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Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia: A History

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A Review of *Buddhism and Iconoclasm* *In East Asia: A History*

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Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia: A History. By Fabio Rambelli and Eric Renders. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012, xvi + 247 pages, ISBN 978-1-4411-4509-3, (hardback), \$120.00.

This fascinating volume, by Fabio Rambelli and Eric Renders, serves primarily as an introduction to an academic field that does not yet formally exist: Destruction Studies. According to the authors, such a discipline would serve to address any and all instances of destruction within any world culture. Such a conclusion is natural when considering that this book focuses on the subject of iconoclasm—literally the breaking of sacred icons. While iconoclasm is well documented in the West, most notably among Byzantines and Protestants, very little work has been done in surveying, much less analyzing, iconoclastic acts throughout East Asia. Taking China and Japan as their specific foci, Rambelli and Renders demonstrate that iconoclasm is by no means limited to the Christian West. In this volume, the authors have not only laid the foundations for the academic study of the destruction of the sacred, but have (perhaps more importantly) undeniably expressed the sheer importance of this field.

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Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia: A History begins with an all-too-important preface. While the preface also discusses the origin of the book, its aims, and its organization, it is here that Rambelli and Renders provide their introduction to the concept of iconoclasm as a whole. They put forth the argument that the term should be expanded in order to include every form of destruction enacted upon any kind of sacred or religious object. They also propose that people as well as objects can be targets of iconoclasm. As novel as they may seem upon reading the preface, each of these arguments is bolstered by the chapters that follow.

After the preface, the book's contents are principally divided into three parts, arranged to proceed aesthetically from a discussion of the tangible and the material to the abstract and analytical. The first part, containing only one of the book's five chapters, focuses mainly on setting up the Buddhist framework that serves as the background to the work itself. Not simply a tradition whose adherents constantly employ the ritual use of icons, Buddhism specifically stresses the impermanence of all things—inclusive of its own doctrines. The Buddhist awareness and emphasis on transience, outlined in this chapter, lends itself particularly well to the authors' discussion of the destruction of the sacred.

The second division of the book comprises three chapters, each of which serves as a case study on iconoclasm in different cultural environments. Chapter two, authored solely by Rambelli, takes up an analysis of iconoclasm in Japan, while chapter three, written by Renders, examines the impact of iconoclasm upon China. Chapter five, written by both authors, departs from analyzing a specific East Asian culture and instead takes as its focus the cultural redefinition of icons as they are displayed in museums and become beacons of tourism. These three chapters serve as a unique collection of quotations, tales, and anecdotes that quickly illustrate the history of iconoclasm over a broad expanse of time. While such stories are frequently utilized, each serves to further illuminate the authors' descriptions of isolated iconoclastic actions.

In chapter two, Rambelli demonstrates that the scope of iconoclastic actions in Japan differed immensely according to the eras during which they occurred. During medieval times, iconoclasts focused on specific sites, people, or groups for specific reasons. No one attempted to uproot Buddhism entirely. By the early modern period, however, iconoclasm in Japan was directed towards the Buddhist tradition as a whole, often in an attempt to eradicate it. Finally, during the modern period, iconoclasm acted only to re-signify sacred objects and ritual icons as art, cultural properties, or otherwise as items with a wholly secular nature. This is particularly interesting because it seems to demonstrate a nationwide movement first towards, and then systematically away from, extreme iconoclastic acts. Rambelli also notes in this chapter that Japanese Buddhists primarily understood destruction of their temples and icons in two largely opposite ways: either that this destruction was intentional, deriving from the hidden realm of buddhas and *kami*, or that it was meant to purify, preserve, or otherwise improve upon Buddhism. Interestingly enough, this sets up a dichotomy that the authors examine heavily in chapter five.

Chapter three focuses on Christian iconoclastic acts and their effects in China. While the Japanese did not require Christian motivation, it seems that the majority of iconoclastic events that occurred in China were a direct result of the Christian prerogative to stifle worship of “pagan” deities and instruct the Chinese with regard to worshiping the Christian God. Renders notes that the early Jesuits were quick to accept Confucianism as beneficial for the Chinese due to its perceived traces of a monotheistic origin. In contrast, Daoists and Buddhists were labeled as idolaters, and Buddhism was specifically chastised for having first brought idolatry to China. Unique to China are accounts of icon mockery, in which native Chinese laugh as their statues are given meat to eat and did not, or when the statues are prodded and fall apart as a result. Renders also notes that the Chinese themselves took to iconoclasm in response to the Christians, though they focused on the destruction of the Christians’ books and buildings, and the missionaries themselves.

Renders continues, discussing the economically motivated iconoclasm undertaken by the Chinese Communist Party as well as the symbolic acts of iconoclasm that occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Such acts did not always focus on objects; indeed, monks and nuns were targets of iconoclasm when persecuted or forced to return to lay life. Renders rightly points out that in cases such as these where humans become redefined as objects, iconoclastic rhetoric can greatly obscure the difference between iconoclasm and murder.

Chapter four relates specifically to the authors' expanded definition of iconoclasm as defined in the preface. In it, they argue that any actions that jeopardize the sacredness of icons should be seen as iconoclastic. Thus, chapter four deals with the iconoclastic (though arguably far less destructive) acts of moving sacred objects to a new and wholly secular framework, such as when religious icons are placed in museums. The authors rightfully note that while such actions are ultimately preservative with regards to the physical object, the sacred context and ritual purpose of such icons has been utterly erased. Icons and ritual objects in museums, they argue, have been culturally redefined as works of art, ethnographic artifacts, or national or cultural properties. While other scholars may take issue with Rambelli and Renders's expanded definition of iconoclasm, it cannot be argued that the secular preservation of such religious objects does extend to the original sacrality of those objects. Perhaps the most interesting question posed by the authors in this chapter deals with the fact that Buddhist icons are specifically created, consecrated, and ritually maintained through obeisance and offerings. If such images are placed in museums where their ritual needs are not attended to, does that ultimately amount to an act of sacrilege? The authors also discuss the Japanese concepts of temple museums and "secret buddhas" (the most sacred Buddhist statues of a temple that are rarely—if ever—made available for public viewing). Furthermore, this chapter also addresses the movement of icons from one place to another and the impact of tourism upon Buddhist sacred objects, especially temples.

Chapter five is the only chapter to appear within part three of the book. In this chapter, Rambelli and Renders revisit the topic of destruction from an analytical and abstract angle. Rather than discuss specific instances of iconoclasm, the authors attempt to establish a framework by which such destructive acts may be catalogued, and herein lies the true value of the book. They argue that acts of destruction are not inherently chaotic and that destruction can be more effectively viewed as a form of cultural activity that follows innate cultural patterns. Such patterns may first be classified according to whether these destructive actions are believed to have been intentional, unintentional, or as a result of neglect. From this point, the authors define seven basic destructive acts on a sliding scale ranging from the simple cultural re-identification of an object to its complete and total obliteration. Interestingly, for each of these seven acts of destruction there is a parallel act based on the intention to preserve an icon. For example, an icon may be confiscated or hidden with a harmful intention, or it may be hidden with the intent to preserve, like the “secret buddhas” mentioned above, or in cases of sutras buried underground.

While this framework is simple at its core, the authors take it one step farther. Each of their seven destructive acts may take a human being, rather than an icon, as its object with the intent to persecute. Such acts again range from one’s cultural re-identification (for example, the laicization a nun) to one’s total obliteration. Scarily, when these acts take human beings as an object, they bear an uncanny resemblance to ascetic practices. For example, the disfiguring of a monk through torture parallels the self-mutilation of a monk who burns his fingers. Likewise, the persecution of a monk to the point of his total obliteration mirrors a monk’s own ascetic self-immolation or martyrdom. Unsettling as these parallels may be, they all fit nicely within the authors’ expanded definition of iconoclasm.

Finally, the authors define two additional terms to aid future Destruction Studies scholars: semioclasm (a breakdown to various

degrees of the semiotic meaning of an object) and hieroclasm (the elimination of sacred value from formerly sacred objects when they are re-signified as cultural relics or art). After this chapter's close, a short conclusion serves to tie the entire work together.

Regardless of whether or not Destruction Studies ever takes shape as a formal academic discipline, *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia: A History* will serve as a good model for future research. A remarkably original and informative work, it certainly blazes a trail for any future scholars (of East Asia or otherwise) that deal even tangentially with the destruction of the sacred.