



Dr. Mei in the pose of offering wine. Although the photograph was obviously taken backstage, it would still be hard to imagine any famous Western actor using an old tin tray and a ten-cent mug as properties when being photographed in full regalia. It speaks for the Chinese theatrical tradition that a Chinese observer would not be struck by this incongruity. To him, properties are very unimportant aids to acting. Indeed, in most cases the actor gets along very well without any properties at all.



Mei Lan-fang making 'up for one of his parts. Although he is not yet on the stage, his movements seem to be already entirely feminine.

MEI LAN-FANG



Adjusting "her" elaborate headdress. The expression of the face, the so typically feminine gesture of the hands, make it hard to believe that we are not looking at a young girl.



Dr. Mei Lan-fang in one of his favorite parts, that of a bashful young beauty.

MEI LAN-FANG AND THE CHINESE THEATER

By A. HOFFMANN

THERE is hardly another country in the world where the theater is as popular, in the true sense of the word, as in China, where it is so much a part of the people. For this country, the theater is of just as much importance as the movies are for Europe and America; and that which the film star represents in the latter countries is represented in China by the actor. Everyone knows him, loves him, and adores him.

No wonder that, when Mei Lan-fang arrived in Shanghai from Hongkong, the whole public seethed with curiosity regarding the intentions of the greatest female impersonator. Everyone would have liked to see China's most celebrated actor on the stage once again. The disappointment was great when it became known that Mei Lan-fang would not, for reasons of health, appear any more on the stage but instead would devote all his strength to the modernization of the Chinese theater. In this way he is carrying on in the quiet of his Shanghai home that which he has been striving for in practice on the stage for many years.

Among the group known as the "four great female impersonators" of China, the *Szu ming ta tan* (四名大旦), Mei Lan-fang was always the one to support a reform of Chinese acting and the Chinese stage within reasonably moderate limits. Some of these ideas of reform had been handed down to him by his great predecessors and teachers, Yü Tzu-yün and Wang Yao-ch'ing. However, this did not prevent him from being at the same time one of the best singers and representatives of the old, "classic" opera. This is a style of singing which originated in the sixteenth century in K'un-shan (Quinsan) near Shanghai and spread from there all over China. It was the prevailing operatic style up to the middle of the last century, since when it has gradually been supplanted by the present modern style of singing and acting.

Beside his exceptional acting talent, it was above all Mei Lan-fang's unsurpassed, very individual style and technique of singing, as well as the natural softness and beauty of his face and movements, which made him the perfect actor of female parts. Even today, the almost fifty-year-old artist, who comes from a long line of actors, is said still to possess an almost girlish beauty.

We might mention here that, in spite of female impersonators, there have also always been actresses on the Chinese stage, in fact, as far back as we are able to trace the Chinese drama. They have always been taken for granted in popular plays, farces, and ballad singing and continue today in an unbroken tradition. Actresses have also been known to form entire troupes. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), there were also troupes composed of male and female actors. However, conditions in these troops often led to scandals, so that in the eighteenth century female actors were entirely prohibited from acting. Toward the end of the last century, purely female troupes as well as mixed troupes of actors began to appear again. In this connection it may be mentioned as a curiosity that there are male impersonators among the actresses to this very day.

Among the numerous different female parts of the Chinese stage, Mei Lan-fang took that of the noble, virtuous beauty, which was best suited to his art. He became one of the few actors of world renown. Extensive and extremely successful tours took him to Japan, Hongkong, the United States, and all the countries of Europe. In the USA, his great art won him an honorary degree. In 1935 the artist spent some time in Germany. We hope that it may be granted to Mei Lan-fang in his retirement to continue to give many a fruitful stimulus to that art which he has served with a success known to only a few of the greatest in the history of stage and opera.