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Elder Gongga 貢噶老人 (1903-1997) between China, Tibet and Taiwan: Assessing Life, Mission and Mummification of a Buddhist Woman[1]

ABSTRACT: Elder Gongga (1903-1997), a Chinese Buddhist woman native of Beiping, played a crucial role in the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism in China and Taiwan, bridged Dharma traditions, and merged Buddhist and cultural identities; she also became an eminent nun in the history of female Buddhism for life achievements and the worship of her mummified body after death. The analysis of Elder Gongga's life and works contributes to better understand history, dynamics and networks of Buddhism in twentieth century China and Taiwan: Elder Gongga's story is the story of a Chinese Buddhist woman who practiced and spread Tibetan Buddhism first in China and then in Taiwan, and therefore another portrayal of the conditions of women following Tibetan Buddhism in the Chinese region in the twentieth-century. The mummification of her body after death contributes to the debate on body and material culture in the Buddhist context.

KEYWORDS: Elder Gongga; Tibetan Buddhism; Buddhist mummification; Buddhism in Taiwan; Buddhist women; networks

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[1] This paper is based on fieldwork research carried out in Taiwan in various years from 2002 to 2015, and could have not been completed without the assistance of Elder Gongga's disciples at Gongga Vihāra in Zhonghe, especially Lin Lama. I wish to thank them all for allowing me to visit the centre and kindly answering my long list of questions about Gongga's life and teachings. The disciples' reports on their relationship with Gongga and what has happened since the enshrinement of Gongga's relic body offered precious data for the third section of this paper. An early version of this research has been presented at *The 1st International Congress on Buddhist Women's role in the Sangha, Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages*, in July 2007.

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Introduction: Agency and Buddhist Domains in Twentieth-century China and Taiwan

> In this life I respected and maintained the teachings of the Buddha, to my parents I have been a filial daughter, and to the Buddhadharma I have been a disciple who kept the precepts; therefore on my death I will leave wearing a smile.[2]

A native of Beijing,[3] Shen Shuwen 申書文 (Elder Gongga's secular name) had her first encounter with Buddhism in 1922. Later on she had the opportunity to meet, and therefore be influenced by, eminent Chinese monks such as the reformer Taixu 太虛 (1890-1947) and the Chan master Xuyun 虛雲 (1840-1959), and at a later stage in her life she learned and preached the esoteric doctrine of Tibetan Buddhism. Elder Gongga was an active preacher in mainland China and then in Taiwan. More important, she undertook the mission to transmit and spread the teachings of the Kagyü School into Taiwan: the Gongga Vihāra (*gongga jingshe*) 貢噶精舍, which she established in the early 1960s at Zhonghe (now part of the New Taipei City), was the first Kagyü Dharma centre founded in Taiwan, as well as one of the very first Tibetan Dharma centres opened on the island.

The story of Elder Gongga presents us with many avenues of investigation. Beyond the particulars of her unique life and practice, there is also the gender-related significance of her mission, and the tension between respecting the Confucian female virtues and being an active member of the Buddhist Sangha is evident from the quote at the beginning of this section. Then, in the posthumous depiction and her life and legacy, we see how two Buddhist traditions (the Chinese Mahāyāna and the Tibetan Vajrayāna) can be integrated within a single female Buddhist practitioner. Finally, but not less significant, is the fact that the preservation of her body, performed according to the Tibetan tradition, was read by her followers as evidence of her attainment of the Buddhahood, despite all the gender-related obstacles and doctrinal controversies surrounding female enlightenment.

This article analyses two main issues. One section concerns the life and practice of Elder Gongga, and the state of her legacy in the present-day Taiwan. Secondly, the paper aims to question and assess the historical and gender-related significance of her mission. My research demonstrates how two cultural and religious/Buddhist identities, namely the Chinese and the Tibetan, have found reconciliation in the figure of a Buddhist woman, Elder Gongga, in her life and mission as well as in her post-mortem permanence.

The historical development of Buddhism in China does not always coincide with the unfolding of the conventional dynasty-based history. Therefore a 'network/domain/practice-based history' can propose an alternative timeline and thus an alternative narrative to the conventional 'dynasty-based history' that is usually adopted, and highlights alternative paradigms to those more often considered. In fact, domains such as communities, networks and practices can evolve independently from

[2] Long 1993, 19. The original quote is from 1983.

[3] Beijing has been called Beiping during part of the Ming (1368 to 1403), and later from 1928 to 1949. However, for consistency, I have used only the name Beijing in this article.

dynastic succession. Not considering these factors would imply a representation of only one historical trajectory at the expenses of a more comprehensive and multi-perspective portrait. Elder Gongga was a crucial actor in three domains: the network of transnational Tibetan Buddhism, the female Buddhist community, and the practice of (Buddhist) religious mummification of the body; this article will then read Elder Gongga's life, mission and mummification within these three spheres.

Transnational Tibetan Buddhist Network: Elder Gongga, Cross-strait Dharma Transmission, and the History of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan



Figure 1: Gongga Vihāra, June 2015 (photo by Stefania Travagnin)

What follows is a historical assessment of the figure of Elder Gongga, whose skills and experiences earned her the title "red-robed female knight" (*hong yi nüxia* 紅衣女俠).[4]

The several periods and milestone events in Elder Gongga's life may be seen as a mirror of the stages of practice of any Buddhist woman at that time, as well as a reflection of the history of the modern diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism in the Chinese region. Some dynamics in her life also reflect the common paradigm that all the so-called eminent monks of the twentieth-century experienced, and in this way Elder Gongga is a good example of the Buddhist Sangha in twentieth-century China overall.

I would divide Elder Gongga's life into five phases:

1. Before becoming interested and committed to the Dharma (1903-22)
2. As a lay Buddhist practitioner in mainland China (1922-58)
3. As a lay Buddhist practitioner in Taiwan (1958-80)
4. Post-1980 practice in Taiwan (1980-97)
5. Post-mummification (2000 onwards)

[4] For biographical data on Elder Gongga see Long 1993; Luo 2001; Lü 1993; Tong 2004.

Here below I will focus on the first four, and leave the analysis of Elder Gongga as 'flesh-body Bodhisattva' to the following two sections of this article.

Before Embracing Buddhist Practice (1903-22)

Shen Shuwen (Gongga's lay name) was born in 1903 in Beijing. It is said that an old monk visited the room of Gongga's mother just before her birth. Because of family relations with the imperial family at the end of Qing dynasty, she also had an audience with the Empress Cixi 慈禧 in 1908.

In 1909 she followed her family and moved to Kaifeng, in the Henan province, where she practiced military arts and later attended the local high school.

The year 1914 marked an important turning point in her life: she dreamed of Daoist immortals showing their practice to her, and as a result the desire to embrace a monastic life started to take seed in her mind. However, the 'causes and conditions' for such a change were not yet ripe at that time; in fact her parents arranged her wedding in 1919. She married one year later but abandoned the marriage soon thereafter.

Early Steps on the Dharma Path (1922-58)

In 1922, she replaced her original interest in Daoism with the study and practice of Buddhist teachings officially, as she took refuge in the Buddhadharma at Fayuan Temple (*fayuan si* 法源寺) in Beijing.[5] At the same time she started her career as a teacher in several female schools in Hebei province (1928-33). In 1937, because of the Marco Polo Bridge incident and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, she left the schools and her teaching job. In 1938, she followed a guerrilla force and thus became involved directly in the war against Japan. During this time she was wounded and imprisoned. While in prison, she spent most of her time reciting the name of Guanyin, and reinforcing her Buddhist faith. She was freed from prison after three days and had a long convalescence in a hospital with a prescribed abstinence from meat and a strict vegetarian diet that increased her determination to practice Buddhism in a more devoted way. Once she recovered, she again took the teaching position she had held before.

In 1939, Gongga took refuge in the reformer Taixu and later on in the Chan master Xuyun too. Following more than one teacher was not unusual at that time. Following Taixu's advice, Gongga moved to Sichuan, where she enrolled the Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Institute (*hanzang jiaoli xueyuan* 漢藏教理學院) and started her study of Tibetan language and esoteric Tibetan Buddhism; the monk Fazun 法尊 (1902-1980) was running the institute those years. As all the contemporary monastics interested in Tibetan Buddhism and language did, Gongga also moved to Kham for further study of those subjects. While in Kanding, she was appointed to the Secretariat of Tibetan Language at the Department of Education in Kham.

Her first important encounter with Tibetan practitioners of esoteric Buddhism was in 1941, when she met Gongga Rinpoché, and then became

[5] Fayuan Temple was originally founded in the Tang period, and is now one of the oldest temples in the city of Beijing, besides being home of the Chinese Buddhist Academy that was established in 1956. In the late Qing and early Republican period it was a major site for monastic ordination, Buddhist learning and practice.

a disciple of the esoteric teachings under him. At that time she received the Dharma name of Chödrup Dönpa and the given name of Gongga.[6] In 1945, after a three-year solitary retreat on Gongga Mountain (*gongga shan* 貢噶山), she assisted Gongga Rinpoché in Dharma meetings and transmission of teachings. Invited to Helin Temple (*helinsi* 鶴林寺), she gave a series of three-day seminars where more than one hundred people took refuge in Buddhism: this was Gongga's first true experience as a Dharma teacher. Her second experience took place in Chengdu (still in 1945) where she preached Buddhist teachings for twenty-one days and guided a seven-day retreat of Red Avalokitesvara Dharma practice (*hong guanyin faqi* 紅觀音法七); this event also led a large number of people to become Buddhist. In 1947, at the Yoga Buddha Hall (*yuqie fotang* 瑜伽佛堂), many other disciples took refuge under her. In 1949, after a two-year solitary retreat (1947-49), she was assigned the post of Director in the Religious Affairs Bureau. From 1953 to 1955 she was in Suzhou, studying Chinese medicine and transmitting Buddhist teachings, and no fewer than one hundred people became disciples of the Dharma under her guidance. It was Gongga Rinpoché who pushed Elder Gongga to go and spread esoteric Buddhism in Taiwan, the land where several mainland monastics were fleeding in order to escape the Communists and continue their practice. In 1956, Elder Gongga went to Shanghai and from there moved to Taiwan two years later, in 1958. In 1957, Gongga Rinpoché died at the Gongga Temple (*gongga si* 貢噶寺).

Spreading Teaching and Practice of the Kagyu School in Taiwan ~ Phase I (1958-80)

Thanks to a donor from Hong Kong and the support of some laywomen, Elder Gongga opened the very first Gongga Vihāra in Zhonghe 中和 (1959-61). In 1960, the monk Quanmiao 全妙 from Zhuxi Temple (*zhuxi si* 竹溪寺) invited Gongga to Tainan, where she gave ten days of Dharma teachings before entering a 108-day solitary retreat. In 1962, he founded the Gongga Vihāra Supervisory Affair Committee (*gongga jingshe conglan shihui* 貢噶精舍董監事會), which was meant to coordinate all the activities and centres arranged by Elder Gongga on the island. In 1965, after offering the transmission of the *mahāmudrā* teachings (*da shouyin* 大手印), she entered a 49-day solitary retreat on Mt. Yangming. After completing some rebuilding work at Gongga Vihāra and transmitting Dharma teaching (1968-69), she carried out two long-term solitary retreats (1969-71, and 1972-75). The Vihāra went through further enlargement in 1978, after the number of disciples who had took refuge in Elder Gongga reached the number of a few thousands. In the 1990s, Gongga Vihāra also started the publication of a series of books and pamphlets illustrating the Kagyü practice and the mission of the centre to the Chinese Buddhists.[7]

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[6] Elder Gongga used to report Rinpoché's advice to her disciples almost daily; here is one of the Rinpoché's teachings that she repeated most often: 'There are three things you must not waste: do not waste time [*shijian* 時間], do not waste affection [*ganqing* 感情], and do not waste wealth [*caiwu* 財物]. These are the teachings of Gongga Rinpoché' (Long 1993, 162).

[7] Besides the regular newsletter *True Dharma Eye* (*Zheng fayan* 正法眼), which publishes the schedule of Dharma ceremonies, short articles on Tibetan Buddhism and Gongga's teachings, the centre has published a series of books under the title Gongga Vihāra Collection (*Gongga jingshe congshu* 貢噶精舍叢書), which include Elder Gongga's teachings and Kagyü doctrinal principles. So far, sixteen books have been published: they

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While in Taiwan, Elder Gongga also worked on building Kagyü centres in South East Asia, and thus transmitting Tibetan Kagyü teachings beyond greater China. The founding of the Gongga Vihāra branch in the Philippines is dated back to 1975, and it was followed by a few visits to Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand for more doctrinal transmissions.

Spreading Teaching and Practice of the Kagyü School in Taiwan ~ Phase II (1980-97)

In July 1980, she went to New York for an audience with the Mahāratna-dharma-rāja, who thus became her tonsure teacher and gave her the Dharma name of Karma Döndrup Namgyal.[8] In those years she also changed the name of her Gongga Vihāra to Karma Triyāna Dharmacakra Centre Gongga Vihāra (*gongga sancheng falun zhongxin gongga jingshe* 噶瑪三乘法輪中心貢噶精舍), and in doing so she made her centre more inclusive and with a larger scope. Since 1981, Lamas and Rinpochés have been visiting Taiwan and the Buddhist centres opened by the – then time tonsured - Elder Gongga, who then facilitated even more cross-strait relations for practice and practitioners of the the Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism.

In 1988, she was hospitalised for a serious illness. Once released from the hospital, at eighty-six year old, she did her last three-year retreat (1988-91). The founding of Gongga Temple in Tainan came in 1992; the groundbreaking ceremony with a teaching transmission was held on 23 November of that same year. On 23 March 1997, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama visited Gongga Temple during his journey in Taiwan and met Elder Gongga. The last Dharma service she presided was on 27 March 1997. Elder Gongga died in the same year, and her gilded mummified body was enshrined in the Karma Triyāna Dharmacakra Centre Gongga Vihāra three years later, in 2000.

Elder Gongga and Buddhism in 20th century China

This account of Gongga's life highlights recurrent elements in the biography of modern Chinese Buddhists.

Passing from her original interest in non Buddhist religiosities (like Chinese Daoism) to the practice of Buddhism resembles the story of many, with the monk Yinshun 印順 (1906-2005) being one. Similarly to Yinshun, Gongga was also forced to an early, but very soon ended, marriage (Yinshun 2005). Obtaining the own family permission to receive ordination was more problematic for male than female Buddhists, still even Buddhist women found family-related obstructions in their monastic career.

Elder Gongga also moved from the mainland to Taiwan in 1950s, and this is another element that many monastics at that time, regardless of their school of practice, have shared. In fact, since the late 1940s Taiwan became called 'the free China' (*ziyou zhongguo* 自由中國), and was

include the main written source for a better understanding of Elder Gongga's thought and practice (see bibliography). Newsletters and books are all given for free, but donations are of course welcome.

[8] This title, in Chinese Dabao fawang 大寶法王, started being used in 1426 to indicate an incarnation of Buddha Amitābha in the Gelug school. Today, it is believed that this incarnation applies to every Bogdo gegen Hutuktu in Mongolia.

conceived as the ideal destination, where mainland monastics could have continued their practice and prepared for bringing a Buddhist revival at their homeland one day. However, history tells that, eventually, those monastics did not go back to the mainland and created the roots of today Taiwanese Buddhism. Two major concerns for those who wanted to flee to Taiwan were visa and funding; donors from Taiwan and Hong Kong helped to solve the second problem very often. As I have reported above, Hong Kong devotees assisted Elder Gongga as well. And once in Taiwan, local devotees were the first aids and supporters; this was also the case for Elder Gongga.

Elder Gongga had the opportunity to approach Taixu and study in Taixu's modern institutes; therefore she could participate in the Taixu's project of a new Buddhism. The Chinese monastic delegations sent to Tibetan areas for learning Tibetan language and practice, and the foundation of the Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Institute in 1932 were part of the overall plan to build a comprehensive pan-Buddhist learning, as well as to fulfil Chinese political request to understand Tibetans and make the knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism at the service of Chinese national reconstruction (Welch 1968, 173-93; Tuttle 2005, 121-127). As Welch argued, 'Just as Buddhism was used by Japan to serve political ends in China, so it was used by China to serve political ends in Tibet' (Welch 1968, 173). The presence of Elder Gongga in Tibet first, and later as a representative of that Tibetanness, fell into that scheme.

Elder Gongga occupied Buddhist (and political) institutional offices; her association with Taixu, Xuyun and Fazun (who were influential monks and not only for their cultivation) facilitated certainly this achievement. This is another recurring trait of twentieth century Chinese Buddhists that Elder Gongga embodied.

Buddhist monastics engaged in the mission of creating affiliated branch centres (and thus a legacy) abroad, mostly in South East Asia. The exchange between China, Taiwan and South East Asia materialised into temple networks, expanded lineages, but also involved financial assistance from the Buddhist South East to the Buddhist China. This element is also found in Elder Gongga's life and mission.

Finally, like the other female practitioners of Vajrayāna Buddhism, Elder Gongga was not fully ordained but acted most of her life as a lay practitioner and, since 1980, as a 'tonsured' (but not fully ordained) novice. At that time, full monastic ordination was not (and still is not) allowed for women in the Vajrayāna tradition, a fact that has led to two possible solutions for Buddhist women: (1) going through a Mahāyāna full ordination, which would never be recognised in the Vajrayāna community, and the following joint practice of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna; or (2) maintaining the status of a lay or novice Buddhist. Elder Gongga chose the second option, although she did blend Chinese and Tibetan elements within her practice in local Taiwan.

Elder Gongga is also one of the earliest protagonists in the transmission and spread of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan, as Taiwanese newspapers reported in occasion of her mummification:

> Elder Gongga began practicing Buddhadharma at the age of 36. After three years she moved to Tibet to study Esoteric Buddhism, and the name 'Elder Gongga' was given to her at that time from her master Gonga Rinpoche. In 1958 Elder Gongga moved to Taiwan to spread the Dharma, and she founded in Taipei and Tainan the centres Gongga Vihāra, Chongqing Temple

> (*Chongqing si* 重慶寺) and Gongga Temple one after the other, and she thus became the first figure who transmitted Esoteric Buddhadharma in Taiwan.[9]

The history of transmission of Tibetan Buddhism to Taiwan is usually divided into two main phases: the first spanning 1950 to 1982, and the latter starting in 1982. The main differences between these two streams lies in the figures involved. While the mission of the first decades counted only a few ordained Tibetan and Mongolian lamas and a large number of mainland Chinese lay disciples, the second period is characterised by the arrival on the island of a steady number of Tibetan monastics (Yao 2000; Jagou 2011).[10]

Elder Gongga stood out as the only woman engaged in bringing the Tibetan tradition into Taiwan during the first stage, at the time when she was still a non-ordained practitioner. Furthermore, she was the one who brought the teaching of the Kagyü school into Taiwan. Her efforts were formally recognised in 1985 by Jamyang Khyentsé Yeshé from Khampagar, the seat of the Venerable Khamtrül Rinpoché and formally the main monastic centre of the Drukpa Kagyü in Kham.[11]



Figure 2: Photos of Elder Gongga and the reincarnation of her teacher on an altar on the first floor of Gongga Vihāra, June 2015 (photo by Stefania Travagnin)

[9] *Lianhe bao*, 10 April 2000.

[10] For a history of Tibetan Buddhism and Buddhists in modern mainland China see Tuttle 2005.

[11] His letter of acknowledgment has been included in books of Gongga's teachings: 'Dear friends, I would like to say a few words of introduction about the Karma Kagyü center. This center is the first Tibetan Vajrayāna institute in Taiwan, and its contribution to the cause of the Buddhist Dharma here is very valuable and important. It has already brought great benefit to the people of Taiwan. Now the center is also publishing a magazine so that information about Dharma events will be made more available to the public. The work of the Karma Kagyü center is extremely beneficial, and I would wholeheartedly recommend its activities to the people here. May all beings be liberated!'

The (Imagined) Community of Buddhist Women: Elder Gongga and other Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Women

In his *Buddhist Revival* Holmes Welch wrote: 'History belongs to those who write it, and the person who wrote more history than any one else was Tai-hsü' (Welch 1968, 256). This statement summarises the limits of the history of Buddhism we know, limits that are reflected and persist in the paradigms that are (too often) used to reconstruct historical narratives. I propose to problematise those paradigms that, I believe, impose *one* history and thus hide other – equally legitimate – histories.

Elder Gongga had been a disciple of Taixu in her early approach to Buddhism; however it was the Kagyü school taught by other teachers that came to represent her final practice at a mature age. The contribution of nuns and less eminent monks who do not belong to Taixu's legacy should also be documented in order to have a more reliable spectrum of the situation of Buddhism in China.

Elder Gongga is then one of those nuns who deserve more attention, for her efforts in continuing the lineage of the Kagyü school in Taiwan, and for the doctrinal and gender implications of her mummified body.

If Buddhist women in the imperial period have been visible and studied even by Western scholars,[12] those in post-imperial China, with very few exceptions, are still quite neglected. Elder Gongga is one of the all too many neglected Buddhist women who structure the domain, and in a certain sense community, of Buddhist women in twentieth-century China, and narrate another history of modern Chinese Buddhism. Other nuns on that list include, for instance, Tongyuan 通愿 (1913-1991), Miaoqing 妙清 (1901-1959), Kaizhong 開種 (1912-1995), Tianyi 天乙 (1924-1980), Ruxue 如學 (1913-1992), Xiaoyun 曉雲 (1913-2004), Wuyin 悟因 (b.1940).[13]

A full account of the (more or less connected) community of Buddhist women from the late Qing until contemporary time goes beyond the scope of this article; here I prefer to focus on a few instances of Buddhist women who blend Chinese (Mahāyāna) and Tibetan (Vajrayāna) practice in the twentieth-century. In fact, the list of Chinese Buddhists who engaged in the study and dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism in twentieth-century China is also not limited to the well known male monks Dayong 大勇 (1893-1929), Fazun 法尊, Fahai 法海 (1919-1991) and Nenghai 能海 (1886-1967), but includes a number of Buddhist women who made a crucial contribution to this mission. The nun Longlian 隆蓮 (1909-2006) is

[12] The main reference for reconstructing the early order of Buddhist nuns in China is Baochang 寶唱 *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 [Biographies of Nuns], T50 No.2063. Secondary literature in Chinese has been published by, among others, Li Yuzhen 李玉珍. For Western works see for instance publications by Miriam Levering, Beata Grant, or Kathryn Ann Tsai.

[13] The collection *Xu biqiuni zhuan* 續比丘尼傳 [Further Biographies of Nuns], compiled by the monk Zhenhua 震華 (1908-1947) and published in 1941 as a continuation of Baochang's work, included a selection of Buddhist nuns from the late Qing and early Republican China. See also He 1997. A brief account of both Tongyuan and Longlian is included in DeVido 2015. For Miaoqing see Travagnin 2004. For an overview of Buddhist nuns in Taiwan, including Xiaoyun, Kaizhong, Miaoqing, Ruxue, Tianyi and Wuyin, see Travagnin 2000, 2004 and 2007a.

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certainly the most famous and already studied case.[14] A disciple of the monk Nenghai and the Geluk School, Longlian was abbess of the Aidao Nunnery (*aidao tang* 愛道堂) and Tiexiangsi Nunnery (*tiexiang si* 鐵像寺) from the end of the 1940s. Longlian became well known for her role in revitalizing the correct ordination for nuns and implementing educational programs for them. She also stood out for her scholarly achievements, including mastery of the Chinese translations of Tibetan Geluk texts and commentaries. For instance, the published version of Fazun's famous commentary on Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatara* is based on Longlian's notes to the lectures that Fazun gave on the scripture in Chengdu. Further, the translation of Gyaltsap Jé's exposition of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, which she compiled in 1952 at Nenghai's request and published with the title *Ru pusaxing lun guangjie* 入菩薩行論廣解, is considered her most important work.

Longlian and Elder Gongga lived in the same historical context and, in addition to a common affiliation to the centre for the study of Tibetan Buddhism in Sichuan and to figures such as Fazun, these two female practitioners each fused successfully Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist identities.[15] From a different perspective, Longlian and Elder Gongga seemed to walk on different paths; the former was a fully ordained nun who engaged in nuns' ordination and education, while the latter was a tonsured but not fully ordained novice who preached mostly to the laity.[16] Furthermore, in China Longlian and Tiexiangsi Nunnery have preserved Tibetan Gelug doctrines as melded with Chinese Buddhism (which was maintained in the ordination procedures and some rituals), while in Taiwan Elder Gongga was the first (lay and then tonsured-novice) Buddhist to teach Kagyü approaches in Kagyü centres, and became famous for preaching and promoting the hitherto unknown Tibetan 'Red Avalokiteśvara Practice' to a Chinese audience.

Another point of distance between Longlian and Elder Gongga is that only the body of the latter has been preserved. The following section will discuss Elder Gongga's mummified body within the context of mummified Buddhists, but here I would like to address the gender implications of the preservation of her body. Elder Gongga's relic body became concrete evidence of women's potential to achieve enlightenment,

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[14] For Longlian's life and works see her biography (Qiu 1997); at present nuns at Aidao Nunnery are preparing an edition of the collected works of Longlian. For Western scholarship on Longlian see works by Ester Bianchi, including Bianchi 1999 and 2001.

[15] Ester Bianchi argued in the case of Tiexiang Nunnery: 'Observing Tiexiang Nunnery, one realizes the unusual coexistence of Chinese and Tibetan elements. The Tibetan elements appear to be more dominant, but Chinese Buddhism also plays an important role in the life of the nuns (…) Influenced by their master's teaching, the nuns at Tiexiangsi live side-by-side with Chinese Buddhists, observing the same rules, and embracing the same doctrines. Despite their unique Tibetan practices and the innovative nature of their nunnery, they do not really feel any disparity, but unity instead. Their everyday lives, studies and practices are a daily affirmation of the universality of the Buddhadharma' (Bianchi 1999, 138).

[16] For a comparative study of full ordination and monastic discipline for women in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna see Tsomo 1996. Several scholars and monastics gathered at *The 1st International Congress on Buddhist Women's role in the Sangha, Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages*, in July 2007, and debated the situation of female full ordination in Vajrayāna and Theravada traditions; some of those papers have been published in the edited collection Mohr and Tsedroen 2010.

and it countered the belief that female practitioners must turn into a male body to attain Buddhahood. Doctrinal controversies and historical biases on the innate potentialities of a female body, and the ongoing and still unresolved debate on the supposed impurity of the latter, seem to have been confuted with the preservation of Elder Gongga's body, and the argument that such a preservation was sign that she had reached Buddhahood (*cheng fo* 成佛). Quoting Luo Wen: 'The Buddhahood achieved by Elder Gongga in her flesh body [*roushen pusa* 肉身菩薩] seems to demonstrate equality among human beings and proves that by conducting a pure and determined practice, regardless of gender, all human beings have the potential to advance along the Buddhist path and gain ultimate Buddhahood' (Luo 2001, 7).[17]

Gongga is not an isolated case of a mummified religious woman. For instance, in 2001 a team of archaeologists found a thousand-year-old mummy of a woman said to have been a Tibetan Buddhist ascetic.[18] In relation to the Buddhist community in Taiwan specifically, there have been cases of Buddhist nuns, such as Fuhui 福慧, abbess of Daxingshan Temple (*daxingshan si* 大興善山寺), who left unique body relics behind after cremation.[19] In China, the phenomenon of artificially mummified women is not limited to the Buddhist monastic community and the female laity; there are also cases of mummies among Daoist women and female practitioners of the so-called 'folk religions' (*minjian xinyang* 民間信仰). Therefore we see that the practice of mummification for women has been a custom in China even beyond the Buddhist domain and is then not limited solely to religious practice. In the non-Buddhist examples, a mummified body (even when it comes down to man-made mummification) is seen as a symbol of achieved perfection and holiness in the case of religious women, or a symbol of having achieved immortality if the woman in question was not a religious practitioner.[20] As for non-Buddhist female mummies in Taiwan, we heard in the news about a Daoist woman whose corpse did not decay, a story that garnered extended media attention. In regard to the cases found within local popular religions, we can count Cha Guanyin 察觀音, better known with the secular name Cha Yuanyang 察鴛鴦, who is said to be a 'transformation body of Guanyin' (*guanyin de huashen* 觀音的化身) and is enshrined at Nantian Hall (*nantian gong*

[17] Luo 2001, 7. Besides the term *roushen pusa* 肉身菩薩 (flesh-body Bodhisattva), a relic-body can be called as *roushen chengdao* 肉身成道 (flesh-body achievement of the Way) or *roushen chengfo* (flesh-body achievement of the Buddhahood).

[18] See article "Mummy Found at Mountain Range in Tibet" [ONLINE]. http://www.cnd.org/Global/01/04/24/010424-91.html (Accessed on 5 July 2007).

[19] More than two hundrend relics of Fuhui (better known as *wuming biqiuni* 無名比丘尼, "nameless nun") have been distributed in five pagodas. Chen Huijian reported that the relics were of different colours: white, dark-green, avory, agate and some transparent. He also stated: "These body-relics are the result of the discipline-meditation-wisdom [*jie ding hui* 戒定慧] practiced by a Dharma practitioners" (Chen Huijian 1994, 297). For Fuhui's relics, also see: Chan Zhihong 2001, 3-5

[20] Andō reported that in China the relic-bodies were usually lacquered, but the custom to cover them with golden powder or stucco was also widespread. Other relic-bodies (incluingd a monk who died in the eleventh century and was mummified in a temple in Guangdong, and the woman 'Chinh-Jui Bodhisattva') have been found covered by a coat of mud (Andō 1963, 138). Demiéville reported on two mummified women of the Ming Dynasty (Demiéville 1965, 158). Quite famous and widely documented is the case of Lady Tai, whose death has been dated to about 186 A.D. Her mummified body was found only in 1972 at Mawangdui 馬王堆 : see Needham 1974: 5, 303-04.

南天宮) at Yanshui 鹽水, Tainan county; and a 'Mazu flesh body' (*roushen mazu* 肉身媽祖) or 'transformation body of Mazu' (*mazu de huashen* 媽祖的化身), whose secular name was Lin Mian 林麵 and is enshrined at Yunü Hall (*yunü gong* 玉女宮) in Taipei. Another similar case of worship of a mummified woman is reported at the Ci'an Hall (*ci'an gong* 慈安宮) in Jilong.[21]

Body-Relics, Relic-Bodies and the Buddhist Practice of Mummification: Elder Gongga from Living Boby to Relic Body and Immortality

The practice of preserving relics or the entire physical body of teachers is not unusual within the Vajrayāna Buddhist community in Tibet. Elder Gongga is, however, one of the few Buddhist monastics to have their body preserved, gilded and enshrined in Taiwan; therefore her case of relic-body is related to the domain of Tibetan Buddhism as well as to the recent history of Taiwanese Buddhism.[22] Finally, as I have explained above, Elder Gongga's relic body is among the list of religious women who had their body mummified. Her relic-body is therefore contextualised in three different domains, a fact that shows the complexity that the practice of body preservation can reach.

In the previous section I have addressed Elder Gongga's relic-body within the context of Chinese religious women, here below I assess the joint Tibetanness and Chineseness of her body preservation (Dharma domain), and contextualise position and reactions within the local community (community domain).

Elder Gongga, Blending Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist Practice of Body Preservation

As Dan Martin has noted:

> Ordinarily, dead bodies are quickly consigned to the elements (through burial, cremation, submersion, or exposure, which may be understood as earth, fire, water, and air "burial"), although embalming is done in some extraordinary cases for highly regarded teachers (the embalming salts then becoming greatly valued as relics).[23]

Chen Rushi reported in more detail:

> Tibetan Buddhism had many cases of relic-bodies. Generally, the enlightened practitioner in the Esoteric School may turn into the so-called rainbow-body [*hongguang shen* 虹光身], where the flesh body gradually gets shorter and shorter until a final complete disappearance as rainbow-light; such as, for instance, Master Lianhua. On the other hand, some practitioners, in this process of

[21] For more studies on religious mummification in Taiwan see for instance Luo 2001; Gildow and Bingenheimer 2002; Gildow 2005 and 2011; Travagnin 2006.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Martin 1994, 278.

> turning-into-rainbow, became shorter but left a relic-body, the diamond indestructible body. Among the well-known recent cases, there are Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoché, Dundrup Rinpoché, Kalu Rinpoché, etc. Their Dharma practice in the human realm has been already confirmed by their disciples, so the relic-body that they leave after death is meant to be another witness of their Compassion Mind, as well as a form of blessed rewards for all living beings.[24]

Elder Gongga's teacher, Gongga Rinpoché, also attained a relic-body. In addition, according to what I have been told by a lama resident at Gongga Vihāra, a Dharma brother of Elder Gongga, who was also a disciple of Gongga Rinpoché, attained a relic-body as well, and his remains are now preserved and venerated in India.

Elder Gongga died on 11 April 1997, at 7pm, as she sat cross-legged in the lotus position. Gongga died surrounded by her disciples who, following her prescriptions, had been reciting the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras throughout the previous ten days.

According to Long Zhaoyu 龍昭宇, a disciple working at the Gongga Vihāra, three days before dying Elder Gongga announced that her body would turn into a relic body and gave detailed instructions to her disciples on how to arrange the embalming treatment in according with Tibetan Buddhist customs. In 1995, she had already invited monastics from Tibet and assigned them the preparation of the jar designed to contain her corpse and preserve it from decay.

The ritual followed in Tibetan (Vajrayāna) Buddhism requires the use of crude salt.[25] The salt has two main functions: firstly, it facilitates the conservation of the body; secondly, its crystals absorb the 'pure light' that the bodies of high-level practitioners are believed to emanate. These salt crystals are called 'samādhi crystals' (*sanmei shi* 三昧石) and are said to have the power to avert calamities and cure disease.[26]

After three years of preservation, the jar was opened and Elder Gongga's body was said to be fully intact, without any sign of decay, the skin soft and the hair grown out. The 'samādhi crystals' used to fill the jar and preserve Elder Gongga's corpse were distributed all over the island with a double aims: to purify the whole island and to 'create karmic connections' (*jie yuan* 結緣) between Elder Gongga and local living beings.[27]

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[24] Chen Rushi 2000.

[25] Besides the use of crude salt, Tibetan Buddhism listed the use of mercury and burying with stones as two other methods to help the process of natural mummification. On the use of mercury also found in China see Demiéville 1965, 159. For the custom of burying a corpse in stones see Schlagintweit 1968, 269-70.

[26] Quoting Demiéville: « Le procédé usuel était la salaison. [...] Le cadavre était aspergé d'eau salée contenant des substances aromatiques, puis immergé dans du sel en poudre (ou du borax, abondant au Tibet) et enveloppé d'étoffes; la dessiccation s'ensuivait au bout de quatre à cinq mois. Le sel qui avait absorbé le sang et les humeurs était donné ou vendu aux fidèles qui l'utilisaient comme médicament, surtout externe ; on en faisait parfois, en le mélangeant avec de l'argile, de petites icônes qu'on portait dans des coffrets au cou ou sur la tête. La salaison s'opérait dans une caisse ou dans un cercueil. Après déshydratation, le corps était revêtu d'un mélange d'argile et de poudre de santal, puis dûment doré, orné de pierres précieuses, et enfermé dans un tabernacle richement décoré » (Demiéville 1965, 160).

[27] For details on the embalming salts (Tib: *pur tshwa*), see Martin 1994.

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As opposed to what has usually happened in the cases of other Chinese Buddhist mummies, the relic-body of Elder Gongga turned out to be not just thinner and dried, but also shorter: according to the devotees at Gongga Vihāra, but not so much to my own observations, Gongga's body shrank to the length of only sixty-five centimetres. This phenomenon, explained as an effect of her deep and constant Dharma practice, is common in Tibetan Buddhism among lamas and other high-level practitioners.[28]

Every point in the embalming process, from the sealing to the opening of the jar and the eventual discovering of the mummy, was performed by only a few specialists and rigorously in private. Neither photos nor video materials document the mummification process. Interestingly, this was meant to show respect for the holy practitioner and to be in accord with the rules of Tibetan Buddhism. For the same reason, in my first visits to the Gongga Vihāra in 2002 I was forbidden from taking photos of the relic-body, however I could easily buy copies of the pictures of both the gilded mummy and of Elder Gongga when she was alive.



Figure 3 – Elder Gongga's gilded relic-body enshrined on the ground floor of Gongga Vihāra, June 2015 (photo by Stefania Travagnin)

Elder Gongga's mummy was also gilded and enshrined: 'As the state of the spirit of Elder Gongga was not in need of further confirmation, gilding her relic-body was simply a way for her disciples and devotees to pay homage and show respect to her' (Shi Hongji 2000).

[28] It is argued that the degree of shrinkage of the relic-body is an index of the holiness of the individual (Waddell 1939, 253). Even the female mummy found at the Mountain Range in Tibet that I will mention below had a height of sixty-five centimetres. Again as with Elder Gongga, the Buddhist ascetic was found sitting cross-legged, and her body was well-preserved. Different from Gongga, however, but in accordance with the Tibetan custom, the corpse was left in a cave sealed by stones.

Chineseness and Tibetanness, the two Buddhist and cultural identities that characterised Elder Gongga, have been reconciled in her relic-body as well. The body of Elder Gongga was gilded according to the standard method followed for preserving other Buddhist mummies in Taiwan, which also finds correspondence with the technique adopted in Tibet.[29] Regarding the Taiwanese side, devotees from Gongga Vihāra explained that the relic-body was gilded in order to better preserve the mummy, because of the hot and humid weather in Taiwan. The Tibetanness of the gilded relic-body is reflected in her robes and garments, which are distinct to Tibetan Buddhism, as are the mantle and hat, her arms folded across her breast, and the golden vajras placed in her hands. Further, according to Elder Gongga's disciples, the timid smiling lips of her relic-body indicate the quietness and peacefulness experienced and embodied by the teacher.

The gilded mummy was carried in procession from Taipei to Tainan, and then from Tainan back to Taipei, before the final enshrinement in the latter. This 'round-trip' of the holy relic-body was reported in the main national newspapers and included the participation of religious and political authorities (see Images 4 & 5).[30] Pictures of the ceremonies and copies of the articles published in the newspapers were collected and at the time of my first visit in 2002 still displayed on a wall in a room of the Gongga Vihāra next to the entrance room where the mummy is enshrined. Even the procession and the ritual ceremony show the fusion of Tibetan and Chinese/Taiwanese Buddhist features. Having left Gongga Vihāra in the morning of March 16, the mummy arrived at Gongga Temple (Tainan) around 2pm.

The gilded relic-body was welcomed in Tainan by hundreds of people (including local people and lay Buddhists, as well as Elder Gongga's disciples); children were holding orchids and roses to venerate the arrival of the mummy. The Chinese attendees were accompanied by twenty lamas, who were holding temple banners and wearing the etiquette robes. Oil lamps, incense, white silk scarves (*khata*), and ritual music were all distinct to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The group of official authorities who took part in the event included the senior monk Jingxin 淨心 (President of the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China BAROC), the monk Wuci 悟慈 (abbot of Kaiyuan Temple *kaiyuan si* 開元寺 in Tainan), Chen Youxin 陳又新 (Director of the Mongolian and Tibetan Association *mengzang weiyuanhui* 蒙藏委員會), Tu Qimei 涂其梅 (from the Tainan local city government) and Zhang Litang 張麗堂 (representative of the Gongga Temple in Tainan). In other words, representative figures of both Tibetan tradition and Chinese locality were present, as another evidence of the Chinese and Tibetan joint significance of Elder Gongga.

Once inside the main shrine hall, the gilded relic-body was first arranged and placed in a seated position by a few selected specialists; only after that were the devotees allowed to enter the temple and pay homage to the saint. Tenga Rinpoché came from Tibet for this special occasion and presided over the welcome ceremony, as well as the ensuing Dharma meetings scheduled for that event. As the relic-body entered the main shrine hall, traditional Tibetan Buddhist rituals began. Tenga Rinpoché

[29] Gildow and Bingenheimer 2002; Gildow 2005 and 2011; Travagnin 2006.

[30] The transportation of the dead body of a Buddhist master from a temple to another in Taiwan is not restricted to relic-bodies but extends to other monastics who are then cremated according to the Chinese Buddhist tradition.

intoned the Red Avalokiteśvara heart dhāranī (*hong guanyin xin zhou* 紅觀音心咒), and all those present joined palms and chanted the dhāranī with him. After a twenty-four-hour dhāranī recitation, Rinpoché held a ten-day Hayagrīva Dharma meeting (*matou mingwang fahui* 馬頭明王法會). In the evenings of March 19, 21, and 24, a particular 'lama dance' was performed with the aim of dispersing natural calamities. On April 3 the gilded relic-body was moved back to Taipei and enshrined in Gongga Vihāra, while a bronze statue of Elder Gongga was placed in the main shrine hall of Gongga Temple in Tainan.[31]



Figure 4: Article on Elder Gongga's relic-body on *Lianhe bao* (14 March 2000)

[31] The enshrining ceremony was officially held on the ninth day of April, and was preceded by a five-day Red Avalokiteśvara Dharma meeting (*hong guanyin da fahui* 紅觀音大法會).



自由時報 中華民國八十九年三月十七日 星期五

貢噶老人金身南巡

數百信眾夾道膜拜

喇嘛奏樂前導 天噶仁波切護送進貢噶寺駐錫十天

Figure 5: Article on Elder Gongga's relic-body on *Ziyou shibao* (17 March 2000)

Elder Gongga, a Relic-Body in the local community

The post-mummificaition era has seen an increasing number of devotees for Elder Gongga, and the escalation of faith may be due to the symbolic value of her enshrined relic-body. Gongga's relic-body became a source of attraction – and donations – for curious local and foreign people, and thus had an appeal beyond the sphere of Buddhist practitioners. In this case it is neither Tibetan practice nor gender value that attracts believers, but rather simply the uncorrupted dead body of a religious practitioner.

We should ask: Is the relic-body a manifestation of bodily immortality or a warning of the impermanence of all things? Is it a material object that devotees have imbued with sacred power or is it a pure icon of enlightenment? Gongga's relic-body is all of these at once.

And how about the Buddhist significance of the embalming and enshrining of Elder Gongga for the local community? Some students of Elder Gongga viewed their teacher's Dharma practice as a key factor in the successful embalming of her relic-body. Solitary retreats, especially long-term retreats lasting two or three years, played a key role in her cultivation; the practice she followed in the retreats included sessions of sitting meditation, *Mahāmūdra* and the visualization of Red Avalokiteśvara, while she dedicated only limited time to scriptural study.[32] Her disciples list three elements as characteristic of the figure of

[32] According to her biography, Elder Gongga did seven major solitary retreats: (1) 1942-1945; (2) 1947-1949; (3) 1961 (108 days); (4) 1966 (49 days); (5) 1968-1971; (6) 1972-1975; (7) 1989-1991. For Elder Gongga, solitary retreats were a joint practice of 'benefit oneself and benefit the others' (*zili lita* 自利利他). Her retreats usually included some 'coming out': a 'small coming out' (*xiao chuguan* 小出關) on the 7th day, and a 'big coming out' (*da chuguan* 大出關) on the 15th day of the 10th month. These interruptions were intended to

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Elder Gongga: severity and firmness (which were unbearable for many disciples who consequently left the Vihāra); particular selectivity in accepting disciples; and finally what are usually called 'supernatural powers' (*shentong* 神通). This last element was interpreted as a sign (and result) of the success of her personal practice and later associated with the achievement of her relic-body.

The selection of disciples was sided by the disciples' selection of the appropriate teacher, another important step for Elder Gongga (Long 1993, 65-8). She used to say that the relationship between the Buddha and Dharma practitioners is like the relationship between a mother and her children; she stressed the importance of daily and regular practice in line with the Bodhisattva path, and the need of a pure mind, the commitment to develop the Bodhicitta (*fa putixin* 發菩提心), accomplish good deeds, and benefit all sentient beings (*liyi zhongsheng* 利益眾生) as key factors of the Bodhisattva practice. When someone was taking refuge in Buddhism and choosing her as teacher, Elder Gongga used to repeat: 'From now on, your body actions, speech and intentions are a Bodhisattva's body actions, speech and intentions' (Long 1993, 59). It was also important to mindfully recollect the Buddha's name (*nianfo* 唸佛) so to preserve the seeds of the Buddhahood inside one's own self.

The daily diet that Elder Gongga adopted is considered crucial in her discipline and practice. During her solitary retreats, she reduced the quantity of food but still kept eating several kinds of vegetables and cereal soup, such as rice soup and bean soup. In doing so Elder Gongga appears to act differently than Daoists do in search of immortality and the cases of self-mummified ascetics in Japan (*miira* ミイラ), but pretty much in line with other Buddhist monastics whose relic-bodies are now preserved in Taiwan, like the case of the monk Cihang 慈航 (1895-1954).[33] According to Elder Gongga, only a healthy body could conduct a good Dharma practice, and she stressed the importance of taking care of the physical body besides the need of purifying the own mind (Long 1993, 27-8 and 38-40).

Elder Gongga became also called 'Vajra Master' (*jingang shangshi* 金剛上師). As Long Zhaoyu explains:

> The *vajra* master [*jingang shangshi*] is the master you keep not only in one lifetime. The disciples of the *vajra* master are called '*vajra* disciples' [*jingang tudi* 金剛徒弟]. […] Why define this master as *vajra* [*jingang* 金剛]? The denomination refers to the indestructible *vajra* body, which as indestructible endures eternally (…) This implies that the relationship between master and disciples is also indestructible and eternal.[34]

What Elder Gongga meant by immortality and the symbolical value of her embalming might be found in the message of hers cited above. To the question of what the uncorrupted body of Elder Gongga meant to her, one of the laywomen working at the Gongga Vihara answered that she had never placed much importance on her master's mummification. For

allow a contact between Elder Gongga and her disciples, to share the accumulated merits and obtained wisdom that she had gained so far.

[33] For a detailed analysis of the case of Cihang see Travagnin 2006.

[34] Long 1993, 68.

her, Elder Gongga never left the present world, and her 'permanent presence' was represented not by a relic body but by the teachings that she transmitted to her disciples and devotees in her lifetime. For her, Elder Gongga continues living in the Dharma practice of her followers. Therefore, she is understood more as a 'Dharma body' than as a 'relic body'; in other words, according to her closest followers, Elder Gongga's spirit has reached immortality through the transmission of teachings to her disciples and in what her disciples will spread and transmit to following generations of Dharma practitioners.

In conclusion, Buddhist believers reacted in different ways to the sight of the gilded relic-body, each establishing an individual connection to Elder Gongga. According to my interviews with devotees at Gongga Vihāra, this difference in effects and reactions, at least within Elder Gongga's circle, is linked with the different relation that each disciple had with her. There is then a continuity from the 'Gongga era' to the 'post-Gongga era': Elder Gongga established a kind of nonverbal mind-to-mind dialogue specific to each disciple, and this unique mind-to-mind connection is maintained even with her as a relic-body. Elder Gongga, then, still talks to her students and followers. Similar stories are told in the case of Chinese Buddhist monks who also had their relic-body enshrined: Cihang in Taiwan, for instance, is said to appear to his followers in visions and dreams, and still guide them in their practice.[35] Continuity between living body and relic-body is shared overall among all the cases of relic-body preservation, and this continuity is due to the master's Dharma practice and achievements.

Conclusion: Buddhist Communities and Practices, Syncretism and Women in Twentieth-century China and Taiwan

> You are not far from being a Buddha
> When you are successful as human being.[36]

In Taiwan, Elder Gongga started with only twenty disciples at the end of the 1950s, and ended up gathering nearly a hundred thousand followers before her passing. Finally, as she became a legendary female figure who obtained Enlightenment in the *vajra* body, the number of followers and devotees has been increasing even more considerably.

Even if very briefly, this article illustrates the combining and coexistence of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist elements in the life and mission of Elder Gongga, a Buddhist woman whose contribution to Tibetan Buddhism in China first and later in Taiwan has so far been overlooked by scholars and consequently left out of historical narratives quite often. It is then crucial to consider these neglected figures in order to recreate the history/ies of religions, and in doing this we need to frame them in the domains that they participate in and at the same time help developing.

Secondly, this paper contributes to the field of research of body-relics and relic-bodies in the religious (and Buddhist) domain. Being a woman, and a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism in a Chinese context,

[35] It is also still possible to become a disciple of Cihang even now that he is in the form of a relic-body, through the mediation of a living monastic. See Travagnin 2006.
[36] Long 1993, 157.

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Elder Gongga represents the merging of more traditions and at the same time a local reality.

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