

SHI CIHANG 航慈釋

THE FIRST CASE OF MUMMIFIED BUDDHIST IN TAIWAN*

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Shi Cihang 航慈釋 (1895-1954), is one of the eminent figures in the so-called Modern Buddhism in Taiwan. Engaged in improving education and training of Buddhist monks and nuns, and promoter of the so-called *renjian fojiao* 教佛間人 (Buddhism for the Human Realm), which refuses any sort of superstitious understanding and practice of Buddhism and calls for the return to the original and pure essence of the Dharma, Cihang is also the first Buddhist monk in Taiwan who attempted to, and eventually succeeded in, preserving his body after-death. Nowadays, the gilded relic-body of Cihang is enshrined and venerated in Xizhi, Taipei county, as well as being included in the list of the *roushen pusa* 薩菩身肉 (flesh-body Bodhisattvas) who appeared in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

This paper analyses Cihang's relic-body as case-study of Chinese mummified Buddhist in the scene of contemporary Taiwan and modern Taiwanese Buddhism, discussing the Buddhist significance, sociological implications and eventual impact of mummification within the reality of the new *renjian fojiao*.

I am not afraid of dying: I may die anytime, anywhere and anyhow. It is known that life is inevitably accompanied by death, so what to be afraid of? [...] What I am afraid of is where will I get to after death? West? East? Heaven? Hell? It is dangerous! I myself do not have any assurance; the distance to cover before dying is boundless and indistinct, is there not a way to know where one is going to get to? Any rebirth depends on Karma.

(Cihang)

Introduction

The study of Buddhist mummification involves several issues. The first issue is the *identity* of the mummy: should the mummy be identified with 'the covering' or with 'the covered'? This issue engages the debate on the *sacredness* of the mummy, involving the still unsolved debate between *holiness* and *materiality* in the religious – Buddhist – context, and so the conception of the mummy as *relic*, *icon of Enlightenment* and/or *material object*.

Another issue regards the term *mummified Buddhist* that I have chosen here for the case-study of Cihang, but that is usually replaced by the expression *mummified Buddhas*. The adoption of the term *mummified* implies both *self-mummification* and *man-made mummification*, while the use of

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Buddhas may be problematised, since there are questions as to are what we are facing *Buddhas*, i.e. fully enlightened practitioners, or *Buddhists*, i.e. practitioners who have not necessarily reached the Enlightenment?

This last issue leads the analysis of Buddhist mummification into a discussion about the *religious* nature of the mummy and, specifically, its *Buddhist* quality, in order to better understand a worship to which the *integral-body relic* is subject. An in-depth study of mummy devotion and veneration is of primary importance, since it is the inter-relationship between the *intact remains* and the *believer* that decides value and significance of the mummy.

The interaction between *venerator* and *venerated* leads to another area of interest: the analysis of the correspondence between the original intention of the Buddhist who decided to turn – or to be turned – into a mummy and what actually happened later around his/her mummified body.

The nature of mummy worship, as well as its development and change through time, is related to the *contextualisation* of the mummy. In other words, as Buddhism was subject to adaptation in order to fit the hosting non-Buddhist environment, so the local non-Buddhist religions (in the terms of folk elements, superstitious beliefs and magical/alchemical practices), death conceptions and burial customs play an important role in shaping the reality of the mummy.

Finally, Buddhist mummies may be subject to restoration. The mummies of two Vietnamese monks have been recently declared *Vietnamese national treasure*.¹ This fact is a further index of the social impact of the mummies, and of the role that they play among the local Buddhist (and otherwise) believers.

Taiwan lists five cases of Buddhist mummified monks and one female Buddhist mummy:

1. Cihang (1895-1954), monk; date of enshrinement of the mummy: 1959.
2. Qingyan清嚴 (1924-1970), monk; date of enshrinement of the mummy: 1976.
3. Ganzhu甘珠 (1914-1978), monk; date of enshrinement of the mummy: 1978.
4. Yingmiao瀛妙 (1891-1973), monk; date of enshrinement of the mummy: 1983.
5. Puzhao普照 (1980/91-1983), monk; date of enshrinement of the mummy: 1983.
6. Gongga貢噶 (1903-1997), nun; date of enshrinement of the mummy: 2000.

The appearance of Cihang's mummy (1959) was preceded in Taiwan by two famous cases of body-relics, both dated 1957: Shi Zhangjia 嘉章釋, who left more than 6,000 relics, and Shi Hongyi 一弘釋, who left more 400 relics.

Being the first case of Buddhist mummy discovered on the island, Cihang's remains attracted the attention of not the only Taiwanese. There is a long list of foreign (i.e., neither Chinese nor Taiwanese) documents that report and describe Cihang's flesh-body.²

¹ I am referring to the mummies of the Zen monks Vu Khac Minh and Vu Khac Tuong, enshrined in the Dau Pagoda (Ha Tay province). For a detailed report on these two mummies, see: Nguyen, Lan Cuong (1982-1984) 'About the Dead Bodies of two Buddhist Monks Preserved in the Form of Statues at the Dau Pagoda'. In *OSSA. International Journal of Skeletal Research*, vol. 9/11, pp. 105-109; Nguyen, Lan Cuong (1988) 'Dead Bodies of Buddhist Monks Preserved as Statues at the Dau Pagoda'. In *Buddhists for Peace. Journal of the Asian Buddhist conference for peace*. B.E. 2532 No 4 (Vol.10), pp. 18-20.

² As for the Western scholarship, Demiéville (1965, 156-157), Welch (1967, 343-344), Needham (1974: 5, 300), Sharf (1992, 2, 24), Raveri (1998, 36-37) and Jones (1999, 109-110) all mention, and some analyse in detail, the successful mummification of Cihang. We even have a Spanish version of life, death and mummification of Cihang from an Argentina Buddhist website (from: <<http://www.cintamani.com.ar/cintamani/maestros/cihang.htm>>). As for the Japanese scholarship, Ando (1961, 204-209; 1963, 140) and Matsumoto 1993 dedicated some paragraphs to the first case of integral-relic body enshrined on the island.

The result was that Cihang's mummy reached a worldwide fame very soon, and thus Cihang's thought and missions became well known on the international stage. A question that might come into mind is: Was the mummy to make Cihang's fame or vice versa?

Finally, it is worth noting that the first mummified Buddhist on the island is one of the promoters of the "Buddhism for the Human Realm" (*renjian fojiao*). Is it not contradictory that a monk who claimed modernisation in/of/for Buddhism eventually attempted to have his dead body preserved and enshrined?

The present paper, which is based on oral interviews made between 2002 and 2005 and written materials collected at that time, aims to discuss the issues listed above through the analysis of Cihang's mummy as case-study of Chinese mummified Buddhist in the contemporary Taiwan. This research investigates the Buddhist significance, sociological implications and eventual impact of mummification in Buddhism taking Cihang as a representative case. The relationship between the monk's relic-body and the Taiwanese (Buddhist and otherwise) social-body is also part of this discourse.

In addition, this research aims to relate the Taiwanese Buddhist relic-bodies to the similar cases found in China, and attempts to questions whether the Taiwanese cases reflect continuity with the phenomenon of Buddhist mummification in China, or are we facing a new phenomenon. The issue of the so-called 'Taiwanese identity' that recently various fields come to deal with may be taken in account even in the context of Buddhist mummification.

I. "Living-body" Cihang and Chinese Buddhism

In reviewing the accomplishments of Bodhisattva Ci-Hang, we realized that he had laid an equal emphasis on the promotion of secular education and the preaching of Dharma. His penetrative insight had enabled him to perceive mutually complementary effects of these two lines of activities resulting in his undying achievement in virtue, endeavor, teachings, and even of his body in flesh. Truly such a one may call fit master of all mankind.³

Was a Traditionalist? A Reformer? Or a "transitional figure", as Jones has suggested?⁴ Cihang, also called "little Taixu" (*xiao taixu* 虛太小), is a Buddhist figure difficult to identify and to classify.⁵

Student of both Shi Taixu 虛太釋 (1889-1947) and Shi Yuanying 瑛圓釋 (1878-1953), practitioner of the "Buddhism for the Human Realm" (*renjian fojiao* 教佛間人) and promoter of Buddhist education for monks and nuns, Cihang made an unprecedented contribution to the development of Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan and of Taiwanese Buddhism.

Three key events signed his life: the Full Monastic Ordination, the meeting with Taixu and the so-called "Buddhism for the Human Life" (*rensheng fojiao* 教佛生人), and his moving to Taiwan.

Cihang was born in 1895 at Jianning 寧建 (Fujian 建福 province), his lay name was Ai Jirong 榮繼艾. He lost his mother at the age of 11, and his father at the age of 17. In 1912, he received the tonsure under Shi Zizhong 忠自釋, and then the Full Ordination at Nengren Temple 寺仁能

³ From the English pamphlet found at the Cihang Memorial Hall.

⁴ Jones 1999, 111.

⁵ At that time (first half of the 20th century), broadly speaking, a "traditionalist" belonged to the faction headed by Shi Yuanying 瑛圓釋, while a "reformer" belonged to the school led by Shi Taixu 虛太釋. Even if Taixu and Yuanying were both teachers of Cihang, the latter is usually classified as belonging to the "Yuanying lineage". On the other hand, Cihang's contribution to renew and develop monastics' education, as well as his promoting the so-called "Buddhism for the Human Realm" (*renjian fojiao* 教佛間人) gave him the right to be defined "reformer".

(Jiujiang 江九). At the beginning of his Dharma cultivation, he made quite a few pilgrimages to famous Buddhist sites such as Jiuhua Mountain 山華九 (where he lived in 1910-1911), Tiantai Mountain 山台天 and Putuo Mountain 山陀普.⁶ As for his Buddhist education, Cihang mastered the Chan doctrine at Gaomin Temple 寺旻高 (Yangzhou 州揚, 1919), Tiantai philosophy with Shi Dixian 閑諦釋, and Pure Land teachings with Shi Du'e 厄度釋.

The meeting between Cihang and Taixu is dated the end of the 1920s. In 1927, he enrolled the Minnan Institute of Buddhist Studies (*Minnan Foxueyuan* 院學佛南閩), founded by Taixu, but left the institute after only three months. Two years later he became student of the Wuchang Institute of Buddhist Studies (*Wuchang foxueyuan* 院學佛昌武), which is another institute founded by Taixu. At that time Cihang made an in-depth investigation of the Chinese adaptation of the Yogacara philosophy (*weishi* 識唯), and started supporting the reform plans promoted by Taixu. His efforts in propagating the so-called “Buddhism for the Human Realm” (*renjian fojiao* 教佛間人) included the founding of the Buddhism for the Human Realm Monthly Magazine (*Renjian fojiao yuekan* 刊月教佛間人) in the 1940s.

Before moving to Taiwan, he went through Hong Kong 港香, Guangdong 東廣, Shanghai 海上, Wuxi 錫無, Changzhou 州常, Zhenjiang 江鎮 and Nanjing 京南. He also travelled to Burma, India and Sri Lanka, sometimes following Taixu, and afterwards, at the age of 47, he visited Singapore and Malaysia. While abroad, he undertook the mission to propose Taixu's ideas, and the task to promote cultural and educational initiatives, such as Dharma lectures, and the establishment of Buddhist institutes and associations.

In 1948 Cihang moved to Taiwan, invited by Shi Miaoguo 果妙釋, and founded the Tawanese Institute of Buddhist Studies (*Taiwan foxueyuan* 院學佛灣台) at Yuanguang Temple 寺光圓 (Zhongli 壩中). Founder of Buddhist institutes, organiser of Buddhist Seminars and Dharma teacher, promoter and reformer of Buddhist educational programmes for monastic and lay disciples (especially lay women and nuns), Cihang eventually became one of the eminent monks on the island. Cihang became well known as founder and abbot of Buddhist monasteries in Taiwan as well. The Maitreya Inner Hall (*Mile neiyuan* 院內勒彌,) founded in 1950, is a remarkable witness of Cihang's efforts in supporting nuns' education and monastic training, and in encouraging the cooperation between the female and the male members of the Sangha.⁷ Those who mostly helped him to settle in Taiwan were four nuns: Shi Daxin 心達釋, Shi Xuanguang 光玄釋, Shi Xiuguan 觀修釋 and Shi Ciguan 觀慈釋. Cihang died in 1954, during his third solitary retreat (*biguan* 關閉).⁸

Cihang outstands for his large literary production too. His works have been collected in the opera in The Complete Works of Cihang (*Cihang fashi quanji* 集全師法航慈), totally 12 volumes, and published in 1981. Although his writings include teachings on the different Buddhist schools, Cihang became well-known especially for his interpretation of the Pure Land School, especially the Maitreya Pure Land, and his study of Yogacara.

The six years that Cihang spent in Taiwan were fundamental for the development of Taiwanese Buddhism. His interpretation of *renjian fojiao*, the support to the nuns' education, and the efforts in promoting the threefold mission of education (*jiaoyu* 育教), culture (*wenhua* 化文) and social

⁶ It is worth remembering that Jiuhua Mountain has a special connection with the cult of mummified monastics.

⁷ Before that he also was abbot of Yingjiang Temple 寺江迎 (Anqing 慶安) in 1929.

⁸ For further biographical details, see: Kan Zhengzong 宗正闕 (1996: 47-91; 1999:), Jiang Canteng 騰燦江 (1991, 59: 46-56, 60: 95-109; 1992: 37-75), Jones (1999, 102-111). Most of the data reported in this essay are from the articles included in the two volume *Cihang dashi jinian ji*, abbreviated in *CHDSJNJ*. Today, Cihang's mummy is enshrined at the Cihang Memorial Hall (*Cihang jinian tang* 堂念紀航慈), Xiufeng rd. 路峰秀, n. 247, Xizhi city 止汐, Taipei county.

welfare (*cishan* 善慈) attracted a large number of followers at that time and are still carried out in the Contemporary Taiwan.

Besides being one from the first Mainland monks who fled to Taiwan after the end of the Japanese Occupation on the island, and one from the first monks engaged in the mission of monastics' Buddhist education, Cihang also became the first case of “integral-body relic” (*quanshen sheli* 利舍身全) in Taiwan, and the first case of mummified monk, in the history of Chinese Buddhism, to ask for the preservation of his body in his will.

II. Cihang: from “Living-body” to “Relic-body”

Is there a line of continuity from Cihang's “living-body” to Cihang's “relic-body”? Or are we facing two distinct identities and two different stories? How has Cihang's image changed in the course of the time, from his death to the successful mummification and subsequent enshrinement?

This section will discuss these issues.

II. 1 Death

The battlefield is the deathplace for the warrior, while the lecture room is the deathplace for the scholar.⁹

Cihang died on 6 May 1954, during the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka retreat (his third and last *biguan*), which he started on 9 September 1952. According to a report by Shi Dao'an 安道釋, Cihang died at 10.10 pm, while working on the Sūtrapīṭaka. Cihang followed his usual daily schedule even in his last day, giving teachings all day until three hours before dying. It is also remarked that he did not take any rest after lunch on that day.¹⁰

Another detail that Cihang's disciples highlight as significant is that in his last five years their master was saying that he would have died at the age of 60, and this really happened.¹¹

As the news of Cihang's death reached his disciples, students and lay devotees, the street leading to the Maitreya Inner Hall (*mile neiyuan* 院內勒彌) became unprecedentedly crowded by all the people willing to pay homage to Cihang.

According to a report by Shi Yanpei 培演釋, some eminent representatives from the local Buddhist world expressed sincere concern for the future of the Dharma without the presence and firm engagement of Cihang.¹²

On the 8th of May (two days after his death) the egg-shaped jar, wherein his corpse once wrapped in a white linen had been placed, was finally closed and sealed.¹³ Everything, from the

⁹ Words by Shi Xuanzhuang 奘玄釋 that Dao'an quoted in reference to the case of Cihang's death. See: Dao'an, “Fayang Cihang fashi de san da jingshen 精神大三的師法航慈揚發”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 58.

¹⁰ Dao'an, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 56.

¹¹ Shi Xiuguan 觀修釋, “Nanwang de sishi 師恩的忘難”, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 221.

¹² Yanpei, “Jingli bei zengshang de Cihang pusa 薩菩航慈的上增悲禮敬”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 74-102. A similar feeling was expressed by Shi Xuming 明續釋 (Xuming, “Jingdao Cigong laofashi 師法老公慈悼敬”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 129-133). The news reached Hong Kong soon too: Shi Ruijin 今瑞釋 talked about Cihang's death as the loss of the last hope for Buddhism to improve and develop, in an era of total darkness (Ruijin, “Daonian Cihang fashi 師法航慈念悼”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 117-120).

¹³ The jar is egg-shaped, formed by two semispheres, yellow-grey colored, and made of porcelain (for details on the jar, see: Cao Jingsan 三敬曹, “Cong Cihang pusa zuogang shuoqi 起說缸坐薩菩航慈從”, *CHDSJNJ*,

disposal of the dead body to the arrangement of the coffin, was performed in accordance with Cihang's instructions and under the supervision of two committees: the Cihang Funerary Committee (*Cihang fashi zhisang weiyuanhui* 會員委喪治師法航慈) and the Cihang Memorial Committee (*Cihang fashi yongjiu jinianhui* 會念紀久永師法航慈). These two organising committees decided to hold two annual Dharma meetings in memory of Cihang: on the 7th day of the 8th month (Cihang's birth day), and on the 4th day of the 4th month (Cihang's death day) of the lunar calendar.

II. 2 Threefold Will

Cihang was not an ordinary human being: three years before dying he had already foreseen the date of his death, while half a year before dying he wrote his will.¹⁴

Two of the three wills compiled by Cihang report his potential turning into a relic-body.¹⁵

His first will, articulated in 10 points and signed on 5 December 1953 at 4:00 am, lists his instructions on the disposition of his dead body (points 6 to 10):

(6) When I die, I do not want the arrangement of a funeral, the divulgation of any obituary notice, the organization of any memorial meeting, the arising of any stupa, nor the burial of the body. I do not want monastics leading any Dharma service or similar events.

(7) As for my dead-body, I ask not to coffin nor to cremate it. Do use a jar, seat me cross-legged in the Lotus posture therein, then place the jar on the hill behind [the Maitreya Inner Hall].¹⁶ I request you to open the jar after three years: if the body is corrupted, do not move it but bury it, according to the Buddhist burial customs; if the body does not show any sign of decay, do gild it and then place it inside a stupa.

(8) I ask you not to perform the repentance and traditional Buddhist rituals that are usually recurrent on such an occasion, but the recitation of the Great Compassion Mantra and to chant Guanyin Bodhisattva's name.

(9) I ask you to build a memorial hall similar to a Chan Hall on the hill behind [the Maitreya Inner Hall], with a Buddhist stupa in the middle, a big stool all around [the enshrined mummy] for the devotees to practice sitting meditation, and a portrait of the deceased behind [the enshrined mummy].

(10) I ask you to keep the retreat room so as you have found it, don't make any change on the disposition of what is inside, allow the devotees to burn incense, mindfully recite the Lotus

2: 625-630). Once sealed, the egg-shaped jar was sustained by iron supports. Shi Weici 慈唯釋 reported the difference in shape between the jar adopted in Mainland China and the one used in Taiwan for Cihang: That used in Mainland had the lower semispher bigger and deeper than that adopted in Taiwan (Weici, "Jieshi yishoushi de yuyi. Jinian Cihang pusa 意寓的詩首一釋解 - 薩菩航慈念紀", in *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 150-180). Detailed description of the jar has been also made by Shi Guangyuan 元廣釋 (Guangyuan, "Cihang pusa zuogang, baozhong xiangguan wenzhang 章文關相塚寶、缸坐薩菩航慈", *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 618-620). Guangyuan reported that the body had been placed down. Limes have been put inside to block the infiltrations of water and the development and growing of germs. Covered by the second upside-down semispher, the egg-shaped jar was tied by varnished clothes, in order to prevent the income of insects from outside. As for the surrounding environment: the lower semispher was collocated inside the ground, while the upper one on the ground: in this way the heat from the sun rays could enter the jar and combine with the air inside the jar. As effect, skin and muscles could contract and remained tied to the skeleton, while visceras and inner water could be absorbed by the limes, germs could not grow and the body, finally, could not putrify. The vegetarian diet followed by Cihang was also helpful in this process, so as the practice of samādhi and the attainment of wisdom are said to be helpful to avoid the decomposition of the corpse.

¹⁴ Shi Cichun 純慈釋, "Cihang pusa bu ke siyi 義思可不薩菩航慈", *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 372.

¹⁵ For the full text of the threefold will, see: Huang Yanhong 宏彥黃, "Cihang fashi shengping luechuan 傳略平生師法航慈", *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 448-449.

¹⁶ As for the "hill behind", he meant the hill behind the Maitreya Inner Hall.

Sutra and prostrate to the Buddha. The verses recite: “Coming with empty hands, going with empty hands; of comings and goings, there is no rest.”

In his second will (also dated 5 December 1953) Cihang wrote: “I will not leave [this world] until even only one human being will have not realised the Way”. According to his disciples, these words are a proof of Cihang’s Bodhisattva vow, and might also refer to his intention to remain in the human realm (*renjian* 閻人). Nevertheless, there is not any explicit assertion that he would have remained in the world as a relic-body.¹⁷

Thirdly, according to Shi Huansheng 生幻釋, a personal letter that Cihang sent to Lin Xiyue 岳希林 (dated 21 April 1954, that is just a few days before dying) gives evidence to the fact that Cihang knew that he would have not left this world, but he would have remained in it as a relic-body. According to Huansheng’s interpretation of the letter, the sentences “I want the play of my life to have a good finale scene, so to make all the people applaud!” reveal a message similar to what is stated at the fifth point of his first will.¹⁸

Some of his disciples affirm that Cihang even ten years before his death had foreseen that his body would not have decayed after death. Furthermore, it is also said that during the pilgrimage to Jiuhua Mountain that he made just after the Full Ordination, Cihang faced with the phenomenon of the mummified Buddhists and made the vow to attain the relic-body.

II. 3 Jar Sealing

Once sealed, the egg-shaped jar was carried on the hill behind the Maitreya Inner Hall and finally closed into a small pagoda.¹⁹ A crew of people, including lay devotees, monastics and representatives of the local Buddhist associations participated in the procession and ceremony that was performed later on the hill.

The Dharma meeting, held for the most before noon, was divided into six moments: sending procession (8 to 10 am), offerings on the altar (10 to 11), homage to the stupa (at 11), devotional recitation (at 11:30), ceremonial lunch (at 12) and finally a speech by the Cihang Memorial Committee (starting at 2 pm).

II. 4 Jar Opening

Cihang gave precise instructions in his will: the jar containing his corpse should have been opened after three years.²⁰ Yet, in 1957, on the third anniversary of Cihang’s death, the Cihang Memorial Committee hesitated to follow Cihang’s instructions. The “official” reason was that, if Cihang’s remains had really been preserved intact, there would have been no place suitable to their enshrinement and welcome the pilgrimage of devotees and disciples. The decision was to wait until the completion of an appropriate altar for Cihang’s possible mummy.²¹

¹⁷ Interpretation by Shi Minzhi 智敏釋: Minzhi, “Dao ci laoren 人老慈悼”, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 37-38.

¹⁸ Huansheng, “Wo suo zhidao de Cihang laofashi 師法老航慈的道知所我”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 200-235.

¹⁹ The pagoda was not required by Cihang in his will, but was initiative of his disciples, in order to protect the jar from water infiltrations. See: Huang Yanhong, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 447.

²⁰ Besides the well known implications of the number “three” in Buddhism, Raveri offered an interesting explanation of the significance of three as the number of years that a “potential mummy” is supposed to spend in a sealed container. Speaking specifically on the Japanese *miira* ライミ, he drew a parallel between the traditional “double burial” and the mummification process. Three year burial is necessary for the corpse to complete the decomposition process and only after that it can be placed in the last tomb. Three years in an underground cave are also necessary for the self-mummified ascetic to make his/her body incorruptible, and only after that the body can lacquered, gilded and finally enshrined. (Raveri 1998, 180-181)

²¹ As reported by Dao’an in date 1957, March 16 (Dao’an, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 62-63).

The Cihang Memorial Committee justified that final decision claiming that the expression “after three years” adopted by Cihang did not necessarily mean “on the exact completion of the third year”.

In 1958, the shrine hall inside the Maitreya Inner Hall, which was meant to be a place suitable to the commemoration (and worship) of a relic-body, was ready.

In 1959, in occasion of the fifth anniversary of Cihang’s death, more than 200 disciples gathered at the Bodhi Lecture Hall 堂講提菩 in Taipei to honour the eminent monk. It was on that occasion that for the first time Cihang’s disciples discussed “if” rather than “when” to open the jar for the first time on that occasion. Among Cihang’s disciples, some relied on the idea that the human body could not but decompose after death and supported the position of not opening the jar. On the other hand, there were those who encouraged to fix a date for opening the jar in order to show respect to Cihang’s will.

The decision was put to the vote: with 162 favourable votes against only 40 unfavourable, the Committee decided to open the jar. The event was scheduled on 19 May 1959, at 5:00 am.

Dao’an (Cihang Memorial Committee, Director), Shi Lühang 航律釋 (Cihang Memorial Committee, Vice-Director; Maitreya Inner Hall, Abbott) and Shi Xuanguang 光玄釋 supervised the ceremony. Around fifty people gathered near the pagoda, reciting the Great Compassion Dharani (*da bei zhou* 咒悲大) and chanting the name of Guanyin Bodhisattva. According to the written reports, all the present disciples were anxious and very concerned for the possibility to extract a decomposed and not intact flesh-body.

II. 5 Remains Appearance

Cihang’s flesh-body appeared without any important trace of decomposition, not yet as a skeleton at least. His skin had assumed a brown-black color, the five organs were clearly demarcated, his hands hung down and his legs still crossed in the Lotus position. All the water internal the body had been absorbed, with the consequence of an evident loss of weight and thinning. No one could believe that such a skinny flesh body was Cihang, who was well-known for his resemblance to Maitreya since his puffy physique. Nose, lips and teeth were still intact, and his flesh resulted to be soft and perfectly elastic like a still alive human being. Hair, eyebrows and beard had grown in those five years.²²

The corpse was immediately covered with yellow satin on the head, neck and all around the body, to avoid any decomposition by the atmospheric agents. Everything was performed in accordance with what Cihang had written in his will: a portrait of the Earth Treasure Bodhisattva (Skr: *Kṣitigarbha bodhisattva*; Ch: *Dizang pusa* 薩菩薩藏地) was hung behind the mummy, and incense was burnt.

The news of the relic-body spread rapidly, and more than 10,000 people a day (people not only from Taipei but also from Xinzhu, Zhongli, Taoyuan, Yilan, Jilong, etc.), some for curiosity, others for devotion arrived at the Maitreya Inner Hall.

²² The report of Demiéville on Cihang, from his death to the appearance of his remains, is rich in details: He died in 1954 at Taipei, leaving instructions in order to not bury nor cremate his body, but for preserving it into a large jar and, if after three years if the body resulted intact at the opening of the jar, to mummify and gild it. The body was disposed in the crouched posture, wrapped with a sort of white linen and closed on a pallet of straw and lime into a jar covered with another reversed jar. All this was sealed up, and it was waited until five years, instead of three, for opening it, on the 19th of May 1959. The body looked slimmer but not decomposed, the skin had become blue but still elastic in the same way of muscles and tendons; nostrils, lips and teeth were in a good state of preservation; the mouth could be slightly opened with the finger. The body was gilded and the face was made up in a good state. The mummy attracted a huge crew of people. Contrary to the tradition, this monk died lying in bed for a stroke (Demiéville 1965, 156-157).

The Cihang Memorial Committee destined NT\$ 1,000,000 for building the Cihang Memorial Hall (*cihang jinian tang* 堂念紀航慈), as the appropriate place to enshrine the gilded relic-body, and to welcome the believers' pilgrimage.

II. 6 “Gilded relic-body” Enshrinement²³

Chen Luguan 官祿陳, a well-known sculptor of Buddhist statues from Taipei, was appointed. Chen Luguan was chosen for his long-term experience, since he had already worked in several temples, like Longshan Temple 寺山龍 (Taipei), Yuantong Temple 寺通圓 (Taipei), Kaiyuan Temple 寺元開 (Tainan 南台) and Dongshan Temple 寺山東 (Pingdong 東屏).

The whole treatment of Cihang's body needed a few months. First, he wrapped the whole body in white silk, then he covered it with red lacquer. Once the lacquer was dried, the body appeared totally black. Then, he covered the relic-body with another stratum of silk and a further stratum of red lacquer. After repeating this silk-lacquer sequence three times, Cihang's relic-body resulted quite similar to the Cihang's living-body. According to Chen Luguan, the most difficult part of this process was the insertion of new artificial eyes.

The gilding process was the second phase of the treatment: the relic-body was covered with four strata of gold foils. Since each stratum was formed by 7,000 foils, the relic-body was wrapped in a total of 28,000 gold foils. According to Chen Luguan, one stratum of gold foils is usually enough for the arrangement of a wooden or metal Buddha statue, but the treatment for a relic-body requires three more strata in order to make it indestructible.²⁴

Since then, Cihang's relic-body did not receive any other treatment but the change of his robe and a dry-cleaning that occurs every eight years.

In the same year, according to the belief that Buddhist relic-bodies (as well as body-relics) embody thaumaturgical power, a procession in the form of a Dharma meeting for dispersing the calamities over the country was performed in honour to Cihang's mummy. The ceremony included a service similar to that held five years before when the jar was closed in the pagoda, and in the same way lay devotees as well as members of the monastic community were present.

Among the many initiatives organised for honouring Cihang there was the founding of the Cihang Magazine (*Cihang zazhi* 誌雜航慈) in 1962. The main aim of the magazine was to illustrate the achievements of Cihang and not just to publicise the phenomenon of his relic-body. In 1963, the Main Hall of the Cihang Hall 堂航慈 was ready to host the gilded relic-body. Afterwards, other complexes, such as a kindergarten and a library, were built in memory of Cihang. Finally, in 1981, the Cihang Foundation (*Caituan faren cihang shehui jijinhui* 會金基會社航慈團財) was established.

A question that comes spontaneously in mind, and which perhaps will never find an answer is: Would all these initiatives have been even planned if Cihang had not become a relic-body? How much did all this depend on the *covered* and how much on the *covering*?

In the 1960s, Welch reported:

²³ Quoting from the *Chinese Buddhist Monasteries* by Prip-Møller (1937), Welch wrote about the custom of making the relic-bodies covered with gold foils: Usually, they were gilded. Sometimes the lobes of the ears were lengthened and a lot was placed between the eyebrows. Golden skin, long robes, and the *urna* dot were among the thirty-two sacred marks of a buddha. The implication was therefore that in his lifetime the monk whose corpse the visitor saw before him had attained buddhahood. Sometimes a notice was placed alongside pointing out that nonputrefaction was proof of this and inviting the visitor to contribute money so that his progeny would “continue for countless ages to be distinguished scholars and enjoy glory and riches” (Welch 1967, 343).

²⁴ Guangyuan, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 619-620.

Today the reader who goes to Taiwan may see the “Diamond Undecaying Body” of Tz’u-hang being worshipped on a high altar in a handsome temple built to house him. Kindly Taiwanese nuns accept a small stream of donations from the devout and the curious.²⁵

In the winter 2002 (period of my first fieldwork), I found the gilded relic-body conserved “on a high altar” in a new big Cihang Memorial Hall, a new complex built through the generous “donations from the devout and the curious”, and managed by a few “kindly Taiwanese nuns”. In other words, nothing seems to have changed since the 1960s, and Welch’s report can still describe the contemporary situation.

Although more than forty years have passed since the enshrinement of Cihang’s mummy, we can individualise a line of continuity between the situation in the 1960s and in the early 21st century. Then, it may be also found a correspondence between the missions undertaken by Cihang during his lifetime and ‘his’ monastic community in the contemporary age.

Cihang became well-known for claiming the need of an improved Buddhist education for monastics. He devoted many of his efforts to improve nuns’ education and training, and to start cooperation between female and male members of the monastic community. A clear trace of Cihang’s ideal may be seen in Xizhi today, where, if the Maitreya Inner Hall is run and inhabited by monks, the Cihang Memorial Hall is managed by nuns. At the time of my visits, there were around thirty nuns (including one from Argentina) resident in the Cihang Memorial Hall. Many of them are very young, and some of them decided to enter the nunhood after seeing Cihang’s relic-body. Each of them has her own duty, but all of them are (or have been) enrolled in the Buddhist Institute. Following Cihang’s emphasis on the importance of receiving a Buddhist education, the nuns learn teachings that range from the Yogacara philosophy to the Pure Land School; they neither adopt Cihang’s commentaries as the only reference books, nor master the sole Cihang’s thought.

II. 7 Ceremonies, Events, Memorial Foundations and Publications.

On the anniversary of Cihang’s death disciples are used to gather near the pagoda that had conserved the jar. The birth-day as well as the death-day of Cihang are commemorated since the opening of the jar and the enshrinement of Cihang’s relic-body.

Special Dharma meetings have been performed on the 10th, the 20th, the 30th, and the 40th anniversary of his death, as well as in occasion of the 80th, the 90th and the 100th anniversary of his birth.

In 1998, the Maitreya Inner Hall and the Mahāyāna Vihāra 舍精乘大 completed the publication of the Cihang Memorial Collection (*Cihang dashi jinian ji* 集念紀師大航慈) in two volumes, an opera that had been planned in occasion of the coincidence of the 40th death anniversary with the 100th birth anniversary. The Cihang Memorial Collection constitutes an important source of details regarding Cihang’s life, the Dharma missions that he undertook and his contribution to the development of Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan. Besides a first section with some passages from Cihang’s writings (including a poem on the meaning of *renjian fojiao*), the two volumes collect more than 150 papers, written from 1954 to the time of the publication. Compiled by monastics and lay people, the writings include mourning letters as well as reports from newspapers and magazines. A few works (especially those written by eminent local monks)²⁶ describe life and

²⁵ Welch 1967, 344.

²⁶ Baisheng 聖白, “Daonian cihang laofashi 師法老航慈念悼”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 47-49; Shi Dongchu 初東釋, “Jingdao cihang laofashi 師法老航慈悼敬”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 68-70; Yanpei, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 74-102; Yanpei, “Wo qinjin cilao yiduan yinyuan 緣因段一老慈近親我”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 103-106; Shi Moru 如默釋, “Shu cilao linzhongshi de liang jian shi de cuozhi 置措的事件兩的時終臨老慈述”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 111-115; Xuming, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 129-133; Xingyun, “Weida yu chonggao – jinian wo zui jingyang de cigong laoren 高崇與大偉 - 人老公慈的仰敬最我念紀”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 138-152; Shi Yuanming 明圓釋, “Yuntian haiwai

practice of Cihang, in other words Cihang as “living body”, while other papers focus on Cihang’s death and final mummification, that is Cihang as “relic-body”. Among the latter group of writings, some stress the miraculous and inexplicable features of the Buddhist mummy, while others deal with the issue of Buddhist mummification and offer significant details on the phenomenon of the flesh-body Bodhisattvas in general.²⁷ The two volumes include interesting photographic material: portraits of Cihang in his lifetime and his embalming treatment described step-by-step, from Cihang’s death to the opening of the egg-shaped jar, from the enshrining procession of the gilded remains to all the ceremonies held in memory of Cihang. Finally, the second volume ends with the proceedings of the conference held in 1994 for the 100th birth anniversary of Cihang.

III. Cihang’s mummy: Effects and Reactions in Taiwan

Cihang Bodhisattva appeared to us in a non-decayed body. This fact rescued not only a few people who had not realized the Way, and helped the human beings not to doubt but to awaken the faith, estinguish innumerable guilts and accumulate infinite blessings!²⁸

III. 1 Scepticism and Faith

Both the feelings of scepticism and enthusiasm welcome Cihang’s firm statement that he would have become a mummy. According to Shi Cichun 純慈釋, even if there already had been relic-bodies in the history of Buddhism, the Taiwanese (even if Buddhist practitioners) could not easily believe that Cihang would have turned into another case of mummified monk. The debate included different opinions. Some thought that Cihang was not serious due to the sense of humour that always accompanied him, while others thought that his words hid a particular meaning that only his disciples would have been able to decipher. These views, according to Cichun, are index of lack of blind faith for Cihang’s potential achievement.²⁹

Even the nun Xuanguang doubted that Cihang would have left an incorrupted body: she confessed to have thought that Cihang was not serious as he told her he would have turned into a flesh-body Bodhisattva one year before his death.³⁰

diao cishi 師慈弔外海天雲”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 255-257; Zhenhua, “Zunshou jiaoyan wei shiling 靈師慰言教守遵”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 287-289; Shi Yinshun 順印釋, “Wo dui cihang fashi de aisi 思哀的師法航慈對我”, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 25-27; Moru, “Gaowei cihang zunzhe 者尊航慈慰告”, *CHDSJNJ*, 2, 39-43.

²⁷ Guangyuan, “Roushen pusa cihang dashi 師大航慈薩菩身肉”, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 306-308; Cichun, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 370-394; Hu Guowei 偉國胡, “Jingang buhuai shen 身壞不剛金”, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 247-250; Xu Qiuting 婷秋徐, “Taiwan diyiwei roushen pusa cihang fashi 師法航慈薩菩身肉位一第灣台”, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 250-255; Guangyuan, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 618-620, “Cihang pusa roushen heyi buhuai 壞不以何身肉薩菩航慈”, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 621-624; Cao Jingsan, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 625-630; Lin Zhengxian 賢政林, “Wen jianhui huyu shenzhong chuli cihang yibao 寶遺航慈理處重慎籲呼會建文”, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 640-642; Lin Zhengxian, “Qing qiaoqiao ri han ruhe baocun wenhua zichan 產資化文存保何如韓日瞧瞧請”, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 643-656. Guangyuan’s papers focus on Cihang as a mummy and the general reality of the Buddhist mummification with a special reference to China, while Lin Zhengxian’s works offer a prospect of the Japanese mummies and an attempt to compare the mummy worship in Taiwan with the mummy worship in Japan. These essays are all good sources for a general overview on Buddhist mummification.

²⁸ Cichun, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 371.

²⁹ Cichun, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 372. This article listed the Buddhist explanation of how it is possible to become a mummy, giving practice and discipline as the main causes.

³⁰ Xiuguan, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 221.

The hesitation to open the jar first, and the anxiety expressed later by the monks presiding the event can also prove the scepticism on the successful discovering of a relic-body. Nevertheless, such hesitation and scepticism might not imply doubts about the level of practice reached by Cihang. In the history of Buddhism not all the eminent monks left body-relics, and only a few of them attained the relic-body. Perhaps Cihang's disciples were aware that a successful mummification is not just the effect of a pure and mindful Dharma cultivation and Bodhisattva practice, but also result of a number of environmental circumstances, so as everything depends on primary causes and secondary (but still effective) conditions, warp and weft of the samsaric world. In other words, even the Dharma practitioners might have been aware of the scientific-material factors determining the bodily incorruptibility, but they preferred not to express this feeling in an explicit way.

III. 2 Folk Buddhism and Orthodox Buddhism

Taiwan recorded different reactions to the appearance of Cihang's mummy. After the interview records and the written documents collected during my fieldwork, I would classify people's reactions into three categories, that can be considered indexes of three different levels of Dharma faith and practice. Each reaction shows a particular relationship and "dialogue" between the mummy and the believer/visitor, i.e., between the *venerated* and the *venerator*: is this dialogue that gives a specific meaning to the mummy.

First, I see a reaction associable to 'stupefaction'. It is shown by those who are not Buddhist, and get to see the relic-body moved by curiosity (the same curiosity reported by Welch) rather than by spirit of Buddhist devotion. They conceive the relic-body as a miracle, an unexplicable phenomenon, a supernatural thing, and think of Cihang as a human being gifted of a supernatural power. These people might associate the reality of the mummy to the Dharma, but taking Buddhism in terms of superstition. Nevertheless, the sight of the relic-body signs a turning point of the lives of some who, as face with the relic-body, awaken their Buddha Nature, and find the correct (i.e., not contaminated with superstition) Dharma Path. Consequently, not only a few of non-believers decide to take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha after seeing the mummy. Some even decide to renounce the secular life and enter the monastic community. We also have the record of some who took refuge in Cihang's relic-body: Cihang has not received the traditional common funeral service, and consequently can still accept lay disciples.³¹ A question that may arise now is: Do they take refuge in *Cihang* or in *Cihang's mummy*? The interlacement of *covered* and *covering* returns again.

Secondly, I list those who are already Buddhist but hold a still low level of faith and practice when they face with the mummy. Feeling a kind of 'happy comfort' at the sight of the monk's relic-body, they show a sort of devotion and gratitude to Cihang, who offers them such a material concrete support in order to strengthen their faith, to encourage them to practice the Bodhisattva Path and to develop the Bodhi Mind. They see the value of *dānapāramitā* (the Perfection of Giving) that a relic-body is assumed to embody.

Finally, we have what can be called 'nearly indifference'. There are those who claim that Cihang is still on earth not only in his relic-body but also, and more importantly, in the contribution that he has made to Chinese Buddhism and to the development of Buddhism in Taiwan, in other words to his threefold mission (education-culture-social welfare), his "Buddhism for the Human Realm", the strict discipline that he chose for himself, his study and practice:

Cihang's name is already well-known in Taiwan as well as abroad, because his flesh body did not decay [*roushen buhuai* 壞不身肉], but turned into an integral body relic [*quanshen sheli* 利舍身全] and was so called living Buddha [*huo fo* 佛活]. Although the concept of relic is

³¹ This is the case of Xie Bingrong 榮冰謝, reported in: Xie Bingrong, "Cihang fashi – Wode shifu 師法航慈 - 父師的我", *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 526-539.

considerable, all the achievements and remarkable deeds that he completed in his lifetime cannot be limited to it. [...] Cihang's greatness is not expressed in his turning or not into a relic-body, but is manifested in the contribution that he made to the monastic community, living beings and whole country during his last lifetime.³²

Thus, the immortality of the spirit seems to be more important than the immortality of the flesh-body.³³ The belongs to this third category express concern for the attention paid on the spectacular and miraculous aspect of the relic-body, since this may obscure Cihang's vows and missions.

In other words, the best way to remember Cihang is not prostrating in front of his relic-body, but continuing the missions that Cihang started, in order to avoid that an eminent figure of the orthodox Buddhism becomes object of devotion of the so-called folk Buddhism.

III. 3 Thaumaturgy and Dreams

There is also a record of miraculous and unexplicable recoveries that have blessed people who paid visit to the relic-body.³⁴ I list here some from the cases that I have collected during my research. In 1959 a woman from Panqiao is said to have recovered a serious stomach disease after paying homage to Cihang's relic-body, and without having the supposed necessary operation. A woman from Tainan, aged 40, had her hand cured after praying before Cihang's relic-body. Another woman from Hualian recovered after drinking the Great Compassion Water (*da bei shui* 大悲水) taken from the hall where Cihang's relic-body is enshrined. A further woman from Yunlin aged 30 was cured by the same Great Compassion Water. A blind from Jinshan also recovered after a visit to the Cihang Hall.

Sometimes Cihang appeared in dream. A woman dreamed Cihang wearing Theravadin yellow robe and asking her to buy incense at the Cihang Hall. Following the interpretation of the nun Xuanguang, Cihang was meant to encourage the woman to develop her Bodhi mind. Secondly, Cihang appeared in dream to some devotees and asked them to modify the building of a certain niche for a certain Buddha statue. Finally, Xuanguang, who had been suffering of a serious stomach disease for a long-time, one day prostrated before Cihang's relic-body, recited the Great Compassion Dharani three times and drank the Great Compassion Water. After one week, she dreamed Cihang giving her a medicine that she took without hesitation. When she woke up, her illness was completely cured.³⁵

However, the best-known story regards a child who got lost and was guided back to her mother by an old and thin man, wearing monastic yellow robe, who was identified as Cihang. The monk pet the hair of the child, and that was a gesture typical of Cihang. Moreover the child, after finding his mother and entering the Cihang Hall, recognised the monk who drove him back in the gilded relic-body of Cihang.

III. 4 Maitreya Belief

Cihang is Maitreya: this is what the nuns repeated to me during my visits.

The link between Buddhist mummification and the Maitreya belief is a widely accepted theory. Nonetheless, it resulted in practice to be a rule with many exceptions. The supposition, rooted in

³² Shi Kaizheng 證開釋, "Wo suo jingyang de Cihang dashi 師大航慈的仰敬所我", *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 194-196.

³³ Shengyin stressed that Cihang's spirit will never estinguish but will be immortal. See: Shengyin, "Cihang jingshen yongzhao renhuan 寰人照永神精航慈", *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 191-194. A similar statement in Xu Qiuting, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 255.

³⁴ For further details on the stories, see: Xingshen 馨馨, "Cihang pusa linggan ji 記感靈薩菩航慈", *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 94-97.

³⁵ For relics as thaumaturges and *abhijñā*, see Faure 1991, 132-133.

Mahākāśyapa's legend, that mummification is not the permanent but the temporary state of a disciple who is waiting for Maitreya's descent on earth is a principle applicable to the self-mummified ascetics in Japan while it rarely works with the Chinese cases.³⁶ The distinction between the mummies who are waiting for Maitreya descending on earth, and the mummies who actually are incarnations of Maitreya may help to understand what the nuns meant as saying “*Ta shi Mile pusa* 薩菩勒彌是他”: He [Cihang] is Maitreya Bodhisattva.³⁷

Cihang became a mummy, but his close connection with Maitreya Bodhisattva is not limited to the bodily perfection and immortality. The resemblance between Cihang and Maitreya has been stressed by Cihang himself, who liked to be painted or photographed sat cross-legged, wearing Theravadin robes, with the big belly naked and a reassuring smile on his face. This all reminded Maitreya's iconography. In addition, the Dharma name *Cihang*, meaning that “he is a bodhisattva of compassion [*ci* 慈] and can ferry us across the sea of suffering [*hang* 航],” as the monk Xingyun 星雲 explained, related Cihang to Maitreya because of the character *ci*, that also identifies the future Buddha.³⁸

Then, there are Cihang's Pure Land teachings: his conception of “Pure Land on Earth” (*renjian jingtu* 土淨間人) emphasised the Maitreya Pure Land, conceived as Maitreya *renjian* Pure Land (*mile renjian jingtu* 土淨間人勒彌).

Finally, as Cao Jingsan 三敬曹 stated, Cihang founded the Maitreya Inner Hall, practiced the Maitreya's spirit of Compassion (*mile de cixin* 心慈的勒彌), welcomed young monks who were without a refuge, lived and ate with them and, overall, shared the Dharma learning and practice with them. His efforts in making vows, his efforts to benefit the others are also connected with the figure of Maitreya.³⁹

He is an incarnation of Maitreya, who made the vow to practice the Dharma and to develop the Great Compassion Mind [*da cibeixin* 心悲慈大], took the Dharma name of Cihang and made the vow to rescue all the human beings.⁴⁰

³⁶ The rare clear association between (Chinese) Chan flesh body Bodhisattvas and Maitreya eschatology is reported in Faure 1991, 154-156.

³⁷ Besides Faure 1991, 154-156, see also Raveri 1998, 23-27. Raveri reported the twofold conception of “*miira* as waiting for Maitreya” and “*miira* as Maitreya”.

³⁸ Xingyun, *On Becoming a Bodhisattva*, available online from: < <http://www.fgs.org.tw/english/talks/w1-2.htm> >.

³⁹ Cihang's brief essay titled “*Mile neiyuan dingming de yiyi* 義意的名定院內勒彌” and included in *Putixin ying – rensheng pian* 影心提菩 - 篇生人, 163-167, clarified the implications of Maitreya and Maitreya Pure Land in Cihang's thought. He started making a clear distinction between “Maitreya Inner Hall” (or Tuṣita Inner Court), that is the place where Maitreya is preaching the Dharma and Bodhisattvas are hearing his speeches, and “Maitreya Outer Hall” (or Tuṣita Outer Court), that is the place inhabited by divine men and women. Cihang continued with a parallel between the Maitreya Inner Hall as the national Government, with President and Ministers, and the Maitreya Outer Hall as the country of people. Then, he listed six reasons for the adoption of the name “Maitreya Inner Hall” instead than “XX Temple”. All the reasons centred on the necessity of practicing and spreading Maitreya's spirit of mercy and compassion in order to get rid of all the sufferings. In Cihang's mind, Maitreya Inner Hall was supposed to be the core of a purification process that should have involved first the whole Chinese and then also Western societies. That Cihang was the Maitreya preaching the Dharma and his disciples and students were the Bodhisattvas hearing the Dharma is not stated but is a clear implicit message. See: Cihang 1981: 3.

⁴⁰ Cao Jingsan, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 628.

IV. Cihang's Remains: Self-Made Mummy or Man-Made Mummy?

How could Cihang's body turn into a mummy?

Buddhist relic-bodies claim to be different from the Egyptian mummies. The Buddhists offer a list of six requirements for the attainment of a relic-body after death: (1) the strenght of holding precepts and respecting discipline; (2) the strenght of samādhi, in terms of *dhyanasamādhi*, the ability of mindful contemplation, origin of Wisdom, and supernatural power (*shen tong* 通神); (3) the strenght of faith; (4) the strenght of making vow; (5) the reliance on Buddha; (6) the reliance on Dharma.

Guangyuan offered a detailed analysis of how Cihang satisfied all these requirements.⁴¹

However, is the only practice involved for a perfect preservation of the (material) body? In which respect is the practice implied?

IV. 1 From the Buddhist Scriptures to Cihang's Teachings

Passing from the Buddhist Canon to Cihang's teachings we find that a pure cultivation, considered in terms of the three discipline-meditation-wisdom (*jie ding hui* 慧定戒), is meant to lead to the realisation of the Way and the final liberation.

In the Golden Light Sūtra (Skr: *Suvarṇa-prabhāsa sūtra*; Ch: *Jin guangming jing* 經明光金) it is affirmed:

Relics are the result of the joint practice of discipline, meditation and wisdom, a very difficult to accomplish, an insuperable field of blessings.⁴²

And again in the Long Āgamas (Skr: *Dīrghāgama*; Ch: *Chang ahan jing* 經含阿長):

Do practice discipline and you will attain meditation, and thus a great reward. Do practice meditation and you will attain wisdom, and thus a great reward. Do practice wisdom and your mind will be purified, and thus the liberation will finally be reached.⁴³

The Cihang's Tenfold Instructions (*cihang shi xun* 訓十航慈) that Cihang left to his disciples embody a similar message:

(1) Approach wise teachers; (2) Rely on good companions; (3) Study the Tripitaka; (4) Keep the Vinaya prescriptions; (5) Recite the Buddha's name; (6) Be devoted to service and prostration; (7) Be mindful of the sufferings of living; (8) Develop the Bodhi-Mind; (9) Benefit the living beings; (10) Make the vow to realise the Buddhahood.

Talking about Cihang's relic-body, Hu Guowei 偉國胡 listed discipline-meditation-wisdom as the primary factors that detemined the successful mummification. Nevertheless, the particular shape and conditions of the jar as well as the environment wherein the jar was conserved should be considered as the natural factors that helped the conservation of the flesh body.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Guangyuan, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 621-624.

⁴² T. 663: 16. 354a15-16; T. 664: 16. 397a21-22.

⁴³ T. 1: 1. 12a20-21; T. 1: 1. 17b20-21.

⁴⁴ Hu Guowei, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 247-250.

According to Cao Jingsan, Cihang was practising *prajñā*, and so he entered Nirvāṇa. Chan masters also said that those who practice *prajñā* can consequently enter Nirvāṇa. *Prajñā* is the cause for Nirvāṇa, and Nirvāṇa is the effect of *prajñā*.⁴⁵

Shi Kuansu 俗寬釋, who is the current abbot of the Maitreya Inner Hall, and was one of the students of Cihang, told me that the practice and the daily cultivation that Cihang had followed determined the final preservation of the body.

IV. 2 Cihang's Dharma Cultivation

If Shi Kaizheng 證開釋 defined Cihang's practice as difficult to pare,⁴⁶ Shi Miaoran 然妙釋 claimed:

I wish to imitate his turning into a relic-body, but my practice has not reached a sufficiently high level for that.⁴⁷

The Ten Instructions listed above embody the Dharma practice as conceived by Cihang. Therefore, Cihang wrote four guidelines for becoming a good monk (and lay practitioner), which are also summary of his conception of Buddhist cultivation: (1) first of all, to be determined and have firm intentions; (2) to realise the vow through the practice; (3) to benefit oneself and to benefit the others; (4) the joint practice of blessings and wisdom.

The solitary retreat (*biguan*) played another important role in Cihang's Dharma path, and may be linked to the successful preservation of his body.

Cihang did three solitary retreats dated 1924-1926, 1944-1946, 1952-1954.

The third, started on 9 September 1952, was conducted differently than the other two.⁴⁸

On 9 September 1952 Cihang entered his third solitary retreat at the Maitreya Inner Hall. This last solitary retreat was different from the other two. Previously, he performed solitary retreats entirely devoted to his own Dharma cultivation and study, while this time one of his main aims was the completion of his writings. Then, this solitary retreat was a retreat spent not really in solitude, since he appeared at the window of the retreat room for giving Dharma teachings several times.⁴⁹

A note on the diet that Cihang followed during the solitary retreat signs a distance between his case on the one hand, and the Japanese self-mummified ascetics and the Taoists who were seeking for the immortality on the other hand. He did not take abstinence from cereals or particular

⁴⁵ Cao Jingsan, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 629.

⁴⁶ Kaizheng, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 196.

⁴⁷ Miaoran, "Huainian Cihang fashi 師法航慈念懷", *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 149.

⁴⁸ Yanpei wrote a digression on three typologies of solitary retreat: the Amitābha Retreat (*bi mituo guan* 關陀彌閉), which implies a mindful contemplation of Amitābha, the Prajñā Retreat (*bi banruo guan* 關若般閉), which requests the reading of Prajñāpāramitā Scriptures, and the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Retreat (*bi fahua guan* 關華法閉), which implies the reading of the Lotus Sutra. What Cihang started in 1952 was a Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Retreat. Yanpei also stated that Cihang was "forced" to do the first two retreats, while the last one was a decision made only by him. See: Yanpei, "Jinian ci lao bailing ji shi ji sishizhounian 年週十四寂示及齡百老慈念紀", *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 50-67.

⁴⁹ For a detailed description of his third retreat, see: Huang Yanhong, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 446-449. The passage quoted above is from p. 446.

restrictions, indeed on his last days he asked for rice, fruits and tea. It is reported that during his last day, he had rice for breakfast and lunch, tea and fruits.⁵⁰

Quoting a thought expressed by Yanpei, but also confirmed by other monastics and highlighted during my interviews as well, Cihang cultivated the joint practice of “benefit himself and benefit the others” (*zili lita* 他利利自) even in a retreat. The *zili* is identified in his personal reading and meditation, while the *lita* practice took place in the form of teachings given to anyone who could come and ask for it. He never refused to teach, even in the retreat.⁵¹

Moreover, during his last retreat, he did not refuse to give Dharma teachings and explanations of Buddhist texts, as if he had felt that those would have been his last opportunities to spread the Dharma among his disciples and students.⁵² The fact that he wrote his three wills during this retreat might confirm this supposition. The Sūtraṭīka was his companion, and he devoted his time to studying and teaching, always guided by the principle “My lifetime is limited, while what I want to know is boundless.”⁵³

Finally, and perhaps most important, Cihang was a promoter and follower of the “Buddhism for the Human Realm”.

IV. 3 Mummy Worship and the “Buddhism for the Human Realm”

First of all, *renjian fojiao* does not have one single definition. Each of its promoter belongs to a different school of thought, thus has founded *renjian fojiao* on a different theoretical basis, and has been engaged in different activities. As a result, the Chinese term ‘*renjian fojiao*’ is variously interpreted and the large number of English expressions used for translating the Chinese is index of this situation. “Buddhism for the Human Realm”, “Humanistic Buddhism”, “Living Buddhism”, “Engaged Buddhism”, “Protestant Buddhism”, “Modern Buddhism” and “New Buddhism” are among the terms commonly in use.

Nevertheless, these different forms of *renjian fojiao* maintain all a common basis: the refusal of any kind of superstition belief and passive practice, the call for an active and concrete realisation of the Dharma in the human realm and for the human realm.

My questions thus are: How can a promoter of *renjian fojiao* even think to ask for mummification? And then, how can the followers and practitioners of *renjian fojiao* be concerned about the phenomenon of mummification? Is there any contradiction between the modern (rational) Buddhism and the practice of mummification?

In *On Becoming a Bodhisattva* Shi Xingyun (1927-), founder of Foguangshan 山光佛 and Buddha’s Light International Association (BLIA), and are from the promoters of *renjian fojiao* in Taiwan, identified the preservation of Cihang’s body as index of the accomplishment of his Bodhisattva vow:

⁵⁰ Demiéville reported: “Il avait observé avant sa mort un régime amaigrissant, mais assez atténué : deux bols de riz la matin, deux à midi, des fruits et du thé, et il avait conservé une corpulence confortable.” (Demiéville 1965, 157).

⁵¹ Yanpei, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 64-67.

⁵² The daily schedule followed during the solitary retreat is as follows: morning service and sūtra recitation (5 to 6:30); reading of English Buddhist texts (7 to 8); teaching (to his students or whoever was willing to hear the Dharma) of sacred scriptures (8 to 10); editing of texts (10 to 12); lunch and short-rest (12 to 2 p.m.); teaching of sacred scriptures (2 to 5); editing of texts (5 to 6); teaching of sacred scriptures (8 to 9); editing of texts (9 to 10); evening service, sitting meditation and rest (starting from 10). Xiuguan, in comment of Cihang’s busy schedule, affirmed that he did not have even 3-4 hour sleep a day. See: Dao’an, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 57. For a detailed description of Cihang’s third retreat by the nun Xiuguan, see: Xiuguan, “Wo yu Cigong enshi de yinyuan 緣因的師恩公慈與我”, *CHDSJNJ*, 2: 139. For further details on his third solitary retreat see also: Xuming, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 131-133.

⁵³ Sentence reported by Xuming, see: Xuming, *CHDSJNJ*, 1: 131.

There is also the contemporary example of Master Tzu-Hang, who vowed that, as a testimonial to his attainment, his physical body would not perish after his passing. When he was alive, he liked to be addressed as a bodhisattva. After his passing, his body, indeed, did not perish, and it is still kept at Hsi-chi for people to pay their respects to. To honor his wish, he is called the "Tzu-Hang Bodhisattva," which means he is a bodhisattva of compassion and can ferry us across the sea of suffering.⁵⁴

Shi Yinshun 順印釋 (1906-2005), who is considered the theoriser of the *renjian fojiao* which is spread in Taiwan, wrote a short essay on the relic-bodies entitled "Roushen pusa 薩菩身肉".⁵⁵ That essay may be considered an update of a previous work on relics dated 1957 and later included in the volume *Fofa shi jiu shi zhi guang* 光之世救是法佛.⁵⁶

About the reason why Buddhists worship the relics, and so why relics play a certain role in the Buddhist world, Yinshun stated that relics are signs of the wisdom and compassion embodied by the Buddhist masters who left them. The worship is due to respect the virtuous eminent monks, and aims at strengthening the faith and practice of the Dharma followers.

To conclude, it appears that even the modern and rational *renjian* Buddhism accepted the traditional custom of mummification, relying on the Mahāyāna value of *dānapāramitā* and the doctrine of the skilful means, but also showing respect to a religious practice often associated with folk belief.

Conclusion

Paul Demiéville concluded his treatise on the Buddhist mummies in East Asia with a list of unsolved enquiries:

“Pourquoi, en fin de compte, les bouddhistes chinois se sont-ils mis à momifier les corps de leurs saints? Les textes restent peu explicites sur les motifs de cet usage, qui n’avait pas d’antécédent dans le bouddhisme indien. [...] Pourquoi ces sacralisations du corps charnel qui sont au fond toutes deux des modalités du suicide? Pourquoi le bouddhisme qui honnit le corps en a-t-il prôné en Chine la perpétuation matérielle, alors que le taoïsme, qui admet et recherche l’immortalité corporelle, n’en a apparemment rien fait? Pourquoi cette obsession de l’effigie réelle que rien ne semble justifier dans le bouddhisme, même si c’est par lui que le culte des icônes et celui des reliques se sont introduits en Chine? Et pourquoi le confucianisme, qui prête une telle importance au culte des morts et une attention si méticuleuse à leur sépulture, s’est-il abstenu de recourir à des techniques propres à en assurer la conservation, sinon de manière temporaire et provisoire?”⁵⁷

To return to Cihang, we may add the questions: How can a promoter of *renjian fojiao* even think to ask for mummification? And then, how can the followers and practitioners of *renjian fojiao* to care the phenomenon of mummification?

We may advance some ipotheses at this point.

Broadly speaking, the followed practice and accumulated merits are the key factors to be considered from the Buddhist perspective. Xingyun affirmed that Cihang proved to be a

⁵⁴ From: <http://www.blia.org/english/publications/booklet/pages/16.htm> (2003.12.22)

⁵⁵ Yinshun (1989): “Zhongguo fojiao suotan 談瑣教佛國中”. In Yinshun (1993): *Huayu ji* 集雨華, v. 4, pp. 195-200.

⁵⁶ Yinshun (1973): *Fofa shi jiu shi zhi guang* 光之世救是法佛, Taipei: Zhengwen, pp. 329-337.

⁵⁷ Demiéville, Paul, “Momies D’Extrême-Orient”, pp. 168-169

Bodhisattva with the attainment of a relic-body that Xingyun intended as the “gift” of the flesh body to the human beings. However, we can object, not all the eminent monks (and nuns) left body-relics or relic-bodies. Perhaps, the successful mummification is not only a matter of Dharma practice. In addition, the voice of the science claims that the most depends on the physical and genetic characteristics of the living being, as well as an accurately sealed jar-container able to help the isolation and conservation of the corpse. Yet, we can object, not all the the healthy people or well-conserved corpses may attain a successful result.

Speaking on the case of the monk Cihang in particular, there are many opinions on “why” Cihang did it, in the terms of “what” he wanted to do for himself, to demonstrate and to communicate to human beings. That difference in answers depends on the difference in people, on their Dharma understanding and practice. Some monks fell in despair crying “*Shifu zoule!* 了走父師!”: the master is gone! Others felt Cihang had not left the human world.

Finally, may we say he “turned into” or “was turned into” a relic-body? May we speak about “becoming” or “making” a mummy? May we find one sole solution to so many inquiries and solve the mystery of the flesh-body Bodhisattva Cihang?

Perhaps the words *bu ke siyi* 議思可不, that we found very often and may be translated as “inconceivable” or “unimaginable”, is the correct expression to adopt in order to conclude the story of the first mummy discovered in Taiwan.

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