, ink on the face, writing on the body, shoes hung around the neck, or imposed physical postures. Third, acts of iconoclasm required the definition of objects as meaningful victims or targets. Iconoclasts defined a fluid array of existing objects as icons or elements of iconography (a pair of pants, a gate, a human body). The definition was imposed without consent and spread in a viral manner. Hence we see in memoirs a tremendous anxiety over categories: Black or Red, ‘cultural’ or ‘religious’ or ‘superstitious.’

In ethical terms, of course, iconoclasm and murder are distinct categories, but the continuity of the objectifying rhetoric served to obscure the differences and therefore promoted violence. I mean ‘objectifying’ very literally: making people into things, and not merely through the objectification inherent in linguistic categories but also through direct enforcement on the body. At least in some cases, it was easier to attack a symbol than a living person, and so violence against people was facilitated by strategies which obscured the person.

References


Eric Reinders, Associate Professor in the Department of Religion, Emory University. He received his B.A. and M.Phil. from the University of Hull, in Yorkshire, England. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1997. He has also taught at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He specialises in Chinese religion, particularly Buddhist monasticism, the relations of monastic and state institutions, and missionary cultures. The primary theoretical theme of his work is the discourses and practices of the body. He has published articles on monastic discipline and on Western perceptions of Chinese religion. He is currently working on Spirits Hover Over the Ashes (a book on iconoclasm in East Asia co-written with Fabio Rambelli of Sapporo University). His Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies, on the role of the body in Christian missionary constructions of Chinese religions, is forthcoming from the University of California Press.