

THE CLASSICAL
THEATRE
OF
CHINA

by
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*With illustrations by
the author*



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION



THE description Classical Theatre of China could be used to mean a variety of dramatic forms and developments, but in this book it refers to the *ching hsi*, or Peking drama. *Hsi* is a generic term for theatricals in general, while *ching* is capital, meaning the drama of the capital, i.e. Peking. Within recent years when Peking was referred to as Peip'ing for a time, the term *p'ing hsi* was often used as a description. This should not be confused with *p'ing chü*, an entertainment which originally came from country districts and was developed in the cities, where it is now being encouraged under the new government. *Ching hsi* is the older and more commonly used name for the Peking theatre.

The history of a true Chinese theatre has been one of many changes since the time of the Mongol invasion and the commencement of the Yuan dynasty in 1280. Local dramatic techniques developed, prospered for a time and then fused with each other, first one and then the other taking pride of place in public esteem. Eventually, what could be called a national drama came into being. The *ching hsi* evolved about the middle of the nineteenth century and became so popular that it replaced the *k'un ch'ü*, which had remained supreme as a national entertainment since the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The new theatre flourished from the beginning, it received Imperial patronage and rapidly became the favourite of the ordinary people as well, a position which it continued to retain in the twentieth century. During this period, there were many developments and, in later days, some aberrations. The latter could be related with declining standards of appreciation in a public affected by newer and more realistic forms of entertainment. In spite of this, the *ching hsi* has commanded a popularity greater in proportion than any of its rivals; it continues today but here we are concerned only with its history until 1949. It is impossible at present to form a correct and unbiased opinion on its more recent developments.

The Chinese drama is often called opera in English. It is true

that there are certain similarities, song is all important and the actor in a *ching hsi* play must sing a large proportion of his parts. However, there are so many other factors to be taken into equal consideration with vocal accomplishment that it is not possible to judge a performance only by the kind of standards required for the appreciation of Western style opera. A Chinese play aims at a harmony of effect which is attained by a strict formality applied rigorously to every aspect of the actor's performance. Song, speech, movement, costume and make up, as well as the musical accompaniment, are alike bound by this formality. Ideally, not one of these may be sacrificed in the interests of the others. Western opera depends primarily on aural values, song is the only reason of its being. Supreme vocal talents in the West are not necessarily consistent with the most suitable physical appearance demanded by opera costume; personal eccentricities and sometimes a ludicrous figure may be forgiven, or forgotten, for the quality of the singing. In the Chinese theatre, any slight deviation from the visual pattern, either in the physical appearance of the actor, his movements and costume, or in the stage ensemble, detracts from the completeness of the entertainment to jar upon the sensibilities of the experienced playgoer with the imperfections produced. The key to a true understanding of the *ching hsi* therefore, is best found by considering its early origins and the reasons of its being, rather than trying to tabulate it under a comparison with Western forms.

It is of paramount importance to understand two things when studying the early origins of the Chinese, and indeed, Japanese drama. First, dancing in ancient days was always combined with spoken verse or song and second, instrumental music was invariably composed to accompany chanted verse or narrative rather than to perform any solo function as playing. These factors are at the bottom of a great deal of the basic construction of Chinese theatrical entertainment of which a drama like the *ching hsi* is the ultimate expression. Old writings record that from the earliest times dance, song and poetry were used to celebrate public, private or religious ceremonies and festivities, dancing methods enlarged the expression of words on these occasions. An extension of this is seen in the *ching hsi* actor who, with the variations of his movements and symbolic gestures, completes the meaning contained within song and narrative. Song, speech

and movement cannot be considered as separate activities, they are units which combine to form the main pattern of expression. In order to understand this more perfectly, the technique of the *ching hsi* stage may be briefly described in its various aspects.

The stage itself is devoid of all scenic aids, it looks what it is, a bare platform from which the actor declaims his part. A hanging curtain at the rear, a single carpet on the floor, two plain wooden chairs and a small table are the basic requirements for a typical stage, however large. The audience do not require any external trappings, their interest is focused on the person of the actor who is telling them a story by word and gesture and the symbolism of his technique dispenses with time, place and atmosphere in any material fashion, these are created in the imaginations of the onlookers.

The actor's technique is the crux of the whole entertainment, the play itself is a vehicle which uses a hallowed theme presented in a fashion best calculated to create situations in which the virtuoso qualities of the actor may be used to the maximum advantage, it is around his skill and talent that the whole thing revolves. The audience comes to see the actor rather than the play, they do not tire when they are confronted with stories which, although they may have been rearranged, are the dramatic inheritance of generations before them. They are thoroughly conversant with the conventions and symbolism of the actor's performance which, in their critical eyes, must not deviate in any way from the standards set by a line of master players before him and yet contain that intangible quality which springs from personality, the hallmark of any actor worth his salt.

In the *ching hsi*, the actor's roles are divided under four main headings, *sheng*, *tan*, *chung* and *ch'ou*, or male, female, painted face and comic. These symbolize the characters and qualities of certain standardized personalities and pay no attention to normal variations in human appearance. In addition, each type of role has its own gestures, way of walking, and particular vocal technique. The audience expects and is familiar with this rigid and unchanging presentation. If the *ching hsi* stage itself lacks ornamental qualities, the costumes of the actors more than make up for it and their brilliance, fine materials and decorative effect, make it appear as though a plain deal box had been opened to reveal a collection of sparkling jewels and brilliants. It is part of

the device to concentrate the attention of the playgoer on the person of the actor, regardless of any other factors.

Since the reign of the Emperor Ch'ien Lung (1735-96), women's parts on the stage have always been acted by men and to this day the most distinguished and talented player of feminine roles is a man, Mei Lan-fang, who epitomizes the tradition. Within recent years women have taken to the *ching hsi* stage and the actress has become more and more common. More will be said about this in a later chapter.

When an actor makes an entry or an exit he obeys a certain procedure in his speech and movements which never varies and is governed by the particular role he plays. This formality is extended throughout the play, the actors use certain movements of their heads, hands and feet to accompany their narration and singing as the plot of the play is unfolded both visually and vocally to an audience primed and fully conversant with dramatic symbolism. Costume, make up and even the more realistic forms of movement such as fighting or sword play, all follow similar strict rules of procedure which is also applied to the position and placing of the actors on the stage and its compositions in general. Realism is dispensed with from every point of view, unless one excepts the byplay of the *ch'ou*, or clown, and the mime in some of the lighter feminine roles, but even in such cases there is present a certain deference to conventions which mark it apart from realism in any literal interpretation of the word. The dialogue of the plays does not imitate ordinary speech except again in the case of the *ch'ou*, who speaks his part in the *pai hua* or everyday talk of Peking, and even he sometimes relapses into more conventional phraseology. Honorific and polite terms mark the *ch'ang pai*, or actor's vocal technique apart from everyday speech, but it is not only there that the difference lies. The effect aimed at is a rhythmic pattern vocally, to gain this the actor adapts his words to special modulations of the voice which rises and falls or draws out certain syllables in accordance with this attention to rhythm, regardless of literal conversational statement. The timbre of the actor's voice is also adapted to the particular type of role he is playing, for, as already stated, each type has its own particular vocal technique. The rhythm of his speech and song is counterbalanced by the rhythm of his movements, while he is singing and speaking he may be walking,

sitting, riding or gesturing and his actions are controlled in accordance with the principles already described. It is on these occasions that the ancient method of combining song with dance is seen developed, if through many processes, in the present stage technique.

Pure dancing as such is rarely seen on the *ching hsi* stage as it is in the Japanese kabuki for instance. It is true that there are certain plays which contain dance pieces, the actor Mei Lan-fang has introduced many based on old Court dances into his repertoire, but it is in the action, gestures and fighting of the *ching hsi* that the dancing element is really preserved. As in the kabuki, a pictorial effect is often achieved during a performance of a play, when the actors remain posed in a tableau for a few moments, particularly in the fighting scenes, but these tableaux are to be observed in the middle of a play rather than the end. While kabuki plays like to conclude with a pictorial composition over which the curtain is drawn, in the Chinese equivalent it is necessary for everyone to leave the stage immediately the last scene ends, for the next scene or play must follow immediately with no curtain and only an orchestral prelude to announce it.

While the strictest formality controls the actor's performance in the Chinese theatre, the reverse is true of the orchestra and the stage assistants who look after the actor's needs during the course of a performance. The orchestra is placed on the stage, generally to the right of the audience, the members sitting in a certain arrangement according to the instrument they play, but here any attempt at formality ends and the ceremony and costume which is seen on the Japanese stage is absent altogether in the case of Chinese theatre musicians. They come and go as they please between scenes, show a catholic taste in the costume they wear and in general display a nonchalant attitude to their whereabouts. This attitude is deceptive however and in no way interferes with the precision of their playing. So too with the stage assistants, who leisurely perform their duties in full view of the audience while the play is proceeding and remain on the stage throughout. Their attire is often quite informal, particularly in the hot weather. It emphasizes a sharp difference between the theatres of China and Japan. In the latter, everyone from the actors down to stage hands obey conventions which add to the pattern of movement and stage design as an entity. In the

Chinese theatre nothing matters beyond the actors, their brilliant figures and precise movements are the only things that concern the audience, beyond them the utmost latitude is granted to everything and everybody connected with the performance. Indeed, to the outsider this latitude is emphasized to an extent at times which makes one feel that the Chinese actor must have the hardest task of players anywhere.

The plays of the *ching hsi* are customarily divided into *wen hsi* and *wu hsi*. The former deal in general with aspects of social or domestic life while the latter contain more martial elements and deal with wars, military encounters, the adventures of brigands and so on. The characteristics of both styles are often intermingled in the plays, whose plots are drawn from historical sources both real and imaginary, mythology and folk lore. Again, facts from any of these sources may be mixed freely in order to make a good dramatic story.

For the uninitiated a better appreciation of the *ching hsi* may be obtained with some knowledge of stage technique and symbolism and a general understanding of the Chinese background. Stage technique is explained at length in a later chapter, what follows here is a brief account of certain features of Chinese life which are useful as a basis of knowledge when considering the plays of the *ching hsi* theatre.

The government of old China was a monarchical one, the nation being ruled by the Emperor as the father of the people, so appointed by the will of Heaven. He was also commander in chief of all the armies, nominal head of religious and ceremonial affairs and dispenser of justice to the state. Society was broadly divided into four classes *shih*, scholars, under which classification also came *ch'en*, officials, and *shen shih* or landed gentry. *Nung* were the farmers or agriculturists, *kung* the artisans and *shang* the merchants. The Emperor administered justice from the capital, the seat of government, where also resided the hierarchy of officials and scholars. The country was divided into provinces which were each administered by a governor who was directly responsible to the Court for the affairs of that province and the other officials and nobles under him. The governors were vested with powers of punishment and reward. Revenue was derived by the state from land tithes and various forms of taxation imposed on the provinces from the capital, a system which required



Su San wearing the cangue

a widespread body of officials of varying degrees. Appointment to official posts was by means of the famous competitive literary examinations held triennially in Peking, to which candidates flocked from every part of the country. The examinations were open to all suitably qualified candidates, rich and poor alike, and it was the ambition of every young scholar to succeed and so make a career for himself. Certain classes considered as outcasts in society were not allowed to compete in the examinations however, this included all actors. The young scholar journeying to the examinations at Peking as a theme colours a number of plays. The unit of provincial administration was the local magistracy to which came senior magistrates on circuit. The background of government with its scholar officials and magistrates is seen portrayed time and time again on the *chung hsi* stage. Criminal offenders were punished for their more serious

faults with decapitation or flogging, often symbolically represented in the theatre. Women prisoners were marched to the courts with a *cangue* round their necks. This was a kind of wooden collar through which their hands were also secured in front of their face, a wooden tablet fixed on the back of the prisoner was inscribed *nu fan*, women criminal, followed by her name. This practice may be seen enacted on the stage in plays like *Chin So Chi* or *Yü T'ang Ch'un*, in both of which the heroine is a prisoner falsely accused.

Marriage was prearranged by parents in old China, celibacy being in general discouraged. The principal aim of marriage was the continuance of the family line and the provision of heirs to carry on devotions to the ancestral spirits. Romantic love was never taken into consideration as a reason for marriage. Betrothals were arranged by parents through the intervention of a matchmaker, a role which provides great scope for the *ch'ou* actor. A marriage concluded with the progress of the bride from her home to that of her parents-in-law where she took up residence as a member of her husband's family. Concubinage was an established practice, originally sanctioned as a further means of securing male heirs. Concubines became members of a family being subject to the supervision of the wife, in theory at any rate. Concubines of the Imperial house have on more than one occasion exerted considerable influence on state affairs besides being famed in story and legend for their beauty and charm. Yang Kuei Fei, the favourite of the Emperor Ming Huang (A.D. 712-54) and Yü Chi, mistress of Hsiang Yü, the King of Ch'u (B.C. 232-201) are two who may be named, for their exploits are perpetuated in plays which rank among some of the most popular in the *ching hsi* repertoire. Women in general, however, occupied a secondary position in society, a woman was expected to be modest, chaste and loyal to her husband while conducting his household affairs and these qualities are symbolized in the type of heroine's role called *ch'ing i*, a sub-division of the *tan* role. No wife could divorce her husband and it was considered a disgrace if he exercised his legal powers to divorce her. A widow rarely remarried as it was considered an act of chastity to remain faithful to a dead husband to whom she still belonged. Few women cared to defy this social convention, so deeply was it regarded in the eyes of society. A man, of course, could remarry

or take a concubine, for in his case he was adding a new member to the clan and therefore strengthening the family line. The family was the keystone of Chinese society and filial piety was a virtue to which everything else was subordinate, a son's prime allegiance was to his parents and through them the spirits of his ancestors. As might be expected, the theatre drew largely on the pattern of life described above and found rich material for its plays.

The courtesan has inspired important roles on the stage for in a society where marriage was so rigidly controlled she was at one time a significant figure in social life. Courtesans were professional women trained from an early age in singing and playing musical instruments, composing poetry, practising calligraphy and being skilled in the art of entertainment generally. Young men and scholars paid court at the houses where they resided and the plots of several plays are concerned with the 'singsong' girls of other days. *Yü T'ang Ch'un* is a good example, its heroine *Su San*, the singsong girl, being one of the best known characters on the stage.

A fashion of the women of former times might be mentioned here, i.e. the practice of foot binding which has given rise to a special stage technique requiring great acrobatic skill on the part of the actor. Accounts differ as to the origin of foot binding as a custom, one authority relates it as being due to women trying to imitate the small feet of the favourite concubine of an Emperor of ancient times, another that it was initiated as a safeguard to prevent women straying too far afield. Whatever the true explanation it became a fashionable cult with women who vied with each other in the smallness of their 'golden lily' feet as they were termed. The practice long ago died out although occasionally an ancient woman may still be seen with the pinched feet resulting from this custom. The method by which *ch'ing hsi* actors simulate bound feet on the stage is described in detail in Chapter V.

The segregated state of women in China had the effect of developing a strong sense of comradeship in the male sex and a young man would esteem it a privilege to acquire a 'sworn' brother who would share his pleasures and stand by him in time of need. This type of relationship is often emphasized in the drama where the loyalty of pledged friendships offers great scope for the actor.

In the past, the Chinese have laid great stress on ceremony and the punctilious observance of an etiquette created to cover all aspects of daily living. Ranks of society were distinguished by certain styles of clothing and types of weapons or objects for everyday use. There were standard forms of address between superiors and inferiors, or vice versa, greetings, the reception and seating of guests and a host of other matters were all bound by formal rules. Disregard of these codes of behaviour was looked upon as the mark of ill breeding, or a barbarian. This regard for ceremonial is clearly expressed in the *ching hsi* where the etiquette of former times is crystallized in the yet more formal speech and gesture of the actor and the costumes he wears.

China's history has been a long series of wars, armed revolts and civil strife. Her dynastic periods have succeeded each other with the rise to power of some new military conqueror and her legends are full of the prowess of the warriors of ancient times. In spite of this, the soldier has always been looked down upon in Confucian society. The drama is full of the feats of arms of the warriors and generals of early times, especially the plays that deal with the Three Kingdoms period (A.D. 220-265) but it is perhaps significant that strategy and ruse are as often shown as the attributes of a great warrior as mere physical feats of arms. A good example is seen in the famous play *K'ung Ch'eng Chi* or the strategy of the Empty City. In this, an unguarded city is prevented from falling into the hands of enemy forces by a ruse which would make any military historian smile, but on the stage it provides first class material for the technique of the actor, particularly his singing!

Religion, in so far as it affects the stage, may be briefly mentioned. The Chinese have always been extremely tolerant in religious matters and Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have flourished side by side as the three principal faiths of China. Confucianism was not a religion in the strict sense of the word but a system of ethics for the conduct of living. The moral principles of Confucianism had their foundation in ancestor worship, as a faith it was agnostic and set the whole pattern of family life and through that the conduct of the state. Confucianism was perhaps dominant among religious beliefs although the majority of Chinese people were eclectic and subscribed to all three faiths quite impartially. Buddhism, which came to China



Chu Pa Chieh

from India, was a religion which appealed through its spiritual conceptions of life after death. Its influence was shown outwardly by the great number of monasteries built all over the country, often in the most commanding positions. Taoism, originally a philosophy evolved by Lao Tze about the end of the fifth century B.C., became a form of spirit worship which took a good deal of its religious formula from Buddhism. The moral reasoning embodied in numbers of plays in the *ching hsi* is based on the principles upheld by Confucianism. Buddhism, on the whole, receives scant treatment at the hands of the playwrights and the Buddhist priest is more often than not a figure of fun, the butt of the dramatist. In passing, it is interesting to note *Hsi Yu Chi*, a record of a journey to the Western paradise to secure the Buddhist scriptures for the Chinese Emperor. The work is a dramatization of the introduction of Buddhism into China and has produced some colourful stage material, including that pair of strange characters Sun Wu K'ung, the monkey god, and Chu Pa Chieh, a spirit who was banished from Heaven and in earthly exile became half human and half pig. The chief contribution of Taoism to the theatre is a number of gods and spirits from its gallery of the supernatural. Elements from Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism are mixed where necessary, as indeed they have been in the religious life of the Chinese people. The *ching hsi* is chiefly concerned with religion from the point of view of making dramatic entertainment, its function is not to spread spiritual propaganda.


In the *ching hsi*, the stark symbolism of stage properties and lack of settings do nothing to create a visual representation as provided say on the kabuki stage of Japan. Such effects as there are only serve to stimulate the workings of the playgoer's imagination, he must conjure it all up for himself. In concluding this chapter, it is worth while considering a few more details useful to the layman whose imagination is not already coloured by the background knowledge which is the prerogative of the Chinese playgoer. Old Chinese cities were built within walls whose gates were closed at nightfall. Streets were unlit and pedestrians walked abroad accompanied by an attendant carrying a lantern, the stage utilises this old custom to suggest night time in a play. Houses, at any rate the larger ones, were built within a system of courtyards reached through entrances whose

double doors opened right and left and were bolted horizontally with a lock in the centre. In addition, they were built with a threshold several inches high which necessitated lifting the feet when entering or departing, facts which are all symbolized in the mime and gestures of the actor. The latticed window panes were not made of glass but opaque paper, as an actor playing the part of an inquisitive old woman will indicate by poking an expressive finger through an imaginary pane, and applying an even more expressive eye to an equally imaginary hole. Travel in the past was by means of horses, closed palanquins or two wheeled horse drawn chariots. Warriors and officials rode horseback but women never, they travelled by palanquin or chariot. Oar and sail propelled junks and sampans conveyed travellers by water and ferried them across rivers. All these forms of transport are represented in original fashion on the stage and are described in detail later.

Every aspect of Chinese life and sentiment has been drawn upon by the *ching hsi*, and it has translated what it has borrowed into dramatic situations which are a part of a formal theatrical art unique in its symbolism, within which are consummated principles found in all Chinese art. One does not go to the Chinese theatre in search of great literature, it is, as already stated, first and foremost contrived as a setting for the art of the actor; this outline is intended as a useful starting point towards an understanding of that art.

CHAPTER II

A SHORT
HISTORICAL SURVEY



THE *ching hsi* drama traces its origins back to the song and dance which accompanied festivals and religious or public ceremonies of ancient times. These are regarded as the basis of all dramatic expression in China. From such a beginning, the drama evolved against a shifting background of social and political changes which contributed to what, eventually, became a national theatre. There are records of dance entertainments which go back to the Chou dynasty (1050-249 B.C.), but the distinguished scholar of the theatre, Ch'i Ju-shan, has pointed out the importance of developments in T'ang times (A.D. 618-906) in their relationship to the *ching hsi*. His researches show that descriptions of T'ang dances, as given in early writings, indicate a remarkable similarity between certain of the dance movements and various aspects of the *ching hsi* actor's technique for instance.

A great deal of our knowledge of the early Chinese drama must remain as a matter for conjecture only, but it seems certain that the T'ang period was one of great developments in dramatic art. During this period the Emperor Ming Huang (A.D. 712-54) became a patron of the theatre and established the celebrated 'Academy of the Pear Orchard' for training young singers and actors to perform at Court. The title 'Leader of the Pear Orchard' was one which later became conferred on China's supreme actors. Imperial patrons encouraged the drama throughout its history and often took an active part in it as amateurs, a position which continued until the death of the Empress Dowager in 1908. It is curious to reflect that, in spite of such exalted esteem and close connection with the Court, the theatre was also frowned upon by scholars and moralists alike in Confucian society and the actor was regarded as an outcast until quite recent times.

The Yüan dynasty (1280-1368) is looked upon as the period which prepared the ground for the growth of the drama and



Sleeve movement

built foundations which were to remain as the basis of all future development; it is from then that we shall trace the history of the *ching hsi*. Until the Yüan dynasty, Chinese drama was not created to any set rules, it was what were called the *tsa chü* of Yüan times which first provided a model for play construction. *Tsa* literally means miscellany and *chü* a play. *Tsa chü* were devised with song and dialogue or declamation woven into a play which was always divided into four acts and they are considered as the oldest form of complete drama in China. The term Yüan drama is not used in the strictest sense of the political dynasty for it includes developments which had their beginning in the Sung dynasty (A.D. 960–1279) and reached their zenith in the Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368–1644). The Yüan drama was marked by a division of styles which are important in tracing the history of the *ching hsi*.

It must be realised that the whole question of the development of various styles of drama through the centuries, as well as their influence on each other, is a complex one on which a great deal of research still remains to be done by Chinese experts. It was never considered worth while keeping records of the drama in former days, the theatre at the best of times is an art of the moment and the passing years quickly obscure stage trends in a vast country like China. Elderly people of today, for instance, can remember *ching hsi* performances of forty years ago which, while staging plays seen now, included acrobatic and humorous numbers that were no doubt bequeathed to the *ching hsi* from various local dramatic entertainments. This is but a minor example, but it indicates the difficulty of analysing the many influences and developments which have waxed and waned throughout even quite a short period of time. However, during recent decades Chinese students have formed a fairly consistent picture of the main stream of developments which led to the rise of the *ching hsi* as the national drama of China.

The division of styles in Yüan times already mentioned is usually referred to under two schools, Northern and Southern, or *pei ch'ü* and *nan ch'ü*. *Ch'ü* literally means song and plays and *pei* and *nan* North and South respectively. Within each of the two schools there were many different dramatic forms however and when describing the characteristics of each of the schools it must be accepted as a somewhat arbitrary naming of general basic points, rather than detailed fact about the many individual styles contained within them. The important difference in the Northern and Southern schools lay in the construction of plays, i.e. the music, dialogue and procedure which differed with the locality of inspiration. The Southern style paid strict attention to certain rules of prosody and the length of its measures while embodying the use of scholarly and literary expressions. The Northern style took some liberties with rules and incorporated the use of terms from everyday speech. The Southern style used a musical scale of five notes and no semitones where the Northern style had seven notes, i.e. five tones and two semitones. String instruments accompanied the singing of the Northern style but the Southern style only used these in a secondary capacity, the chief instrument being the flute. The songs of the Northern school were lively and vigorous in keeping with the bolder spirit

of its region, those of the Southern school were softer in melody and feeling.

The two schools continued to thrive, each in their own fashion, until about the beginning of the Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368-1644) when a development of the Southern school of drama, the *ch'uan ch'i*, began to exert a powerful influence on public interest at the expense of the Northern school whose popularity waned. *Ch'uan* means to announce or transmit, while *ch'i* means wonderful or rare, hence the combination of the two words came to mean a play or drama. The term had been used earlier of certain technical developments in Yüan-drama but finally came to be associated with Southern school developments. The *ch'uan ch'i* was largely based on the technique of the Southern school but also borrowed from the Northern particularly in matters connected with the roles of both comic and serious characters as well as in the simplification of certain plots. The *ch'uan ch'i* were generally arranged in about thirty or more acts each of which had their own title and were to some extent complete in themselves, thus allowing plays to be shortened at will by the exclusion of certain acts if desired. Each act was composed of a part for singing and a part for dialogue. The first act commenced with a secondary actor named the *fu mo* appearing on the stage, the two terms literally mean assistant and insignificant. The *fu mo* did not take part in the rest of the play, his task was to recite and sing a summary of the plot to the audience so that they understood the main outline of the piece. The plot of a *ch'uan ch'i* play would begin to unfold in the second act and become more complicated as it was interwoven among numerous episodes which were finally disentangled in the finale. As in the Chinese theatre today, there were no intervals between acts which followed in quick succession. There were six principal role divisions *sheng*, *tan*, *ching*, *ch'ou*, *mo* and *wai*. *Sheng* were the male roles, the heroes of the piece, who were generally young lovers or scholars and known as *hsiao sheng* or *kuan sheng*. When the *sheng* actor played older men they were known as *lao sheng* and these roles were not so important as the first named. This is different in the *ching hsi* where the *lao sheng* is one of the most important roles. *Tan* were the female roles which had different names according to the type portrayed. These were *cheng tan*, generally a fairly old woman though sometimes young, but

always a good if serious character. *Tz'u sha* was a talkative lively woman and *tso tan* a role full of action and movement. *Kuei men tan* was a young girl, *lao tan* an old woman and *t'ieh tan* a secondary character. *Mo* and *wai* might be either young or old, men or women, but they were always secondary roles. Principal parts were called *chu chiao* and secondary parts *p'ei chiao*. A *chu chiao* part was invariably a *sheng* or *tan* role.

The *ch'uan ch'i* of the Southern style drama, i.e. *nan ch'ü*, attained such popularity that they eclipsed the rival Northern style plays completely and eventually brought about a dramatic style called the *k'un ch'ü* which was to remain supreme in the theatres of China for three hundred years. At the beginning of the Ming dynasty, the Southern style drama, which outstripped the rival Northern style in popularity, was divided into several small schools named *yu yao*, *hai yen* and *yi yang*, which had their origin in different provinces and which, while deriving from the main dramatic stream of the times, adapted themselves to local needs including dialect. This state of affairs continued until the middle of the Ming dynasty when the collaboration of a famous dramatist Liang Po-lung and an equally famous musician Wei Liang-fu brought about developments which were to have a far reaching effect on the course of the Chinese theatre in general.

Liang Po-lung was a scholar who came from K'un Shan in the province of Kiangsu and was unusually gifted in the art of dramatic composition. He was considered a master poet and his work was known everywhere. A Chinese writer has recorded that he was a handsome and elegant man with a magnificent beard, who sat facing West at a large table when instructing the theatre people and singing girls who flocked to him for instruction. Wei Liang-fu came from Kiangsu also, being a native of T'ai Ts'ang, a neighbouring town of K'un Shan, the birthplace of his colleague. He was a highly skilled musician and composer and is said to have spent twenty years on the creation of a musical style called *shui mo tiao*, before he became a professor of music at Soochow. Liang Po-lung went to consult him on theatrical matters with the result that Wei Liang-fu composed the music for the dramatist's newest play. It had such a great reception from the public that it became the forerunner of a new school of drama, adopting, at first, the name *shui mo tiao*. After this, the

work of the two men acquired them a brilliant reputation and a number of scholars and musicians went to work under them, while the other schools of drama all began to be influenced by these new developments in the theatre. Eventually, the new school of drama took the name *k'un ch'ü* which was henceforth to designate the principal form of theatrical art in China for centuries to come.

Certain factors assisted the rise to popularity of the *k'un ch'ü* drama. During the Ming dynasty Soochow became the cultural centre of China, scholars and poets settled there and began to extend their patronage to the theatre. Composing and writing for the drama were regarded as accomplishments. The best actors and singers went to Soochow to participate in an art which was beginning to receive such intellectual favour. It was not only the literati who helped to make the *k'un ch'ü* so popular but also the singsong girls and public entertainers, their renderings of *k'un ch'ü* airs were quickly responsible for their being on the lips of high and low alike. Soochow at this time was a centre of fashion which became a model for the rest of China, its singsong girls were emulated by their sisters elsewhere even down to their accents. Besides this, Soochow remained the most prosperous commercial centre in China until its fall in the T'ai P'ing rebellion and the conquest of Kiangsu province in 1853. The *k'un ch'ü* thus also received financial as well as intellectual encouragement and it can readily be seen how a combination of circumstances established this drama as a first favourite among the Chinese people.

The *k'un ch'ü*, as dramatic art, passed through several stages of development and enjoyed Imperial patronage which reached its climax in the reigns of the Emperors K'ang Hsi (1661-1722) and Ch'ien Lung (1735-96). The increasing interest of courtier and dilettante was responsible in some measure for the decline of the *k'un ch'ü* after this, the ordinary public found the theatre was acquiring qualities too rare for their appreciation. On the other hand, during the period 1821-1850 the scholars began to neglect the *k'un ch'ü* in favour of other literary tendencies and the contents of the drama began to deteriorate in the eyes of the connoisseurs. The conquest of Kiangsu by the T'ai P'ing rebels in 1853 rang the death knell of the *k'un ch'ü* theatre. Soochow, the heart of the theatrical world, was thrown into complete disorder by the civil war which threatened the whole nation and the

training of singers and actors had to be abandoned. The Soochow companies resident in Peking left the capital for their native place under the stress of events and the *k'un ch'ü* drama fell into a decline from which it never recovered.

During the long reign of the *k'un ch'ü* drama, local dramas continued to exist to a greater or lesser degree. The *k'un ch'ü* itself had drawn upon many of these for its ultimate inspiration, a process of intermingling which had characterized the whole history of the Chinese theatre and was to continue to do so. The dramatic styles of Anhui, Hupeh and Shensi came into prominence with the decline of the *k'un ch'ü* and were drawn upon to create a new and single drama. When the *k'un ch'ü* disappeared so quickly from the scene another form took its place for a brief period in Peking, this was the *yi yang* style mentioned earlier as one of the three schools in existence prior to the emergence of the *k'un ch'ü*. Its new popularity soon waned before that of the *hu tiao* which came from Hupeh province. This local drama was adapted and perfected by actors of Anhui province and so it became called the *hu tiao* of the Anhui school, a school which was to play a prominent part in the development of the new *ching hsi* drama. The *hu tiao* style drama had already made an appearance in Peking during the later years of the *k'un ch'ü* when *hu pan*, or Anhui troupes, were established in the capital alongside the *su pan* or Soochow troupes. The first occasion of their appearance is recorded as on the occasion of the birthday celebrations of the Emperor Ch'ien Lung in 1790. The Anhui troupes quickly multiplied in the capital with the disappearance of the Soochow troupes at the time of the T'ai P'ing rebellion and gained an increasing popularity among Peking audiences. The Anhui style drama soon eclipsed all other forms and went from strength to strength. Peking became the centre of development, which eventually led to the creation of the *ching hsi*, or theatre of the capital. At the time these developments were going on, another dramatic style had a short run of popularity in Peking, this was the *pang tzu* school which originated in Shensi province. Its style was inferior and it was soon overshadowed but it too made some contribution to the new drama for the *ching hsi* drew upon it as upon other forms although to a much lesser degree.

The decline of the *k'un ch'ü* therefore brought a wider public to the other forms of drama, some of which had already begun to

have a greater attraction for the ordinary playgoer. The fusing of certain techniques from these various styles created a pattern which formed the basis of the *ching hsi* drama and the Anhui school of actors were largely responsible for this. The *hsi p'i* and *erh huang* styles, which form the basis of the *ching hsi*'s musical construction today, originally came from Hupeh through the Anhui school. The two names are now telescoped to give *p'i huang* as a general term for a musical style. *Hsi p'i* literally means Western skins, the origin of the term is obscure but it is presumed to refer to the skins or hides used in the construction of the instruments. *Erh huang* is explained in two different ways. Some writers say that it derives from two districts in Anhui both bearing the name Huang, while others declare that it means 'two flute airs' and refers to the fact that formerly two instruments were used in the accompaniment. *Erh* means two so there can be no argument on the numerical score, *huang* is also a name for a reed which is used in a certain kind of ancient musical instrument, but it was not a flute and the latter instrument has no reed anyway, so that the true origin of the name *erh huang* would still seem to be a matter of opinion.

It may be useful at this point to make a brief comparison between the fundamental characteristics of the *k'un ch'ü* drama and the *ching hsi* which replaced it. There have been several movements to revive the *k'un ch'ü* during the present century but with no widespread success. It has remained the prerogative of the connoisseur or amateur singer. A number of its plays are still performed and Mei Lan-fang has incorporated some of its more popular qualities in his personal plays, the scholars and playgoers of an older generation remember it with admiration but it is a form which finds no place in the general standards of dramatic appreciation in modern China. The greatest living exponent of *k'un ch'ü* is the famous actor Yü Chen-fei, one of the most distinguished players of the *hsiao sheng* rôle in the *ching hsi* theatre. He is the son of a leading *k'un ch'ü* scholar of Soochow and was literally cradled in this theatre, for he tells how his father sang the airs of the drama to him as a lullaby when a small child. In addition to being a master actor, Yü Chen-fei is also an accomplished performer on the *ti tzu* or flute, and he has also collected and revised the important plays of the repertoire many of which had become bowdlerized. Yü Chen-fei has been

living in semi-retirement in Hong Kong for the last four years. He has managed to give an occasional performance but the lack of theatres and supporting casts have presented insuperable difficulties. He has eked out an existence with film work and teaching *k'un ch'ü* music. To listen to Yü Chen-fei playing his flute on a quiet evening, as this writer has often been privileged to do, is a never to be forgotten experience and one which brings the fervent hope that such art may never disappear from the Orient. At the time of writing this, Yü Chen-fei has just left for the mainland and rumour has it that he has been invited to become head of a school for *k'un ch'ü* which the authorities wish to open in order to preserve this old dramatic art.

The chief differences between the *k'un ch'ü* and the *ching hsi* may be said to lie in the musical accompaniment and the structure of the plays. The *ching hsi* uses string instruments for song accompaniment where the *k'un ch'ü* uses the flute, so that there is immediately a marked contrast in the quality of the music, that of the older drama being softer and possibly more romantic. There is more variation in the musical phraseology of the *k'un ch'ü* than in the *ching hsi* which possesses a limited range of airs to be used again and again, and which are transposed to suit the particular dramatic situation. This is a device which makes it easier for a wide public to familiarize themselves with the music of the theatre. *K'un ch'ü* music makes use of a more subtle technique and embodies a far greater number of musical styles in its accompaniment than does the more rigidly defined *p'i huang* of the *ching hsi*.

Although in both theatres the sung parts of the actors are written in verse those of the *k'un ch'ü* have a greater value as pure literature. The dramatists were men of letters who employed their talents in writing for the theatre, and their work is full of metaphors and allusions expressing their sentiment and philosophy in elegant style. The *ching hsi*, on the other hand, drew its plots from popular historical novels and romances whose characters were familiar to everyone and therefore admirable subjects for the actors to portray. The plays of the *ching hsi* were devised by actors rather than literary men and the repertoire as a whole was conceived from their standpoint first, the stories were simply vehicles for the technique of the actor and there was no attempt to create independent literary works of art. The

ching hsi was intended to appeal to the theatregoer only but the *k'un ch'ü* aimed at satisfying the reader as well as the spectator. It is because of this that the vigorous, colourful and swift moving combat scenes which characterize the *ching hsi* are not found in the *k'un ch'ü*. They are conceived purely in terms of visual values.

K'un ch'ü plays divided into *ch'ih*, or acts, follow in detail the events of the various episodes and the actions of all the characters in the plot: *ching hsi* plays by comparison are short and often only briefly indicate the origin of the plot or even its conclusion, concentrating on the developments between these events as related to certain characters. An entire *ching hsi* play may often be no longer than one or two acts of a corresponding *k'un ch'ü* drama. The fact that each act of a *k'un ch'ü* play was more or less an independent dramatic unit of its own made it possible to utilize such acts in the *ching hsi* drama and it is this kind of process which has provided such *k'un ch'ü* elements as are incorporated in the newer theatre.

The rise to supremacy of the *ching hsi* might rudely be described as the triumph of the art of the boards over the art of the book and, as described, was due in great part to the many great actors who lived during the Ch'ing dynasty (1616-1912). Prominent among them was Ch'eng Chang-keng of Anhui, a man who had a profound influence on the theatre of his time and who is commonly regarded as the father of the *ching hsi*. He is said to have been primarily responsible for the emergence of its finished technique. His teaching benefited many who followed him. Another celebrated name was that of T'an Hsin-p'ei; he had a magnificent voice and developed the bearded *sheng* roles to new heights. His contribution to the drama was also a far reaching one, his acting and teaching benefited a long line of actors who followed him. There were many other outstanding actors besides these two men who both received the favours of the Court. The Empress Dowager (1835-1908) last of a long line of Imperial patrons and herself an enthusiastic amateur actress, played a part in encouraging the *ching hsi* theatre and the work of actors like the two named above.

Both these men were masters of the *sheng* role which was regarded then as the supreme one for an actor to play but in 1913 there appeared like a meteor out of the sky a young actor who was to shed lustre on the *tan* or female roles to an extent never

known before. This phenomenon was Mei Lan-fang (1894-), grandson of Mei Ch'iao-ling (1841-1881), a noted actor of his time. Since he made his debut at the age of nineteen in Shanghai, Mei Lan-fang has remained the stage idol of China and his individual contribution to the drama has been a distinguished one. Trained in the rigid discipline of the old school of acting from childhood, he has remained unrivalled as a female impersonator throughout his long career. It is through him that the *tan* roles have assumed an artistic importance on the stage that they never had previously. In addition to his peerless acting Mei has been responsible for producing new plays in the classical tradition, reviving ancient dances as well as modifying and designing traditional theatrical costume. A school of acting has grown up within recent decades bearing the hall mark of his individual genius and many of the actresses who now grace the *ching hsi* stage derive their main inspiration from him. Hsueh Yen-chin, a talented actress who was one of the first to be accepted in orthodox stage circles, was a pupil of Mei Lan-fang, who will always be remembered as one of the great forces in his country's theatre.

The Japanese war interrupted developments in the *ching hsi* theatre as in all other artistic fields, but it carried on in one form or another in both free and occupied areas. The Japanese, a race with a long theatrical tradition of their own tried, not always successfully, to encourage the *ching hsi* during their occupation. Many well known actors refused to perform in occupied China as a patriotic protest. Mei Lan-fang was among them and, according to report, grew a moustache during this period to emphasize his decision the more effectively. One noted actor became *persona non grata* with the Nationalist Government after the war because he continued to act in occupied territory: it is perhaps significant that he was eventually invited back to China by a Communist government.

The post war years saw the theatre suffer from the nation's common ills. Inflation, plus the lack of effort on the part of apathetic authority to assist, brought hardship to theatre people in general. While lip service was paid to cultural traditions nothing was done to extend practical aid to an impoverished national art and its training schools. With the barrier that now exists between China and the outer world it is impossible to form an

accurate and unprejudiced appraisal of the *ching hsi* theatre today. Propaganda utterances made it clear at the beginning of the Communist regime that the old drama would have to be changed to suit new ideology and if the long list of revised or banned plays published in the press is accepted, it is clear that this process is being carried out. All other available evidence points to the fact that the *ching hsi* is still an immensely popular dramatic entertainment which, when it does not impinge on the dictates of new thinking, has been encouraged to continue. The fact that it does come under political pressure is of course another question. Certainly if we penetrate beneath the propaganda verbiage which cloaks all statements about art in the new China, it would appear that the *ching hsi* theatre is in a healthier physical state than it was. It would be strange indeed if the Communists had not managed to make capital out of the depressing conditions in which actors found themselves prior to 1949.

After the Communist government came to power and during the period 1950-51, three leading actors from the mainland, Ma Lien-lang, Chang Chün-ch'iu and Yü Chen-fei, each distinguished in their own particular field of acting, gave a regular weekly *ching hsi* performance with a company in Hong Kong, the first occasion on which this colony had had the opportunity of acquiring a standing *ching hsi* company. Unfortunately the actors were compelled to abandon their performance in less than two years. There were several reasons, the chief ones being the difficulty of making financial ends meet and the lack of interest on the part of local Chinese people in the Northern drama. The Cantonese drama, an exceedingly debased and vulgar but none the less popular form, occupies the few leading theatres in Hong Kong and the managers refused to make any financial concessions to the Northern actors while at the same time allowing them only the worst bookings. Cantonese audiences have little appreciation of *ching hsi* drama, so that the Northern actors, depended solely on their compatriots, of whom by this time there was no inconsiderable number, for their patronage. It was unfortunate that some of the Shanghai people, with the help of others, did not do something towards establishing the company on a firm basis, it could have been achieved with a little public spirit and imagination. As it was, the actors were in perpetually

low straits from the beginning and eventually Ma Lien-liang, together with Chang Chün-ch'iu, returned to China at the invitation of the Communist government and they are now acting on the mainland again. The chance of building up a first class *ching hsi* company in Hong Kong has gone for ever. Some years later Yü Chen-fei has followed the example of his colleagues and returned to the mainland. All the great actors are now in China and one can hardly expect them not to remain there. What the eventual future of the *ching hsi* actor will be it is difficult for anyone outside China to surmise, it would seem that his theatre is still a vigorous entity, if a controlled one.