

Death Cannot be Seen: The Mortuary Rites of a Contemporary Monastic



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Abstract

What should death be like for a deeply venerated or highly prominent Buddhist monastic? This question itself does not just pertain to death rituals, funerals, or cremations but also to the entire process, as understood within the tradition, of leaving this realm and entering into another. It is in all of these aspects that something exceptional should be highlighted to exemplify accomplishments of the given individual's religious life, and draw attention to the profound spiritual attainment of that figure that devotees believe lies beyond what is achievable by ordinary humans.

The recent death of Venerable Hsing Yun, the founder of Fo Guang Shan, led to plentiful discussions in Taiwanese society from people of all walks of life, spanning scholars to media and citizens. This study will reveal the peculiarities of this interesting case, mainly as it relates to the late master's mortuary rites. In doing so, other monastics who passed away in contemporary times will be brought up for comparison. In addition to its notable innovations and creativity, the focal case of the mortuary rites for Hsing Yun manifests the tension between traditional and modern Buddhist ideologies and practices; especially as these tensions unfold within the Humanistic Buddhist context.

Keywords: Hsing Yun; Fo Guang Shan; Death Rites; Zuogang; Śarīra

Introduction

On February 5th 2023, the Lantern Festival marked the end of Chinese New Year. It was amid this initially festive atmosphere that the passing of eminent monk and founder of Fo Guang Shan (佛光山), Venerable Hsing Yun (星雲, 1927–2023), took Taiwanese people as well as Fo Guang Shan supporters around the globe by surprise. Although the news was not officially confirmed at the time, the next day it was verified that Hsing Yun had died at the age of 97. He was one of the longest-lived of his generation and especially among monastics who had crossed the strait from the mainland to Taiwan around 1949. It is a widely acknowledged fact that a large part of the current state of Taiwanese Buddhism was built by these Civil War diasporic Buddhists. Another example is the Dharma Drum Mountain (法鼓山) founder, Sheng Yen (聖嚴, 1931–2009), who passed away more than a decade ago.

Hsing Yun, however, suffered from illnesses long before death. His diabetes can be traced back to the 1960s, at the time when his religious career was about to expand. He then underwent heart surgery in 1995, and combined with the preexisting diabetes, these ailments hindered his ability to walk. By the 2010s, Hsing Yun began having difficulty with his vision, and it was even rumored that the master was more or less blind during the last years of his life. Those years were also notable in that he no longer made public appearances.

Despite those health issues, he set an example for other leaders in terms of institutional management, and stepped down as abbot in 1985. Since then, the position has been held by four different abbots. If we consider how many FoGuang Shan branches are in Taiwan and internationally, the significance of institutionalization becomes clear. The organization has shown it can be run even without its charismatic founding leader. That being said, Hsing Yun still serves as the crucial spiritual support at the heart of Fo Guang members. Events such as the Chinese New Year reunion dinner, will likely present pre-recorded video clips of Hsing Yun providing well-wishes, to substitute for his actual presence.

His iconic status is a key factor in understanding why his passing and funeral were so significant to hundreds of thousands of people. In order to more deeply examine that matter, first a review of ideas regarding mortuary-related practices in the Chinese cultural context will be provided. The process of death as a means to demonstrate religious attainments in Buddhism is an essential part of this examination. Throughout the course of this investigation, the peculiarities of the mortuary rites honoring Hsing Yun will be made more apparent.

Buddhist Death and Manifestations of Sacredness through Rites

Although generally death is feared, in traditional Buddhism it is a way to demonstrate the accomplishments produced by long years of practice. Even non-believers sometimes value the act of passing as a means to reveals one's virtue. A good death (善終, *shanzhong*) indicates someone dying in peace, and this term can be juxtaposed against a sudden end (橫死, *bengsi*), which implies a violent death, an accidental death, or even a suicide. Additionally, to die with family and friends present is considered better than dying alone.

Buddhists push those non-Buddhist social conventions surrounding death further by setting additional criteria. Pure Land practitioners would be eager to know if the deceased left signs that they were on to the road towards the grand destination. Within tradition, signs include an improved complexion or an auspicious place wherein the body's last bit of warmth lingered. For example, auspicious signs include the deceased's face appearing ruddy and moist (面色紅潤, *mianse hongrun*) or their body remaining soft (身體柔軟, *shenti rouruan*) instead of falling into quick rigor mortis. If the body's last trace of warmth pools at the top of their head, this is taken as evidence that they are bound for rebirth in the Pure Land.

There are alternative protocols and remedial measures if the above criteria go unfulfilled or are insufficiently fulfilled. In such cases, Pure Land practitioners provide chanting services, which mainly consist in reciting homages to Amitābha Buddha. The timing is considered crucial, as it should last eight to twenty-four hours from the time when the deceased stopped breathing. During this period, people in the vicinity are prohibited from touching the body or crying. The chanting is believed to eliminate bad karma and summon Amitābha to carry the deceased over to be reborn in the Pure Land (往生極樂, *wangsheng jile*). It is further believed that interruption of the service, decreases the chance that the departed will attain an auspicious rebirth.

Pure Land beliefs have become a mainstream in Chinese Buddhism since the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1636–1912). Due to its simplicity and claimed efficaciousness, the Pure Land style chanting of the Buddha's name merged broadly into funerary rites, and this created a market-demand for such services. Some providers of said services have merely shaved their heads without taking precepts or undergoing religious training. Elite monastics see this as degrading Buddhism. Republican Buddhists like Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) reacted to this type of Buddhism, and advocated for a more rational and socially engaged practice which came to be known as “Buddhificationism” (*fobua* 佛化) or “New Buddhism” (新佛教, *xin fojiao*). This version of Buddhism keeps its distance from death rituals, and distances itself from faith in Amitābha's Pure Land, in order to avoid being seen as superstitious or connected with negative images of popular Buddhism. Taixu indicated that the training ground to achieve Buddhahood was one's present life in the human realm (人生, *rensheng*). Clearly, these were the basic ideas that characterize Humanistic Buddhism as observable in Taiwan nowadays.

The reasons why this background is essential for understanding Hsing Yun's death rites will become apparent in the following discussion.

Below, a broader picture of the generalities of Buddhist death will be presented. Here too, the image of death as a passage from this realm to another, from a flesh body to something unknown, is drawn upon, and Buddhists who are confident that they can control part of that sequence, are expected to demonstrate it in a tangible way. To be noted, most of these phenomena can apply to both monastics and laity. Indeed, even non-Buddhists have been known to exhibit these phenomena. Foreknowledge of one's time of death (預知時至, *yuzhi shizhi*), for instance, is rather common among devoted practitioners. It is not surprising that ordinary people sometimes demonstrate this ability, even accidentally. Other "auspicious signs" (瑞相, *ruixiang*) include exuding pleasant smells (異香, *yixiang*), dying in the seated posture (坐化, *zuohua*), leaving behind bodily relics (舍利, *śarīra; sheli*), and non-burning or non-decaying, which is known as leaving behind a whole-body relic (全身舍利, *quanshen sheli*). Cases of the above can be found in traditional texts such as biographies of eminent monks and multiple Pure Land Buddhist biographies, as well as, recent word-of-mouth or documented recollections within various Buddhist communities.

This study will argue, however, that in the modern and contemporary era, high-profile demonstrations of auspicious deaths have increasingly become a privilege reserved for monastics. These demonstrations are meant to mark the continuity of a monastic's religious life as extraordinary or present their life from a different angle. Buddhism, which has undergone many significant reforms during Taixu's lifetime and more recently, has modified in a knowledge-oriented direction that emphasizes doctrinal and textual studies, as well as participation in social welfare activities. For many monastics and lay practitioners alike, their lives are not especially devoted to the pursuit of spiritual power and the corresponding practices of cultivation, as these are sometimes deemed irrational. Still there have been notable instances of well-known auspicious deaths, and most of these cases have involved monks. Taixu, for example, died young, and when he was cremated, a portion of his heart formed an interconnected crystalline structure which was passed down as a sacred relic (an "unburnable heart") that reminds devotees of his this-worldly system of thought and spiritual practices.

To examine this matter in further depth, it will be necessary to explain a number of mortuary rites. These practices are meant to convey a sacred nature to wider public. What constitutes auspicious signs during the death of Buddhist individuals is often overly subjective. For laity and lesser-known monastics, either the relatives of the deceased observe the body of the departed and determine there were auspicious signs, or they might state that they had visions of buddhas, bodhisattvas, or lotuses. Ultimately, these are no more than personal experiences and remain in a fairly private domain. For eminent monastics; however, their death rites are examined for physical evidence, and more crucially, these rites are witnessed by the masses, photographed, and recorded

via audio and visual mediums.

Two rites that will be briefly explained below are *zuogang* (坐缸, premortem sitting or postmortem placement into a seated posture within a large earthenware jar) and traditional cremation (荼毗, *tupi*).¹ Both of these contemporary rites for sacred deaths within Buddhism directly link to the discussion of the rites recently held for Master Hsing Yun.

Zuogang

This term, literally meaning “sitting (in a) tub,” is one of the most common ways to produce a whole-body relic. This is achieved by placing the deceased’s body into an earthenware tub, and then placing another upside-down tub on top of it like a cap. Once sealed, this enables the body to dry out naturally. Substances that assist in drying are sometimes used (charcoal, lime, various desiccants, and so on). Years later if the body resists decay, it is processed and then gilded to create the appearance of a ‘golden body’ (金身, *jinsben*). The resulting ‘flesh-body bodhisattva’ (肉身菩薩, *rousben pusa*) is then be enshrined and venerated.

Although various customs Western scholars term ‘mummification’ can be traced back to ancient China, over ten flesh-body bodhisattvas have occurred in Taiwan mainly in the second half of the last century. Many of the cases occurred within popular folk religion rather than Buddhism.² Among the Buddhist examples, Venerable Cihang (慈航 1895–1954) was purportedly the ‘first,’ and his remains the most well-known case. This is why, as will later be apparent, when Hsing Yun’s death rites were first partly revealed to the public, scholars and many in the media (who likely relied upon testimony from the former) suspected that *zuogang* would be carried out the way it had been done for Cihang.

Indeed, Cihang case serve as a sort of paradigm as he made the unfamiliar method of tub-sitting widely known to the Taiwanese island. Being a mainlander as well as Taixu’s disciple, he had an overwhelmingly positive reputation among Buddhists. This helped his allegedly miraculous mortuary rites gain acceptance even among individuals who prided themselves on their rationality. In this research, it is posited that after his example gained recognition, *zuogang* became a byword for the process of Buddhist and also non-Buddhist mummification. Later in the 1970s, another monastic, Venerable Qingyan (清嚴, 1924–1970) was also mummified via a process that closely followed the model established by Cihang (Gildow and Bingenheimer, 2002).

To bring a broader context here, it is worth noting that the earthenware pot, jar, or urn burial was an ancient method, notably in prehistoric times, across different cultures. Archaeological reports indicate that this distinct style of casket was often used for remains of infants, children, and those who died in their early youth; however, it was not strictly limited to those cases. Records on eighteenth century Taiwan show it was local custom in a region mid-south of the island, which employed a large earthenware

tub to enclose the body for burial under the family's house (Huang, 1879). Given such containers were a daily household item for storage, they were presumably more accessible than wooden caskets, and these containers were also cheaper and more compatible with human-living areas.

In the context of Buddhist funerary usage, the fact that receptacles are able to contain a seated body make them suitable for monastics and laity if they died in a meditative posture or were arranged in such a position post-mortem. The vessel, a wooden box or earthenware tub, for this usage is called a *kan* (龕).³

Data gathered by Yetts (1911) and his observations show that in the middle and lower Yangtze River region in the early last century, earthenware tubs were commonly used in monastic death rites. Both cremation and burial may require a *kan*, especially in the case of an eminent monk, the final interment will not be carried out for at least a week. Burial could be postponed for months or even years. During the time prior to burial, a corpse is placed in a *kan* and kept in the monastery. The burial tub procedure was indicated previously when it was described as an upright jar-tub, with the body inside, which is covered with an upside down and sealed along the rims of the two jars. Ordinarily, leaving behind a flesh-body relic, requires a special diet meant to emaciate body prior to death. Tubs (jars, other large vessels, and so on) of these kinds are meant to be reopened two or three years after the time of sealing. In mummification cases where *zuogang* was not performed, the bodies might still dry naturally (sometimes by accident), sometimes smoked into that state via incense, or prepared by removing viscera.

To further this research argument, it is important to cover the details concerning the first Taiwanese Buddhist mummy. One unique aspect to note is that, strictly speaking, Cihang was not a traditional ascetic. It was rather the case that his religious career had many modernized aspects. His postmortem image is, by and large, in contrast to his previous life, and many speculated that the precedent he set could foreshadow Hsing Yun's own potential use of the *zuogang* method.⁴

Multiple cases studies have been done on Cihang's different stages of wandering and promoting dharma in Southeast Asia and Taiwan. Stefania Travagnin (2006) has specifically discussed thoroughly his death, enshrinement, and reactions from the Buddhist community. Born into a notable family in 1895, Cihang, then named Ai Jirong (艾繼榮) lived in Jianning, a county in the northern part of Fujian. Before become a renunciant monastic, he lost both of his parents successively. Then under Venerable Zizhong (自忠), he received his tonsure, and soon, full ordination in Nengren Monastery (能仁寺).

When he began to wander around sacred sites and monasteries, two factors are worth noting: one, is that he had been to Mount Jiuhua, which has deep ties to the phenomenon of whole-body relics. This might have affected Cihang, who eventually decided to adopt this way for his own death rites.⁵ Second, as many monastics did, he became part of the new Buddhism network through one of Taixu's sangha training

facilities, the Minnan Buddhist Seminary (閩南佛學院). Though previously learning Chan, Tiantai, and Pure Land from various masters at different sites, at Minnan he had the chance to study closely under Taixu, and he internalized ideas regarding social engagement which became crucial to his later career.

Modernized education carried out at the seminary challenged many of the students who struggled under the unfamiliar system. One reported incident recorded that the dean, Venerable Daxing (大醒, 1900–1952) once humiliated Cihang for being illiterate. He was also known to be poor at composition. (Kan, 1996) Instead of becoming frustrated by these criticisms, Cihang studied diligently, founded the Buddhist Studies Department and embarked on sangha training course as well as social education later on when he served as the abbot of Yingjiang Monastery (迎江寺) in Anqing.

From 1930 to 1935, he traveled from Hong Kong to Burma and established a local Chinese Buddhist Studies Association (中國佛學會) in Rangoon. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, he joined the international delegation of Taixu again traveling to countries of South and Southeast Asia where he stayed in Malaysia and Singapore. Together with laymen such as Bi Junhui (畢俊輝, 1906–1981), Cihang continued to promote what he believed to be the “lifebuoys of Buddhism”; namely “education, culture, and social welfare.” Since for Republican monastic elites the spiritual tradition entailed struggles with the fate of China, the way to adjust was understood to be through a total reform.

Yet it is insufficient to think of the master as only a modern monk. Examining his life more deeply reveals that he had mixed qualities. Reflecting back on their time in Taixu’s Sangha Training Course (僧伽訓練班) at Pulu Monastery (毘盧寺), Nanjing, Venerable Daoyuan (道源, 1900–1988), an acquaintance of Cihang, mentioned that Cihang was unlike other “new monks” who were unwilling to wear dharma robes and carry prayer beads. Cihang wore a robe while prostrating every day at the main hall (Daoyuan, 1954). To put it simply, Cihang consciously maintained what then would have been categorized as “outdated” practices as a compromise between traditional and modern sensibilities. Another example is that in Penang after the death of Taixu, he received his dharma lineage from Venerable Yuanying (圓瑛, 1878–1953), who, to some extent, had a rivalry with Taixu over the national Buddhist association, and also in terms of their competing views on modernization. The action of receiving his dharma lineage in this manner was seen by many in the community of new monks as controversial, and this led to further challenges for him during his time in Taiwan.

In 1948, Cihang made his last border-crossing under the invitation of Venerable Miaoguo (妙果, 1884–1964), the abbot of Yuanguang Monastery (圓光寺). This phase of his religious career seemed full of suffering. During seminary, he and Miaoguo worked together, but only for a short period. Along with the Kuomintang regime’s retreat the following year, some young monks who came from the mainland were eager to find a place to stay. Cihang showed great compassion to them, but Miaoguo refused to include more monks. He then transferred junior monks from one monastery to

another; however, due to economic factors, it was not easy to accommodate them. The worst was yet to come; that same year, due to fears of communist infiltration, many monastics from the mainland were taken into custody. Cihang was not spared from this incident, and the majority of high-ranking monks did nothing to intervene. Even after his release, this episode was a shadow that lingered over him for quite some time, and he remained under surveillance by the ruling regime.

Cihang finally settled in a suburb in Taipei where he lived out his remaining years. Nuns of the Jingxiu Chan Monastery (靜修禪院) were willing to build a place from him, the Maitreya Inner Hall (彌勒內院), which was completed in August 1950. This hall was also an institute that could accept young monastics. The name was due to Cihang's continuation of the Maitreya faith practiced by Taixu; yet, quite interestingly, Cihang himself has an appearance similar to the Chinese version of Maitreya Buddha. Despite the various miseries he had endured, Cihang was a widely welcomed dharma propagator and teacher who was deeply loved by devotees and disciples. His Dharma lectures attracted mass crowds, and one particular memorial article (Zhong, 1954) praised him as "the best guiding teacher for beginners" (*jiyin chuji de daosbi* 接引初機的導師). Student monks were especially grateful to him since he was the one provided them with the most care on the island.

With Cihang's life now reviewed, the following crucial question can be addressed: why did he chose *zuogang* as one of his mortuary rites in hopes of becoming a flesh-body bodhisattva? He foresaw the time of his death three years in advance and left a will six months prior to his death. The will addressed numerous matter, and clearly indicated "...to deal with..." the remains without coffin or cremation, but instead, to use a big tub "... place (my body)..." in lotus posture and "... set it at..." the back hill. Three years later the tub is to be opened, and if "...the corpse..." has fallen apart and decayed, leave it in the earth. If it remains intact, gild and enshrine it in stupa or the monastery." This style of advanced directive was claimed by a disciple to be "unprecedented" (Cichun, 1959). Although many among followers were suspicious of the message and some thought Cihang was joking since he was a humorous person, while others suggested there the directive contained a secret meaning to be contemplated.

As three years passed, opinions on whether to open the tub (開缸, *kaigang*) varied. It was Venerable Dao'an (道安, 1907–1977) who presided over the Commemoration Committee which decided to extend the original time period to five years. Yet in 1959, this hesitation led to a vote on the matter, and on May 19th, a tub-opening ceremony was held. Cihang's remains were found to be in an auspicious state, and the first wide-known full-body relic in Taiwan created quite a stir in society. Reports dominated newspapers coverage for days. People poured into the site to see it for themselves in-person and pay their respects. Buddhists, many of whom were surprised and delighted, joined the discussions and said the result was due to the spiritual practices and virtue of Master Cihang. They pointed out that this case was not like other historical mummies

(such as those from Egypt), since none of the internal organs had been removed and since his hair, beard, and eyebrows all continued to grow. The successful drying process made his body much thinner and darkened his skin; however, it was recorded that his body remained elastic.

To answer the question posited two paragraphs above, religiously speaking, if Cihang is taken as a manifestation of a bodhisattva, he revealed lingering imperfections in terms of his personality and degree of ability. On the other hand, through great compassion and aspirations, the dharma emerged from within his turbulent life. By adopting *zuogang* Cihang conveyed the message that despite challenges, a person's level of attainment eventually is revealed through their death. There could also have been other strategic motivations. Hsing Yun (2013) who knew Cihang quite well, guessed that he had considered it a way to keep disciples and devotees waiting for at least the three years, and that delay would prevent them from scattering or losing enthusiasm. Hsing Yun himself was against opening the tub, since he believed that all organic matter is subject to decay.

Cremation

Buddhist cremation and the related phenomenon of *śarīra* worship are no less complicated than mummified whole-body relics. The production and credibility of relics derived through cremation are sometimes met with doubt or held to the scrutiny of scientific criterion. Most Buddhists believe through proper practice, and especially through Pure Land style chanting of homages to Buddha (念佛, *nianfo*), some “material” sign will be left behind after cremation. Opposite opinions include those from medical professionals who consider relics to result from various physical conditions. In addition, those who argue for purely physical causes tend to further state that low-heat cremation is a necessary component that enables relics to form.

According to this more scientifically-oriented explanation, *śarīra* can hardly be said have manifested due to practice, morality, or other such factors. It is more likely, that those who desire relics connected to their relatives or masters create the conditions that ensure the highest likelihood of the formation of relics. Non-Buddhists do not typically sift through ashes looking for relics, and as such, it is hardly surprising that they do not find these objects. Some modern rational Buddhists have taken to downplaying the meaning of relics. They reason that it is not essential to doctrinal teachings. Some even agree with the physical explanations of how *śarīra* are formed.

For the “enchanted” though, cremation today has become more and more problematic. Crematoriums in urban areas use furnaces that reach one thousand degrees Celsius or more to maximize efficiency. High-heat cremations make the formation of relics unlikely for Buddhists who put their faith and practice through this rather literal test of fire.⁶ Crematoriums in less populated areas or venues with specially made furnaces are better suited for the pursuit of material results.

Two representative cases of Buddhist cremation relics were those of reputed incarnated Buddhas in post-war Taiwan. The senior figure was the seventh (or nineteenth according to legend) Jangiya Khutughtu (章嘉呼圖克圖, *Zhangjia Hutuketu*, 1890–1957), and the other was the fifth Kanjurwa Khutughtu (甘珠呼圖克圖, *Ganzhu Hutuketu*, 1914–1978). Jangiya was one of the most eminent monastics who retreated with the Kuomintang regime to the island. Since the Qing Dynasty, the incarnations were close to rulers. They constantly lived in capital and were responsible for the religious missions of inner Mongolia and various other regions. Privileges for these preceptors (國師, *guoshi*) were maintained during the Republican period by awarding them high positions replete with titles such as the “Master of Protecting the Country, Pure Enlightenment, and the Auxiliary of Dharma” (護國淨覺輔教大師, *buguo jingjue fujiao dasi*).

After he died in March 4th 1957 of gastric cancer, the funeral of Jangiya was supported by the regime. Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石, 1887–1975) led more than a thousand government officials in attending the ceremony. A marching band was sent to take part in the procession. He was cremated in Beitou, a suburb of Taipei, beside which his relic stupa still stands. During the rites, Kanjurwa lit the fire. There were “eight dishes of small colored śarīras” and “four plates of śarīra flowers and large śarīras.” The total number of relics was claimed to be around six thousand in total. It is worth noting that while that massive number of relics was understood as evidence of the Khutughtu’s status, as time passed, these relics faded from memory for local Buddhists. The stupa went on to be covered by overgrown grass and even faced the risk of being torn down. Through media reports, civil efforts came in, and only then did the city government resolve the issue by recognizing it as historic site. (Lefeng, 2018) Naturally, a renovation was scheduled, and it was recently completed.

To some extent, the value of relics is decided by the living devoted Buddhists. The mere existence of śarīra relics is not especially meaningful if no one feels compelled to venerate them. Kanjurwa’s case is another standard example. His tradition was also Mongolian, and he migrated to Taiwan in 1949. The relationship between this younger “living buddha” and rulers was probably not as prominent as it was for Jangiya. After the latter’s passing, Kanjurwa entered the leadership circle of Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (中國佛教會, *zhongguo fojiao hui*) for a while; however, he also maintained his own preaching audiences and supporters.

Kanjurwa died on June 13th 1978. At the end of the month, a cremation stupa was built at Fayu Monastery (法雨寺) in Beitou. Although details are unclear, his remains were said to have been exposed to flames for five-day five-night period. On the seventh day when his disciples were picking relics from the ashes, they “unexpectedly” found that the fires had failed to burn a large part of their master’s body. This resulted in an unusual relic-body. It was recognized as miraculous matter. Gildow and Bingenheimer (2002) based on their sources indicate that the product was only due to the improper handling of the rites. The relic-body enshrined in his vihāra located in Xindian (新店),

but later something deeply unfortunate transpired. A rape case happened there in 1992, and this led to the closure of the site. The scene that was once crowded with worshippers no longer exists, and a desolate vihāra is all that remains.⁷ After thirty years passed, the site was renovated and reopened via support that mainly came from the former Minister of National Defense, as well as the Minister of the Veterans Affairs Council, Feng Shih-kuan (馮世寬 1945–).⁸

Hsing Yun's Mortuary Rites

The abovementioned Buddhist deaths, mortuary rites, and relics serve as an important basis to understand the more recent events and those of Hsing Yun in particular. On the night of February 5th 2023, news of Hsing Yun's death broke after years of his personal public silence. Buddhists both in and outside the Fo Guang Shan circle either saw this coming and were prepared, or were abruptly shocked. They were witnessing the end of an era. The generation which involved Hsing Yun himself and other monastic mainlanders and their role as leaders of Taiwanese Buddhism symbolically ended with his passing.

At first, caution prevailed as many wondered whether the unverified news may have been misreported. Early the next morning, a ceremony at Fo Guang Shan took place, and people were probably rather stunned by what they saw. The master's remains were encased in a white tub with decorative border; and a sort of cap on the top. It looked more like an Indian style stupa, and later verified to be a stupa (塔, *ta*) rather than a tub (缸, *gang*). Below, there was a lotus-shape pedestal mainly made of wood. The whole set was taller than a human.



Figure 1. Hsing Yun's stupa-like casket (photograph by author [2023])

It is worth noting that the process allowing the masses to pay homage to the master's remains, which for figures like Hsing Yun would be normally necessary, was not observed. Perhaps only close disciples were around when enclosing of the body (真身封龕, *zhenshen fengkan*, the official term) was carried out privately. The "stupa" was later moved to the memorial venue. After being moved, it was viewable by the public.

Confusion began to emerge. Many of those who remembered Cihang's *zuogang* had the instinct to speculate that something would be done. That would have been rather surprising though, as it might contradict the modernized Buddhism promoted by Hsing Yun and his followers. For most, those rites fall under the classification of being traditional, mystical. Yet as soon as speculation that Hsing Yun might be on his way to becoming a flesh-body bodhisattva, it was announced that he would be cremated in a matter of days.

What was even more perplexing was that the media seemed to be unaware that *zuogang* and *tupi* are completely distinct death rites. The two rites lead to separate disposal methods and different material results in terms of the type of relic(s) produced. A more responsible press, would have taken great care not to conflate these radically different rituals. According to the reports, they had the understanding that Hsing Yun's *zuogang* was based on his will. At the same time though, preparation for his cremation was underway. Suffice it to say that the deceased master was seated in a casket (*kan*) as one stage of his preliminary rites as Yetts described. As for what would be done with the *kan*, whether it be kept to preserve the body, buried, or cremated, that would be determined by either Hsing Yun's will or by his disciples.

As a matter of fact, it is not clear whether he had chosen to follow the *zuogang* rites in an attempt to produce a relic-body. In 2013, back when he was eighty-five, he composed an article titled "Sincere Confession: My Last Order" (真誠的告白: 我最後的囑咐, *Zhencheng de gaobai: Wo zuibou de zbufu*, 2015). This was taken as his open will, and in it, he interestingly said "I shall leave behind no relic-bits" (我沒有舍利子, *wo meiyou sheli zi*, literally, "I have no śarīra"). In terms of analysis, his words semantically do not preclude the production of a flesh-body relic, yet this cannot be taken too hastily. There could be several explanations. As for the question of why a master of Humanistic Buddhism would wish to become a corporeal immortal, that decision would have indicated the master's willingness to stay in this "human world" as a comfort or source of inspiration to sentient beings.

The confusion was, in part, due to the lack of clarity and immediate response from Fo Guang Shan officials. Among other considerations, in the same will Hsing Yun claims he had no personal savings, but only had a charitable educational trust fund of more than a billion dollars which mainly came from income derived from his writings and calligraphy. However, elsewhere he mentioned the assets donated to the fund were in excess of twenty million dollars. Different media outlets opted to report only one figure or the other (one billion or twenty million), and the general population hardly knew

which was accurate.⁹

On February 8th, the fourth day after the master's passing, Fo Guang Shan indirectly responded to the *zuogang* confusion via its online media. The *Merit Times*, the *Life News Agency*, and the websites operated by Fo Guang branches, posted same article titled, "Why Master Hsing Yun Adopted a Sitting-stupa Cremation," composed by the president of Merit Times, Venerable Miaoxi (妙熙). Multiple ideas were brought up in this short article that had been provided for clarification. For the most important, the widely circulated speculation that *zuogang* would be used in an effort to produce a whole-body relic was overthrown. The author explained the rites being observed were such that Hsing Yun's casket imitated the style of Parinirvana Stupa,¹⁰ wherein the "dharma-body, true body" (法體真身, *fati zhenshen*) sits for seven days until cremation, and this is called a "sitting-stupa cremation" (坐塔茶毗, *zuota tupi*).

She further connected the ideas of a sitting-stupa and "dying in a seated posture" by indicating that the master passed in meditative position, and was not manipulated into that posture postmortem (this is the original, intended use of a *kan*; a receptacle for an "already" seated body). Miaoxi, through a Q&A format, pointed out differences between sacred and the mundane phenomena. Conventions dictate that auspicious signs serve as a verification of a practitioner's attainment, as well as a good death without suffering and pain. Although Hsing Yun's passing is consistent with this expectation, naturally, detractors will remain suspicious that the master was post-facto sanctified. Furthermore, interestingly and perhaps ironically, the young disciple mentioned Hsing Yun's instruction of leaving behind no relics (at that time he had not yet been cremated and relics had not yet been retrieved) and expounded that his intent was to encourage others not obsess over Śarīra beliefs and veneration.

With regards to this clarification, it can be observed that the article stated "tradition" was being followed; however, much of the rhetoric was recently only "invented." Precedents may exist for a seated-stupa cremation in Buddhist hagiographies; however, Hsing Yun's *kan* does not follow any previous example. It is certainly of interest that his casket was inspired by the Buddha's Parinirvana Stupa. Furthermore, it makes sense for there to be a certain degree of invention given that Fo Guang Shan is known for its modern sensibilities.

With regard to the disposal of the *kan*, there has been a great deal of speculation, but in this article, it is inferred that Hsing Yun's remains being preserved in that receptacle may have at one point been considered. The reason is that it seems Fo Guang Shan did not have an exact plan for how to deal with this matter and whether or not cremation would ultimately be used when they designed the stupa-style casket. According to media reports, discussion about cremation between the personnel of Fo Guang Shan and Daxian Monastery (大仙寺) continued until February 7th. The latter, which owns a crematorium, had received request from Fo Guang Shan and undertook the task, but preceding operation was said to have been a rush-order. Apparently, there were some technical issues resulting from the size of the casket being significantly

larger than a standard-sized coffin.¹¹ From these details it can be surmised that the the means to dispose of the remains had only been recently decided.

It turns out Daxian Monastery crematorium had handled other cases of high-ranking and well-known monastics over the past few years, including Wei Chueh (惟覺, 1928–2016), another founder of one of “Taiwan’s four Buddhist mountains,” Chung Tai Shan (中台山), and Chin Kung (淨空, 1927–2022), a Pure Land master and the founder of the Buddha Educational Foundation (佛陀教育基金會). Both cremations resulted in relic flowers but no reports of relic-bits. It is worth noting that the furnace at the crematorium runs at a lower-temperature than those of normal urban crematoriums. It burns below nine hundred degrees according to sources. It is unclear whether the choosing of the site was due to hopes of producing śarīra. But after the relics of Hsing Yun had been collected and publicly announced, it was indeed controversial due to the way in which it potentially contradicted Hsing Yun’s written will. The credibility of those “countless” round and smooth relics, some of which resembled pearls was questioned as well.¹²

Of potentially greater issue though is the context behind the encasement of the master’s bodily remains. Namely, the attitude towards death presented by Hsing Yun, how it was shaped by the social circumstances of the modern era, and how it was expanded to an internal culture at Fo Guang Shan are all ultimately worthy of interest. Moreover, it is fascinating that the relics potentially contradict the faith commonly attributed to Fo Guang Shan.

The endeavors and achievements of Hsing Yun in promoting Humanistic Buddhism is overwhelmingly admired by Buddhists both inside and outside of Fo Guang Shan. Though his contact with Taixu was rather brief, he managed to gain recognition as one of the main successors of Taixu in Taiwan (Pittman, 2001). The time of Republican period was one wherein Buddhism faced challenges from secular worldviews and values. Taixu used words that emerging intellectuals and middle class could understand while expounding Buddhism’s commonalities with some aspects of the Western intellectual tradition known to readers of that time. He upheld the Buddhist worldview as superior, as it tends to examine phenomena more deeply and result in greater overall wellness. It was reckoned that since modern citizens participate in political activities, labor, and entertainment, modern Buddhists should also expand their Buddhism into these avenues.

To rephrase this more simply, this movement determined that Buddhism ought to honor tradition, but do so while incorporating new understandings and necessary modifications. This emerging new culture was known by Buddhist modernists as “Buddhification,” and it can be seen as a more secular and popularized (大眾化, *dazhonghua*) Buddhism. Hsing Yun went even further than Taixu in pursuit of this style of Buddhism. He also had better conditions to accomplish than his predecessor.

As a monastic who had been born in Jiangsu (江蘇), Hsing Yun was young when followed the Kuomintang army’s landing on Taiwan. During the post-war period, a

decade or so, the good-looking and talented Hsing Yun cultivated his audience. He wrote well-received Buddhist pop literature, and some of these works were adapted into plays and films. This is how he achieved fame early in his career. In the middle of the 1960s, Hsing Yun's dharma propagation career saw him transferred from the northern to southern part of Taiwan. He built a seminary on desolate hill surrounded by a bamboo forest and woods. This was the beginning of Fo Guang Shan. Back then, his focuses were on sangha education and cultural activities. As the institution expanded and martial law was lifted in 1987, social participation diversified into domains such as education within the system, charity, and sports.

This type of intense engagement had not existed in traditional Buddhism, and as was mentioned earlier this was a reaction to both outside changes such social circumstances, and also to inner problems. Repentance, rituals, and chanting Buddha's name on behalf of the dead were deemed by many to be over-emphasized. These practices led Buddhism to be linked to death and passiveness. The image of monasticism as a whole was thereby implicated. At that same time, the Pure Land faith was increasingly accused of not caring about the world.

In turning the tide, the concern of Hsing Yun was that of worldly matters with which Buddhists could engage in order to propagate dharma broadly and to as large an audience as possible. He wished to present Buddhism as a youthful and vivid religion. Besides the success of his Buddhist novels and films, the master proved himself to be charismatic and skilled in mobilizing young people. Needless to say, generating capital was a crucial factor behind his successful career. Fo Guang Shan, like other groups in Taiwan, was fortunate to have developed during the island's economic boom, and the movement also enjoyed support from overseas Chinese.

Holding these considerable resources, Hsing Yun advanced Buddhist popularization to the maximum degree possible. In recent years, those visiting Fo Guang Shan during the Chinese New Year period will find that the mountain has been created like a "Theme Park for Humanistic Buddhism," with all varieties of entertainment such as concerts, fireworks, drone light shows, shopping, restaurants, carnival parades, museums, 3-D films, and even a street full of vegetarian food vendors. One could say Fo Guang Shan has its own version of most common forms of leisure and entertainment. Some describe the institution as a "department store" (I feel "religious enterprise" might be more fitting). Furthermore, the religious community at Fo Guang Shan do not tend to discuss death, and the reason for doing so is fairly obvious.

This is done to disconnect the perceived ties between death and Buddhism and to avoid generating a potentially negative image. Fo Guang Shan formed a unique culture wherein insiders normally greet each other by saying "auspicious" (吉祥, *jixiang*), instead of following the Chinese Buddhist habit saying Amitābha (阿彌陀佛, *amituofo*). The wording clearly shows a this-worldly and positive direction, and it can be taken as another example of this recurrent topic in the Fo Guang environment. Regarding the

afterlife, Hsing Yun was like other masters of Humanistic Buddhism who have no interest in attaining a Pure Land rebirth. He told disciples that he will continue to be a monk in his next life. During his death rituals, the masses chanted the name of Śākyamuni Buddha, which was rare on this kind of occasion.



Figure 2. The concert and light show at Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum (photograph by author [2023])

Therefore, when Hsing Yun asserted in his will that he will leave behind no relics, this statement matches the beliefs he stated throughout his life. Conceptually, relics honor the dead, but they can hardly be said to produce “worldly” benefits for society. He also instructed that the rites and rituals observed should be kept as simple as possible. A model of a simplified funeral for an eminent monastic was held for Sheng Yen, the founder of Dharma Drum Mountain, who also set a precedent not to collect relics.¹³ All in all, this article argues the result of Hsing Yun’s cremation still struggled with the stereotype of a traditional good death or sacred death in the Buddhist context. The material response was perhaps what Fo Guang Shan’s numerous devotees from around the globe wished to have, especially after years of silence of the master. They did not even see his remains, due to the tendency to deemphasize death. Some may conclude that the end product was due a tension between or mixture of “old” and “new.”

Conclusion

It is fascinating that Hsing Yun’s legacy revives widespread discussion of mortuary rites. That noise in part resulted from contemporary people not understanding the traditional funerary rites for high-ranking monastics and those believed to have achieved spiritual attainments. If the function of a *kan*, and its typical usage and variety of outcomes were better understood, the possibility that he aspired to become a bodily

immortal would have been understood as just one of numerous possibilities. Cihang's case foreshadowed this possibility. Furthermore, the design of the *kan* and the later clarifying statements can be considered evidence of invention to some extent.

Furthermore, the modern system of thought instructed by Taixu, Hsing Yun, and others tends to highlight human life and generally avoids linking Buddhism to death. One can say this has even become a sort of ideology. Previously in this article, it was shown how it is these ideological tendencies are deeply rooted inside the Fo Guang Shan environment, and therefore, one would naturally expect these values to be mirrored during the founder's final rites. Some speculation can be made as to why Hsing Yun's death was covered in a way that did not permit the public to view and pay respects to his pre-cremated remains; opting instead to have his last image be that of a master privately seated within a stupa-like *kan*. In the Humanistic Buddhist context and Fo Guang Shan's version in particular, it just cannot be forgotten that death-related concepts, practices, and physical death itself tend to be hidden since they do not manifest the positivity of life.

As for the relics, these are trickier to characterize. Experiences documented in texts and testimony from Buddhists indicate a perceived connection between material results and religious accomplishments. It was not easy to eliminate this long-standing convention even Hsing Yun himself expressed reservations about it in his will. The religious sentiment of hundreds of thousands of the devotees cannot easily be dismissed. Their faith in Master Hsing Yun must be respected as they are the economic pillar of Fo Guang Shan's sizable international organization. Conversely, the high-profile public declaration brought some inevitable criticism. This issue should not be overlooked; however, it can also be understood as a manifestation of the core of tension between traditional Buddhism and modern Buddhism. Many decades after the introduction of the rational milieu, Buddhists have not given up searching for signs of sacredness, and their quest will no doubt continue in the future.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

¹ It should be noted that *tupi* is used in the context of monastics. The term is likely to be Indian-originated. There is an equivalent word in Pali, *jhāpita*, meaning "cremation." In standard Chinese, cremation generally is called "*huohua* (火化)" or "*huozang* (火葬)."

² For more information on mummification in Chinese Buddhism refer to Demiéville (1965), Faure (1992), Sharf (1992), Matsumoto (1993), and more recently Ritzinger and Bingenheimer (2006). These authors provide a critical review of previous works. For information on whole-body relics in Taiwan, see Gildow and Bingenheimer (2002), Gildow (2005; 2011), and Travagnin (2006; 2016).

³ See also the description of Yetts (1911), in which he refers to the deceased monastic under such a

condition as a “priest sitting in the *kan*” (坐龕和尚, *zuokan heshang*).

- ⁴ To avoid confusion here, *zuogang* in this context specifically means to leave a flesh-body. Aside from this though, they both were seated in a type of *kan*, and little difference can be observed.
- ⁵ Gildow and Bingenheimer (2002) seem to suggest this potential connection, while Travagnin (2006) references a saying that points out the same thing. And it is said Qingyan had traveled to Mount Jiuhua, as well (Kan, 1996).
- ⁶ However, regarding the temperatures of the furnaces at different crematoriums and which conditions are conducive to producing relics, data from the sources is not entirely consistent. What is provided here are just relative numbers.
- ⁷ See also Lu (1993).
- ⁸ The brother of Kanjurwa who inherited the vihāra was a veteran. The property was then taken over by the Veterans and Dependents Foundation after his death.
- ⁹ Another issue is that some maintain that Hsing Yun was born in 1922 and died at the age of 102.
- ¹⁰ The Stupa located in Kushinagar, north India, purportedly where the Buddha passed away. The Parinirvana Temple as well as the Stupa thus serve to commemorate his nirvana.
- ¹¹ As a result, their solution was to lay down the “stupa” allowing it to enter the furnace to be cremated.
- ¹² Taiwanese Buddhist scholar, Chiang Tsanteng (江燦騰), posits these questions on his personal website, and indicates his suspicion that the relics are artificial. He makes reference to previous forgeries of Tibetan dzi beads (天珠, *tianzhu*) and relics in Taiwan, suggesting such forged relics are not a new phenomenon. Chiang’s points have been echoed by others.
- ¹³ It is said, according to who witnessed the cremation, that Sheng Yen left many colorful relic flowers and bead-shaped relics. Yet the sangha group that followed the master’s instructions did not verify these and simply ground his remains into powdered ashes.

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