

**My Recollections**  
**Zhao Puchu, President of the Chinese Buddhist Association**  
**By SGI President Ikeda**

Darkness and light — they alternated in my mind’s eye as Zhao Puchu, president of the Chinese Buddhist Association, recalled the struggles of his youth.

“It was during the war,” he began. “I was in Shanghai, trying to help the refugees and orphaned children. Hunger, cold and disease exacted a cruel toll. People were dying by the roadside. The great majority were infants and poor peasants. But there was nothing we could do for them.”

Mr. Zhao shared his story with me as we floated in a boat on Lake Kunming, some miles northwest of Beijing — this was during my first trip to China in 1974. The grounds of the beautiful Summer Palace encircle the lake, with Longevity Hill and its tiered temples rising high in the background.

The Summer Palace is a vast park encompassing about 720 acres, three-quarters of which are Lake Kunming. The bright blue sky of early summer was reflected in the quiet surface, which seemed to stretch on forever. From where we sat, we could hear happy voices of families enjoying a day’s outing in the green grounds. Peace pervaded.

It was to make certain that peace and serenity endured that I visited China. My sole purpose was to build a bridge of friendship between Japan and China, for it was the Japanese military that created the darkness, the living hell, that Mr. Zhao described.

I told Mr. Zhao of the Soka Gakkai’s firm, continuous opposition to militarism, which had started even before World War II. “Our first and second presidents,” I explained, “were both persecuted by the Japanese military authorities and imprisoned. Our first president died in jail. The Soka Gakkai will forever champion the cause of peace. We will be the eternal allies of the people of Japan and the people of China. That, I believe, is the true spirit of Buddhism.”

“Precisely,” responded Mr. Zhao. “The fundamental spirit of Buddhism is to serve the people.”

Mr. Zhao is the leading theoretician of Chinese Buddhism today. He is some 20 years my senior, with graying hair, a noble face and an ever-ready smile. He said: “Each day I still recite one volume of the Lotus Sutra.” Mr. Zhao’s mentor, it turns out, was an ordained T’ien-t’ai priest, and Mr. Zhao devoted his life as a layperson to the revival of Chinese Buddhism.

He was born in 1907 at the end of the Qing dynasty, in Anhui Province near Shanghai. He was educated in literature, history and philosophy from a young age, first coming into contact with and beginning to study Buddhism while a student at Dongwu University (present-day Suzhou University, Jiangsu Province).

At that time, his homeland was being shaken by a violent tempest. The country was divided, in chaos. On the one hand, it fought to throw off the oppressive yoke of the European powers that had carved it into realms of influence. And on the other, it struggled to resist the invasion of the Japanese. Terrorism was widespread.

“Where are we to find light?” wondered Mr. Zhao. He sought an answer in the Buddhist scriptures while plunging into liberation activities for his country. Given the crisis China faced, he was driven by a desperate inner compulsion to study, to take action.

In 1937, Japanese forces invaded Shanghai. Low-flying aircraft, droning ominously as they approached, dropped bombs on the roofs of civilian residences, setting them on fire. Battleships shelled the city from the Huangpu River. Giant flames leapt wildly into the air left and right. People fled, panic-stricken. The sound of machine-gun fire rang out from street corners. Factories were destroyed. Houses burned to the ground.

Looting went on day and night, extending even to the refugee camps, which became the scenes of violence, murder, theft and the abduction of women. The destruction reached the outlying villages, where corpses floated in the fish ponds and paddies. The stench of death filled the air.

A dead body lying in the fields was so commonplace, it no longer even drew comment. Robbed of shelter due to the bombings, people slept on the streets, some freezing to death during the bitter winter nights.

“I worked desperately to save the refugees and orphans,” Mr. Zhao continued. “I must have rescued several hundred lost, forlorn children and seen to it that they were cared for. But I was in complete despair. The old regime produced infinite numbers of unfortunate people, and no matter how intense our efforts, there was no way we could stem the tide of suffering and misery.”

He went on to speak of Chinese Buddhism at that time. “There is a tradition in Buddhism of labor and self-sufficiency, but in the long feudal period of Chinese history, it had become obscured,” he said. “In the past, Buddhism had become allied with the ruling class and, from the Song dynasty [960–1279] in particular, it had entered a long period of decline. The priests became great landowners. But Buddhism was originally for the people. Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, it has returned to its fundamental spirit.”

In his book *Bukkyo Nyumon* (Introduction to Buddhism), Mr. Zhao wrote: “Historically speaking, the periods in which Buddhism flourished were not the periods in which there were the greatest number of priests. In fact, when there was an overabundance of priests, Buddhism was in decline.” This was because many priests entered Buddhist orders for personal gain, rather than out of a sincere interest in religion.

“Genuine Buddhism is nothing so selfish; it exists to stop people’s suffering,” Mr. Zhao believed. His wish, first and foremost, has always been for peace — that the people have food, a place to sleep, clothing and peace of mind. And he noted calmly that the new Chinese republic provided the people with these basic necessities.

Nichiren Daishonin wrote that a person of wisdom practices Buddhism nowhere but in the reality of society (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 6, p. 142). As examples, he cited T’ai-kung Wang [teacher and advisor to King Wen of the Chou dynasty], who appeared in the Yin dynasty’s final years, deposed the Yin tyrant and put an end to the people’s suffering; and Chang Liang [statesman and strategist who assisted Liu Pang], who helped overthrow a tyrant in the late Ch’in dynasty and assisted in the establishment of the Han dynasty, enabling the people to prosper. These men, said the Daishonin, lived before the introduction of Buddhism yet helped the people as emissaries of Shakyamuni. Though they may not have been aware of it, their wisdom in its essence incorporated the wisdom of Buddhism (MW-6, 143).

People may call themselves Buddhists, but if they bring suffering to others they are the worst heretics, declared the Daishonin. But anyone who works to improve the lot of the people, for their happiness, is in a sense a Buddhist. This is the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism as taught by the Lotus Sutra — a text that expounds the principle of the true entity of all phenomena and reveals that everything in the universe is a manifestation of the Mystic Law. For Nichiren Daishonin, the people’s happiness was the most important thing.

Mr. Zhao has a profound grasp and understanding of the Lotus Sutra. If I say “body and mind...,” he will immediately reply, “are one.” Talking with him is like finding a kindred spirit. We have talked about many of the main themes of the Lotus Sutra: the ten factors of life; the parable of the phantom city; the oneness of life and its environment; and the one great reason for which all Buddhas appear in the world. Whenever we meet, we are never

at a loss for stimulating conversation.

Mr. Zhao has worked hard to promote a human Buddhism — human in that it is a practical Buddhism dealing with the problems of everyday life. It is Mr. Zhao's firmly held conviction that Buddhism must not shun or turn its back on reality. Buddhism, he stresses, must entail striving diligently at the bodhisattva practice within society.

Buddhism, for him, must be a force that “creates a spiritual culture wherein people rejoice in willingly helping others and which benefits society and the nation” (*Bukkyo Nyumon*). It must never estrange itself from human problems. This is the sentiment of, the conclusion of, contemporary Chinese Buddhism, forged in the crucible of indescribable pain and suffering.

One day on my fourth trip to China, in September 1978, Mr. Zhao accompanied me on a visit to the Ming Tombs (at Dingling, 30 miles northwest of Beijing). The stone-paved courtyard and pathways around the Ming emperors' spacious mausoleum were wet with rain.

As we strolled the grounds, Mr. Zhao and I again spoke of Buddhism. We had also met in Tokyo earlier that year. “On my recent visit to Japan,” he said, “I saw a film of a Soka Gakkai culture festival. It overflowed with the enthusiasm and energy of the people. The fundamental teaching of Buddhism is to go out among the people. I saw that spirit in the festival participants.”

Our visit to the Ming Tombs coincided with the day of the harvest moon. I had hoped to view the moon over China, but unfortunately it was raining and the sky overcast.

That night, after I returned to my lodgings from a welcome banquet at the Great Hall of the People, my interpreter handed me a work of calligraphy from Mr. Zhao. Written in bold brush strokes was a series of three short poems reciprocating the short poem “The Moon's Wish,” which I had presented to the Chinese scholar the day before. Mr. Zhao had composed the three after our visit to the Ming Tombs and before going to the banquet. One read:

*Now I reply to your poem  
Let us talk freely of life's mysteries  
Though the mid-autumn rain persists  
The moon in our hearts continues to shine.*

To shine though the rain persists — how that seemed to sum up the spirit of Mr. Zhao. During the Cultural Revolution, all religions were attacked, and Mr. Zhao was accused of being a counterrevolutionary. Several members of the Chinese Buddhist Association of which he was president were hounded to their deaths. But through everything, the moon of Mr. Zhao's heart shone brilliantly. After the Gang of Four was finally ousted, Mr. Zhao could declare that indeed “the future of Buddhism in China is bright as can be.”

There was a short additional poem, a fourth, at the end of the calligraphy. After Mr. Zhao wrote the first three poems, the rain stopped and the moon appeared in the sky. This prompted him to pick up his brush once more. The words he wrote still glow warmly in my heart, like China's bright future:

*When I finished my poems, the rain suddenly stopped  
I went outside to wait for the moon to appear  
Rejoicing with you  
In the light it would shed on the world.*

**WT**