

Winds blow fierce in the Gobi Desert. So what was a film crew doing there?

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Shooting took about 20 days, and all we had to endure strong winds, sandstorms and a shortage of water. But historians have already worked there for decades under such difficult environmental conditions. The grottoes there have a great healing power. They show the height of ancient civilizations and the role of the Silk Road.

Teng Junjie
Film director



Xu Wei

The 1,600-year-old Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes in the wind-swept desert of northwestern China have attracted archeologists, art specialists, explorers and opportunists for more than a century.

The priceless treasures in the caves also captivated veteran film director Teng Junjie and Chinese opera star Mao Shanyu.

They combined their talents to produce a recently released movie based on the work of archeologist and heritage specialist Fan Jinshi who was born in Beijing but grew up in Shanghai.

Now 84, Fan is popularly known as the “daughter of Dunhuang.” She spent more than half a century researching and preserving the priceless Buddhist art and murals in the grottoes.

Mao portrays this remarkable woman in a film aptly titled “Daughter of Dunhuang.” The story is told in traditional Shanghai Huju Opera style. The movie premiered in the city in early October and is scheduled for nationwide release later this year.

Fan’s lifelong dedication to her noble cause provided rich raw material for the film. After graduating from Peking University in 1963, she was assigned to work at Dunhuang in the Gobi Desert of Gansu Province.

The past president and current honorary president of Dunhuang Academy China said in her autobiography that Dunhuang was her destiny, although she confessed to bouts of loneliness and homesickness while living in an abandoned temple in the remote desert.

“On some windy days, I felt that I was forgotten by my family and the whole world,” said Fan. “But when I entered the grottoes,

I was overwhelmed by a sense of peace, awe and happiness. Step by step, Dunhuang became an integral part of my life.”

The work of Fan and generations of Chinese antiquarians has been a race against time as the grottoes age and decay from the effects of weathering.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site is home to an invaluable collection of Buddhist artworks, including 2,415 colored sculptures and 45,000 square meters of murals spread across 735 caves. Often called “the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas,” the artworks were created by ancient worshippers.

The cultural relics also include sutra manuscripts, silk paintings, embroidery and documents of Chinese philosophy.

Dunhuang, a stop on the ancient Silk Road, played an important role in ancient trade between China and the outside world. At one point, it was a frontier military garrison town established to protect the trade routes.

In 1900, a sealed cave was discovered by Taoist monk Wang Yuanlu, a controversial figure in the history of the Mogao Grottoes. He stayed there for years, cleaning up, guarding and restoring parts of the caves.

The caves’ rich troves were a magnet for foreign treasure hunters. Wang’s sin in modern eyes was selling some of the artworks to foreigners, including British adventurer Marc Aurel Stein and French sinologist Paul Pelliot. American explorer Landon Warner damaged the site by extracting over 10 ancient murals and stealing a colored sculpture from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907). Today, some of relics are scattered in more than 10 countries around the world.

Fan spearheaded a project to digitalize the remaining treasures to preserve them for



Huju Opera artist Mao Shanyu portrays Fan in the movie from the age of 25 to 80 years old.
— Ti Gong

posterity as weathering slowly destroys them. Avant-garde technologies such as immersion display and virtual interaction have been applied to the database to render the grottoes and murals “alive.”

Enter a joint venture of Shanghai Huju Opera Theater, Dunhuang Academy China and Shanghai Media Group, which shot “Daughter of Dunhuang” with a 4K camera.

Drones were used to capture the spectacular setting of the grottoes and surrounding natural landscapes.

Huju Opera was specifically chosen for the film because it is a younger genre than traditional Peking and Kunqu operas and has a more contemporary approach to storytelling.

Teng explained that the challenge of making a Chinese opera film nowadays is to keep pace with the tastes and faster viewing rhythms of today’s audiences.

He has already shot six acclaimed Peking Opera movies including “Farewell My Concubine” and “Xiao He Chasing Han Xin Under the Moonlight,” and said filming on location required considerable sacrifice by the film crew.