

CHINESE PRESERVED MONKS (肉身塑像)

The preservation by both Taoists and Buddhists of the bodies of famous monks and abbots by lacquering, varnishing or coating and embalming in clay was not as uncommon as one would think. It is only too easy to see how after the death of a particularly wise and beloved abbot, his presence would be badly missed throughout the monastic community. They would begin to venerate his memory and perhaps even a cult might emerge. Again we can visualise that his contemporary detractors, should there have been any, would eventually die and their prejudice, jealousy or even dislike perhaps, would fade in time. The opposite however, would be true of the memory of his wisdom, piety and gentleness. Another major motive for the preservation of such saints and very religious monks was the very mundane desire to obtain more funds for the religious institution by exhibiting the body to the faithful. In some monasteries such mummies were kept in private apartments hidden from public gaze. They had been members of a community, so their brethren claimed, and only other members had the right to see them. Most monks were cremated after death and their ashes retained in reliquaries in their monastery.

Some of the more famous "preserved monks", or 'fleshy bodies' which is a direct translation from the Chinese, displayed or kept for personal reverence, were to be found in the following temples and monasteries :

Pai Sui Kung on Chiu Hua Shan, Anhui

Tsu Shih T'ien on O Mei Shan, Szechuan

T'ien T'ai Ssu in the Western Hills near Peking

Yueh Lin Ssu in Chekiang

Nan Hua Ssu in Northern Kwangtung

T'ien An Fu below T'ai Shan in Shantung

Hui Chu Ssu in Pao Hua Shan, Kiangsu.

There is also one such in the Temple of Ten Thousand Buddhas above Sha Tin, Hong Kong.

A Danish architect, J. Prip Møller¹ spent a considerable time in the early thirties touring around many monasteries throughout China in his research into monastery construction. He referred on several occasions to 'fleshy bodies' set up as images in monastery

halls, noted how common they were in Central China and continued "they may almost be said to abound in Szechuan". He suggested that the custom sprang from the belief that the benevolent influence exercised by the deceased during his lifetime would still be active if his body was preserved and set up. These mummies were placed in a hall on their own and even in the main hall beside the Buddha's image directly in front of the main altar. The "images" were usually gilded, though several on O Mei Shan were made up in fresh colours and dressed in silken robes which sometimes produced quite a monumental effect. The finest example he saw was in a wayside monastery on Chiu Hua Shan at the Ts'ui Yun An where the features of a monk who had died about the turn of this century had been gilded and "stood out as though carved in oak".

The Chinese appear to have used two ways of preserving corpses. The usual method consisted first of evisceration; the body was then pickled in salt for a considerable period of time, afterwards being placed in a sealed urn and left for several years. If, when opened up, the urn was found to contain an undecayed body a subscription list was opened for the gilding and enshrining of the relic.² The body was thickly gilded or varnished and, if not exposed to the elements or to great extremes in temperature and humidity, it would then last for centuries. The second method was for the dying monk, if he felt divinely inspired, to fast before death and in the process dry himself out, so that after death little was required to finish off drying the body into a leathery, hard mass of skin and bone³.

The following short notes on the better known "fleshy bodies" provide a clearer picture of how widespread the practice was. In May 1975 a preserved body, just emaciated skin and bones, seated in a cross-legged position was returned from Japan to Taiwan. The relic, the body of the monk Shih Tzu-kung (獅子吼) known as the Stone Monk (石頭和尚), had been in Japan since World War II when it had been secretly shipped there by a Japanese military dentist. The body, more than a thousand years old, was of a T'ang Buddhist leader born about 700 AD in Kwangtung into a family named Ch'en (陳). His title during life was Wu Chi Ta Shih (無際大師), which is the title he is still known by. He has now been returned to his original monastery in Taiwan.

A embalmed body exhibited in the eastern part of the Great Hall of the Yueh Lin Temple in Chekiang was claimed to be that

of the Cotton Bag Monk, Pu Tai (布袋), an incarnation of Mi Lo Fu. Pu Tai was said to have died at that temple at the beginning of the tenth century.

Another preserved body was that of a Shantung peach seller who dropped dead at the altar and was embalmed in mud and became a deity, Wu Yu Hsien (烏羽仙), around whom a local cult sprang up and flourished during the fourteenth century. Yet another was the skeleton of an old and holy abbot overlaid with gold foil on Chiu Hua Shan at the Pai Sui Kung⁴.

A preserved body in the Nan Hua Shan Monastery in northern Kwangtung was that of the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Buddhism (六祖佛). It appears to be the earliest recorded "fleshy body". The Sixth and last of the Chinese Patriarchs, Hui Neng (惠能), died in AD 712. His corpse is said to have remained incorrupt⁵ and even to exhale a sweet fragrance. His chest maintained its natural position and the skin appeared glossy and flexible. In AD 1236 when the Mongol troops pursued the last emperor of the Southern Sung and defeated him in Kwangtung, it is said that Mongol soldiers violated the tomb of the Patriarch and even went so far as to rip open the abdomen with a sword thrust. On seeing that the heart and liver were still in a perfect state of preservation, they were filled with fear and went no further in their sacrilege⁶. Several replicas are to be seen in Hong Kong; a good example is on the altar of Huang Ta Hsien (黃大仙) in the San Yuan Temple (三元宮) in T'ai P'ing Shan Street, Hong Kong. (See plate 27). Incidentally, smaller images of Hui Neng, often seen in curio shops, are easily recognisable by the small dragon in his begging bowl. He is considered to be the founder of the Vegetarian Sects of Buddhism, Ch'ih Su Chiao (吃素教).

Another mummy, black faced, covered in lacquer and gilded, sat in a lotus position in a place of honour in the T'ien T'ai Temple south-west of Peking, wearing Buddhist robes but of Imperial yellow. He wore a vairocana five-leaf crown on his head, his face was smooth and full fleshed and his skin black with age. Many thought that he was a wooden image and legend, since disproved, claimed him to be Fu Lin, the first Manchu Emperor of China (1638-1661) better known as Shun Chih who died at the age of 30. The story probably grew from the known fact that he wished to become a monk. The mummy was refurbished annually at a minor ceremony and was a great attraction for pilgrims.

There was a 'fleshy body' in Anking in Central China. It had been placed in a large earthenware *k'ang* filled with willow charcoal and left for three to four years. The corpse was then gilded and set up beside an image of the Buddha, Sakyamuni⁷.

The shrivelled and varnished body of a Taoist priest named Sun (孫), who died in 1703 aged 94, was enshrined in a glass case in the Grotto of the Immortals in the east side of the lower Court of the Temple of either the Jade Emperor or, as stories vary, of the Three Sovereigns on T'ai Shan in Shantung. He had lived in the temple nearby for some sixty years under the religious title of Chen Ch'ing and was known as "the Immortal". Apparently he felt divinely inspired, and slowly starved himself to death; he became just skin and bone sitting crosslegged. He had requested his fellow priests not to inter him but instead to leave him in a vacant room. This they did, and he remained withered but not decayed as a relic for future generations of believers. One could see, apparently, only the bare bones of his arms and legs. His face had been replaced by a mask in his likeness and all that remained on his hands was skin and nails.

It was not only monks who had their bodies preserved. In 1878 Reverend MacKay, a missionary in Taiwan, wrote⁸ of a Chinese girl who died of consumption not far from Tamshui, North of Taipei. Someone in the neighbourhood more gifted than the rest announced that a goddess was present, and her wasted body immediately became famous. She was given the title of the Virgin Goddess, (Sien Lu Niu in Fukienese) and a small temple was erected and dedicated to her. Her body was immersed in salt and water for some time, and then placed in a sitting position in an armchair with a red cloth around her shoulders and a wedding cap on her head. Seen through the glass of the case in which she was placed she looked to Mackay, with her black face and teeth exposed, very much like an Egyptian mummy. Before many weeks had passed, hundreds of sedan chairs were to be seen bringing worshippers especially women to her shrine, and rich men sent presents to adorn the temple. Another preserved body of a female was exhibited in a temple near Fenchow in Szechuan. She was a Buddhist devotee who died there in a sitting position: being Tibetan she was particularly worshipped by the local aborigines⁹.

The most recent example of a 'fleshy body' has been the mummification of the corpse of the Buddhist monk, Yueh Chi Fa Shih

(月溪法師) who founded the Ten Thousand Buddha Temple above Sha Tin in the New Territories, Hong Kong in 1961. He was a widely known and admired monk who at the age of 24, according to the Temple broadsheet, had been named Buddha Simha in recognition of having perceived the cause of the Universe. He was born in Yunnan in 1878 into the Wu (吳) family and was educated in Shanghai and Peking. In the latter place, the record states, he was a "professor of philosophy" at Yenching University at the early age of 19 in 1897 before he became a monk. He preached throughout his life and died in April 1965 at the age of 87 in his temple in Sha Tin.

The story of his interment, exhumation and preservation is described in the temple brochure. The body was placed in a seated position, cross-legged in a wooden box and buried on the hillside behind the temple. There it remained for eight months. Yueh Chi, during his latter days, had instructed that his body should be exhumed after such a period of time, and when uncovered it was found that very little decomposition had taken place. A mark on the lower side of the right ribs excited comment as it appeared to be an image of a tiger, and another on the breast that of a human head. The body was then gilded, dressed in a salmon pink robe and a five-leaf vairocana crown, and enthroned in May 1966 in front of the large image of Amida Buddha which towers some twenty five feet above him (plate 28). Another image, carved ostensibly in his likeness, is enshrined in a glass case in the rear of a Buddhist nunnery on a spur some two miles from the Ten Thousand Buddha Temple. This carving one suspects, is stylized. It is gilded, apart from a heavy beard and a head of hair painted shiny black. The image holds a fly whisk, and has a pair of slippers before his throne, but has no crown.

Other forms of image based on human remains, usually of laymen rather than of monks, such as those seen in Singapore and Ipoh made of a mixture of concrete, sand and human ashes, have not been included in this article. Whereas most wealthy devotees achieve recognition by having their donation details carved on the monastery wall, a few however, will their ashes to be mixed and made into an image in their likeness, warts and all, in addition to donating a final large sum to the establishment.

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Hong Kong, 1976.

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13.	Unidentified	Tang 鄧

* A Gazetteer of Place Names in Hong Kong, Kowloon and The New Territories (Hong Kong, Government Printer, n.d. but 1960)