STILL ALIVE

By EILEEN CHANG

Ever since Marco Polo visited China, thousands of books have been written about this country, and some people might feel that there is nothing new left that could be said about it. This, however, is not true. The vast majority of literature concerning China and the Chinese consists of the description of facts—historical, geographical, cultural, linguistic, and others. But, in contrast to the nineteenth century, our age is more interested in the "why" than in the "what," and it is in this respect that a great deal still remains to be done.

The following article, dealing with a famous old Chinese institution, does not add just one more to the many former descriptions of this subject, but tries to answer the question, why this institution is still so popular in present-day China.

Miss Eileen Chang, whose article "Chinese Life and Fashions" (January 1943) found much acclaim among our readers, is a Chinese who, in contrast to most of her countrymen, does not simply take China for granted. It is her deep curiosity about her own people which enables her to interpret the Chinese to the foreigner.—K.M.

NEVER before has the hardened city of Shanghai been moved so much by a play as by "*Autumn Quince*" ("*Chiu Hai Tang*"), a sentimental melodrama which has been running at the Carlton Theater since December 1942. The play, freely adapted from a novel of the same name, has not yet been published, but the majority of the audience attend the performance so regularly that they learn the dialogues by heart and anticipate everything said, repeating aloud the more stirring speeches after the actors. Strong men weep copiously at the tragic downfall of a Peking Opera star, a female impersonator, who answers to the lyrical stage name of Autumn Quince.

The success of the play has given rise to a host of imitators. At one time there were no less than six plays showing simultaneously in Shanghai which dealt with the private lives of Peking Opera stars and backstage intrigues. ("Peking Opera" is the term used for the prevailing form of Chinese stage play, which is characterized by singing after set tunes and by dialogues in a mixture of the Peking and Hupeh dialects; by conventionalized costumes, masks, and movements; and by the absence of scenery.) The color and atmosphere of Peking Opera strongly prevails in these plays, with here and there a brief interlude of actual Peking Opera. It astounds us to reflect that, although the new theater of China has taken a firmly antagonistic stand against Peking Opera from its very conception, the first real triumph of the new theater is a compromise—a humiliating fact.

Why is the Peking Opera so deep-rooted and universal a favorite in the Chinese entertainment world, although its artistic supremacy is far from undisputed?

THE QUOTING HABIT

It is significant that the most memorable line in *Autumn Quince* is a quotation from a Peking Opera, and that in turn is a quotation from old poetry. It goes thus:

"Wine partaken with a true friend—
a thousand cups are not enough;

Conversation, when disagreeable—
half a sentence is too much."

These words deeply touch Autumn Quince, aged, disfigured, penniless, intensely lonely, when he sings them for the benefit of an upstart actress who gets the beat wrong. To the audience, the situation is immensely enriched by

the quotation. The Chinese are ever alive to the joy of an apt quotation. Picturesque phrases, words of wisdom, jokes two thousand years old, freely circulate in everyday speech. These are the tissues of a living past. The body of traditions is invigorated by its continual application to new people, new events. In contrast to people in the West, the Chinese never say anything direct when there is a suitable quotation at hand—which there always is. Nearly every imaginable situation has been enshrined in a cozy little phrase.

A man troubled by the insecurity of his position compares himself to "the swallow nesting on a curtain." The opium smoker is shown in a most flattering, fairy-like aspect as one who "inhales the clouds and exhales the mist." The Chinese are especially good at being modest, hence a writer calls his own epilogue to somebody else's book or an attempt to complete the unfinished work of some deceased author, "a dog's tail attached to a sable."

Ninety per cent of what passes for wit in our country is the skillful application of the past to the present. To Chinese students, the mastery of English idioms and set phrases is the mastery of English wit—which accounts for the popularity of little handbooks enlisting idiomatic phrases which, they believe, have only to be grammatically linked together to make good reading matter.

ROMANTIC ESCAPE?

Perhaps nowhere else in the world does the past play so active a role in common everyday life—the past in the sense of elucidated experience, communal memories analyzed by the historical viewpoint. If we see the quotations in this light, the relation of Peking Opera to the world of today is also in the nature of a quotation. The world of Peking Opera bears a very thin resemblance to the Chinese world in any given stage of our evolution, and yet the public has at the back of its mind the impression that the Peking Opera world, with its tidy ethics, its beauty and finish, is a faithful representation of the old order. Our elders regret that it has now passed away; two hundred years ago, men of the last dynasty also felt as if it had just ceased to exist. It never did exist. Is it romantic escape, then, that it offers us?

The Peking Opera is an escape only in the sense of the transition from one point of view to another. A cook holds up an emptied vegetable basket to shake off the few leaves of spinach stuck in the bottom. The leaves, a translucent green in the checkered sunlight, remind him of climbers on a trellis. Now the latter is no less real or homely an object than the former, and yet the analogy is pleasing, as it calls up associations to things which mean more to us because men's thoughts have dwelt upon them and men's art has shaped those thoughts to advantage. The tiny chores in the kitchen, the immediate reality, uninteresting by itself, gains significance through its connection with a more lucid, comprehensible reality.

Whatever preys upon the peace of mind of the inhabitants of the Peking Opera world, they "have it out," if not with other characters in the play, then straight with the audience. They express themselves flauntingly, not only in spoken words (which we know from our own daily experience to be inadequate), but also in gestures, tune, movement, costumes, the colors and patterns of the facial makeup. All these means of expression are highly unnatural. Men walk in a hippy swagger and women in timorous mincing steps, both with an exaggerated grace. Even sobbing is exquisitely timed—a diminuendo of round and polished drops of sound. Other forms of personal display are more unreasonable and border on the ridiculous. But it is this consistent overexpression which enables the one or two actors on the stage to expand and multiply themselves, so that the stage always looks well peopled. The desirable crowded effect thus achieved is an important feature of Chinese drama and Chinese life.

THE CROWD AND CHINESE PSYCHOLOGY

Like French monarchs of old, the Chinese are born in a crowd and die in a

crowd. There is no getting away from onlookers. A woman of the upper classes lives in nominal seclusion, but from the moment she rises in the morning the door of her bedroom is not supposed to be closed. In rigorous weather a cotton-padded curtain wards off the icy wind, but the door remains ajar, welcoming the inspection of all members of the household. A door closed in day time is considered scandalous. Even under the shelter of the night, an uninvited guest with any initiative at all can see everything behind the barred door by licking the paper pasted on the window and peering through the moistened spot.

Above all else, marriage and death are affairs of public concern. A man breathes his last under the watchful eyes of all members of the family, the near relatives, and the most lowly of the servants. It is not without reason that we find the Chinese tragedies bustling, noisy, showy. Grief in Peking Opera has bright, positive colorings.

The lack of privacy in China explains a certain coarseness in the Chinese temperament. There are no such things as "the lonely places of the soul." The most intimate feelings have to be defensively, satisfactorily explained for the benefit of the ever-present crowd. Whatever cannot be made public must perforce be guilty. The Chinese are forever astonished by the ridiculously secretive attitude foreigners take to entirely inconsequential things.

NO ECCENTRICS

The influence of the crowd has much to do with the fact that there is very little genuine eccentricity to be found among the Chinese notables, even in the field of art and letters. The artists have their strong likes and dislikes, but much of it is sheer affectation. They go without washing or take to the opposite extreme of being unable to stand a single speck of dust; loathe the talk of money; cultivate a weakness for pines and bamboos, and propose to drink themselves to death—all because these are the accepted appendages to art in China. In segregating themselves from one crowd they merely join another.

The habit of quoting, the incessant repetition of treasured ideas of the cultural inheritance, leads naturally to the dogged adherence of certain ideas to one another. The psychological mechanism is trained to work in such a way as to make it impossible for one who is drawn by one idea to extricate himself from the entire devouring system which dictates the life of a certain crowd.

Similarly, with the Peking Opera, the different factors of physical and vocal expression are systematized so that they work in close co-operation. Touch one, and the entire frame is set in motion. The Peking Opera world materializes only with the orderly revolution of the entire constellation. The slightest deviation in some one aspect, and that world, fragile like all things of perfection, falls into ruin. Hence the supreme emphasis on the rigorous enforcement of conventions in Peking Opera.

THE SECRET OF ETERNAL YOUTH

This method of conventionalization, with its crude thoroughness, its childlike intensity, is no different from that of the dramas of many infantile and adolescent civilizations. But China's is the only case in which this technique has been evolved and perfected when the civilization was already past its maturity.

The nineteenth-century Chinese found Peking Opera an adequate embodiment of their racial inheritance. Peking Opera reflects the national traits and inclinations most faithfully because it is a natural growth originating from the peasantry, with very little artificial interference from the higher quarters. Peking Opera originated not in Peking but in the provinces of Anhwei and Hupeh, where it amused the gods and, incidentally, the peasantry on divine birthdays and festivals in general. For some time it remained one of the many types of provincial dra-

mas held in disdain by adherents of the elegant Kwun Opera, handed down from the previous dynasty and much polished up by the literati. A revolutionary actor, Wang Kwei-fung, experimentally combined the Anhwei Opera with the drama brought in by the Manchus. The result was a great success, especially among royalty and officials, so that the center of theatrical activity shifted to the capital.

That the sophisticated upper classes are receptive to such a product is a tremendous tribute, not so much to Peking Opera, as to its new audience. Then, as now, the Chinese public was fond of Peking Opera against its better judgment. Our case is the exact opposite to the New York public, which takes to impressionism, surrealism, peasant pottery, etc., upon the recommendation of art critics. Chinese men of taste are unanimous in pronouncing Peking Opera vulgar, lowbrow, but its childlike vigor appeals to the primitive in us which the Chinese civilization has been too sloppy to root out. Somewhere about there lies our secret of eternal youth.

CLASSICAL AND COLLOQUIAL SPEECH

In its scanty dialogues the Peking Opera employs a mixture of classical and colloquial speech. The former, though outworn, is indispensable because it has at its command the majority of those set phrases which the Chinese so dearly love. With the aid of these phrases the classical language is able to convey the most complex feelings in an amazingly short sentence. Young writers in the early days of the Republic, in resolutely discarding classical speech, have never succeeded in overcoming the Chinese attachment to quotations. The new literature too often combines the pedantry of the classical speech with the clumsy foreignized style freshly imported. It is a more sensible compromise—the graphic qualities of the classics plus the intimacy of colloquialism—that Lin Yu-tang is after in his attempted literary reform. However, nowhere else are the two coexisting languages so harmoniously blended as in Peking Opera. There the dialogue is delivered in the singsong tune which is a natural accompaniment of classical recitations, and it is this singsong tune which binds together the two styles of speech that would otherwise be extremely jarring side by side.

EMPHASIS ON BREVITY

By far the most important feature of Peking Opera is its music. Ricksha coolies know it only in the form of singing which comes to them in loud blasts from radios in the shops. Connoisseurs go to the theater to hear, not to see. The music of Peking Opera reflects the extreme and perhaps disproportionate emphasis on brevity in all forms of Chinese art. We do not seem able to appreciate vast complicated construction in art. European symphonies, in which form is discernible only when viewed as a whole, are to the Chinese a giant, unintelligible, sprawling mass. The Peking Opera tunes are short and shapely, and their effect instantaneous. Every line and stanza is a semidetached entity.

Drums, cymbals, castanets are only used to help out the atmosphere. The chief instrument, the Hun's Guitar, seemingly monotonous but really very supple, plays several standard tunes: the Swing Beat, the Slow Beat, the Quick Beat, the Reversed Beat, the Original Beat, etc. As vehicles of expression these cover the entire emotional range. Anger, haste, ecstatic surprise are keyed to the Quick Beat. A man in a reflective or melancholy mood sings in the Slow Beat.

The male voice is akin to the Western tenor or baritone, but the female voice is nearer to the bird and the flute than the soprano. It does not aim at naturalness, and that is why the public prefers female impersonators to actresses. This may seem paradoxical, since actresses are far less costly to train and the moral objections to their working in the theater have now been removed. However, a man's voice has more volume, his figure lasts longer, and when he makes a name for himself he does not marry the highest bidder and retire.

CLAY TEAPOTS

The lyrics, written to go with the tunes, are regulated by severe restrictions on the nature of vowels in the words employed. We may think it hard to write lines which answer all those requirements and yet make sense and are easily understood. But experience proves that restrictions act as stimulants to Chinese thought. The Chinese always create best with a predetermined mold, as in the case of Tang poetry and Sung lyrics. Modern Chinese poetry has had scant success because it starts out with a negation of form.

The Chinese are not a self-seeking race in the big things of life. Maybe that is why they are very selfish in the small things as a compensation. In the big things by which a nation is known to its distant neighbors and posterity—art, for instance—form comes first, invariably. Personal success is judged by the degree in which the individual is submerged in the traditional form. It is not that originality is not valued, but the artist spends his originality on the effort to overcome those qualities in him which may be excellent but which hinder a perfect fit into the form.

With the clay teapots of China, the older the pot the better the tea tastes in it, because the porous clay has sucked up the essence of the tea of other days. Similarly, the innovators in Peking Opera enrich the eternal mold with the faint aroma of their own personalities. To say that they leave behind the imprints of their personalities would suggest too much violence done to the pre-existing form.

The humility of the Chinese attitude toward form is equally manifest in other fields. Politically, the Chinese never dream of imposing their own private theories upon existing social patterns. The only three daring reformers in Chinese history—Wang Mang, Wang An-shih, and Kang Yu-wei, living respectively in the second, eleventh, and nineteenth centuries—unanimously refer to saintly legendary emperors (whose pleasantly vague style of government has become an inseparable part of Chinese political science) as the sources of their new measures. This reliance on authority cannot be dismissed as a mere symptom of the habitual fear of responsibility. Rather does it show a consciousness of the integrity of the past and present as a whole.

WATERTIGHT TYPES

Once we understand the Chinese attitude toward originality, we find it easier to accept the fact that the whole lot of popular Peking Operas are curiously free from the slightest mark of individual creative genius. It appears to be a shattering conclusion that all the plays could have been written by one man. But then, the numerous restrictions rule out the free choice of style, and as for the subject, there is only one—which is Man, and not the individual. Personal irrelevancies are ruthlessly suppressed or ignored.

The characters are divided into watertight types, but these are only Man in his different moods and capacities. We have the Military Actor, the Military Actress, the Bearded Actor (the matured man), the Young Actor, the Blue Gown (the good woman, usually a tragic character), the Flower Actress (the vamp), the Clown, the Literary Clown, the Military Clown, etc.

This thoroughgoing generalization eliminates scenery, because the historical background is unimportant. In whatever time or clime, the lover would be a lover, the fighter a fighter.

China is the only country consistently loyal to Man as he is. The Chinese are more interested in the ordinary man than in his aspirations—the ascetic, the superman, the regimented fighting machine, the skilled specialist. This contentment with the strictly human plane is clearly marked in Peking Opera. China has its fantasies, its colorful stories of the supernatural, but the Chinese mystery plays with their gorgeous gods and demons have never enjoyed any permanent popularity.

CHINESE MORALS

Although the operas are apparently governed by a tidy moral code, morality never amounts to a religion with the Chinese. From the Age of the Warring Nations onwards, a number of dashing warriors, scholars, and statesmen, obsessed by a fastidious sense of honor, have died for mere nothings and have been lavishly praised by historians; but they do not have the wholehearted approval of elders and housewives, those who really matter. The life of an individual is not his own to dispose of, because it involves too many weighty institutions. The Chinese may marvel at extravagantly moral men and women, but they secretly consider it a misfortune to have them for members of their own family. They want their own offsprings to be modest, unassuming people who keep the ancestral belongings in order, attend to the ancestral graves, beget children to carry on the line, and die in quiet mediocrity. Even in a more respectable era than ours, the morals in Peking Opera were to the audience only the Sunday clothes in their psychological wardrobe. Hence the supposed collapse of old moral standards does not at all affect the Chinese devotion to Peking Opera.

SAMPLES

In attempting to analyze the contents of the operas, we may be surprised at the large number of war plays. The two great cycles based on *The Tale of the Three Kingdoms* and *All Men Are Brothers* taken alone add up to an impressive one third of the popular repertoire. The Chinese are not a warlike race, but the life of a military man, full of the swiftest changes, excitement, and ups and downs, provides much material for analogy to the official or business career. A war in Peking Opera is never directed toward any other end except the personal fortune of the leader and his dependents.

Lady Precious Stream, one of the best-known of the Peking Operas, portrays the exquisite selfishness of men. It is characteristic of the male temperament that the hero pursues his career for eighteen years with never a thought of the wife back home. But, once he is reminded of her existence, he rushes back day and night to deliver her from the state of a social outcast in which he has left her. He expects that the bliss of reunion is sufficient compensation for the poverty and loneliness which has laid waste the best years of her life. He does not realize that he is offering her an impossible situation—she has to maintain her authority as head of the house in the face of a younger, all-powerful wife to whom he owes his rise. She dies eighteen days after having been made a queen, supposedly killed by the joy of it. Such is the charm of Peking Opera that it makes the hero no less sympathetic a role on that account.

GIRL GUIDE AND SUGAR DADDY

Spring in the Hall of Jade typifies the countless tales in China on the theme of the virtuous prostitute. That she makes her living on her looks implies that she must be attractive, in addition to which she is good. The modern Chinese has outgrown many ancient ideals, but not this one. (In a recent film entitled *Troubles in the Fragrant Bower*, trouble arises because of a "girl guide," whose profession is a most infamous institution in Shanghai. The movie advertisement in the newspapers is devoid of all details except a single arresting phrase: "The Chaste Girl Guide," which alone is sufficient to make the movie a draw.)

In the Peking Opera *The Scheme of the Black Bowl*, a man is murdered and his soul imprisoned through witchcraft in a vessel used as a commode. To Westerners, it appears puzzling how such ridiculous, unmentionable things can be associated with high tragedy, except by a people entirely devoid of any sense of humor. It is owing to their incredible frankness with the physiological functions that the Chinese feel no disgust, only pity and horror, at the poor soul's torment.

The sugar-daddy theme is given sympathetic treatment in *The Courtyard of the Black Dragon*. The man here is the swashbuckling leader of the 108 brigands

immortalized in *All Men Are Brothers*, but that does not prevent him from making a fool of himself before a courtesan whom he is keeping. We see his pathetic attempts at conversation:

"What is it you have in your hand?"

"Your hat," she replies.

"Oh, but it is evidently a shoe. How can it be a hat?"

"You know it, and yet you ask?"

The wearisome affection of an unwanted man and the cruelty of the woman who does not love in return cannot be better depicted than in this sardonic comedy.

THE MACABRE BURLESQUE

Another show which can only be termed Peking Opera by courtesy is *The Cotton Weaver*, a burlesque, a little piece which has detached itself from a play about adultery which leads to murder. The callousness in the Chinese sense of humor is such that out of this gruesome subject it has made the most sensational comedy of many years. Peking and Shanghai have gone wild over its recent revival.

Dressed in the latest style instead of a Peking Opera costume, the Cotton Weaver sings while she works, mimicking the mannerisms of the Four Great Female Impersonators and other celebrities, and backchats with the audience, which has a voice in the choice of her subjects. An atmosphere of cheery informality prevails, a tremendous relief from the rigid conventions of Peking Opera.

The Chinese are a law-abiding people. They get the full flavor out of laws, not necessarily in the dexterous manipulation of legal quibbles to save a man's neck or gain him a fortune, but in deliciously pointless little violations, such as walking on the right side of the street when there is a poster telling them to go by the left. The Cotton Weaver sins against the Peking Opera tradition in the right spirit. It is not a reaction against the system, only a playful tug at an object of great reverence — a gesture of recognition.

THE "WICKED" CHINESE

The success of *The Cotton Weaver* is also partly due to the Chinese enjoyment of a fictitious sense of wickedness and power. The man in the street hails an overcrowded tram. Then, realizing that it probably will not stop to pick him up, he calls out imperatively, "Don't stop! Don't you dare stop!"—and it does not. He laughs, aglow with terrible might.

When a man quarrels with another he shouts, "You dare swear at me? Don't you recognize your father?" The implication of an affair with his opponent's mother in the distant past gives him great spiritual satisfaction. The Chinese in a moment of manly anger invariably suggests that his enemy's wife or mother is his mistress.

The Cotton Weaver succeeds because it is the only show to exploit this instinct. The weaver's husband returns from afar, discovers she has been unfaithful, and forces her to confess who is her lover. She points at the audience. Instead of exploding with anger, the husband bows to the deeply affected audience and says: "Thank you for looking after my wife during my absence."

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These typical, timeless, universal situations provide well-established emotional formulas for the Peking Opera public. When the complicated feelings in actual life are resolved into such clear-cut formulas, much may be lost during the process, but the result is singularly gratifying. The simplification leaves the feelings stronger, surer, with the weight of centuries of experience behind them. It is always pleasant to fall in with an old tradition, to be harmonious with the communal habit which makes up a great part of one's surroundings. The Peking Opera is to the Chinese an emotional rut, well oiled by the generations who have fallen into it.