MEI LAN FANG IN THE RAINBOW PASS

Realistic in the sense that it touches upon familiar episodes of the past and present, the Chinese theatre is nevertheless conventionalized, with each situation, character and object presented abstractly or symbolically. 'The art of the duel on the stage', therefore, 'consists first of all in the fact that the enemies never touch each other.' Mei Lan Fang, highest exponent of this theatre, gives a symbolic representation of the duel in *The Rainbow Pass*, one of a vast number of plays in the actor's repertory.

The Enchanter from the Pear Garden

Introducing to Russian Audiences a Visitor from China

SERGEI EISENSTEIN

Mei Lan Fang's popularity extends far beyond the boundaries of China; his portrait or silhouette you can find in the house of every intellectual Chinese family in San Francisco, in the little stores of Chinatown in New York, in the fashionable Chinese restaurants in Berlin, in the taverns of Yukatan — everywhere where there beats a Chinese heart that remembers its country. Everywhere Mei Lan Fang is known. Everywhere you can find copies of the statue-poses in which, following the Chinese theatrical tradition, he performs episodes from his remarkable dance-dramas. But it is not only among his countrymen that Mei Lan Fang is popular. The greatness of his art captivates people of other countries and of different cultural traditions. Charlie Chaplin was the first to tell me about the remarkable work of this great Chinese artist.

In connection with the Chinese theatre which Mei Lan Fang brought to its highest degree of perfection, I should like to relate one of those colorful, although not very authentic, legends about the origin of this theatre. The legend tells about the siege of Ping-Yang in the year 205 before our era. The emperor's army was surrounded in this city, besieged by the Huan army whose commander-in-chief, Mao-Tum, had surrounded the city on three sides. He had given command of part of his forces to his wife, In-Shi, who hemmed in the city on the fourth side. The besieged city was suffering from hunger and other privations, and was about to surrender, when General Chang Ping, who was defending it, succeeded in saving it through a ruse. Having heard that In-Shi was a very jealous woman, he had many female figures cut out of wood which resembled living women. He placed these figures on the walls that faced the besiegers who were under the

command of this martial and jealous woman. Through a clever mechanism, the figures were made to dance and move about. They captivated their audience with the grace of their movements. In-Shi, from the distance, took these figures for living women and, what is more, for women of seductive charm. Aware of the susceptibility of her husband she began to fear that after capturing the city he might become infatuated with these dangerous rivals. This, she knew, would deal a blow to her prestige and to the influence which she had over her husband. She ordered a retreat from the walls of the city. The besiegers' ring was broken and the city was saved. Such is the legend, but historians, of course, explain that the city was saved not through a ruse but through the brilliant strategy of General Chang Ping. This same legend deals with the rise of the marionettes which were eventually replaced by men. (The Chinese actor has for a long time, however, retained the name of a 'live puppet'.)

I relate this legend as an introduction to the art of Mei Lan Fang because this actor's art is bound up with the ancient and best traditions of the Chinese theatre and also with the marionette and its typical dance that has left an everlasting imprint upon Chinese theatrical art. I mention it also because in it appears one of the types that now belong to the gallery of those characters, unusual for us, that are depicted by Mei Lan Fang. This is the woman-commander, the woman-soldier. Mei Lan Fang is great in depicting the lyrical type of woman, and no less successful in playing the part of this martial girl. In the play, *Mu-Lan in the Army*, for instance, where he plays the main role, he depicts the military adventures of a girl who disguises herself as a soldier in order to take the place of her aged father.

Articles and stories about the Chinese theatre usually stress those 'peculiarities' which strike the superficial and unprepared tourist accustomed to the routine of the European stage. These 'peculiarities' are never considered to have any connection with Western-European theatre and its art, and yet the influence of the Chinese theatre upon Western theatrical art, particularly upon the Soviet theatre, is well known. But that is not what I want to speak about here. Nor do I want to describe those marvelous and unexpected things that the Chinese theatre holds in store for the uninitiated spectator. The technique and system of the Chinese theatre deserves more than a catalogue of its peculiarities. It deserves a deeper look into that

philosophy which is expressed in art forms apparently so removed and yet so near to us which, although not always understood, are always profoundly experienced. Otherwise, how can one explain the magnetic creative force which has made this art overlap national boundaries. Should we enter deeper into its meaning, these peculiarities would indeed soon lose their strangeness. How many tourists, for instance, have been amazed by the fact that the audience in the theatre was seated in profile, facing a long table that extended perpendicularly from the stage. Yet there is nothing strange in that. According to the ancient tradition the ear and not the eye should be turned toward the stage; one went to the ancient Chinese theatre not to see a drama but to hear one. A somewhat similar theatrical tradition we have in our own Moscow Maly Theatre. The older generation still remembers Ostrovsky, who never looked upon his plays from the auditorium but listened to them from back stage.

The ancient Chinese theatre was always synthetic: the dance was organically related to the song. Then a separation was effected. The vocal aspect of the theatre began, at the expense of the plastic, to root itself in the north of China. The visual aspect flourished in the south. Thus, even today, a northern Chinese speaks of going to 'hear' a drama while a southern Chinese goes to 'see' a drama.

Mei Lan Fang was confronted with the problem of creating a synthesis of these two tendencies. A profound student of Chinese culture, he revived the ancient Chinese theatrical tradition. He resurrected the visual aspect of the theatre, adding to it a complex blending of dance and music and thus restoring the ancient Chinese synthetic theatre. But Mei Lan Fang is not merely a restorer. He knows how, in restoring the perfect forms of the old traditions, to endow them with a new content. He tries always to broaden the thematic content of his plays and he tends to emphasize social problems. Several of the hundreds of plays in which Mei Lan Fang performs speak of the difficult social status of the woman, the exploitation of the poor, etc. Some of them deal with the struggle against backwardness and religious superstition. These dramas, although played in the old conventionalized style, because of the temporary themes and problems they present, are of a poignant sharpness and splendor. The theme of the woman is presented in his plays from many angles. His ability to depict a variety of female types is a great achievement of

Mei Lan Fang's art. Usually there is a specialization and a limitation in the actor's field, but Mei Lan Fang is a master over a wide range, and while adhering strictly to the traditional style in depicting his female characters, he has added a number of details.

Chinese theatrical tradition knows six basic female characters:

1. *Ching-Tan* — a kind matron, a faithful wife and devoted daughter.

2. *Hua-Tan* — a younger woman, usually a servant. Whereas *Ching-Tan* represents a positive type, lyrical and melancholy, depicted usually through songs, *Hua-Tan* represents a frivolous type. She is usually depicted through fast and lively movement.

3. *Kuei-Men-Tan* — a girl, graceful, elegant and kind.

4. *Wu-Tan* — a heroic girl; a female soldier and military commander.

5. *Tsai-Tan* — a cruel and intriguing woman, a servant always ready to betray her masters. Although she is endowed with great beauty, she is nevertheless extremely base.

6. *Lao-Tan* — a very old woman, usually a mother. This is the most realistically presented woman on the Chinese stage. The part is played with great tenderness.

All the names of these female characters end with the symbol *Tan*. In ordinary translation this symbol designates one who performs a female role. This, however, does not explain the complete meaning of the word. The symbol *Tan*, as Mei Lan Fang emphasizes, while it describes the concept of woman on the Chinese stage, stands primarily for a stylized, aesthetically abstract image of woman, altogether unrealistic.

The realistic depiction of woman is not part of the Chinese actor's art. Instead, the audience is treated to an idealized, generalized female image. Here we come upon the principal aspect of the Chinese stage. Realistic in its own specific sense, capable of touching upon familiar episodes of history and legend, as well as upon social and everyday problems of life, the Chinese theatre, nevertheless, is conventionalized in its form, from its treatment of character to the minutest detail of stage effect. Indeed, no matter with what aspect of the Chinese theatre you deal, 'each situation, each object is presented abstractly and often symbolically.' Pure realism has been banished from the Chinese stage.

Let me cite a few examples from the ancient theatre.

Ma-Pien is a riding whip. When an actor holds a whip in his hand he is supposed to be riding horseback. The mounting and dismounting is depicted through established conventions of movement.

Che-Chi is a cart. It is depicted by two flags upon which there are painted wheels. Two servants hold the flags on each side of the rider who may either stand quietly or move about.

Ling-Chien is the messenger's arrow. When in ancient times a military commander would dispatch a messenger, he would entrust him with an arrow to indicate the authenticity of his news and also to convey the command that the message should be delivered with the speed of an arrow.

Similar symbols are used in the stage directions. For instance, if a Chinese actor is to show that he is passing through a door, he limits himself to raising one leg as though he were crossing a threshold. If, at the same time, he is supposed to be opening the door, he spreads his hands towards a non-existent door. When he is closing the door, he brings his hands together. These conventional stage directions are identical whenever a door is part of the business — for entrance or exit, for inside and outside, and so forth.

A realistic depiction of a dream is considered unaesthetic. If an actor is required to show that he is dreaming, he does so by leaning his head on a table. The act of battle is characterized by the following basic traits: 'The art of the duel on the stage consists first of all in the fact that the enemies never touch each other.' The duel consists of swiftly changing, synchronized rhythmical movements which give a conventionalized concept of the duel. Finally, in the old drama the taking of food was never presented realistically. Eating was usually depicted through a song or through several tunes on a flute. Such examples as these will show how certain objects have acquired definite symbolic meaning.

More interesting are the cases where the meanings are multifarious, where one and the same object, depending upon its use, may have more than one meaning. Such, for instance, are a table, a chair and a broom made of horsehair. 'A table or *Cho-Tzu*, more than any other object, can depict all sorts of things: sometimes it is an inn, sometimes it is a dining table, a courtroom or an altar.' A table is used when it is necessary to show that a man is climbing a mountain or jumping over a fence. When it is turned sideways (*Tao-I*) it symbolizes

a man sitting either on a cliff or on the ground in an uncomfortable position. When a woman is climbing a mountain, she gets up on a table. Similarly several chairs put together represent a bed.

Even more varied are the functions of *Yingch'en* — a broom made of horsehair. On the one hand *Yingch'en* represents the attribute of a demigod. Only gods, demigods, Buddhist priests and spirits of various sorts are entitled to possess it. In the hands of a servant, on the other hand, it becomes merely a household object. A Chinese description of the function of an *Yingch'en* says: 'Generally speaking, a broom may represent any number of objects on the Chinese stage.'

This aspect of multifariousness and elasticity is even more striking than the conventional method of acting. What is still more significant is the fact that this multifariousness is not a trait of the theatre alone. Its meaning is rooted much deeper. It is part of the Chinese 'thought process' and its influence upon the theatre is merely incidental.

By 'thought process' I do not mean the prevalent ideas which are conditioned by the national and racial interests of the Chinese. What I refer to is that aggregate of concepts with which the Chinese operate in the cultural and ultra-rational sphere. Its nature is deeply rooted in the social history of China and in that original social phenomenon according to which forms reflected in consciousness from earlier stages of social development are not discarded by later forms but are canonized by tradition. This, I repeat, is true primarily of the cultural field which is, however, broad enough to include problems of speech, morals, and so on. In this original aggregate of concepts, the structure of the pre-feudal system was preserved. It was shaped into a hierarchical system of thought in the post-feudal periods and finally in the eleventh century into a finished system of philosophy — a justification and legalization of the reign of the rising Han dynasty.

Such order of succession is to a certain degree typical of any system of thought. Particularly is it true of art. The question is, however, one of degree: in Chinese culture these traits are so strongly emphasized that they are strikingly impressive, even outside the boundaries imposed by specific fields of culture. They are essential to an understanding of the complex and exquisite hieroglyphs and emblems of China. Moreover, the multifariousness of meaning that astounds us when we examine the Chinese theatre forms the basis of any Chinese method

of expression. In these traits, as well as in a number of other characteristics, the pre-feudal traditions and concepts are strikingly imprinted; you will find traces of them no matter what branch of Chinese culture you examine.

Let us begin with the first means of cultural communication — speech. Here this trait is to be found in practically every word. The Chinese language belongs to the so-called monosyllabic languages. It has 460 monosyllabic words which do not change in speech. They convey definite meaning only when they are pronounced with a certain intonation, with a certain accent. A Chinese expresses each monosyllable in five different intonations. As a result, out of 460 indefinite sounds he acquires 2000 so-called root-words, each of which conveys a definite meaning. Since, however, these root words are not sufficient for purposes of speech, there also appears in the Chinese language a number of anonyms, each conveying from four to twelve different meanings. For instance, the designation of a chatterer, a fire, a ship, and feathers are expressed by the word *chou*. The word *hao*, depending upon the intonation with which it is pronounced, may mean 'to love', 'good', 'charity', 'friendship', 'very'. So the same word in the Chinese language expresses not only different meanings but also different parts of speech. In the spoken language, it is very difficult to distinguish one meaning from another. One has to guide himself by the general context or by the arrangement of the words. Similar phenomena, incidentally, are found in the cultural traditions of other countries, as, for instance, in the English language, the language of a country that is also steeped in traditionalism.

In this connection I remember a humorous poem about a Frenchman who tried hard to learn to pronounce properly the 'ough' with which so many words in English end:

> I'm taught p-l-o-u-g-h
> Shall be pronounced 'plow'.
>
> Zat's easy when you know, I say,
> Mon Anglais I'll get through.
>
> My teacher say zat in zat case
> O-u-g-h is 'oo'.
>
> And zan I laugh and say to him,
> Zees Anglais makes me cough.

He say: Not coo, but in zat word
O-u-g-h is 'off'!

Oh, sacré bleu! Such varied sounds
Of words makes me hiccough!

He say: Again mon friend ees wrong!
O-u-g-h is 'up'

In hiccough. Zen I cry: No more,
You make my throat feel rough!

Non! non! he cry, you are not right,
O-u-g-h is 'uff'.

I say: I try to speak your words
I can't pronounce them though.

In time you'll learn but now you're wrong,
O-u-g-h is 'owe'.

I'll try no more! I shall go mad,
I'll drown me in the lough!

But ere you drown yourself, said he,
O-u-g-h is 'ock'.

He taught me more! I held him fast
And killed him with a rough!

In the Chinese language the syntax, unlike Western Europe, is still in a rhythmical stage. The rhythmical pronunciation of a whole phrase decides its grammatical meaning — the phrases themselves mean 'anything you please', like the broom made of horsehair.

A word, a sign, an object and a phrase are not used to convey a definite meaning. While European logic attempts to establish the exact meaning of a given sign, the Chinese sign pursues a different goal. The Chinese hieroglyph serves first of all to convey an emotional impression perceived through a whole aggregate of accompanying impressions. The purpose of the hieroglyph or the symbol is not to give a rigidly defined idea. On the contrary, its purpose is to give a diffused image which is perceived indirectly. The role of the multifarious image is to allow each concept to inject its emotional experience, communicating with its neighbors in the most general terms. It is interesting to note that this method which is based, first of all, upon emotional communication and presented by a symbol which lacks intellectual rigidity could become a method of communication only

among the numerous peoples of the orient. The languages of north and south China or of China and Japan are so different that they find it hard to understand each other. The general symbolisms of these languages, however, are similar over the whole great territory. Similar concepts exist in Chinese art and in the theatre. In the light of these traits all the 'peculiar' aspects of Chinese theatrical technique become quite explicable.

What then is the practical lesson that we can derive from studying this theatre? For us, after all, it is not enough to admire its perfection. We seek in it a means to enrich our own experience. At the same time, we are in entirely different positions. We, in our creative practice, believe in realism and, what is more, in a realism of a higher form of development — socialist realism. The question then arises: Can we derive anything from an art that is altogether steeped in convention and is seemingly incompatible with our system of thought? And if we can derive something from it — what is it?

Whenever we deal with the problem of enriching our experience through other highly developed cultures from which we cannot borrow directly, we must first of all find out where there is a common language and in what specific field of our art we are nearest to this culture. Such a problem, for instance, arose in our relation to the technique of the Japanese Kabuki theatre. In an altogether original way, the Japanese theatre has influenced the aesthetics of our sound cinema.

The experience to be derived from the Chinese theatre is even wider and deeper. In its own sphere it is the acme of perfection, the sum total of those elements which form the kernel of any art work — its imagery. The problem of imagery is one of the main problems of our new aesthetics. While we are fast learning to develop our characters psychologically, we still lack a great deal when it comes to imagery. And here we come upon the most interesting aspect of Chinese culture — the theatre. Imagery in Chinese art is emphasized at the expense of the concrete and the thematic. This emphasis is the antithesis of the hypertrophy of imagery upon which our art is still based.

Is the polarity of these two approaches incompatible? Not at all. They are just two extremes in the development of those traits which, when they will blend into one harmonious whole, will give the highest phase of realism. And this extreme which is imprinted upon the past

cultural traditions of China is highly instructive in its examples of pure imagery, its multifarious and conventionalized symbols. The system of imagery in the Chinese traditional culture is inseparable from us historically. In her great tradition there is imprinted a stage of complex conceptions through which sensibility always operates. The traditional Chinese culture has brought us vestiges of a system of thinking through which every culture must pass at a certain stage.

Merriment from Megara

ROSAMOND GILDER

For a moment the stage is empty, the dancer has just finished her performance; the acrobats and tumblers have had their turn. The musicians are resting on their instruments. Into the silence walks an amiable gentleman with a market basket on his arm — bread, a bottle, sausages, all the paraphernalia of a picnic protrude from it. The man's face is ruddy, a bit pop-eyed, his mouth extraordinarily large, his entire expression mildly inane — benevolently imbecile. Roars of laughter greet his mere appearance. His way of walking, his innocent struggles with his over-laden basket, his candid solemnity put everyone in good humor. He selects a convenient spot in the middle of the floor and spreads a tablecloth on which he proudly sets forth his precious meal. The bottle he deposits carefully on his right hand, the loaf, the fruit, the meat all about him. He is gluttonous and hungry — full of expectation of a noble feast.

As he turns to pick up his bottle for a pre-prandial swig, a bald-headed rascal of a thief slips behind his back unseen and snatches away the loaf of bread, crouching down again behind a convenient rock before the unfortunate picnicker has finished his first drink. Smacking his lips with satisfaction, our hero turns to pick up the bread. The loaf is gone! His expression of astonishment and grief is devastating. The audience howls with joy as the poor man searches in vain on the empty cloth, while the thief, popping up on the other side, makes away with the bottle. Just too late the picnicker bethinks him of