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The Animated Image in Asia: Image Consecration and Desecration

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Abstract:

Throughout history religious images have elicited strongly conflicting sentiments. For some, images are seductive and compel an inordinate amount of interest and attraction. Others see them as repulsive, deceptive, and dangerous objects that incite violent acts of iconoclastic destruction. It is precisely the fear and disdain of certain images that inspired iconoclasts—from the Ancient Near East, France, England, and the Netherlands to China, India, Africa, Mexico, and Afghanistan—to smash images. Images are critical to the understanding of religion and religious art not merely due to their connections with objects in temples, monasteries, shrines, and homes, but also because of their connections to “icons,” “idols,” “magic,” and “fetishes” which have been at the heart of lively discussions within religious traditions and in the study of religion. Animated images are often denigrated by referring to them as “idols” and “fetishes,” which became situated on the wrong side of the line separating primitives and idolaters from the civilized. Once an image is referred to as an “idol” or “fetish,” you know you have entered a battleground, shaken by charges of paganism, heathenism, magic, and idolatry. This talk will focus on a specific category of images, namely those that are transformed through a process of animation that enlivens them. One of the primary ways to confer, confirm, or authorize the sacrality of a manufactured image as being enlivened is through an intricate consecration ritual. The consecration process generally involves several steps that include the anointing of the image and the insertion of relics or other things, including live animals, symbolic viscera, and *materia medica*, into a cavity in the body of the image. There is a long prehistory of cultic images before they were categorized as art since secular modernity merely constitutes a few frames on the long reel of history. Throughout most of world history, and in most parts of the world, religious traditions have engaged with images, either in theory or in practice, positively or negatively. This talk will demonstrate just how ubiquitous these practices were cross-culturally, but will narrow its focus to specific image consecration rites found in East Asia and why certain images, especially those perceived to have magical powers, elicited such strong reactions throughout history.

Selection of Suggested Readings:

- Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1992).
- Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994).
- Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000. First French edition 1994).
- Helmut Brinker, *Secrets of the Sacred: Empowering Buddhist Images in Clear, in Code, and Cache* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2011).
- Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989).
- Richard H. Davis, ed., *Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1998).
- Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997).
- Robert DeCaroli, *Image Problems: The Origin and Development of the Buddha's Image in Early South Asia* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2015).

- Hubert Delahaye, "Les Antecedents magiques des statues chinoises," in *Revue d'esthétique*, n.s., 5 (1983): 45-54.
- Glen Dudbridge, "Buddhist Images in Action: Five Stories from the Tang," in *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 10 (1998): 377-391.
- David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989).
- Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998).
- Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel ed., *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art* (Karlsruhe: Center for Art and Media. 2002).
- Lin Wei-Ping, *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2015).
- James Robson, "Hidden in Plain View: Concealed Contents, Secluded Statues, and Revealed Religion," in Paula Varsano, ed., *The Rhetoric of Hiddenness in Traditional Chinese Culture* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2016), pp. 117-205.
- James Robson, Seunghye Lee, and Youn-mi Kim, "Introduction: The Korean Pokchang Tradition and the Placing of Objects in Buddhist Statues," in *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 28 (2019): 1-21.
- Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf eds., *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001).
- Deborah Sommer, "Destroying Confucius: Iconoclasm in the Confucian Temple," in Thomas A. Wilson ed., *On Sacred Grounds: Culture, Society, Politics, and the Formation of the Cult of Confucius* (Cambridge: Harvard Asia Center, 2002), 95-133.
- Alexander Coburn Soper, *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China* (Ascona: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1959).
- Michel Strickmann, *Mantras et Mandarins: Le bouddhisme tantrique en Chine* (Paris : Gallimard, 1996).
- Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004)
- Donald K. Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004).

Key Words [When two words are separated by a "/" the first is Chinese and the second is Japanese]:

zongjiao/shūkyō 宗教: The terms in Chinese and Japanese used to render the term "religion" *mixin*

迷信: superstition

minjian xinyang 民間信仰: popular religion (folk religion)

ling 靈: The notion that something is efficacious or numinous (imbued with spiritual potency) *shenxiang*

神像: Images of divinities or divine images

pratiṣṭhā: Consecration ceremony done for monasteries, temples, and especially buddha-images in India

kaiguang 開光: "Opening the light [of the eyes]" or *dianyan* 點眼 "dotting the eyes"; the painting of the pupils of the statue's eyes to "enliven" it as part of a consecration ritual.

zōnai nōnyūhin 像内納入品: The Japanese term for objects placed inside of statues *pokchang* 腹藏: The Korean term for the practice of enshrining things inside of statues *sheli/shari* 舍利: relics *wuzang* 五臟:

"five viscera" (heart, liver, spleen, lungs, kidneys). Symbolic viscera are inserted in statues.

yizhi 意旨: A "consecration certificate" *fu*

符: talisman

Cultural Revolution: The period from 1966-1976 when religion in China was attacked as being a feudal superstition and many cultural relics (including Buddhist images) were destroyed