

## THE NEW DRAMA AND THE OLD THEATER

BY PENG-CHUN CHANG

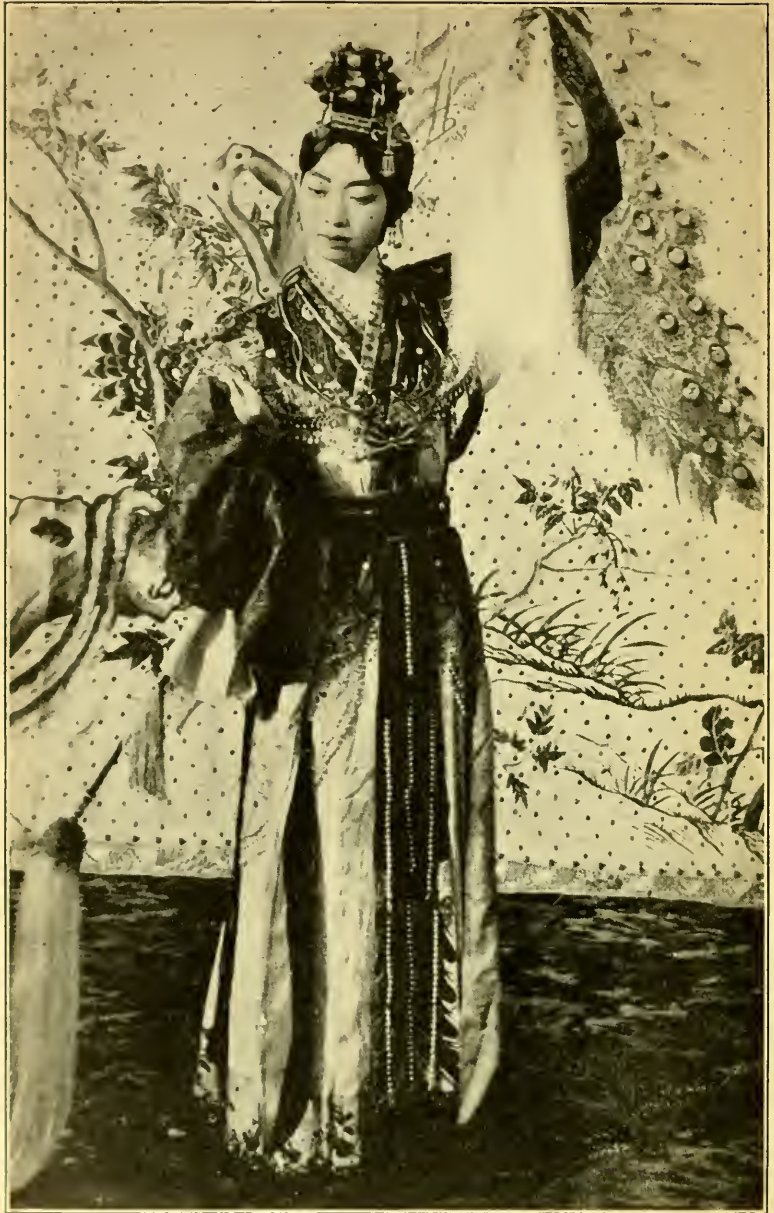
Professor at Nankai Middle School, Tientsin

CHINESE drama and theater, together with other forms of cultural expression, have been affected by the impact of the modern West. New influences have been brought in from abroad, and old traditions are being re-examined from a new point of view. Out of the complex situation, two movements are clearly discernible: the experimentation with new forms of dramatic composition and the re-evaluation of the technique of the traditional theater.

The Chinese became acquainted with Western drama in the beginning of the twentieth century. Amateur groups began to take interest in the production of Western plays. One of the better known groups, calling itself "The Spring Willow Society," about 1908, gathered enough courage to stage a Chinese translation of *La Dame aux Camélias*. The manner of presentation, judged by records in photographs and written descriptions, must have been very crude indeed.

After 1917, when the new literary movement began, knowledge of Western drama gradually increased. As one of the declared objectives of the movement was the introduction of new literary forms from the outside world: drama, especially modern prose drama with a social-problem content, attracted special interest. Plays of Ibsen were quickly translated, widely read, and much discussed. The craving for knowledge of Western dramas, thus engendered, gave an impetus to a wide searching of playwrights to be translated. At this time I find in my collection of translated plays, which is by no means complete, more than forty authors represented. They range from Shakespeare, Molière, Goethe, Schiller, Sheridan, Hugo, to the more recent writers such as Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Wilde, Shaw, Galsworthy, Rostand, Brieux, Tolstoi, Chekov, Andreyev, Lunacharsky, and Pirandello. While there is much unevenness in the merit of the translations attempted, there can be no doubt that Western drama has definitely made its entry into the intellectual horizon of the younger generation.

The tendency is also clear that some writers have taken upon themselves to experiment in writing in the new prose drama form.



MEI LAN-FANG IN THE ROLE OF "THE FAIRY SCATTERING FLOWERS"

They feel that, with all the social changes around, new experiences demand of plays a new content and a new philosophy of life. Plays of the old type are the embodiments of ideas of traditional morality and of traditional values which are undergoing unavoidable transformation. New prose plays are being written, reflecting on life in the present-day complex social situation. For instance, pieces have been composed taking as themes the experiences of the new industrial proletariat, the revolt of youth against family and social restrictions, the exultations and disappointments of romantic love, and the indignation and resolute courage in facing the invading foes. New life experiences demand new forms of expression.

As the interest in the new drama has come as a phase of the new literary movement, it is but natural that students in the schools and universities should form the main force that appreciates and supports the new plays, translated and original. This explains why the production of new plays is still mostly done by students as amateur adventures, though sometimes with consummate skill and scrupulous attention to technique. It is just a matter of a few years, I believe, before professional groups giving performances of the new plays will emerge and attain both artistic and financial success, because students who have left the schools and universities in the past fifteen years are gradually assuming positions of influence in society, and their number is increasing with the graduates of each year.

I relate here, in passing, an experience I had in producing Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, some five years ago, to serve as an illustration of the suspicion toward the new drama on the part of the old conservative elements, which I am happy to say is no longer existent at present. This play of Ibsen, though much colored by his individualistic bias, I thought, might give instructive warning against certain democratic practices. During the dress-rehearsal, after the second act, I was informed that a telephone message from the military governor's office ordered that the performances as announced should be canceled. We could do nothing but obey. Evidently, the title *An Enemy of the People* gave the military authorities much uneasiness and cause for suspicion that the play might be directed against them. The following spring I wanted to try again the presentation of the play. This time I was cautious. I changed the title to *The Stubborn Doctor*—a change, necessarily, without the consent of the author, but not altogether too outrageously inappropriate. Under this new name, with the same military authorities in the city.

we got by safely. I learned from that experience that there was a great deal in a name.

While the new drama form is being acclimatized and while experiments are being made in the direction of giving the imported formula some distinctively Chinese flavor, what is the attitude toward the old theater? How is the indigenous theater that has had a continuous tradition of more than seven hundred years being re-examined and re-evaluated?

During the first flush of the new literary movement it was not uncommonly asserted that the traditional theater contained nothing of lasting worth and was destined to extinction in the evolutionary struggle. More recently, however, attention has been directed in looking into the art of the old theater to find if there may not be in the perfected acting technique some things that deserve analysis and re-evaluation. While the old plays may contain points of view that are no longer suitable for the present era, in the consummate art of presentation on the stage are found elements both instructive and suggestive, not only for the emerging new theater of China, but also for modern experimentation in other parts of the world. I was most happily surprised two years ago, when I visited the Meyerhold theater in Moscow, in learning something of its method of training actors. In a conversation which I was privileged to have with Meyerhold, he told me that he was influenced by his observations of the technique of plastic body control and coordination of Chinese and Japanese actors of the traditional school. He worked on the suggestion thus derived and evolved his system of actor-training which he called bio-mechanics. Every morning he had his actors go through a series of exercise-patterns that were intended to render the bodily parts plastic and agile and to effect an organic coordination of muscle and mind.

According to the tradition of the Chinese theater, actors must go through long strenuous training, usually beginning at the age of twelve or thirteen and lasting for seven years or more. The training was very severe, and patterns of dancing—in the broad sense of the term, including all bodily movements—and of singing were taught and practised with the minutest attention to detail. The rhythm and grace of Chinese actors of the old school were the result of an intensive training. And it is in this emphasis on bodily plasticity that we find one of the glorious achievements of the old theater.

We may wonder and ask, if all actors receive training in the execution of the same patterns of dancing, singing, walking, and talking, what is the chance for individuality and progress? If all learn the same manners of acting, how can a great actor be distinguished from an unaccomplished one? Roughly speaking, there are three ways by which a great actor may be recognized and acknowledged. First, a great actor executes his patterns with more finish than an average one. He does not do things mechanically, but coordinates his



THE ACTRESS CHIN SHAO-MEI

muscles with his mind. And his attention is strained for the perfect production of significant details. Second, a great actor in his execution of the continuous sequence of patterns, produces what we might call an aroma of unity. He gives you no chance of detecting where one pattern ends and another begins. And third, a great actor, after having achieved distinction in the execution of patterns that belong to the common stock of tradition, earns for himself the right of creating new patterns and of contributing his share to the heritage of the stage. Here is where progress comes in. Not any willful innovator, but only the accomplished virtuoso can claim the prerogative of creating and of leaving his mark on history.

The traditional technique is obviously not motivated by photographic realism. The Chinese theater cannot take pride in the minute and accurate imitation of actuality. In our theater stage walk is frankly different from ordinary walk, stage talk from ordinary talk, stage costume from ordinary clothes, and stage make-up from ordinary facial appearance. Yet, the process of extracting, for the purpose of the stage, "essence" from actuality is by no means arbitrary or fantastic. There is a method in its madness. The distinctions between art and actuality have been formulated and patterned gradually and cooperatively. The process of separating art from actuality is not of the assertive type as evidenced in certain of the modern art movements. When a modern artist tells you that he sees the world only in terms of certain shapes and of certain primary colors which are strange, to say the least, to the common mortal eye, he is following a well-reasoned point of view, to be sure, but that point of view happens to be recent and somewhat sudden in origin. The Chinese, however, have evolved the distinctions between art and actuality in a slow and gradual manner.

For illustration, let us see how a certain part of the Chinese stage costume gradually attained its present seemingly extraordinary appearance. People who have attended Chinese stage performances must have noticed the flowing pieces of white silk, sometimes over two feet in length, attached to the sleeves of certain costumes on actors playing female parts. These pieces of material are there not exactly because of the requirements dictated by historical authenticity. They gradually grew from the short originals attached to ordinary clothes for practical purposes to the flowing and fluttering lengths now seen on stage costumes. And the motivating principle has been the artistic need of making these pieces longer and longer for their function in assisting expression. The movements of hands and arms are emphasized greatly and most meaningfully by these long appendages. They add to gestures a certain extended expressiveness.

Re-evaluated from the viewpoint of artistic technique, the old Chinese theater has much of suggestive and instructive value. Is not the modern theater in the West reacting against the photographic realism that predominated a generation ago? And are not modern experiments being directed toward simplification, synthetization, and suggestiveness?