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# The Destruction of Immoral Temples in Qing China*

Vincent Goossaert

China, like other pre-modern East Asian countries, was characterized by a pluralistic religious system. Although the Qing Imperial state (1644–1911) recognized this system by granting freedom of practice to a wide range of distinct religious traditions, it was not, for all that matter, tolerant. What was not included within the corpus of officially recognized practices was the object of repression in its various forms. This repression generally remained only a threat, but in some cases the threat was carried out and the reasons and ways in which it was carried out were generally complex and numerous.

This article proposes to examine repressive acts as not being necessarily self-evident, as a way of understanding the logic and workings of a state apparatus in its dealings with the religious domain, a particularly difficult area to control. The case studies allowing us to explore this approach abound: repression of banned religious groups and practices are a common feature throughout Chinese history. The most famous examples are undoubtedly the campaigns against "superstitions" that occurred during the twentieth century.[1] For the preceding late imperial period, the better known cases were those involving the Qing state's battle against devotional movements whose teachings it defined as heterodox (*xiejiao* 邪教, also referred to as "sectarian movements" in historiography), and which were at times suspected of harbouring insurrectional schemes, as well as against Christianity, during the period it was banned (1723–1842).

However, other less renowned or less dramatic forms of repression are just as significant in understanding the dynamics at work behind repressive action. I have focused here on the study of more ordinary, but no less violent forms of control, in order to explore the

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1 Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (work in progress).

everyday mechanism of a repressive state: the destruction of "immoral temples" (*yinci* 淫祠). This very flexible category includes all those temples which officials (at all levels of the bureaucracy) regarded as unacceptable and which therefore had to be destroyed. In some instances, the official led the attack in person or through his armed guards, in dramatic performances in which statues were drowned or decapitated, liturgical material destroyed and leaders of the cult punished. I will first discuss the banning of these temples within the framework of the state's religious policy before defining the outlines of the "immoral" category. The accounts of repressive action presented here are mostly drawn from collections of anecdotes, which provide the most detailed account; while official sources provide more examples, they are generally poor in contextual information. Finally I will attempt to show the role the destruction of temples played in the projects of religious reform undertaken by local officials.

The present article covers the period of the Qing dynasty while referring to incidents that took place under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), a period which has been better studied from the perspective of temple destruction and whose legal system was, for the most part, adopted by the Qing. I will not cover the period beyond 1898 which marked the introduction of a new policy based on very different concepts and schemes and which led to destruction on a much larger scale, i.e. the campaign to "destroy temples in order to build schools," which resulted in the destruction of the majority of Chinese temples in the twentieth century.[2]

The decision to cover such a long period of time is justified by the stability of the legal texts on which religious policy was based, the state's ideology, and the social class which provided the officials responsible for implementing the policy. I will avoid dwelling on the imperial-political aspect of the issue, even though the important variations in the frequency with which destructions occurred is closely linked to the larger political history. In my study of the numerous cases documented between 1644 and 1898, I have preferred to focus on the local logic behind the confrontations and different situations rather than on chronological order. The accounts of destruction present a coherent corpus of cases characterized by strained relations between government officials and local religious communities, occurring within a relatively stable normative context (state ideology, laws), and sharing a number of similar constraints.

The purpose of such an approach is to gain a better understanding of what, in concrete terms, took place on the field rather than to analyse the events in terms of Qing dynastic history and centralized policy making. I have attempted to identify the numerous factors that influenced the turn of events when government officials decided to engage in destruction of "immoral temples." While drawing upon previous research on the history of such destructions, I have attempted to complete the information provided by normative texts with accounts derived not only from official records but also from journalistic and literary sources (in the form of collected anecdotes). Such sources shed light on less famous and far less documented cases involving small-scale destructions, as well as the

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[2] Vincent Goossaert, "1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?" *Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 2 (2006), pp. 307–36.

cases in which attempts at destruction failed or resulted in compromise. Indeed, the impression gained from the more famous episodes taken alone is that destruction was an exceptional event, while in reality destruction and the threat of destruction were fairly common phenomena, and it is this "ordinary" type of destruction which particularly interests me here.

## The Religious Policy of the Qing State

The religious policy of the Qing represents a vast subject of study which has been relatively little explored beyond general principles. There were important variations between theory developed in the normative texts (code, imperial edicts, local and provincial regulations) and local administrative practice. Both theory and practice varied with time and space. To begin with, one must take into account the fact that the religious policy of the Qing did not acknowledge the religious sphere as separate and independent from the political domain, even though religious issues (cults, deities, sacrifices, rituals, specialists) were clearly identified and dealt with in specific ways. The Emperor, recognized as the supreme doctrinal authority, had absolute control over the Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist canons, which together formed the cornerstone of orthodoxy. Indeed, it was the Emperor who regulated all cults and rituals (but not beliefs). The Emperor was the guarantor of the official ideology which was shared to a certain extent by all government officials and which constituted Confucianism in its rigoristic form. However, taken individually, the religiosity of the political elite (government officials and more broadly the gentry, i.e. those individuals who had passed at least the first of the three levels of civil-service examination) was in fact very rich and diverse.

Among the different religious practices and traditions recognized as orthodox, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism represented the main clerical institutions. All three were as such protected by the state, on the condition, however (for Buddhism and Taoism), that they remain within the limits of the prescribed monastic forms. The Confucians were managed directly through the school and examination system. The integration of Buddhism and Taoism within the state apparatus was marked by the state's nomination of religious officials who were theoretically (very little in practice) in charge of the Buddhist and Taoist clergies. Other categories of specialists, such as spirit-mediums who often played an important role in "immoral cults," acted outside the law.

With regard to local forms of religious life, the state recognized a number of cults by integrating them into the "Register of sacrifices" (*sidian* 祀典), a process described by historians as canonization, which did not prevent these cults from retaining their autonomy in every respect. All other cults were (in theory) prohibited. In the same way, countless imperial edicts and proclamations by local officials (from provincial governors to prefects to district magistrates, the latter representing the lowest level in the administration) were issued to distinguish the authorized forms of cults, rituals and festivals from those which were banned. In a general way, communities and cults that conformed with the local society's established order (territorial communities of village or neighbourhood temples, clans, guilds) were officially recognized, whereas devotional organizations with their own independent networks (including the Christians between 1723 and 1842) were banned and

occasionally persecuted. The repressive action of government officials usually involved the arrest and punishment (beatings, cangue, exile, and, in some cases, even execution) of the religious leaders, and the destruction of material goods (place of worship, icons,[3] and texts).

The elite's hostile discourse and repressive action were essentially aimed at four categories of religious practice that can be singled out for the purposes of this analysis but that frequently overlap: devotional groups, intervention of the Buddhist or Taoist clergy in the public arena (outside monasteries), major community festivals with processions and opera performances characterized by the active participation of women,[4] "immoral cults" and the role played in them by spirit-mediums.[5]

The ability of the state and its representatives to enforce these laws was restricted owing to lack of means (shortage of staff notably) and to the population's resistance, including the local elite (members of the gentry, rich merchants), which constituted an essential pillar for the officials' action. Indeed, religious communities, temple associations and devotional groups were fundamental to the constitution of the local population's identity and self-organization (maintenance of public order, management of conflict and collective resources, charity). In practice, the issue of their legality was more often avoided, either through negotiation and compromise, or through mutual ignorance between the religious communities and the state representatives, rather than being dealt with through effective control.

In concrete terms, the local official's motivation to apply the ambitious religious policy decided far away in the capital and to suppress the vast range of banned (but widely practised) religious cults varied according to different criteria. Taken individually, government officials were more or less zealous and therefore more or less inclined to pursue the religious policy they were meant to follow. Their activism was also determined by the political and religious context of the time, which underwent cycles of alternation between phases of laissez-faire and phases of repression. Bureaucratic literature (the Code and its commentaries, compendiums of imperial edicts, jurisprudence, central and local archives, handbooks for officials, collected works of famous government officials, stele inscriptions) provide an impressive number of proclamations banning all kinds of religious practices; their real impact on the field, however, is difficult to measure. The issue of immoral temples provides a valuable case study on one of the many practices which the central state required its officials to eradiquate. It also sheds light on the general processes at work behind the religious policy carried out by local officials.

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3 I use the term "icon" here to designate the various representations of deities (statues, paintings, tablets); statues are the most common form of representation in the examples discussed.

4 On policies aimed at banning women from temples, see Vincent Goossaert, "Irrepressible Female Piety: Late Imperial Bans on Women Visiting Temples," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 10 (2008). This is a special issue on "Women, Gender and Religion in Premodern China."

5 On the increasingly strained relationship between the gentry and spirit-mediums in late imperial times, see Donald Sutton, "From Credulity to Scorn: Confucians Confront the Spirit Mediums in Late Imperial China," *Late Imperial China* 21, no. 2 (2000), pp. 1–39.

## The Case of "Immoral Temples"

The category of "immoral temples" dates from antiquity and the foundational texts of Confucian theology and liturgy. The *locus classicus* was: "a sacrifice (to a deity) whose worship is banned is an 'immoral sacrifice' (*yinsi* 淫祀); immoral sacrifices bring no blessing."[6] The notion of "immoral temple" (and immoral cult or sacrifice) was therefore determined by the state's definition of authorized and prescribed cults, which together formed the "Register of sacrifices" (specific to each district and listed in the local gazetteer), and were also referred to as orthodox (the deities whose cult was authorized were called *zhengshen* 正神 [orthodox deities]). Incidentally, many texts from Ming and Qing periods provide examples in which the destruction of immoral temples is directly related to the upkeep of temples in the "Register of sacrifices," in which officials denounced the wealth of immoral temples compared to the decrepit state of the other temples and proposed to seize the goods of the former in order to restore the latter.

What is not orthodox is considered as heterodox (*xie* 邪) or immoral (*yin*)—two notions that widely overlap, even though the term *xie* applies more specifically to texts and devotional groups, whereas the notion of *yin* refers more to the notions of interdiction, excess (in terms of money spent and emotions expressed) and immorality (mainly sexual immorality in late imperial times). The notion of heterodoxy was closely related to that of morality since the order of the Universe and doctrine of the Imperial regime were fundamentally moral.

The foundational texts from antiquity reflect a feudal approach in the regulation of the different cults and sacrifices which were mapped onto the social classes. While the feudal aspect disappeared at the beginning of our era, the notion of "immoral cult" remained at the core of all discourse on religion and its control by the Imperial state until the end of the Empire, and was associated with the policy to ban the worship of deities that were not recognized by the state. The state continued to co-opt more and more cults, but also to wage war on others. The pivotal period of the Song dynasty (960–1279) is marked by the acceleration of these two concomitant processes.[7]

In fact, the notion of "immoral cults" rarely appears in the normative texts of the

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6 *Liji* 禮記, chapter "Quli" 曲禮.

7 Liu Liming 劉黎明, "Lun Songdai minjian yinci" 論宋代民間淫祠, *Sichuan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 四川大學學報(哲學社會科學版), 2004, no. 5, pp. 95–101; Pi Qingsheng 皮慶生, "Songren de zhengsi, yinsi guan" 宋人的正祀、淫祀觀, *Dongyue luncong* 東岳論叢 26, no. 4 (2005), pp. 25–35; Yang Jianhong 楊建宏, "Luelun Songdai yinsi zhengce" 略論宋代淫祀政策, *Guizhou shehui kexue* 貴州社會科學, 2005, no. 3, pp. 149–52; Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Robert Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

Qing state,[8] but appears essentially in texts written by members of the elite (in the form of anecdotes, local gazetteers, essays and official correspondence) describing local forms of religion. As a result, the content of the notion was not fixed: it was not so much an objective category defined by the state than a polemical tool. The Qing state did not explicitly require its officials to "destroy the immoral temples," but the latter perceived such destructions as part of their duty.

Thus, in Qing society "immoral" (*yin*) acts as an insult, a label, a subjective category: everyone recognizes that *yinci* exist and that they must be destroyed, but no one recognizes oneself as such: the *yinci* are cults practised by others. The *yinci* category and the acts of destruction it served to justify thus served as a tool in the reconfiguration of the religious scene to meet the purposes of countless specific schemes which might have shared the same discourse but not necessarily the same aims. On this account, the state was not the only institution in Chinese history to carry out such destructions: Buddhist and Taoist institutions were also associated with such actions, for instance during the first millennium, in the struggle against "demonic" cults, when they first opposed local cults before adopting a closer, symbiotic relationship.[9] Under the Qing dynasty, the Heavenly Master Zhang 張天師, head of the Taoist administration (also a guarantor of the orthodoxy of cults and rituals and responsible for the canonization of local deities[10]) played a role in the destruction of temples he regarded as demonic.[11] During the period which interests us here, the destruction of *yinci* were mostly the acts of zealous officials who wished to prove that they were up to their task of morally educating (*jiaohua* 教化) the local population, and occasionally of local activists or Confucian fundamentalists without any official status.

According to the fundamentalists, who stuck with the *locus classicus* (the *Liji*

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8 The notion of *yinci* does not appear in the Code (*Da Qing lüli* 大清律例); in the compendium of laws and regulations (*Da Qing huidian shili* 大清會典事例, 1909 edition, restricted access online on the website of Academia Sinica), the term appears only twice: in a law (1675, *juan* 132) condemning magistrates who allowed the construction of *yinci,* and in an imperial edict (1824, *juan* 400) ordering the destruction of Wutong temples that were built following Tang Bin's campaign. "Immoral sacrifice" (*yinsi*), a closely related term, also appears only twice.

9 The reconciliation of the Taoist and Buddhist institutions on the one hand, and local cults on the other, put an end to the destruction campaigns initiated by the two institutions. However, during the modern period the Taoist clergy continued to incorporate in its liturgy the ritual (symbolic) destruction of temples (*pomiao* 破廟) possessed by demonic spirits who deceived and harmed the people.

10 On the Heavenly Master and his role in the management of local cults, see Vincent Goossaert, "Bureaucratic Charisma: The Zhang Heavenly Master Institution and Court Taoists in Late-Qing China," *Asia Major,* 3d ser., 17, no. 2 (2004), pp. 121–59. Tang Bin himself is reputed to have requested the help of the Heavenly Master in his campaign against the Wutong: Jiang Zhushan 蔣竹山, "Tang Bin jinhui Wutong shen: Qingchu zhengzhi jingying daji tongsu wenhua de ge'an" 湯斌禁毀五通神——清初政治菁英打擊通俗文化的個案, *Xin shixue* 新史學 6, no. 2 (1995), pp. 67–110.

11 Goossaert, "Bureaucratic Charisma," p. 132.

definition quoted above), all cults that were not included within the Register of sacrifices were immoral. Several officials even went so far as to include within this category a great number of cults which they judged inappropriate, even though they were on the register of sacrifices *for other places*—one important example is that of the God of the Eastern Peak.[12] For the others, however, such a definition was far too wide because it applied to the majority of cults practised in local society since the process of canonization was very selective. In practice, even though the majority of temples were not included within the Register of sacrifices, they were considered by the majority of the elite as orthodox.[13] Only a minority of temples which were perceived to directly disturb the moral order of the Universe and the Empire were considered as *yin*. From the Han dynasty to the end of the Empire in 1912, in the towns and throughout the Chinese countryside, new temples dedicated to local saints who had not been officially recognized and which therefore should have been classified as *yinci* were consecrated on a regular basis. However, besides a small number of zealots, no one attacked these temples which were associated with territorial cults and which did not undermine social order, and thus occupied a grey, intermediary zone between those cults which were recognized and those which were actually targeted for repression.

This loose boundary between tolerated illegality and condemned immorality explains why the destruction of "immoral temples" concerned very different targets at different times and in different contexts.[14] The delimitation of this boundary was subjective and, moreover, constantly modified by the imperial regime itself which, through the process of canonization, included new deities (previously considered as immoral!) within the Register of sacrifices, thereby protecting them from destruction. One such example is the cult of Liu Mengjiang 劉猛將, a territorial deity, protector of crops in the region of Jiangnan, which became an official target for destruction in a campaign in 1685 before it gained official recognition through canonization in 1724.

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12 Zhao Kesheng 趙克生 and Yu Haiyong 于海涌, "Mingdai yinci zhi jin" 明代淫祠之禁, *Shehui kexue jikan* 社會科學輯刊 146 (2003), p. 127, document the extreme case in which Ming officials undertook the destruction of all the temples under their jurisdiction that were not included in the Register of sacrifices.

13 Wang Jian 王健, "Sidian, sisi yu yinci: Ming Qing yilai Suzhou diqu minjian xinyang kaocha" 祀典、私祀與淫祀：明清以來蘇州地區民間信仰考察, *Shilin* 史林, 2003, no. 1, pp. 50–56, uses the notion of *sisi* 私祀 (private sacrifice), which is also found in several local gazetteers, to designate the vast range of cults that were not included within the Register of sacrifices but that were nevertheless widely accepted (including by officials) as orthodox and that theoretically were not supposed to be repressed.

14 The variety of definitions of "immoral cults" that appear in official records has been well studied, especially with regard to the Ming period, by Zhao Xianhai 趙獻海, "Mingdai hui 'yinci' xianxiang qianxi" 明代毀"淫祠"現象淺析, *Dongbei shida xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 東北師大學報(哲學社會科學版), 2002, no. 1, pp. 28–33; Zhao Kesheng and Yu Haiyong, "Mingdai yinci zhi jin"; and Kojima Tsuyoshi 小島毅, "Seishi to inshi: Fukken no chihôshi ni okeru kijutsu to rinri" 正祠と淫祠：福建の地方志における記述と論理, *Tôyô Bunka Kenkyûjo kiyô* 東洋文化研究所紀要 114 (1991), pp. 87–213.

Cults condemned as *yinci* were, in good part, cults which in one way or another radically challenged the established morality. The most famous example is that of the Wutong 五通 (Five Powers) gods of sudden and undeserved wealth, who granted money to husbands in exchange for their wives' favours.[15] Another example is that of Hu Tianbao 胡田寶, patron saint of male same-sex marriages who was resented for profaning the sacred institution of marriage.[16] Other, otherwise unknown deities who manifested themselves through spirit-mediums to offer their services outside the dominant moral framework were also the target of accusation. The general aim was to condemn any group or institution that was founded on an inappropriate, immoral relationship between men and gods. It was not, strictly speaking, a question of ideology. However, since the state destroyed temples on the basis of their inappropriate theological foundations, these destructions may be perceived as a struggle against heterodoxy. It is important to specify that the struggle did not stem from a rationalizing or anti-religious discourse: above all things, *yinci* were charged with "profanation" (*xie* 褻, *xiedu* 褻瀆) of the temples and gods of the Empire.

The documented cases of destruction which I was able to find for the Qing period may be classified into three broad categories. The first category includes cases of concerted campaigns at a district or provincial level, which had the support of local governors and even, in some cases, of the Emperor himself, and whose purpose was to destroy all the temples dedicated to a given deity or temples sharing a certain number of similar characteristics within the more general context of religious reform. The second category refers to temples or hermitages managed by individuals accused of immoral conduct (very often, female or male members of the Buddhist clergy accused of debauchery); in such cases, but not always, the temple was turned into a Confucian temple or public edifice (school, granary, etc.[17]). The last category, undoubtedly the most common, related to situations where cults managed by entrepreneurial leaders enjoyed spectacular and rapid growth, attracting throngs of adepts as well as the attention of officials, who often took immediate measures to suppress the cult before it became an uncontrollable movement. These religious entrepreneurs were either members of the Buddhist or Taoist clergy, spirit-

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15 Richard von Glahn, "The Enchantment of Wealth: The God Wutong in the Social History of Jiangnan," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51, no. 2 (1991), pp. 651–714.

16 Michael Szonyi, "The Cult of Hu Tianbao and the Eighteenth-Century Discourse of Homosexuality," *Late Imperial China* 19, no. 1 (1998), pp. 1–25.

17 See, for instance, "Sha nigu long" 殺尼姑衖, in Liang Gongchen 梁恭辰 (1814–?), *Chishang caotang biji* 池上草堂筆記 (1843. Kaifeng: Yiwentang, 1873; Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1970), *juan* 5, pp. 35a–b; "Sengni huiji" 僧尼穢跡, in Chen Qiyuan 陳其元 (1811–1881), *Yongxian zhai biji* 庸閒齋筆記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), *juan* 8, p. 185; Yu Yue 俞樾 (1821–1906), *Youtai xianguan biji* 右台仙館筆記 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), *juan* 11, pp. 292–93 (all three dating from the nineteenth century); other cases of destruction following lawsuits are discussed in Wu Xin 吳欣, "Qingdai simiao chanye jiufen zhong de guojia yu shehui—yi dang'an yu pandu ziliao wei li" 清代寺廟產業糾紛中的國家與社會——以檔案與判牘資料為例, *Zhongguo shehui lishi pinglun* 中國社會歷史評論 7 (2006), pp. 235–48.

mediums, or else persons without any particular religious qualification. They all had in common the fact that they created *ex nihilo* cults that offered services (healing, divination, etc.) to individuals rather than to groups, without relying on a pre-existing social base and often without any intention of founding a community.

The first category mentioned above, which refers to cases of large-scale destruction reflecting a proactive reformist policy, is the most well-known of the three—the other two categories, from the point of view of historiography, are more anecdotic in nature and pertain to local history. The first category was largely attested during the Ming dynasty: notably, the campaigns encouraged by the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–1567) to convert "immoral temples" into schools between 1520 and 1540.[18] Another example can be seen in the very ambitious campaigns of religious reform in the province of Guandong during which officials, such as Wei Jiao 魏校 (1483–1543) and Ye Chunji 葉春及 (*fl.* 1570), destroyed a great number of immoral temples and Buddhist institutions in an attempt to build a new network of Confucian temples and to reform and integrate spirit-mediums within an orthodox ritual framework.[19] While "immoral temples" constituted a special target, Buddhist institutions, whose resources (land notably) were taken over by the lineages and other institutions under the control of the gentry, were also particularly aimed at in these campaigns.

Under the Qing, such large-scale campaigns of systematic destruction were not so common. Moreover, they usually lacked the anti-Buddhist element observed in the destruction campaigns under the Ming and were not so clearly directed towards the building of new institutions such as schools and Confucian temples. Although the leaders of the 1898 reforms and subsequent *huimiao banxue* 毀廟辦學 movements evoked Qing precedents to justify their actions—i.e. seizing temples and turning them into schools—such campaigns were in fact relatively rare and generally aimed at temples in bad condition which officials declared "in a state of ruin" in order to take them over.

The most famous of the large-scale campaigns under the Qing is undoubtedly that of Tang Bin 湯斌 (1627–1687) who, as governor of the province of Jiangsu, undertook the destruction of the Wutong and Liu Mengjiang temples at Suzhou, the provincial capital, and then throughout the entire province, with an aim to reform local customs and practices. The fact that women participated voluntarily or involuntarily (through possession) in

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18 Sarah Schneewind, "Competing Institutions: Community Schools and 'Improper Shrines' in Sixteenth Century China," *Late Imperial China* 20, no. 1 (1999), pp. 85–106; David Faure, "The Emperor in the Village: Representating the State in South China," in *State and Court Ritual in China,* ed. Joseph P. Mcdermott (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 267–98. Zhao Xianhai, "Mingdai hui 'yinci' xianxiang qianxi," pp. 28–30 documents several cases in which a memorial requesting the destruction of all immoral temples in the Empire is approved by the Emperor. In most cases, with the exception of the first reign (Hongwu, 1368–1398) and the period between 1520 and 1540, the approval was not followed by an effective mobilization of the bureaucracy. Incidentially, Zhao also mentions cases in which the Emperor strongly tempers the destructive zeal of his officials.

19 David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 101–7.

these cults was a determining factor in these campaigns. Upon taking his functions as governor in 1685, Tang Bin immediately went to the major temple of Shanfang shan 上方山 in Suzhou to destroy the Wutong statues in person (the wooden effigies by fire and the terracotta statues with a club) and to drive away the spirit-mediums and Buddhists. He then ordered his subordinates throughout the province to follow his example.[20] Tang's campaign had a deep impact because he had the strong backing of the Emperor, and because it spread throughout the entire province and resulted in the destruction of several hundred temples, some of which were very large.

Another example is the fight against devotional groups whose teachings were qualified as heterodox. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed several campaigns approved by the Emperor and aimed at the mass destruction of the Temples of the Three Religion, temples where Buddha, Confucius and Laozi were worshipped on an equal footing, a practice which, in the eyes of local officials, pointed strongly to heterodoxy.[21] There were other large-scale campaigns which concerned the peripheral provinces and which corresponded to phases of accelerated sinicization of the local population by the state through the eradication of cults proper to non-Han ethnic groups. Thus during the Daoguang period (1820–1850), the governors of Guizhou and Yunnan "ordered all the magistrates of their province to lead their troops in person to all the temples in which non-orthodox deities were worshipped, and to throw the statues into rivers, destroy the temples and turn them into schools, or temples dedicated to orthodox deities."[22]

Such large-scale campaigns of destruction represent only a small proportion of known cases, especially during the Qing period. More often than not, destruction was decided and acted out in a very local context. The greater frequency of large-scale destruction campaigns under the Ming does not necessarily mean that there was more violence than when under the Qing. In order to understand the nature of this violence, it is helpful to examine not only accounts relating to large-scale campaigns but also those relating to cases in which destruction was more narrowly focused.

## Narratives of Destruction

Not all destructions represented cases of repression: for instance, sometimes a person or group sought personal revenge against a given deity who had refused to grant a request or

[20] Jiang Zhushan, "Tang Bin jinhui Wutong shen," who places the destruction within the broader context of Tang's religious reform policies; see also Wu Jianhua 吳建華, "Tang Bin hui yinci shijian" 湯斌毀淫祠事件, *Qingshi yanjiu* 清史研究, 1996, no. 1, pp. 93–98; von Glahn, "The Enchantment of Wealth" and *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 236–44.

[21] Timothy Brook, "Rethinking Syncretism: The Unity of the Three Teachings and Their Joint Worship in Late-imperial China," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 21 (1993), pp. 13–44.

[22] "Wu Wenjie yishi" 吳文節逸事, in Chen Kangqi 陳康祺 (1840–1890), *Langqian jiwen erbi* 郎潛紀聞二筆 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), *juan* 13, p. 576.

to come in aid. Anecdotes abound in which a person destroys a deity's icon because the deity betrayed him or her. While these cases help understand the relationship the Chinese maintained with icons and places of worship, they nevertheless belong to a different category than destructions with a political purpose, which constitute a distinct type of narrative.

One common theme in bureaucratic hagiography is the story of the official who, upon taking up his new functions, discovers that the local population participates in immoral forms of worship. The new official immediately proceeds to the temple in question, accompanied by his men, to destroy[23] (by axe or by fire) the statues and other ritual instruments, and to drive away or punish those responsible for the cult. He then ensures that the temple is reconverted to serve a moral purpose, either as a school or a Confucian temple, in which case it is generally re-dedicated to one of the national deities such as Guandi 關帝 or Mazu 媽祖.[24] The act of destruction is mainly directed at the icons, but has nothing to do with iconoclasm, since the destroyed images are generally replaced by new images; it is not so much the representation than what is represented which is at stake.

Such accounts are numerous and each has its own specific details, but there are a number of core elements that appear almost systematically in all the stories. The official comes across an "immoral" temple during his travels, or hears of an immoral cult through a rumour or a complaint. This particular detail demonstrates the lack of the official's knowledge (and therefore control) of the local religion: it was not until the twentieth century that officials were provided with complete lists of all the active temples under their jurisdiction. As a result, the accounts from the Qing period reflect an arbitrary approach in the process of destruction: the magistrates decide to destroy only when they are informed of the existence of a cult that has provoked the resentment of the local elite; many cases never come to their ears. One journalist writes of a case that occurred in 1878, in which a healing cult, led by a Buddhist and a soldier who was healed by the intervention of an Immortal, became a major movement. The local magistrate, upon being informed, destroys the entire site (a make-shift edifice, as the actual temple was not yet complete), confiscates the money accumulated by the cult leaders and punishes them. The author expresses his indignation at the fact that it took two weeks for the local official to be informed and to react, despite the fact that his office was located close to the site in question, and reflects on how local officials may be better informed of such affairs.[25]

Other core elements in the destruction narratives include the presence of women in the incriminated temple, the licentious iconography of the deities, as well as the heterodox nature of the rituals that take place within the temple. Officials confronted with the

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23 The most frequently used term is *hui* 毁, but *chai* 拆 (to demolish), *che* 撤 (to eliminate), *ge* 革 (to change), or *chu* 除 (to get rid of) are also used.

24 When Christianity was banned in 1723, an imperial edict ordering the Churches to be turned into temples dedicated to Mazu was issued.

25 "Zhenxian jiangshi" 真仙降世, *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai: Shenbao guan, daily), GX4/8/23 (19 September 1878); "Yue 'Zhenxian jiangshi' shi yougan er yan" 閱真仙降世事有感而言, *Shenbao,* GX4/8/27 (23 September 1878).

immoral cult are described as being shocked by its sexual nature (the above-mentioned Hu Tianbao and Wutong cases providing good examples).[26] In such cases, the official proceeds to the temple with his guards or, if necessary, with soldiers from the local garrison, destroys the statue and throws it into the river. The intrinsic violence of such acts is crucial and never denied in the accounts. It also has value as a pedagogical tool: for instance, one illustrated account published in the press in 1887 recounts the story of an official who, upon hearing of a temple dedicated to a serpent-deity (a typical example of immoral cult), orders the villagers to destroy it, but in vain. He then meets with the village elders inside the temple, explaining to them that the cult is immoral, illegal and will only bring misfortune. He decapitates the statue with his own hands and orders his men to burn all the placards and other wooden inscriptions in the temple. In the end, the temple is reconsecrated to the God of Earth and crops.[27]

Another recurrent element in these accounts is the judicial character of the destruction. For instance, it is said that when Tang Bin destroyed the Wutong temple in Suzhou in 1685, he first had the doors of the temple sealed, before removing the statues' garments. He then had the statues whipped and chained before destroying them.[28] In 1826, in a small town between Shanghai and Suzhou, a young woman who had drowned became the object of a lucrative healing cult in the form of an alluring statue (the temple's guardian, a Buddhist, charged an entry fee to the temple). The profit engendered by the cult gave rise to a lawsuit: the newly posted magistrate had the statue chained and brought to his *yamen* before ordering its burning as the sentence.[29] Thus, deities were judged and condemned in the same way as human criminals. By acting in this way, the officials demonstrated what Paul Katz refers to as the ideology of justice, according to which all bad actions are inevitably punished by law in this world or the next, both worlds complementing each other in a continuum where in some cases temples serve as courtrooms for the living and in others, gods are judged by government officials.[30] Through the staging of such judicial performances (chains, physical punishment, judgment in the *yamen*), officials legitimated their destruction which therefore appeared not as an arbitrary act of violence but as the fair outcome of a legal procedure.

What were the motivations of the officials who took such action? It is important to

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26 In one text from the late seventeenth century exhorting officials to destroy immoral temples, the author of a popular handbook for officials states the main reason as the fact that such temples represent a sacrilege and incite women to debauchery: "Jin Yinsi" 禁淫祀, in Huang Liuhong 黃六鴻 ([1633]–?), *Fuhui quanshu* 福惠全書 (1699, *Guan zhenshu jicheng* 官箴書集成, Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1997), vol. 3, *juan* 26, pp. 7b–9b.

27 "Du hui yinci" 督毀淫祠, *Dianshi zhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 (reprint. Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1983), vol. Zi, p. 87.

28 "Ma gong Song xiang" 馬公宋相, in Qian Yong 錢詠 (1759–1844), *Lüyuan conghua* 履園叢話 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), *juan* 15, p. 399.

29 "Chen sanguniang" 陳三姑娘, in *Lüyuan conghua, juan* 15, pp. 417–18. The author of this collection, usually very hostile to popular religion, noted that the deity possessed a woman at the moment of his "execution" to ask for help—in vain.

30 Paul R. Katz, *Divine Justice* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

stress that these destructions were, to a certain extent, dictated by a profoundly religious attitude. The condemned cults offended the officials' sense of morality. Contrary to the idea suggested by a number of historians that Confucians were agnostic rationalists, the religious policy of government officials was not only motivated by the concern to maintain public order and the fear of mass movements (although this aspect played an important role), but also by their religious convictions.

While one cannot doubt the religious sincerity of zealous officials, it cannot be denied that spectacular destructions also offered the officials an opportunity to improve their reputation, and even to obtain a promotion. Accounts often give examples of destructive officials passing before the Emperor as upright and uncompromising servants of the state. The most frequently evoked and worshipped model is that of Di Renjie 狄仁傑 (630–700), who left only two temples standing when he left his posting in southern China.[31] A more recent example is that of Tang Bin who took pains to preserve his reputation as an austere saint and who became a legend as a great destroyer of Wutong temples.

It is clear from bureaucratic hagiography that to gain a reputation as an honest and brave official and to impose one's personal authority over the local society (on the condition that the conflict is well managed) were good reasons to envisage the destruction of a few temples. In both the Ming, and to a lesser extent, Qing sources, there are countless texts listing the accomplishments of government officials in which the destruction of immoral temples is mentioned alongside the construction of schools, improvement of local customs and other such stereotypical expressions.[32] The number of destroyed temples measured merit (real or hyped), with some officials claiming to have destroyed hundreds of temples, although in most cases it is impossible to know precisely on what basis such claims were made.

In reality, zealous officials were always a minority. The exploits of a few conceal the generally far more precautionary attitude adopted by the silent majority of officials; some among them even went so far as to protect temples during national or provincial campaigns of destruction. In practice, destruction involved important risks for the local official who, it is important to stress, was always a foreigner in the province of his posting and could only rely on limited means and support; he was thus very much isolated among those he governed. There was always a risk that the community of a destroyed temple would revolt and take revenge and that the official's grand plan would turn against him: a poorly managed riot could seriously compromise an official's career. One local eighteenth-century gazetteer even claims that "officials never dare to destroy."[33]

The god of the temple itself could also take revenge, and stories of vengeful deities

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31 Liu Xu 劉昫 et al., *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), *juan* 89, p. 2887.

32 One example among others: a biographic note on Zhang Kui 張夔, an official who served as a magistrate in various districts in the Beijing area under Kangxi (1661–1722), mentions that he "organized famine relief, built schools, and destroyed immoral temples" (*Jiangnan tongzhi* 江南通志 [1736, *Siku quanshu* edition], *juan* 146, p. 28a).

33 Wang Jian, "Sidian, sisi yu yinci," p. 53, quoting *(Qianlong) Wujiang xianzhi* (乾隆)吳江縣志, *juan* 7.

haunting officials abound in bureaucratic folklore. In a slightly different vein, there were also stories circulating among the elite concerning officials who had desecrated a holy place, without necessarily the intention to destroy it, and were then punished by the gods—like, for instance, one magistrate who had used the materials from a ruined temple to repair the walls of his city.[34] In any case, a precautionary attitude towards any potentially offensive action against a holy place seems to have been prevalent. Furthermore, an official who engaged in destruction exposed himself to the hostility of the local elite who sometimes actively participated in the condemned cults.[35] Without the support of the local elite, the magistrate had very little power indeed. The establishment of a modern administration endowed with a police force, starting around 1905 in the larger cities, changed the balance of power completely and paved the way for large-scale destruction.[36]

All these factors explain why destruction, when it took place, was carefully weighed beforehand and not blindly applied. An episode which occurred in 1878 and which was related in the press clearly shows such scruples: a temple dedicated to the Earth god in a neighbourhood of the great port of Ningbo suddenly became the focus of a healing cult. The temple leaders were selling the ashes from the temple's incense burner (for four bronze coins a packet), claiming that the ashes had the property to heal all ailments. The crowds pressing around the temple were such that an official awaiting his new posting and delegated by the local magistrate to enquire on local customs sent a report to the prefect, who immediately dispatched his men to close down the temple, destroy the furniture and arrest the leaders. The prefect then had the statue moved to another temple dedicated to the Earth god. The immoral temple was razed to the ground, with only the stove to burn papers bearing inscriptions (*xizi lu* 惜字爐)[37] and walls covered with paintings left standing.[38] The process described here is not only violent—the prefect immediately reacts to annihilate a downtown popular cult—but also meticulous since he only destroys what he can legitimately destroy, and spares those objects which are inherently orthodox (the statue of the Earth god and the *xizi lu*).

In contrast with the unregulated proliferation of new constructions, most destructions were thus characterized by precaution and moderation. In fact, historians who have

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34 "Huisi debao" 毀寺得報, in Gong Wei 龔煒 (b. 1704), *Chaolin bitan* 巢林筆談 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), *juan* 6, p. 144 (eighteenth century); "Fu guancha Sun cishi" 福觀察孫刺史, in *Chishang caotang biji, juan* 7, pp. 18a–b (early nineteenth century).

35 Wang Jian, "Sidian, sisi yu yinci," p. 54 quotes several cases from the Ming period and one from the eighteenth century where members of the local elite lodged a complaint against the magistrate responsible for the destruction and won the case.

36 Goossaert, "1898."

37 This kind of stove could be found in many Chinese temples, and can still be found in Taiwan: it was used to burn inscribed papers or writings (collected beforehand by the members of the gentry or paid employees) in a respectful manner. Chinese characters, as symbols of Chinese civilization are sacred and must not be soiled or left on the ground. To burn them and to then throw the ashes into the sea is considered the only honourable way of disposing of them.

38 "Yaoyan huozhong" 妖言惑眾, *Shenbao,* GX4/11/27 (20 December 1878); "Huozhong huiji" 惑眾毀迹, *Shenbao,* GX4/12/7 (30 December 1878).

documented the destruction of temples by zealous officials all mention the limited effects of these occasional campaigns: many of the destroyed temples were rebuilt immediately after the officials who destroyed them left for a new posting. Some temples even became famous for the impressive number of times they were destroyed throughout the centuries, which means that they were more often standing than not. Qing elite were well aware of this; thus Tang Bin's first measures were initially met with a certain degree of scepticism from his colleagues and other observers who thought that, like similar measures taken previously, they would have little effect. Only progressively did they rally to his campaign.[39]

This is not to say that the destruction of immoral temples was an epiphenomenon without any great impact. In the case of the most ambitious campaigns, such as that against the Wutong in Jiangnan, the cults tended to reappear but under modified forms. Tang Bin and his successors seem to have succeeded in greatly reducing the presence of the cult on the public scene, although it continued to thrive at a domestic level.[40] As a result of persecution, the perception of the cult and its associated deities also changed: without becoming fully orthodox, they lost most of their provocative aspect. Moreover, in addition to the immediate effect of destruction, the impact of the threat of destruction should also be taken into account, and in order to do so it is necessary to consider the propaganda effect and theatrical aspect of the destructions.

## Destruction as a Power Contest

The destruction of immoral temples represents a very good narrative subject, and the authors of anecdotes made good use of it. Its violent and dramatic nature, as well as the symbolic wealth in the judicial aspect of its performance, provide real suspense. In these accounts, the local population fear the revenge of the flouted god and all await the final outcome: either the official and the entire community are punished for their temerity or else nothing happens, which is seen as proof of the official's victory and the disappearance of the deity. Indeed, the destructions were public acts which were attended by crowds of people affected by a vast range of emotions: fear, anger, as well as hope and joy.[41] In fact, in some cases it is likely that in addition to the small number of officials and members of the gentry who approved and even demanded the destruction, part of the local population would have also welcomed the destruction of cults that were considered

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39 Jiang Zhushan, "Tang Bin jinhui Wutong shen," pp. 91-96.

40 Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way,* pp. 236–44 and Jiang Zhushan, "Tang Bin jinhui Wutong shen," pp. 101–7, have differing interpretations. The former insists on the continuity of the cult in the homes and mentality of the people, while the latter underlines the long term effect of the destruction of temples.

41 "Xianling huixiang" 賢令毀像, *Dianshi zhai huabao,* vol. Hai, 10 (published in 1891) recounts and depicts a scene in which a magistrate orders the burning of a statue; among the onlookers the journalist describes angry devotees standing next to joyous partisans of the destruction (including himself).

dangerous and on the fringe of the religious system (for instance, the Wutong whom the people worshipped but also feared at the same time). Moreover, entrepreneurial cults generally gave rise to tensions in the local religious scene. This explains why in some cases the local population did not oppose the destruction.[42] In contrast, the violent suppression from 1901 onwards of territorial cults, which were fundamental to community identity and to the traditions of the local population, often led to riots.

In Confucian fundamentalist hagiography a constant theme is that of frightened villagers blinded by ignorance and fearing the vengeance of the god whose temple has been destroyed, a vengeance which never actually comes and whose absence is proof that the destruction was well-founded. In one eighteenth-century anecdote, a magistrate who wished to destroy a temple dedicated to a lion-deity whose statue was miraculously discovered in the ground combines cunning with his conviction that the destruction will not have undesirable effects. The magistrate first assures the population who fear the god's vengeance that he will not destroy the statue but simply remove it to another temple. Once his men take hold of the statue, they break it and throw the pieces into the river. And, concludes the author, nothing terrible happens.[43] In other cases, the official chooses a handful of strong men to assist him in his task and to administer the blow.[44] But the official's guards may also fear the reaction of the condemned deity and refuse to touch the statue, in which case the official must give the blow himself, which only serves to enforce the direct nature of the confrontation between the official and the "immoral" god.[45] Sometimes, the conflict between the magistrate and the god is so personal that only the former is entitled to give the determining blow. One story describes a magistrate who, having allowed the practice of a local cult, attends a festival organized by the temple. However, when his son is possessed by the god who demands an offering, the magistrate smashes the statue and the cult is put to an end.[46]

Many stories describe officials who, as a result of having destroyed a temple, are haunted and sometimes killed by vengeful gods. The threat seems to have been taken seriously enough for officials to take ritual precautions before undertaking the destruction of a temple. During the Song dynasty, some officials were initiated in Taoist practices of exorcism which supposedly gave them power over the demonic entity whose place of worship

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42 Jiang Zhushan, "Tang Bin jinhui Wutong shen," pp. 108–9.

43 "Shishi qiu jiuming" 石獅求救命, in Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1798), *Zi buyu quanji* 子不語全集 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1997), *juan* 18, pp. 444–45.

44 *Qinding Baqi tongzhi* 欽定八旗通志 (1739, *Siku quanshu* edition), *juan* 237, p. 9b (re. the destruction of over a hundred temples in Fuzhou, Fujian in 1697).

45 For example "Chen Ruxian libi yiduan" 陳汝咸力闢異端, *Langqian jiwen sibi* 郎潛紀聞四筆, *juan* 9, p. 152.

46 *Youtai xianguan biji, juan* 6, pp. 139–40.

they wished to destroy.[47] Such accounts are not so frequent during the period which interests us here. It is probable that officials at the time were, for ideological reasons, less familiar with Taoist rituals than their predecessors. Late imperial officials still practised exorcism but through purely bureaucratic channels, for instance by writing petitions to the City god (Chenghuang shen 城隍神) or other members of the bureaucratic pantheon, to eliminate the demons at the centre of the condemned cult. For example, in order to drive away an evil spirit from the house of his relatives, a magistrate writes to the Earth god, requesting him to drive away the spirit and threatening to burn his temple down if he refuses—a threat which in the end has the desired effect since the spirit is no longer heard of.[48]

Accounts from the Ming and Qing periods underline the sincerity (*cheng* 誠) and virtue of government officials which supposedly made them inaccessible to demonic forces. Sincerity is a spiritual notion which explains the effectiveness of the ritual. In some cases, it takes the aspect of magic,[49] when, for instance, an official acts in such a way as to give public proof of his invincibility. Good Confucians are not afraid of demons and ghosts since, as they themselves like to recall: "vice cannot overcome virtue" (*xie bu sheng zheng* 邪不勝正).[50] An anecdote narrating the exploits of Guo Shilong 郭世隆 (1645–1716), the governor of Zhejiang and Fujian, provides a good illustration: following the example of Tang Bin, he gave the order to destroy all immoral temples under his jurisdiction. A huge fire broke out near the largest of the targeted temples and all that remained among the ashes was the placard bearing the order for the temple's demolition.[51]

By choosing to deal with the conflict from the perspective of virtue rather than that of ritual technique, officials took a number of risks. Indeed, the destruction of immoral temples put into play the struggle between two kinds of power: the imperial, bureaucratic and Confucian against the local, charismatic, and unmediated. The outcome of such conflicts could never be predicted, hence the suspense underlying the accounts of destruction. Which of the two: the official, or the deity, has the most power/virtue/charisma (*de* 德)? Officials rarely denied the existence of the deities they condemned and were prepared to fight them in person. In the hagiography, even the god recognizes the spiritual superiority

47 On the battles between officials and local gods during the earlier periods, see Jean Lévi, "Les fonctionnaires et le divin: luttes de pouvoirs entre divinités et administrateurs dans les contes des Six dynasties et des Tang," Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie 2 (1986), pp. 81–110; Judith M. Boltz, "Not by the Seal of Office Alone: New Weapons in Battles with the Supernatural," in *Religion and Society in T'ang and Sung China,* ed. Patricia B. Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), pp. 241–305.

48 "Zhou taishi quyao" 周太史驅妖, in *Zi buyu quanji, juan* 20, p. 488.

49 On the notion of Confucian magic, see Sutton, "From Credulity to Scorn," pp. 26–33.

50 Vincent Goossaert, "La culture religieuse des élites chinoises à la veille de 1898: Yu Yue et les esprits" (forthcoming), studies the theme of the Confucians' superiority over spirits in the anecdotes from *Youtai xianguan biji.*

51 "Guo shangshu xi hui yinci" 郭尚書檄毀淫祠, in *Langqian jiwen erbi, juan* 7, p. 439; a different version in "Wuxian Wutong" 五顯五通, in Ruan Kuisheng 阮葵生 (1727–1789), *Chayu kehua* 茶餘客話, *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* edition, *juan* 4, pp. 6a–b.

of the magistrate. One such account tells of the campaign led by Qiu Baoyong 裘寶鏞 (a magistrate also known for his heroic exploits against the Taiping), which took place in the 1850s in the region of Kaifeng where more than a thousand temples were destroyed (such large campaigns are rarely attested in the nineteenth century). The author writes that the majority of the temples were dedicated to "ghosts or fox spirits with little power (*ling* 靈),"[52] but that one among them was both a powerful and honest god; when the order to destroy the temples was given, this god, recognizing that he was powerless against magistrate Qiu, sadly took leave from the Taoist who managed his cult, claiming that he had no choice but to go and heal people in other provinces.[53] This very hagiographic account demonstrates the superior power of the magistrate over that of the god, while tactfully providing the god with an honourable way out.

However, the conviction that the official must also be morally pure in order to successfully eliminate the accused deity and to avoid his revenge is largely attested in Qing sources. Thus a story from the end of the nineteenth century describes how a magistrate attacked an apparently indefensible cult: young male students who were lovers during their lifetime together became the object of a cult after their deaths. The magistrate, upon discovering the temple of this cult during his travels, exclaims: "but this is an immoral temple!" and orders the village headman (*libao* 里保) to destroy it. The two young men appear to the magistrate in a dream and accuse him of charging them with debauchery and condemning them without proof; they also reveal that the magistrate himself does not have a clear conscience. Upon awakening the magistrate, seized with panic, orders the temple to be rebuilt, but the damage is already done: he is denounced for his corruption and punished by his superiors.[54] Another example is provided by the following anecdote from the same period: a magistrate cuts down a tree on his residence in which lived a deity, who takes revenge. The magistrate dies. The author, one of the greatest scholars of his time, gives the following commentary: "to drive away demons and to destroy temples are acts that only the like of Di Renjie and Fan Zhongyan [范仲淹, 989–1052] can accomplish: if one does not have enough virtue to win, one can only lose at this game!"[55]

This theme is illustrated by the tales that developed around the person of Tang Bin, the great destroyer of Wutong temples. Jiang Zhushan has compiled a number of stories depicting Tang as an exorcising deity: people borrowed the tablet dedicated to him from temples of Confucius (Tang was canonized at the very prestigious rank of associate saint in temples of Confucius in 1823) in order to drive away evil spirits from their homes.[56]

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52 On the relationship between magistrates and fox-spirit temples, see Kang Xiaofei, *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2005), chap. 6 which relates several cases of destruction in which the magistrate is assisted by the City God in his struggle.

53 "Laodiaoye" 老刁爺, in Qi Xueqiu 齊學裘, *Jianwen suibi* 見聞隨筆 (1868), *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* edition, *juan* 20, pp. 9a–b.

54 "Shuanghua miao" 雙花廟, in *Zi buyu quanji, juan* 23, pp. 572–73.

55 Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805), *Yuewei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記 (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1994), *juan* 1, p. 18.

56 Jiang Zhushan, "Tang Bin jinhui Wutong shen," pp. 96–101.

Such a discourse, while enhancing the status of heroic destroyers, also tended to discourage any emulators. Far from encouraging indiscriminate destruction, elite writers, even when they were clearly against non-recognized cults, generally tended to reprove excessive violence in their writings. One anecdote describes the case of a prefect posted in Hubei province in 1870, who, as if seized by "madness," began to destroy temples here and there. At the prefecture's temple of the God of the Eastern Peak—an official cult very seldom singled out for destruction—the prefect, accompanied by several members of the gentry armed with axes, attempts but fails to bring down the very large statue. One of the members of the gentry present suggests that the prefect paint the statue's eyes red to make it fall. The advice is followed and the statue falls to the ground, but shortly after the prefect becomes ill and dies.[57]

## Repression and Negotiation

How frequently, in practice, did such acts of destruction occur? A number of episodes have become famous examples and are used in a variety of sources from different geographical origins: this is notably the case with Tang Bin and his destruction of the Wutong temples which are quoted repeatedly in Qing literature, albeit with very differing interpretations. Tang Bin's example even gave rise to utopian visions and wild fabrications. For instance, one eighteenth-century scholar writes that, following the example of Tang, the emperor Kangxi had all the statues in the country destroyed with the exception of those representing the City and Grain Gods![58] Moreover, other similar but less-known examples of large-scale destructions took place throughout the course of the Qing and the whole of China. Such actions therefore occurred frequently enough and were sufficiently publicized in official literary sources, scholarly writings and popular literature for a large part of the population to be well aware of the real possibility that an official would destroy their temple.

However, in all the cases in which it was theoretically possible to destroy temples, destruction took place only in a minority of instances. This fact is illustrated by the large number of temples that were considered "immoral" and were largely criticized as such, but that nevertheless continued to be active, or that were destroyed but then rapidly rebuilt. This leads us to the question of the processes involved when the temple's destruction was avoided. In most cases, the question did not even apply in the sense that many officials had little interest in immoral temples and religious policy in general. However, anecdotes relating cases in which the plan to destroy was aborted provide interesting insight into the mechanisms behind the destructions. In such cases, the crisis which involves risks for all parties concerned is solved through negotiation between the potentially destructive official and the victims.

One such anecdote written at the end of the nineteenth century tells of a case in

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57 "Taishou hui shenmiao" 太守毀神廟, in Ding Rouke 丁柔克 (1840–?), *Liuhu* 柳弧 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), *juan* 3, p. 151.

58 "Tumu ouxiang" 土木偶像, in *Chayu kehua, juan* 4, p. 6a.

which an official who had just taken up his new posting in Maozhou 茂州 (in Sichuan) is confronted with the cult of a female deity who had taken a local student as her husband. The latter regularly fell into a trance and slept in the temple. Judging, as expected, that the cult was demonic (*yao* 妖), the magistrate was about to burn down the temple when representatives of the non-Han ethnic groups (probably the Qiang) who worshipped at the temple begged him to spare the goddess and finally convinced him.[59] As in many other documented cases, the content and consequences of the negotiations remain unknown, but what is clear is that the threat of destruction, in some cases, paved the way to negotiation between the magistrate and the representatives of the local community. In this particular case, the focus of negotiations was probably related to the official recognition of the ethnic identity of the Qiang.

From a symbolic point of view, the crux of such negotiations lies in the reformulation of the deity's identity and hence the reinterpretation of the orthodox or heterodox nature of the cult in question. Obviously, other factors, more socio-economic in nature than theological, also come into play in such negotiations (the presence of women, spirit-mediums, the organization of processions, etc.). But what the narratives clearly show is the importance of the god's name and the way it is reformulated so as to allow as many persons involved as possible to save face: the official who has corrected a "theological error," and the community who keeps its temple. Even Tang Bin, the paradigm of intransigence, is reputed, during his destruction campaigns, to have spared two statues which he was unable to move and which were described to him as representing the "God of wealth" (*caishen* 財神), a reasonably orthodox name; subsequently the cult of these two deities enjoyed widespread development.[60]

The process which reveals the "truth" and establishes the legitimacy of the new formulation may be direct (an encounter between the official and the accused deity) or indirect, requiring mediation from outside. One anecdote from the end of the nineteenth century (but relating events that took place more than a century before) provides a good example of the direct process: a magistrate visits a temple containing a statue representing a beautiful young man. The Taoist in charge of the temple assures him that the statue represents Sun Ce 孫策 (a famous general), but the magistrate, shocked at the sight of such a sexually ambiguous representation, decides to have the temple destroyed and to use the material from the destroyed temple to rebuild one dedicated to the Dragon King. The deity appears to him in a dream and reveals to him that he is in fact not Sun Ce but an honest minister and friend of the Emperor, and that he was executed by an imposter. The magistrate, upon awakening, orders the temple's restoration instead of its demolition, and even adds a statue (representing a disciple of the honest minister).[61]

This account can be simply read as the story of an official's dreams and changes in his personal convictions. However, it becomes more relevant if one takes into account the negotiations that certainly took place between the magistrate, publicly threatening to

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59 *Youtai xianguan biji, juan* 9, p. 236.

60 "Ma gong Song xiang" 馬公宋相, in *Lüyuan conghua, juan* 15, p. 399.

61 "Dong xian wei shen" 董賢為神, in *Zi buyu quanji, juan* 2, pp. 51–52.

destroy the temple, and the community (represented here by the Taoist guardian of the temple) who, to save their temple, suggest changing the god's official identity to a more orthodox one. Here the magistrate makes a large concession, since the statue of the beautiful young man is not even changed. Another story tells of an official who, upon taking up his new posting in Guangxi province, made known his intention to launch a destruction campaign; the local population changed the names of their temples and deities in favour of orthodox cults and Confucian saints. As a result the temples remained standing.[62] Similar stories are found in other parts of China. In his study of the Five Emperors cults around Fuzhou (Fujian), Michael Szonyi shows how a campaign of repression against this cult in 1700 was averted when locals renamed their Five Emperors temples as Guandi temples.[63] The accounts are not always as explicit with regard to the negotiations' content, but often contain many allusions: for instance, a local gazetteer relates that during the 1520–1540 campaigns, such or such a temple previously singled out for destruction had been spared "for the services rendered by the spirit."[64] These "services" (in other words, miracles) were probably an argument put forward (with written proof when possible) by the temple's representatives in their negotiations with the official.

Sometimes the negotiations failed and it is interesting to note that in such cases, the official sometimes called upon outside authority in order to reinforce his own intransigent position. An eighteenth-century anecdote recounts the story of a magistrate who upon his arrival at his new post is invited by the employees of his *yamen* to visit a temple where his predecessors practised a cult. Once inside the temple, no one is able to inform the magistrate of the exact identity of the three central gods. As a result the magistrate declares that he must destroy the temple, but his employees beg him not to. After checking the local gazetteer, the magistrate still finds no trace of the deities' identity. He gathers his employees and representatives of the population inside the temple, places iron rings around the necks of the statues and pulls them to the ground where they shatter into pieces. The temple is renovated and dedicated to Guandi. Still intrigued, the magistrate writes to the Heavenly Master Zhang who replies that, in fact, the deity is Chen Youliang 陳友諒 (*c*. 1320–1363), a rival warlord of the founder of the Ming dynasty[65] and therefore a heterodox deity; the Heavenly Master thus proves him right *a posteriori*.

This analysis rejoins that of other historians of the Ming and Qing periods who have attempted to retrace the homogenization of Chinese culture through the influence of the imperial state's Confucian fundamentalist ideology, as well as the different forms of passive resistance and adaptation of the local population to such processes imposed from

62 Wang Sen 汪森 (1653–1726), *Yuexi wenzai* 粵西文載, *juan* 58, quoted by Zhao Kesheng and Yu Haiyong, "Mingdai yinci zhi jin," p. 129.

63 Michael Szonyi, "Making Claims about Standardization and Orthopraxy in Late Imperial China," *Modern China* 33, no. 1 (2007), pp. 52–53.

64 *Jifu tongzhi* 畿輔通志 (1735), *Siku quanshu* edition, *juan* 50, p. 13b.

65 "Hui Chen Youliang miao" 毀陳友諒廟, in *Zi buyu quanji, juan* 10, pp. 254–55.

above. As a result, the official cults of Mazu[66] and Guandi[67] spread throughout the entire country, while the public discourse on these deities tended to erase the different local interpretations of their history in favour of a unified version. However, the homogenization was not as deep as it seemed: appearances were kept up with an official, orthodox interpretation of local cults, while in fact practices and legends that were in no way orthodox were maintained.[68]

In such a context, the threat of destruction may be perceived as a tool in the hands of the state in its complex, symbolic negotiations with local populations. While the countless proclamations aimed at furthering the country's cultural and religious homogenization (banning of important festivals, processions, spirit-mediums, the presence of women in temples, etc.) went unheeded, the destruction of a temple had the potential to tip the balance of power in favour of government officials and to reinforce the credibility and efficiency of their religious policy and dialogue with local leaders. The threat of destruction was explicitly used in edicts and proclamations with the purpose of achieving other aims, such as pushing spirit-mediums out of the larger temples (Qing laws banned spirit-mediums but officials found it near-impossible to control or repress them to any significant extent) or limiting female presence in temples, especially female penitents taking part in processions. One poem recounts the story of a magistrate who destroyed a temple in which women continued to worship in spite of repeated prohibitions—an unmistakable warning.[69] The real efficacy of such a threat remains questionable, however, especially in those cases where the penitents worship at officially recognized orthodox temples, like those dedicated to the City God.[70]

This type of violent and theatrical offensive against "immoral cults" involving public destruction, by axe, fire or drowning, of the deities' statues represented, among a wider range of arsenal, a distinct form of religious repression. In the Qing Empire as in other political regimes, the decision to destroy a temple was neither incidental, nor was it a stopgap measure, but the outcome of a reasoned choice between various modes of

66 James Watson, "Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien-Hou ("Empress of Heaven") along the South China Coast, 960–1960," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China,* ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 292–324.

67 Prasenjit Duara, "Superscribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War," *Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (1988), pp. 778–95.

68 Michael Szonyi, "The Illusion of Standardizing the Gods: The Cult of the Five Emperors in Late Imperial China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 1 (1997), pp. 113–35; Guo Qitao, *Exorcism and Money: The Symbolic World of the Five-Fury Spirits in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2003).

69 He Jun 何俊, "Hui Yinci" 毀淫祠, in Zhang Yingchang 張應昌 (1790–1874), comp., *Qingshi duo* 清詩鐸 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), p. 901. The *Qingshi duo,* compiled in 1869, is an anthology of scholarly poems classified by theme, with social and moral reform occupying a large portion of the work.

70 Goossaert, "Irrepressible Female Piety."

intervention.[71] This specific practice must be understood within the context of a larger range of other possible alternatives; it reflected not only the will to make an imprint on minds, but also the determination to take a strong position in the balance of power between the various representatives of the state and local population. In this sense, destruction as a form of repression reflected the failure of negotiations over a temple or a group of temples, but at the same time it represented a means of influencing the course of further negotiations over religious life and the reforms of customs and practices. For instance, one official who destroyed a temple in 1872 took this opportunity to issue a warning to all the other temples under his jurisdiction, reminding them of all the banned practices (big festivals including the participation of both men and women, etc.).[72] Spectacular destruction and diplomatic negotiation are the two faces of a single political procedure.

By examining the destructions within the context of the relationship between government officials and local society, it is easier to identify the various conditions which led to effective repression, since the majority of officials had the possibility, in theory, to destroy temples but did not do so (which does not mean that they did not, more or less explicitly, threaten to do so). One important factor was undoubtedly the official's personality and religious convictions; those among them who had little interest in religious questions were probably less likely to pursue religious repression than those who felt they were on a mission of religious reform. However, for an official to undertake destruction, the local balance of power had to be such as to provide the necessary conditions for the repression to succeed. There should also be no intermediary (member of the local elite) powerful or willing enough to negotiate a compromise—some of the entrepreneurial cults had no support among the local elite, which was not the case for the majority of the older, more firmly established temples; hence the "easier" destruction of the former. Finally, the negotiations, if there were any, had to fail.

The successful destruction of a temple reflected the superior power of the official who ordered it and his ability to re-establish order and impose his theological/moral authority. However, destructions had to remain relatively marginal if they were to fulfil their deterrent role beyond the more immediate aim of suppressing practices considered scandalous, and to allow the official to efficiently effect a transformation of local society. Unchecked destruction, without any possibility for compromise and negotiation, would have very likely resulted in open conflict and resistance going against the interests of the administration. Hence, it is appropriate here to describe the general phenomenon of destruction as an endemic form of repression.

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71 Nathalie Kouamé and Vincent Goossaert, "Le vandalisme d'État en Extrême-Orient: Les destructions de lieux de culte dans l'histoire de la Chine et du Japon," *Numen* 53, no. 2 (2006), pp. 177–220.

72 "Ji Qingpu Jinze zhen saishen zishi feng fang chaihui miaoyu tongxing yilü chajin shi" 記青浦金澤鎮賽神滋事奉訪拆燬廟宇通行一律查禁事, *Shenbao,* TZ11/8/28 (30 September 1872).