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RÉINTRODUCTION ET DIFFUSION DES PRATIQUES DE MOMIFICATION À TAIWAN 1959-2011

THE REINTRODUCTION AND DIFFUSION OF MUMMIFICATION PRACTICES IN TAIWAN, 1959-2011

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The Reintroduction and Diffusion of Mummification Practices in Taiwan, 1959-2011

Douglas Gildow

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Most human dead are eventually forgotten but are not supposed to be forgotten too soon. This point is suggested by the ritualization of corpse disposal, which follows special protocols marking it as separate from the disposal of ordinary waste. Even anonymous cadavers are often buried or cremated individually rather than more cost-efficiently cremated en masse or dissolved in pressured vats as deceased pets or livestock often are.

This paper describes a small set of “special dead” in Taiwan, namely mummified corpses that have been adorned and enshrined. These are dead that, for some people, are worth remembering and have never died. Thus their deaths are hidden yet their bodies are displayed. But the gilded shells that often encase them may lacquer over bodily decay.

* *

Currently there are at least eleven formally enshrined, mummified corpses in Taiwan (see Table 1). The first was enshrined in 1879 and the most recent in 2007, although the earliest extant mummy had been held in military and police facilities and museum storage vaults since 1912 and was re-enshrined, on loan from a museum, as recently as 20 September 2011. There are also dozens of very similar mummies throughout China, many of which were produced over the past three decades. Unlike ancient Egypt or parts of Melanesia, mummification is not generally associated with the Chinese cultural sphere. Rather, the Han (ethnic Chinese) are known to have strong fears of the death pollution associated with the corpse and particularly with its flesh. Who has been recruited into the growing ranks of such mummies, and why?

Below I contextualize and explain mummification in Taiwan by answering the following questions. How do these mummies fit into the broader mortuary culture? How has the practice been disseminated? What are the trends in the practice? Finally, how can we explain its revival?

This paper builds on research published in Gildow and Bingenheimer 2002 (focusing on the history of Buddhist mummification in Taiwan) and Gildow 2005 (focusing on mummification within the larger set of Taiwanese post mortem practices and how these correlate with religious ideas). The fieldwork was mainly done during 2002-2003 and 2005-2006, when I lived in Taiwan, where I have personally visited the sites of twelve mummies, former mummies, attempted mummies, or potential mummies. My information on developments over the past four years comes mainly from several dozen newspaper and television reports, many of which space does not permit me to cite for now. Research on the recently re-enshrined mummy of Kexiang, who was linked to an anti-Japanese revolt and confiscated in 1912, has been underway since August 2011 under the direction of Fan Yenchou 范燕秋, and will be published later (email correspondence with Professor Fan, Sept 2011). Many thanks are due to Mary Picone, who organized and invited me to the conference panel at which this paper was first presented (on 14 September 2011) and who gave suggestions on the paper itself.

Table 1: Mummies and Attempted Mummies, Taiwan¹

Name	Death	Enshrined	Status	Condition
Yunü 玉女	1837?	1837-1847?	Female religious	Destroyed
Sien-lu-niu 仙女娘	1878	1878?	Girl	Fate Unknown
Kexiang 柯象	1879	1879, 2011	Male, spirit medium	Extant
Cai Guanyin 蔡觀音	1911	1911	Female religious	Destroyed
Cihang 慈航	1954	1959	Monk, Mainlander	Extant
Qingyan 清嚴	1970	1976	Monk, Mainlander	Extant
Daoan 道安	1977	No	Monk, Mainlander	Failed
Kanjurwa 甘珠	1978	1978	Tulku, Mainlander	Extant
Yingmiao 瀛妙	1973	1983	Monk	Extant
Puzhao 普照	1983	1983	Monk, Mainlander	Extant
Dexiu 得修	1993	1999	Female, spirit medium	Extant
Gangkar 貢噶 (or Gongga)	1997	2000	Nun, Tibetan order, Mainlander	Extant
Xie Shide 謝石德	1998	2002	Male religious	Extant
Mingjie 明潔	2003	2004	Female religious	Extant
Kaifeng 開豐	2004	2007	Monk	Extant
Wuming 悟明	2011	No (not yet)	Monk, Mainlander	Processing
Yuanxing 願興	c. 1996	Uncertain	Lay nun (<i>zhaigu</i> 齋姑)	Processing

Song lao taitai 宋老太太	c. 1968	c. 1972	Pious lay woman	Unverified
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For most of Chinese history, burial has been the most common as well as the officially sanctioned means to dispose of the corpse, except for Buddhist monastics, who were often cremated.² In contrast, today in both the PRC and ROC (Taiwan), cremation is widespread, officially encouraged, and even mandatory in some localities. Yet for centuries in China, the mummified remains of certain religious figures have been enshrined and venerated. Such mummified corpses throughout history probably number in the hundreds or thousands, but most have not survived. As a percentage of all disposed cadavers these mummies have been insignificant but as objects for cult worship and as

¹ In this chart, a “religious” is someone recognized as a religious figure with special powers and linked with popular Buddhism or generic popular religion, but not formally ordained in a monastic order. Basic data on Kexiang: Xu 2011. On Xie Shide: Yu 2010. On Kaifeng: Lin 2007 and Lin and Zhou 2004. On Song lao taitai: Ling 2004. On Wuming: Guo 2011. I personally acquired data on Yuanxing during fieldwork in 2006, but I have not visited her site since then. Data for all the other mummies on this chart may be found in Gildow and Bingenheimer 2002, Gildow 2005, and the present paper.

² History of Chinese cremation: Ebrey 1990. Buddhist monastic funerals: Cole 1996.

capital for institutional memory and attracting pilgrims and tourists many have been important.³ Although it falls outside the scope of this paper, we should also note that arguably the embalmed corpses of Mao Zedong (1893-1976) and Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) are the most famous cadavers in the PRC and ROC, and they share traits in common with the mummified religious corpses I will discuss.⁴

In Taiwan today, corpses are not embalmed but they are often kept in refrigeration until coffining. A damaged corpse will be restored as possible, and shortly before coffining, the corpse's hair will be combed and makeup applied. Some funerary specialists say that the corpse should be made up and dressed nicely so that the deceased looks presentable when he "meets his ancestors." Others claim that substitute limbs must be made if any are missing or the deceased will be reborn into a new body that lacks the corresponding limbs. For final disposition, officially there are only two basic options, cremation or burial. Traditionally corpses are buried and the bones are exhumed years later for transfer elsewhere; if the corpse accidentally mummifies or if any flesh has not decayed, it is considered inauspicious for descendants and the flesh is destroyed. The exhumed bones or cremated remains eventually end up in a grave, mausoleum, or columbarium, and these are still the most common destinations for remains. Today regulations provide new options for those who choose cremation: pulverized cremains may also be scattered at sea or, in designated areas, buried under or scattered over vegetation.

The preservation and enshrinement of a desiccated corpse, however, clearly does not fall under legal disposal practices. Taiwanese do attempt to preserve the exhumed bones of ancestors, which are placed in urns with charcoal interspersed among them as a desiccant. Both monastics and laity display portraits of the deceased, which are employed in funerary and memorial rituals. And Buddhists collect and enshrine the crystalline, colorful bits of bone relics that found in the cremains of some people. In some ways the mummies resemble preserved ancestral bones, ritual portraits, or enshrined bone relics. But not all mummies are even Buddhist, and flesh is typically destroyed rather than preserved or displayed.

What, then, is the origin of this peculiar practice in Taiwan, and how does it persist? Prior to 1959, there appears to have been no publically enshrined mummies in Taiwan for over forty years, but some Taiwanese would have been familiar with precedents. Two deities with large cults in Taiwan are said to have had their bodies preserved.⁵ And some Taiwanese would have heard or read about

³ History of Buddhist mummification in Asia: Demiéville 1965; in China: Ritzinger and Bingenheimer 2006; Jørgensen 2005, 190-273; Sharf 1992.

⁴ On the other hand, the long-term preservation of Mao's and Chiang's corpses also parallels the treatment that the corpses of other leaders of Leninist political parties, namely Vladimir Lenin (d. 1924), Sun Yat-sen (d. 1925), Wang Jingwei (d. 1944), and Ho Chin Minh (d. 1969) received. Chiang's corpse, unlike the cadavers of Lenin, Ho, and Mao, is not displayed in a crystal casket. On Mao's and Chiang's remains, see Wakeman 1988 and Wagner 1992.

⁵ Preservation of Madame Linshui's corpse: Bapandier 1996, 136; "Linshui Pingyao," 245-246 (in chapter 16, 祈甘霖

the mummies of famous monks in China. Furthermore, we have evidence that at least four mummies had previously been enshrined, only one of which survived has survived (see Table 1).

Then in 1954, the famous Mainlander monk Cihang died having specified in his will that his corpse undergo a form of burial possibly new to Taiwan: interment inside a desiccant-filled urn.⁶ He further specified that if his body emerged mummified after three years that it be enshrined in a stupa. In 1959 the urn was opened and the successful mummification and enshrinement of Cihang, one of the most respected monks in Taiwan, created a huge sensation. In fact, the state-sanctioned Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC) had the lacquered, gilded corpse carried in a procession and conducted its largest ritual assembly to date for the occasion. Then in 1970 Qingyan, another Mainlander monk linked to the BAROC, underwent the same mummification process, and when his urn was opened in 1976 his mummy was also enshrined. The following year the famous Mainlander monk Daoan died and his corpse was also placed in urns and kept sealed for twenty months. Daoan had directed the mummification of both Cihang and Qingyan, and even kept Qingyan's mummy for a time. However, it is said that the mummification of Daoan's corpse failed, and so his remains were placed inside a closed memorial stupa. Also during the 1970s, another prominent Mainlander monk, Wuming, resolved to undergo urn-burial after his death and ordered two custom-made, interlocking urns for this purpose.

These four Mainlander monks were part of a close network with a particular interest in mummification and relics. They had seen Buddhist mummies on the mainland and participated in one another's funerals, mummifications, enshrinements, and promotion. Cihang set the pattern that Qingyan followed, and the mummies of both, which were widely reported in the media and the subject of a television program, then influenced or inspired the mummification and/or enshrinement of many of the later mummies. Also, a lineage of sculptors, surnamed Chen, became involved in the sculpting, preservation, and enshrinement of the mummies. This lineage was invited to help in lacquering and gilding the mummies of Cihang and Qingyan. When other parties found or produced desiccated corpses to enshrine, they asked for advice from institutions that already had a mummy, which directed them to the Chens. In turn, a Chen sculptor helped to preserve and enshrine the mummies of Yingmiao, Puzhao, Dexiu, and Mingjie, although he refused to help in the case of Kaifeng. Other recent mummies have been produced due to a failed cremation attempt (Kanjurwa), through Tibetan Buddhist techniques (Gangkar), or are still poorly understood (Xie Shide), but they were probably inspired or at least influenced by the precedent set by Cihang.

In summary, the revival of mummification practices in Taiwan can largely be attributed to three

萬民感恩得成正道三次受榮封); of Sagely King Guo's corpse: Dean 1993, 137-38.

⁶ Welch 1967, 343-44; Travagnin 2006; Gildow and Bingenheimer 2002. Some reports on the earlier mummy Kexiang indicate that it was interred in an urn, but others only mention its being smoked.

factors: (1) precedents (especially Cihang's mummy), (2) social capital (a network of elite Mainlander monks and a lineage of sculptors), which was mobilized to legitimate the practice, and (3) vectors that disseminated and facilitated the practice (especially print and broadcast media, plus a nationwide telephone network). Although the population of Taiwan has more than doubled since 1959, as of 2011 there has still been a roughly 143% increase in the number of mummies per capita, which does not include failed or unverified mummies or corpses currently undergoing mummification. Yet despite this relative increase, all of the mummies enshrined since 1980 have been, relative to the monastic Buddhist mainstream, marginal figures. Mummification has managed to catch on among controversial monks, spirit mediums, and laity while at the same time it never gained widespread appeal in the mainstream. Other prominent monastics and intellectuals have critiqued the cult of mummies and relics and have made efforts to downplay or modify the association of monastics with the provision of mortuary services. Leading monastics today are typically cremated and subsequently parts of their remains are selected and enshrined, although the monk Shengyan, who has critiqued the cult of relics, went so far as to have all his cremains pulverized and buried in unmarked locations.

Above I explained the revival of the current wave of mummification in Taiwan in terms of specific precedents, institutions, and vectors. I also alluded to the functions mummies can play in institutional maintenance (establishing continuity, capturing charisma) and generating income (attracting donations), which make mummy production more attractive. These explanations mainly fall under what we might call social factors.⁷ We could also explain it in terms of psychological, cultural, and physical factors. For instance, psychologically: ritualized mummified corpses are clearly a global phenomenon, present on every continent except Antarctica.⁸ Are there innate psychological dispositions that incline humans to preserve and enshrine their dead?⁹ Or culturally: in Chinese culture, what set of ideas, whether narrowly limited to the principles or partially shared among their potential devotees, might foster (either to motivate or justify) mummification and mummy cults? Or physically: how difficult is mummification, what is the "life expectancy" of a mummy, and how can new technologies increase their "life expectancy"? To what extent can apparent increases in mummification be attributed to more successful attempts and to longer-lasting products?¹⁰

⁷ A social factor for what currently appears to be a growth spurt in mummification in the PRC is the political environment. During the Taiping Rebellion and the Cultural Revolution mummies were targeted for destruction. Today, in contrast, even mainstream, Communist or "Red" media such as the *People's Daily* and *CCTV* report on mummies in a generally positive light, probably in an effort to spur tourism. See Gangxiao N.d. In Taiwan, in contrast, the state generally ignores the mummies, although politicians sometimes attend funerals of the future mummies or make appearances with the mummies, sometimes as part of an election campaign stop. See for example Gildow 2005, 12, and Guo 2011.

⁸ See Cockburn, Cockburn, and Reyman, 1998.

⁹ For research that might suggest such ideas, see for example Boyer 2001, 203-228.

¹⁰ Mummies in Australia and Melanesia, for instance, typically do not last more than two generations (Pretty and Calder 1998). The nine Buddhist mummies in Japan that Ogata investigated were all "in the process of rapid deterioration," which he made efforts to counteract during his research (Sakurai *et. al.*, 1998, 324). The famous Chinese mummy of

Here we only have space to briefly touch on one of these additional facets, namely the motivations of two of the deceased who sought mummification. Cihang was the first to be mummified as well as a scholar and leader. But none of his numerous writings explicitly concern mummification or his motivations to seek it. We do know that Cihang was a devotee of the bodhisattva Maitreya and a student of the scholar-monk Taixu. Furthermore, an important sutra about Maitreya, the *Sutra on Discerning Maitreya Bodhisattva's Rebirth up into the Tusita Heaven*, states that at the end of his penultimate life on the earth, Maitreya “assumed the lotus posture and seemed to enter into the meditative absorption of extinction. His purplish-golden body shined as brilliantly as a hundred thousand suns... his body relic was like a cast golden image, neither moving nor shaking... when various humans and gods found him they made a bejeweled, wondrous stupa as offerings to his relic.”¹¹ The sutra then describes Maitreya's spontaneous rebirth in Tusita Heaven. Taixu's commentary on this sutra explains that the gold body Maitreya left behind was a whole-body relic, “like the undecaying flesh-bodies of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng and others.” Taixu further explains that Maitreya left behind a *whole-body* relic because his work on the earth was still unfinished, whereas Sakyamuni Buddha left behind relic *pellets* resembling grains of rice because his work on the earth had been completed.¹² Given Cihang's devotion to Maitreya (he even posed as Maitreya in a photograph, the very photograph which sculptors used as a guide to restore his mummy) and his respect for Taixu's scholarship, it is likely that, informed by Taixu's gloss, he was inspired to follow in Maitreya's footsteps by leaving behind a whole-body relic.

Cihang's other connections with Maitreya are numerous. The monastery he founded is called the Inner Court of Maitreya. Moreover when I asked the former disciple of Cihang and current abbot of this monastery about Cihang's motivation for becoming a flesh-body bodhisattva, he verified that it had to do with the *Sutra on Discerning Maitreya Bodhisattva's Rebirth up into the Tusita Heaven* and that this was further explained in the monk Mingshan's commentary (interview, August 2005). Mingshan had been invited to lecture on this sutra on the Cihang's fortieth annual death-day anniversary in 1994. Mingshan follows Taixu's interpretation, claiming that Maitreya left behind a whole-body relic since his work on the earth was not yet complete. He then said that, like Maitreya, Huineng and Cihang left behind gold-covered flesh bodies so as to abide in this world and deliver

Huineng may actually be a thick lacquer shell supported by bones and a metal frame (Xu 1987). And mummies in Taiwan feature a concealed steel bar supporting the spine of one, a lacquered-over fiberglass reinforced plastic covering around another, and a germicidal ultraviolet light illuminating a third (Gildow 2005, 11, 14). Clearly mummies, especially those that are enshrined in open, public places, have a limited life expectancy. Like the humans around them, all else being equal this “life-expectancy” is probably higher in the developed world. All of this also suggests important operational questions: how well-preserved should a corpse be before we consider it a mummy? Or is it enough that, say, a given threshold of devotees (or of the general public?) *regard* it as a mummy, even if, for example, it is now an empty lacquer shell, or was even an outright fraud from the beginning?

¹¹ *Taishō* 452, 14.419c17-c21.

¹² Taixu 1970, 24. Thanks are due to Justin Ritzinger for suggesting I look at what Taixu wrote about this sutra.

people.¹³ In addition, according to a nun who lived for over ten years in the monastery that now looks after Cihang's mummy, some of Cihang's devotees consider him an emanation of Maitreya. She notes this is because he resembles Maitreya in that he liked to teach consciousness-only doctrines, advocated seeking rebirth in Maitreya's Tusita Heaven, and was fat like Budai, a previous emanation of Maitreya (interview, September 2005). In Buddhism, anyone who is reborn in a heaven is a god. And in popular religion, gods can be contacted through or dwell inside their icons. It appears that Cihang hoped to be a bodhisattva, aiming for Buddhahood, but also to become a god, and to leave his transformed corpse-cum-icon as a connection to his former home.

Wuming, the monk who resolved to be mummified in the 1970s, died in July 2011. Currently his corpse is sealed inside two urns, which have been placed in front of his wax likeness. According to his disciple Mingguang, Wuming had made the following vows in connection with his wish to be placed in urns: "In the future, if there are sentient beings, who may be holding holy water, and who come before my urn with an earnest request, then their wishes will definitely be fulfilled," and also to "sit in an urn in order to speak the wordless Dharma to sentient beings, and to deliver countless multitudes."¹⁴ Evidently Wuming also hoped his corpse will become a Buddhist deity that grants requests and guides beings to liberation. Mingguang also states that no decision has been reached as to whether the urn will be opened, because Wuming left no further instructions. I suspect this really means the following: an inner circle of disciples will open the urn, probably after three or more years. If mummification is successful they will then lacquer, gild, and enshrine the cadaver. If mummification fails, they will keep this fact to themselves.

Discussion

There are many possible explanations for mummy-related practices in Taiwan. Probably each of multiple conditions is necessary, and none sufficient, for the practice to have revived as it has. One explanation is that mummy worship meshes with cultural beliefs about the bodily remains of saints. For instance, a popular Taiwanese typology of supernatural beings can be correlated with the conditions of bodily remains, and sometimes incorruptibility is linked to sainthood. Another explanation concerns conflicting human motivations and inclinations to both forget and remember the dead as if they were still partially present or even alive. Such motivations to stem the decay of

¹³ Mingshan 1999, 64-65. There is also an earlier precedent for this line of interpretation, found in the Tang dynasty monk Kuiji's (632-682) preface to the same sutra: see *Taisho* 1772, especially the lines 38.292a15-b2. But Kuiji does not explicitly identify the term "body relic 身舍利" from the text with mummified corpses, as Taixu and Mingshan do. In the sutra, Maitreya's body instantly becomes golden and brilliant. Unlike Cihang's, it does not first sit in a desiccant-filled urn for five years, undergo sculpting, lacquering, and gilding, have its spine supported by a steel bar, or have artificial eyeballs installed. Another canonical writing that almost certainly influenced Cihang's understanding of mummification is chapter 11 of the *Lotus Sutra*, but for lack of space I cannot describe how that chapter relates to relics and mummies here. Cihang died while on a three-year solitary retreat during which he spent time making copies of the *Lotus Sutra*.

¹⁴ On Wuming's postmortem aspirations: Guo 2011.

memories or even to transform dead may also be behind the much more common Taiwanese practices of restorative work on corpses before coffining, the display of funerary portraits, and the preservation of ancestral bones and sacred relics. Yet such background ideas merely affect the possibility that a society will develop and justify mummy worship. If background ideas are already widely shared and longstanding, they cannot on their own explain why mummification went dormant and then re-emerged, why certain individuals started the practice, or how the practice has spread.

Rather than illuminating mummification in postwar Taiwan in terms of shared beliefs, here I employ an epidemiological approach to the transmission of cultural representations.¹⁵ To recap in a way that makes this model explicit: Cihang and his associates “caught” the mummification “virus” through exposure to physical and textual representations of it (actual mummies and certain religious writings). This small group of monks spread a new strain of the virus in Taiwan through their own mummifications and writings. Given their cultural beliefs and history, some Taiwanese were susceptible to infection. Yet its spread has also been inhibited by critiques of mummification and relic worship. Thus the virus spread, continually mutating into forms often partially delinked from Buddhist doctrine, mainly to vulnerable populations outside its original host community of monks. No Taiwanese cultural representations or social developments necessitated the revival of mummification, although some facilitated the possibility of its re-emergence while others inhibited its growth. If it were not for Cihang and his cohort, it is likely that there would be no mummy worship in Taiwan today.

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¹⁵ Epidemiological models of culture: Sperber 1996. While here cultural representations are compared to viruses, there is no implication that such representations are unhealthy. And in the case of mummification practices, unlike in the spread of a virus, the more mummies there are, the lower the marginal utility of each new one in the mummy-aficionado niche of the religious gift economy (unless the publicity around a mummy manages to increase the overall “demand” for mummy worship). So to the extent that the decision to produce a mummy is calculated in cost/benefit terms (and evidence from the Chen family sculptors suggests that production can be quite expensive), each new mummy reduces the incentives to produce a new one.

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