THE PEKING OPERA

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by

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Photos by Eva Siao

Supplement to

CHINA RECONSTRUCTS

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OPPOSITE: Stone carving of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) showing musician (*sitting*) and performers.

FRONT COVER: Mei Lan-fang, China's foremost actor, in the title role of the play *The Nymph of the River Lo.*
Photo by Li Wei-ming

BACK COVER: One of the two open-air stages in the Summer Palace, Peking. It was built by Emperor Chien Lung in 1750. *Photo by Chang Shui-cheng*

THE PEKING OPERA — AN ART FOR THE PEOPLE

DESPITE its conventional form, the Chinese drama ("Peking Opera") is essentially realist. It sprang from the people and has never ceased to express their hopes and strivings. It has never hesitated to lash out, with mordant humour, at tyranny and corruption. One favourite stage character is Yueh Fei (A.D. 1103-1142), killed by a traitorous Prime Minister because of his determination to resist foreign invasion. Another is Pao Chen, the fearless, upright judge of the Northern Sung dynasty (A.D. 960-1127). Such types have always been close to the people's hearts. And even in such a fairy-tale fantasy as *The White Snake,* which was given a fatalistic turn by China's old ruling class in an attempt to distort its anti-feudal theme, the sympathy of the audience always goes to the young woman whose tragedy is that she loves the man of her own choice. It is this affirmation of positive values of life that has kept Chinese drama popular.

The grace which wins hearts for the "Peking Opera" comes from the fact that it is essentially a dance drama. In the very old days in China, dancers did not sing and singers did not dance. Later, song and dance were combined to tell the story. Dancing became an integral part of the Chinese theatre. Today we see it skilfully woven into the dramatic situation as a regular part of our stagecraft. Because of this, the training of Chinese actors is an unusually exacting process.

The traditional stage had no scenery whatsoever. The actor was expected to evoke illusory doors, rivers, trees and other objects on the bare boards through his dancing, singing and acting. Performances were given in the open air. The stage was a square, raised platform with pillars at the four corners supporting an upcurled roof. Only the back was partitioned off, with two openings for the players to go on and off; the other three sides were exposed. The spectators stood all around, craning their necks to catch a glimpse. This was the rural theatre.

In the towns playhouses arose. But the arrangement remained basically the same. Stools and tables were set out at right angles to the dais on the main floor. Here the audience sat drinking tea while listening to the singing (if interested in seeing the acting, they could turn to face the stage). There were also balconies where boxes for women or private parties were located. In Peking, old playhouses of this type could be seen as late as the 1920's, a decade after the first modern frame-like stage was introduced.

The success of the play depended almost entirely on the art of the actors—sometimes of only one actor. Take for instance the short play *The Runaway Nun*, based on a story several hundred years old. A solitary performer portrays a young girl of 16, confined in a nunnery on a

lonely mountain-top. The day before, she has watched some young men loitering outside. They cast admiring glances at her. Now she has no heart to study her daily lesson, and wonders sorrowfully why her parents should have sent her away to be a nun. She leaves her room to walk in the cloister, where there are eighteen sculptured Buddhist saints, more than life size. She sees sympathy in each of them and imitates their postures one by one as she dances. Her determination mounts. Longing for freedom to marry and have a child, she runs away. On the stage there are no mountains, no young men, no cloister, no images. All are conjured up before our eyes by the dancing of the nun.

In *Autumn River,* the imaginary river and boat are conjured up before the spectators by the dancing movements of the old boatman, and of the girl trying to overtake her lover. In *The Crossroads,* a fight takes place under the full glare of the stage light. Yet the groping motions, the wild swinging of swords, the incredible succession of tense and comic situations, make it clear that the furious opponents are in the dark.

Symbolic Representation

The properties used in the Chinese drama are as simple as the stage is bare. A table and two chairs are the most common. In real life there are many kinds of tables serving different purposes, but on the stage one takes the place of them all. What is more, it may do extra duty to represent a mountain, a platform, wall or roof. A chair, besides its proper self, can be the door of a jail or a cave dwelling. An embroidered curtain hung between sticks behind the two chairs may represent a canopy, or a bed. Means of transport are always shown symbolically. The man holding a tasselled whip mounts and dismounts as if there were a real horse. The official

bends his head as he steps into the carriage represented by two square flags with a wheel painted on each.

The Music

Music plays a vital part. It not only accompanies the singing and dancing; it also greatly heightens the dramatic effect of certain gestures, expressions and events by beating out a precise, hypnotic rhythm. Because of the close coordination between acting and music, the orchestra used to sit at the back of the stage in full view of the audience. Now it is generally placed to one side, behind the curtain. The most important instrument accompanying the singing parts is the *hu chin,* a shrill two-stringed fiddle. In battle scenes, gongs, drums and cymbals stir up an atmosphere of high tension. The music is led by a man playing a small drum and a wooden clapper.

Types of Roles

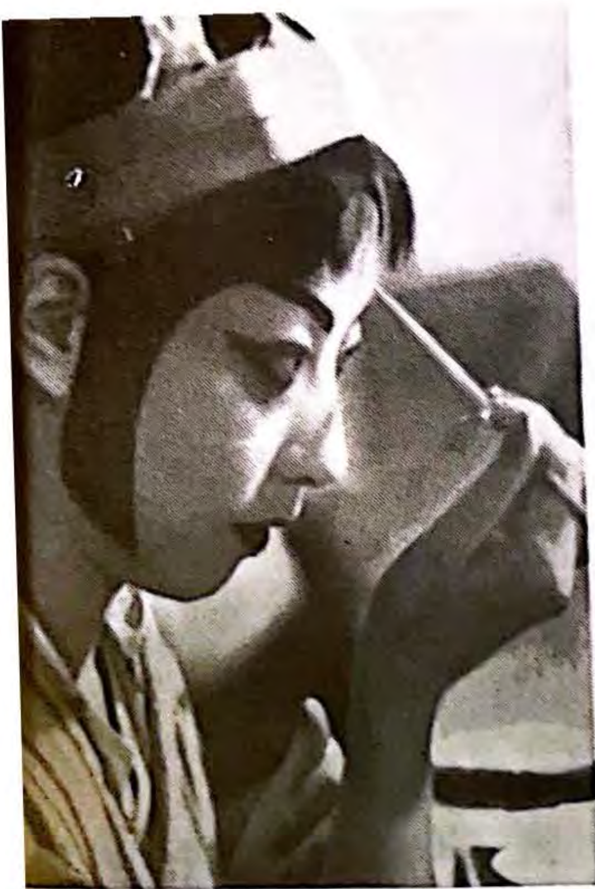
Actors are trained according to the nature of their parts. The four main roles in the Chinese drama are *sheng* (male lead), *tan* (female lead), *ching* (painted faces) and *chou* (clowns with a patch of white around the nose). The original principle on which this division was based is not clear. Sometimes it was the sex, sometimes the character of the role. But the classification, at least as regards the first three categories, has remained the same for over a thousand years.

A 'military sheng' *by Ting Tsung*

As the theatre developed, each type of part was further sub-divided. One such division was into "civilian" and "military". This was necessary because the same actor could rarely be expected to have both a good voice and the capacity to perform extraordinary physical feats. Then there were the age distinctions. The male lead might be bearded, singing in a natural voice, or a juvenile, singing in falsetto to show his youth. *Lao tan* (old woman) and *tsai tan* (ugly woman) were special categories of female parts. The former wore no makeup and sang in a natural voice. The latter was usually played by the clownlike *chou*. The most important *tan*, however, were the youthful beauties. They could be of the demure type, always exemplary in behavior. Or they might be sparkling coquettes, generally more innocent than malicious.

The "painted faces" lay the main emphasis on character. Their colours and designs have come to stand for certain moral qualities. Kuan Yu, a respected hero of the Three Kingdoms (A.D. 220-264), is described in popular literature as having had a reddish complexion. Since he was known for his loyalty, red has come to symbolize loyalty on the stage. So also with the symbolic meaning of white (craftiness) and black (integrity). The colours themselves are not so important as the pattern of the makeup, which evokes in the audience the feelings appropriate to the character portrayed. In the facial makeup of Chang Fei, a warrior of the Three Kingdoms, for instance, while black and white show his valour and hot temper, the basic pinkish tint shows him to be a warm and lovable character. By contrast the crafty character of Tsao Tsao, a wicked prime minister of the same period, is brought out by two elongated, half-closed eyes and subtly-placed wrinkles around the nose and lips.

As distinct from the *ching* roles of despots and corrupt high officials, the *chou* are usually petty and comic



A 'tan' making up

villains. The boxing master and his disciples in the *Fisherman's Revenge*, a play we will describe later, are good examples of this. But not all *chou* are detestable. Some are simple rustics, like the one in *The Cowherd and the Village Girl*, a play we describe briefly further on.

Training of Actors

In former times a boy would begin to train for the stage at the age of seven or eight. He did not choose his role for himself. It was usually chosen for him by his family or master. Basic training consisted of four arts: singing, dancing and mime, memorizing dialogue, and acrobatic combat. There was no text. It was all done by verbal teaching and recitation.

Mei Lan-fang, China's leading actor, comes from a family in which male actors have played *tan* (female) roles for four generations. He recalls how he started learning when he was only eight. The master sat at a table and held in his hand a ferule, which served the double purpose of beating time and inflicting punishment on the lazy pupil. Mei stood by, repeating the part word by word after his master. Singing, which did not begin until he was word-perfect in the text, was taught the same way. Then came miming, including the mincing stage walk, closing and opening doors, making hand and finger gestures, motions of the long sleeves, crying, laughing and so on. Meanwhile, Mei also practised the art of fighting. He learned how to make up, and how to put on and manage the costume.

Chinese theatre costumes, elaborate and splendid, often create immense difficulties for their wearer. As a *tan,* Mei Lan-fang was not accustomed to the boots often worn in the male roles, with their thick soles raised two or three inches above the ground. But since some plays require a female character to disguise herself as a man, he once had to practise fighting in these raised boots for two months before he had enough confidence to wear them on the stage. In 1912, when he was already an accomplished master, Mei relates, he donned the full array of a woman warrior for the first time—and found himself unable to keep his head properly erect because of the weight of the four pennants on his back.

Equally revealing is the experience of another actor, Li Shao-chun, well known for his part as Sun Wu-kung, the "Monkey King". Now 38 years old, with 24 years of acting behind him, he excels in both singing and "military" parts. This unusual combination comes from natural endowment combined with rigid training. When Li was seven years old his father, himself an outstanding actor, decided that he should learn to play *sheng* roles. For the next seven or eight years the boy worked from six o'clock in the morning to eleven o'clock at night. Be-

A 'chin' making up

sides singing and acting, he was taught tumbling, jumping, kicking and other acrobatic feats. Each day was rounded off by learning to read and write.

The old theatrical teachers believed that good actors were made with the aid of the stick. Boys in training were often thrashed black and blue. Now these barbarous ideas are forgotten. In the two schools of traditional acting in Peking young children of both sexes are taught by better methods. The course lasts eight years. In the first four years fundamental training is given in singing, dancing and mime, dialogue and stage fighting. Only after this do the students begin to specialize in *sheng, tan, ching* or *chou* parts. The next four years are devoted to advanced courses in acting, singing and the analysis of plays. In addition, all students are required to complete an ordinary secondary-school course.

Every Chinese actor in training has heeded the popular saying: "The master gives you the key; it is up to you to make full use of it." Even well-established actors never miss their daily physical and voice exercises. As their understanding develops, they search ceaselessly for a deeper interpretation of their parts. After more than fifty years on the stage, Mei Lan-fang is still trying to perfect his acting by constant revision. It was he who gave new life and new charm to the old play *The Drunken Beauty,* about a favourite neglected by her imperial lover. The beauty's despair is an expression of the enslaved position of all women, even the most highly placed in the old Chinese society. Only recently Mei made another change in the traditional interpretation. He added a gesture by which the drunken beauty scornfully rejects the proffered help of her attendants, thus helping to show the complexity of her feelings.

Chinese dramatic acting has often been described as conventionalized. It is true that many conventions sur-

round it. But they themselves are based on actual observation of life. They were handed down and perfected from generation to generation because they were found to be the most effective way of expressing reality. But they were not meant to be restrictive. While helping the beginner to reach a certain standard, they also afford freedom to experienced actors to introduce variations or invent new forms as warranted by dramatic necessity. Historically, this is the way the conventions were formed. And this is what has kept them from becoming static. Great actors have made their contribution to all the well-known roles.

History of the Art

The Chinese drama in its present form has been traced back to the Sung dynasty (960-1279). Some authorities believe it probably dates from the Tang dynasty (618-907). Even earlier, we know, there were character sketches in terse dialogue, mimetic dances, story-telling accompanied by music and acrobatic performances. All of these went into the making of the drama. But there is little recorded information about the Chinese theatre before it bloomed into full glory in the thirteenth century. In the past, popular theatrical perform-

A 'chou'
by Chang Chen-yu

ances were looked down upon by writers. The first history of the Chinese drama was written less than fifty years ago.

Recently a mural dated 1324, representing a stage scene, was found in a temple in Shansi province. It is the earliest known picture of the Chinese theatre. In the background is a drop with two painted scrolls. In front of it stand five men, all in the costumes of an earlier age. The middle one, in a scarlet robe, wearing a high official's hat and holding an ivory tablet with two hands, appears to be the hero of the play. Of the other four, one wears a painted face, another has a patch of white around his eyes, and a third is bearded. In the background, a man and a woman play a flute and clappers. Facial makeup, costumes, beards and musical accompaniment—things familiar on the modern stage—are all there in their simpler early form.

In a fourteenth-century play a rustic is satirized because he makes his way into a town playhouse without recognizing it. He gawks at colourful bills posted at the street corner. A man standing at the gateway tells him what kind of play is going on inside and ushers him in. He pays two hundred coins and walks up a wooden slope. There he sees a "building like a bell-tower" (probably the stage) surrounded by crowds. A few women are sitting on the stage and gongs and drums sound incessantly. Such were the playhouses that were a common scene in Kaifeng and later in Hangchow during the Sung dynasty.

After the fourteenth century play-writing, acting and dancing were further perfected. Costumes became more gorgeous and facial makeup more elaborate. Major changes took place in music and singing, and many schools competed for popularity.

It was on the basis of this dramatic heritage that the Peking opera made its conquest over a hundred years ago. Despite its name, it did not originate in the capital, but

Trial scene from 'Yu Tang Chun' *by Chang Kuang-yu*

was brought there by actors from Anhwei province in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The Anhwei style of singing, which originated in the countryside, had already been popular for three centuries. Shortly before it went to Peking, it was pronounced the best of all the styles of drama gathered at Yangchow, then the most prosperous city on the lower Yangtze.

There were two major divisions of dramatic style in Peking at that time: the "refined" and the "flowery". The "refined" *(Kunshan)* had dominated the Chinese stage since its formation in the early sixteenth century and was considered the most finished in acting, singing and poetic expression. The "flowery" style included all the other schools that had found their way to the capital from various places. Though less elegant than the *Kunshan* school, these were more lively and more popular. The Anhwei school enriched itself from all these sources, as well as from another style subsequently brought in from Hupeh province. This is shown in the name of the first

company formed by Anhwei actors in Peking. It was called "Three Joys", which meant that it performed not only in its own style, but also in two others of the "flowery" division.

By 1850, when Peking opera as we now know it won unassailable primacy, it was no longer recognizable as a variation of the Anhwei style. In fact, it was a synthesis of the entire heritage of the Chinese drama. In its repertoire today, we find many plays taken over from other schools which are still given in their original form.

There was another reason why the newcomer achieved nation-wide popularity. It brought the theatre nearer to the people. As compared with the *Kunshan* style, from which it borrowed more than others, its singing parts were much less "literary" and the language more easily understood. Plots were more compact and dramatic. Character interpretation responded to the feelings of the people. Villains were vigorously stigmatized, even if they were high officials or emperors. Patriotic warriors, or daughters who rebelled against feudal oppression, were extolled. The new range of characters expressed a strong sense of social justice. This was the chief reason for the success of the Peking opera.

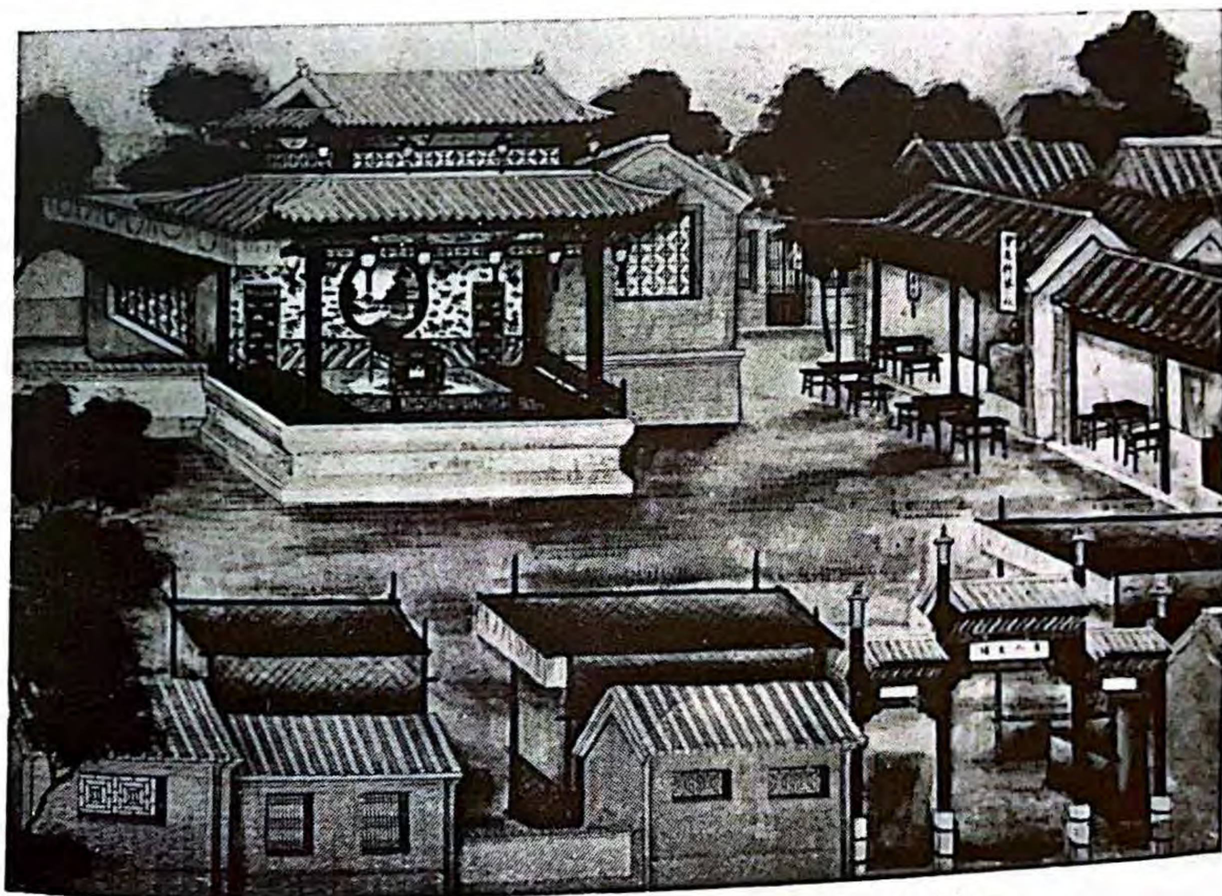
The other side of the coin is that the Peking opera developed in a feudal age, and to some extent under court patronage. It therefore could not be entirely free from the taint of the feudal outlook. Later, in capitalist Shanghai, it was often so commercialized that it became shoddy and fantastic, without art or reality. There was also a tendency to over-emphasize its formalistic aspect, making it untrue to life.

Since the liberation much has been done to restore the Peking opera to its original purity, to cut away meaningless fantasy, obscurantism and cheap sensuality. New plays have also been written and successfully staged. Con-

siderable discussion has taken place on technical problems such as proposals to make some changes in the use of "painted faces", the introduction of scenery, and the improvement of the music. No conclusive answers to these questions have been found. The theatre is seeking a new road that will meet the new feelings of the people without impairing the traditional forms they love. This cannot be done in a day.

Since liberation all styles of drama, numbering over 200, have been encouraged to develop and learn from each other. Their repertoires, probably totalling several thousand plays, often overlap. As far as the Peking opera is concerned, a pre-liberation collection gave more than 500 titles.

Themes were drawn from history and legend, social situations and fairy tales. There are also a number of



A seventeenth century theatre in Peking

short, almost plotless plays consisting of a series of dances and songs with a strong folk character. Four typical plays are discussed below.

FOUR CHINESE PLAYS

Resisting the Tartar Invaders

Resisting the Tartars is a good example of the patriotic theme. It describes how the Chinese people repulsed invaders from the Northeast who, from 1125 onward, began to overrun north China. In the year 1130 a Tartar army, 100,000 strong, marched all the way down to the Yangtze River, reaching what is now Chinkiang, Kiangsu province. The defending generals, Han Shih-chung and his wife, Liang Hung-yu, commanded a force which had less than a tenth of the enemy's strength. But they beat back the Tartars because they had the support of the people.

The play begins by showing the big army led by the Tartar chief, Wushu (on the stage this is symbolically represented by six generals and eight soldiers). To identify them as alien invaders, the faces of Wushu and his generals are painted in bizarre colours. Wushu consults his chief-of-staff, a clownish man with a patch of white around his nose. Then he announces his intention of taking Yangchow, on the north bank of the Yangtze. Meanwhile, civilians are fleeing southward and volunteering for service under Han Shih-chung.

The scene shifts to the Chinese camp. General Han's wife, Liang Hung-yu, enters in a splendid robe, accompanied by eight women warriors. Her advice is to attack the enemy. General Han flies into a rage at a commander who advocates a wait-and-see policy. Liang Hung-yu intervenes. With eloquence and lofty patriotism, she wins over the weak-hearted commander, who agrees to participate in the concerted assault on the invaders.

From then on, Liang Hung-yu dominates the play. Short dialogues inform the audience that the Tartars have crossed the river, employing as their guide an innkeeper who is really a secret patriot. Before the battle, Liang Hung-yu and her husband inspect their army. In the quiet of night, while the soldiers rest, the couple sing and dance together. They vow to each other to wipe out the enemy.

Next morning, Liang Hung-yu dons full armour and issues orders to various units. Soon the climax is reached.

At the river, Han Shih-chung is leading his troops into attack. Liang Hung-yu, who has taken her station atop a a hill (represented by a chair), beats a drum to spur him on. Soon she and her women soldiers throw themselves into the combat. The Tartars flee. The Chinese pursue. The fight takes place on the Yangtze River, but there is no river on the stage, not even a painted one. Nonetheless we know it is there, from the oarsmen who closely follow each army, and the graceful gyrations of the actors.

As the curtain falls the faithful innkeeper leads the Tartars into a trap. Han Shih-chung and Liang Hung-yu prepare to destroy them.

The Fisherman's Revenge

This play strikes another frequent note: the struggle of the plain people against feudal oppression.

The story takes place in the twelfth century. Old Hsiao En, with his daughter Kwei-ying, is fishing on a river. The girl is thrilled by the beauty of the clear water and verdant hills. Her bearded father is more occupied with his old age and the problem of making a living. As

they moor their boat under a willow, two men approach them.

They are Li and Ni, brave outlaws who redress the wrongs of the poor and oppressed. Respectfully they address Hsiao En as "old hero roaming the rivers and lakes". While the men are drinking to their friendship, an evil-looking type appears on the river bank and casts covetous eyes on Kwei-ying. Challenged, he claims to have lost his way to the house of the rich landlord, Ting. Then one of Ting's bailiffs comes up. He demands that Hsiao En pay a tax which is due.

The old man promises to deliver the tax when he is able. But the two outlaws say to the bailiff: "Remit the tax or we'll beat you." Hsiao En pleads with them not to cause trouble. He has fought and struggled all his life. Now he desires to spend his remaining years in peace with his daughter. But when the outlaws ask whether that is any reason why they should tolerate oppression, he knows they are right, although he still hopes the thing will settle itself quietly.

Next morning Ting's boxing master, with four cronies, comes to Hsiao En's house to collect the tax. The master is a swaggering coxcomb; even his own pupils mock and ridicule him. He tries to put chains on Hsiao En but gets all tangled up in them himself. Hsiao En tries to keep his temper. But when the ludicrous extortioner challenges him to fight, his blood rises and he lays about him, beating all five and calling them "slaves of slaves". After they have run away, he tries to save the situation by being the first one to lodge a complaint with the magistrate.

The magistrate is hand in glove with the landlord. He orders that Hsiao En be given forty strokes with a heavy bamboo rod before asking him a single question. Then he orders the old man to go to Ting's house and beg forgiveness. Outraged, Hsiao En sees that there is only

one way to get justice. With his daughter, he rows across the river. Penetrating into Ting's house he kills the landlord, the boxing master, and the man who had cast eyes on Kwei-ying the day before.

The play has come to an end. But the question lingers in the mind of the spectators: Can there be any "peace and quiet" for the oppressed under despotic feudal rule?

Storming the Heavens

Sun Wu-kung, the Monkey King, is a delightful creation in Chinese mythology. Being a supernatural creature, he is endowed with incredible resource and prowess. But he is still a true monkey, always mischievous and unruly in the eyes of the oppressors. His story, told and retold since the twelfth century, was greatly popularized by *Hsi Yu Chi* (*Journey to the West*), a sixteenth-century novel.*

Storming the Heavens tells one of Monkey's many exploits over Heaven and Earth. In the first scene he is mockingly clad in a red robe and has attendants, like a high official, because he has been appointed by the Emperor of Heaven to be the custodian of the Garden of Peaches of Longevity. In this mythical garden the peach trees bear fruit only once every 18,000 years, and those who taste them can live as long as the sun and moon. Four women come to pick the peaches for a great goddess, the Queen Mother of the West. She has invited some guests to eat the magic fruit. Monkey is furious because he has not been asked. He decides on revenge.

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*Translated into English by Arthur Waley under the title of *Monkey*.

Floating over the clouds, Monkey soon reaches the Queen Mother's palatial garden, where the banquet has been set out. He helps himself to the celestial food and drink. Then he finds the gourd in which is kept the Elixir of Long Life, which he also swallows greedily. The whole of Heaven is thrown into an uproar by these outrages. The Emperor orders Monkey's arrest. But the heavenly host of martially resplendent spirits and warriors suffers miserable defeat at Monkey's hands. He laughs them all to scorn saying, "Behind the fine front, there is only decayed stuffing."

As a rule the main role is played by military *sheng*, on whose expressive dance and mime the success of the performance depends. At times he imitates the movements of a monkey; at another moment he is performing a graceful dance accompanied by singing; then he hurls himself into fantastically skilful acrobatics as he fights against his opponents. The whole performance is pervaded with the mocking and exultant spirit of the common man triumphing over the mighty ones of the earth.

The Cowherd and the Village Girl

This dramatic vignette is characteristic of the rustic plays. It is simply a short series of songs and dances. The slight story is more an afterthought than a dramatic plot.

A cowherd meets a girl. They admire each other. She asks him where she can buy the best wine. He points out the way, but will not let her go until she has sung him some songs. So they sing and dance together. Whenever she finishes and wants to go, he detains her, begging for one more.

The peasant origin of the play is revealed by its use of folk melody and by the style of the dance. It is a little gem, pure and charming.

CHINA RECONSTRUCTS AND ITS SUPPLEMENTS

CHINA RECONSTRUCTS, to which this booklet is a supplement, is an illustrated monthly magazine chronicling China's progress in the economic, social and cultural fields. It also presents special features including trade news, a Chinese language lesson, answers to readers' questions, a women's corner, stamp column and songs with music.

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTS are a regular feature of "*China Reconstructs.*" There will be three in 1956, of which this is the second. The first, "Two Chinese Picture Stories", was published in March. There will be a third, the story of the Li Shun-ta agricultural producers' cooperative, in October.

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