

My Recollections
Chang Shuhong, Custodian of the Treasures of Dunhuang
By SGI President Ikeda

Chang Shuhong (1904– 94) said the heavenly maidens spoke to him in a dream. Flying down from the wall paintings of the Dunhuang Caves, these celestial beauties, or *apsaras*, glowing forms with fluttering robes, beseeched him: “Your wife has left you and gone. But you must not leave us.”

It was the middle of the night. Frozen stars twinkled like mother-of-pearl in the deep blue-black sky. The Cave of the Thousand Buddhas was asleep. The only sound was the ringing of the wind bells from the eaves of the nine-story pagoda.

Chang heard this somber clamor day and night. It was a monotonous, unvaried sound, like that of a camel’s bells. Now, like weeping, like pleading, it struck deep in his heart.

The year was 1945. The war between China and Japan was still in progress. Chang Shuhong had just passed age 40. It was two years since he had arrived in Dunhuang, an isolated, uninhabited desert spot far from the hearth fires of human dwellings.

“They were very hard times,” Chang remembered. “In the beginning, we didn’t have any water. We didn’t have any food. Everyone was against us going there. They all said: ‘What are you going to do there? You’ll die!’ Some compared it to serving a life sentence.

“But I wasn’t going for my own sake. I was doing it for my country, for the cultural heritage of all humanity. I wanted to do whatever possible to protect the magnificent art of Dunhuang.”

Chang had studied Western painting in Paris. The many prizes and accolades bestowed on him assured a promising future as an artist. But his life was changed forever by a chance encounter with a book at a used-book stall on the banks of the Seine. It was a collection of illustrative plates by Paul Pelliot titled *Les Grottos de Touen-houang* (The Grottos of Dunhuang). Suddenly, 10 centuries of glorious Chinese art from the 4th century onward danced before his excited gaze.

“These are incredible!” thought the young Chang. “Miraculous! They far surpass the paintings of the Renaissance that I have been so enraptured with!” At the same time, he was angered and distressed to realize that his country’s greatest treasures had been plundered by Pelliot and other Westerners who had ventured to Dunhuang.

“I will go home to China,” Chang decided. “I will protect these treasures with my own hands. I am Chinese and have a duty to protect these treasures of my homeland.” He returned to China, but it was only after seven years of bitter struggle that he at last opened the road to Dunhuang.

He turned his back on fame and honor as an artist. And finally, after an arduous month-long journey, he and a small group of comrades arrived at the great art museum in the desert, their destination.

But everywhere they looked, they encountered destruction and desolation: Walls had crumbled and fallen, pagodas stood roofless, caves had been plundered and were buried in sand and rubble. Where would they begin?

Dunhuang is 1,200 miles from Beijing. It is a lonely island in a sea of desert where the highest temperature on record is 111 and the lowest, -72. It is regularly battered by the desert storms called black winds.

Chang’s wife at first refused to go with him, but he finally managed to persuade her. Some time later, she joined him at Dunhuang with their two children. But one day not long after her arrival, Chang returned home from work to find that she had gone, leaving behind their 13-year-old daughter and 3-year-old son.

On top of that, the Kuomintang government had just declared that the newly established Dunhuang Relics Research Institute was to be shut down. Even before this announcement, it had sent no funding and effectively had left Chang and his comrades to fend for themselves in the harsh desert environment.

All these worries kept Chang awake at night. Then one day when he returned from work, his children were missing. He rushed about to find them. The long shadow of the emaciated Chang stretched across the desert sand.

At last he found them. His daughter threw her arms around him. "Where is Mother?" she asked. The children had left home in search of her. His daughter carried a cloth sack containing four corn dumplings and some pieces of sugar candy. His son also entreated him: "Where's Mama? I want my Mama!" Chang embraced both children and wept.

He endured many hardships.

There is a famous painting from the Northern Wei Dynasty (founded around 386 A.C.E.) in the Mogao Caves that depicts Shakyamuni Buddha, as a bodhisattva in a previous existence, offering his life to save a starving mother tiger and her cubs. "The bodhisattva gave his life to help the tigress," Chang thought. "Why don't I give my life to save this great treasure trove of art? In these days of strife and warfare, it is crucial that someone do this!"

Chang roused himself with these thoughts: "Shuhong, why is it that you came back to China? Why did you come to this isolated desert post? Be strong! If you and your wife do not have the same goals, then perhaps you should not be husband and wife. Life is a continual struggle. Though you may have fallen now, just rise up again and keep advancing as long as you live. You must not retreat. You cannot."

The moonlight streamed in through his window. In the sound sleep that followed his decision, hundreds of *apsaras*, the heavenly beauties adorning Dunhuang's frescoes, seemed to fly out from the caves and fill the night sky.

Behind every brilliant achievement, there are always dedicated individuals. Dunhuang, one of the miracles of human civilization, was created by nameless artists who worked in that harsh environment with no thought of fame or applause.

Today once more Dunhuang lives up to its name, which means "to shine far and wide." It has been designated by UNESCO as a world heritage site. It has also become a tourist destination, with people from all parts of the globe lining up to view exhibitions of its art. Behind this recognition that Dunhuang enjoys today lie the indescribable efforts of Chang, his family and others who have worked hard to preserve this precious treasure of humankind.

Some time after his wife left him, Chang married Li Chengxain, who came to Dunhuang as a fellow researcher. She was the daughter of a revolutionary, one of the leaders of the alliance established by Sun Yat-sen, the father of modern China.

When Chang first interviewed Li for the position of a researcher at Dunhuang, he said: "Dunhuang is a very isolated place. In ancient times, the only people who lived there were soldiers or exiles. Life there is very hard. Do you think you can stand it?"

She replied: "I am prepared to give my life for art. I would never refuse to go simply because it's too hard."

And go to Dunhuang she did. They later married and spent close to a half-century together.

I met Chang and his wife again at the State Guesthouse in Beijing in June 1990. That was 10 years after our first meeting. They were accompanied by their son, Chang Jiahuang, a renowned artist. In those 10 years, Chang and I had forged a deep friendship, working together on an exhibition called "Dunhuang" at the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum in 1985 and a

dialogue, *Tonko no Kosai* (The Brilliance of Dunhuang), published by Tokuma Publishing Company.

“My artist’s name,” confided Chang, “is Damo Chiren (Desert Freak) — in other words, Crazy for Dunhuang. Life in Dunhuang was very hard. We had to battle our way through many painful struggles. And my wife was at my side the whole time.”

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the Dunhuang Relics Research Institute was denounced for “spreading poison” among the people, with Chang condemned as the chief perpetrator of the evil. His persecutors drew a big black **X** through a certificate of commendation he received from the government — a precious award that Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, who always encouraged and supported him in his endeavors, had personally bestowed on him and suggested the text for. Chang’s family was driven from their home and forced to live in a pigsty. Such is the madness of power run amok.

Mr. Chang’s words moved me deeply. “Whenever I meet you, President Ikeda, I am swept by a powerful emotion that touches the very depths of my soul,” he said. “I see in you, a person who has fought against all obstacles and withstood every attack for the sake of world peace, culture, art and friendly Chinese–Japanese relations, a mirror image of my life.

“When people strive to realize an ideal, they encounter difficulties others do not see. They suffer again and again, though others are not aware of it. When I see what you have accomplished, I know, from my experience, what it has cost you. And when I think of that, I am overcome with emotion.”

Then I responded: “I am deeply moved by your generous words. I feel I have been embraced by your towering spirit. I will never forget, as long as I live, the vibrant sincerity of your life, far surpassing words.” True friendship is rare indeed.

I humbly set down these words for posterity and as a memento of my friendship with the late Chang Shuhong.

Chang once said that the last half-century had passed all too quickly. He still had far to go to realize his dreams. Much remained to be accomplished. I asked him what profession he would like to devote himself to if he were born again. His response was symbolic of the victorious life he had led. “If I really could be reborn as a human being,” he replied, “I would once more choose to be Chang Shuhong and finish the work that I have started.”

Fifty years of devotion — 18,000 days and nights. I feel I can hear the sound of the wind bells that filled his life, ringing across the distance from Dunhuang.

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