

CHINESE DRAMA TODAY

FIRST I must make clear what I mean by modern drama. I am not referring to modern developments of the many types of Chinese opera with their distinctive blend of speech, song and dance which are a time-honoured tradition in China. I mean plays with plots and dialogue, with scenes and acts, realistic decor and lighting, mirroring contemporary life or founded on historical fact. Such plays reached China from Europe little more than half a century ago.

First Steps

In the years that followed the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, patriotic young Chinese intellectuals were quick to voice their pent-up indignation against imperial misrule and foreign aggression, and strove to rouse public opinion through all sorts of traditional forms such as Kunshan and Peking operas, and the rhythmic and patter ballad, all of which served their purpose to some extent. But in modern drama they found a fresh keen weapon, a new vehicle to express their political sentiments. Before that, missionary colleges in Shanghai, Canton and other places had staged Shakespeare and Moliere, but such productions had little obvious effect. It was the Spring Willow Club, organised by Chinese students studying in Japan, which really started to introduce drama in Western style to the Chinese people.

In 1907, the year after the death of Ibsen, Tseng Hsiao-ku, Li Hsi-shuang and others, all Chinese students studying the arts in Japan, staged Dumas Fils' *La Dame Aux Camelias* in Tokyo. A student studying commerce saw the performance and said admiringly, "Fancy there being plays like that in

by
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the world!" He promptly joined the theatrical company and became one of its most important members. That student was Ouyang Yu-chien, who was later to become the director of the Central Institute of Drama in New China and honoured as one who had devoted fifty years of his life to modern drama in China.

New Influences

A still more powerful influence was the performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which they staged the same year. Tseng Hsiao-ku had turned Mrs. Stowe's novel into a seven-act play. The righteous indignation it expressed against national discrimination and oppression was completely in accord with the sentiments of the students pursuing their studies and the revolutionaries in exile in Japan. In 1911, on the eve of the revolution, Jen Tien-chih, a member of the Spring Willow Club, returned to China and produced the play in Shanghai. The effect was electric. New theatrical companies sprang up all over the country. After the success of the 1911 revolution, the Spring Willow Club itself returned to China and put on plays. The "new drama" swept the country, and the traditional opera was relegated to the background as "old stuff." In fact, traditional opera was, consciously or unconsciously, influenced by the "new drama," and took over from it a certain amount of stagecraft and gesture. Mei Lan-fang staged new productions of the Peking operas *Teng Hsia-ku* and *A Piece of Hemp Thread*, obviously modified by modern drama.

Yuan Shih-kai, who betrayed the revolution, suppressed most of the new, progressive theatrical companies. The



A scene from Act II of *Shakuntala*

new theatre movement with Shanghai as its centre was baffled. But even so, some companies managed to stage two plays, *Spring Dream inside Hsinhua Gate* and *Dream of an Emperor*, which held the traitor up to ridicule.

After 'May the Fourth Movement' of 1919, the new drama movement revived. Unfortunately, and quite wrongly, the traditional operas were

criticized indiscriminately as feudal and obscurantist, while modern drama was regarded as necessarily democratic and scientific. Ibsen, Strindberg and Shaw were translated into Chinese fairly systematically. In an attempt to stop the theatre being commercialized and vulgarized, many dramatists advocated *aimai* (beauty loving) drama, a term ultimately derived from the word "amateur." The Jenyi School of



Dramatic Art—the earliest school in China for training new talent in modern drama—was founded in Peking.

The New Trend

A flourishing dramatic literature always accompanies a revival of the theatre. After 'May the Fourth Movement' there was a spate of modern plays like Kuo Mo-jo's *Nieh Yung*, Ting Hsi-lin's *Oppression*, Tien Han's *Night of the Tiger Hunt* and Hung Shen's *Chao, King of Hell*. Later, in the thirties, came Tsao Yu's *Thunder and Rain* and *Sunrise*, and plays by Hsia Yen, Yu Ling and Chen Po-chen. In Shanghai, the centre of the movement, organisations like the Drama Club, the South China Club, the Hsin Yu Theatre Club and the Art Theatre Club were active, specializing in European plays presented in a more conventional way. One outstanding success was Hung Shen's production of Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Theatrical circles began to pay more attention to the technique of acting and stagecraft.

The early thirties saw much repression from the Kuomintang on the left-wing drama movement. The Art Theatre and the South China Club were closed down. But new clubs sprang up. Juikin in Kiangsi, the Red Army Club and the Workers' and Peasants' Theatrical Company were formed, and then, in the winter of 1932, the Central Theatrical Company and the Gorky Dramatic School. These organisations performed quite a number of plays including *I, the Red Army* (a collective effort), Hu Ti's *Red Spy*, Sha Ko-fu's *To Arms*, Li Po-chao's *Victory at All Costs*, and *The Nanchang Uprising*, another collective effort. After the main force of the Red Army set out on the Long March, the actors and playwrights in Juikin were regrouped into three theatrical companies under the leadership of Chu Chiu-pai. They lived right among the peasants and soldiers, and put on plays for them. Early

in 1935, the three companies returned to Yutu, Kiangsi, and held a festival. Chu Chiu-pai watched the performances under an umbrella in the pelting rain, patiently guiding and enthusiastically encouraging the actors.

On the 8,000-mile Long March, the three army corps each had its theatrical company. These companies did a magnificent job of entertainment, agitation and propaganda, but they also paid dearly for it. Hu Ti, the most prolific playwright in the central revolutionary area in Kiangsi was murdered by a traitor; Chien Chuang-fei was killed by an enemy plane, and Ma Po and others in the third company were trapped by the enemy in the Kansu Corridor, west of the Yellow River, and all of them killed. Only one of the three companies was still in existence, its strength reduced to eight, when the Red Army arrived at Yen-an.

On August 13, 1937, resistance to the invaders became nation-wide. The National Salvation League of Dramatic Groups in Shanghai organised the actors of the city into thirteen teams. Two of them remained in Shanghai, one went to Eastern Chekiang, and the remaining ten made their way to Nanking, whence they fanned out to different places north and south of the Yangtze and put on agitational plays. These teams drew in the cream of the Chinese theatrical world. They toured city, town and country in the hinterland, rousing people to action and at the same time educating themselves. Amid the holocaust of war they ran into frightful difficulties, but managed to thrive despite the complex political situation. Plays like Lao Sheh's *Our Country Comes First*, Tsao Yu's *Metamorphosis*, Sung Chih-ti's *Foggy Chungking*, Kuo Mo-jo's *Chu Yuan*, Mao Tun's *Before and After Chingming Festival* and Chen Po-chen's *Jobs for the Boys*, were produced as a clarion call for national liberation, democracy and freedom. This lead was followed by theatrical workers in Kweilin, Kun-



A scene from the play *Chu Yuan*, by Kuo Mo-jo

ming and other places under Kuomintang rule. In July 1949, with liberation, the first national congress of artists and others active in the cultural field was held in Peking. It brought together artists and writers from the old and new liberated areas, and even from areas still to be liberated.

Modern Chinese drama is now, as it was before 1949, closely related to the people's aspirations for national liberation and for freedom and democracy.

In Chinese the word for drama is *hua chu* (dialogue play), and it does, in fact, stress the importance of speech. But etymologically speaking the word *drama* implies action. It is true that our *hua chu* set out to convey ideas, but it is perhaps a weakness that they tend to make characters speak too much and act too little. We have to admit that our artistic level in both respects leaves much to be desired. Our actors and directors are now making a real effort to master the Stanislavsky tradition of realistic acting and staging.





A scene from the opera

The White Haired Girl

—a modern
Chinese opera

Condensed from an article by Ma Ko—one
of the composers of "The White Haired Girl"

The story of *The White Haired Girl* is now a much-told tale in China. It was the first Chinese opera to tackle a theme worthy of grand opera and a theme drawn from significant happenings in our own times—something absolutely new in the history of modern Chinese opera. The music, however, is not in the style of Western grand opera, nor much like Western operetta, but follows the pattern of traditional Chinese opera with its fusion of singing, dialogue and dancing. It draws on the wealth of Chinese folk song, opera and revolutionary songs, and also draws on modern Western music for certain technical devices like the *leit-motiv*, for harmonization and counterpoint. The band to which the original orchestration was necessarily limited also used some Western instruments. Everybody in China knows and loves the air:

*Pei feng na kē ch'ui, hsieh hua ne kē
p'iao,
hsieh hua na kē p'iao p'iao nien lai tao.*

*(The north wind blows, the snow flakes
whirl,
A flurry of snow brings in the New
Year.)*

It is sung to the tune of the folk song, *The Little Cabbage*, by Hsi-erh, the heroine, as she happily waits for her father to come home to enjoy New Year's Eve. The theme is a *motiv* which characterizes Hsi-erh all through the opera.

Hsi-erh, humiliated and raped by Huang Shih-jen, the landlord, sings:

*T'ien na—tao sha wo, fu k'an wo, pu
kai cheh-mo tsao-t'a wo,
Tzu-ts'ung chin-liao Huang-chia mên,
hsiang pu tao chin-t'ien na. . .*

*(Heaven! You could kill me with a
knife or axe,
But you shouldn't have shamed me!
I little thought of this
When I came to the Huang house...)*

This passage is moulded upon the *san pan* in classical Chinese drama, used rather like free recitative in Western opera, closely following the vivid rhythms of speech, expressing emotional and dramatic conflict by an alternation of rapid and slow *tempi*.

The finale of the opera depicts a "struggle-meeting" against the despotic landlord, Huang Shih-jen. Here Hsi-erh's accusations and the angry shouts of the peasants are expressed in a liberally employed succession of duets, trios, choruses and unison singing and such like devices of Western music which are absent from or only tentatively used in our traditional opera. But audiences take them in their stride,

first because such scenes demand this treatment for it has become familiar in our every-day musical life, and secondly because the melodies still retain a national colour all through.

To non-Chinese audiences *The White Haired Girl* may seem less than perfect in musical form, may not fall in with their conception of what an opera should be. They may think the theme fit for grand opera treatment, but consider the actual treatment more like operetta. But Chinese audiences are used to this form of expression, and I think whatever faults the opera has are due to our not making the best use of Chinese operatic skill in stating and resolving dramatic conflicts.

