

# ORIENTAL SHADOW SHOWS OF CHINA BECOMING A LOST ART

By BARBARA POLIKOFF

IG-HEADED COMPANION and White Snake Maiden were veterans of Chinese shadow shows before Dr. Lauffer, former Chief Curator of the Museum of Anthropology, secured them for the Museum. During the Blackstone Expedition to Tibet in 1908-10. Anyone who has seen the spectacle created by these shadow figures as they move across the screen might have felt a momentary tinge of nostalgia to see them taken from their native land and held in the confines of a museum. In the China of 1910 there were still many shadow figures to take their

place with most folk-art, the origin of the shadow show is obscured by legend. In a pamphlet, *Oriental Theatricals*, Dr. Lauffer stated that the first shadow figure was made in the 6th century A.D. by an emperor whose favorite concubine died. To ease his grief he commissioned a magician to summon her ghost. The magician, who had often performed the art of shadow play, created an illusion of the girl by using a shadow of her carved likeness on a screen of tapestry.

If this story is not true, Dr. Lauffer believes that it reveals, in a general way, the origin of the shadow play. It must have been the derivation of the shadow play: "The shadow figures, which were the shadows or souls of the deceased, were summoned back into the world of the living by professional magicians. This is the origin of ancestors as shadow-souls is characteristic of Chinese that it goes far beyond the priority of this performance in its inception, therefore, is purely spiritualistic and traceable to spiritualistic

could be carried on one cart, and within a very short time after arriving at a home the company of four or five showmen erected a wooden stage and put up a screen and theatre curtains. When all were assembled and the shadow figures were hung on a wire in the order of their appearance in the evening's performance, the curtains were pulled back, the screen was illuminated by an oil

similarly studied and correspondingly held to exacting standards. The servant and his master must be distinguished in every subtle gesture, in every rhythm of the body, in every step along the highway. And the animator must be skilled not only in one part but in all."

Unlike the drama of the Chinese legitimate stage that is presented without



SCENE SET—READY FOR ACTION

As the embroidered curtains are drawn back from the screen the audience sees this scene set for the last act of a play called "The Lotus Flower Temple." As is usually the case with Chinese drama, this play has little plot. It presents a glimpse into the life of Peiping's younger set about 1750 and was still being shown in 1932 after a run of almost 200 years. (Photograph reproduced from "Chinese Shadow Shows" by Gertrude Wimsatt through courtesy of Harvard University Press.)

lamp (more recently by an electric-light bulb), and the first "actor" would appear to announce the beginning of the drama.

## THE ART OF THE SHADOW

The shadow figures themselves are about 12 inches high, carved out of parchment, usually donkeyskin, cowskin, or pigskin, and stained with color. The bodies are jointed at the shoulders, elbows, wrists, and knees with knots of threads to allow complete flexibility. Similar to puppets, they are manipulated by means of wires attached to the neck and the tip of each hand.

To acquire the skill necessary to animate the shadow figures requires many years of practice, a fact that someone unfamiliar with the art might be surprised to discover. Benjamin March, a scholar of Chinese culture, explains the reason for this in a passage from his book on shadow figures: "Patterns of acting in the Chinese theatre are distilled and refined from centuries of observation of men and women; each movement is in nowise an imitation of one person's but rather the essence of action of all characters of a type. For the shadows, movement is

settings, shadow shows are usually very intricately staged. The props are carved out of parchment with as much attention to detail as is given to the shadow "stars" themselves. Comparatively small objects, such as tables or chairs, are usually made in groups and leaned against the screen. Larger and more elaborate props, such as temples and carriages, are pinned into place so that the showmen have only the figures to take care of once the scene is set.

## FROM STAGE TO SCREEN

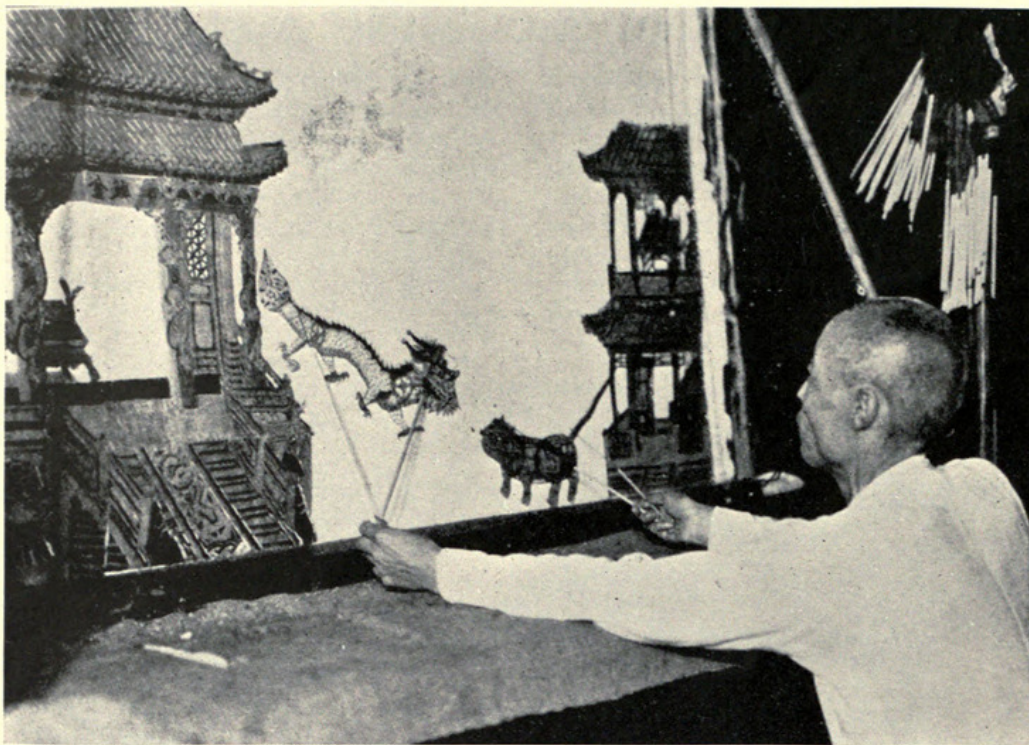
The plays produced by the shadow-show companies are usually those originally written for the legitimate theater. The important difference between the two presentations is that the legitimate play follows the highly literary language of the classical drama while the script of the shadow show is written in the colloquial language of the people. Some plays, usually folk tales, are originated by the shadow companies themselves and exist only in synoptic form, the individual companies filling in the parts as they see fit. As in motion pictures, the action of a drama is accompanied by music

## PLAYS FOR ALL TASTES

As time passed, shadow figures became popular in dramas that were presented in the yards of the wealthy or aristocratic. The women of these families were by social custom to frequent the restaurants, and other public places in the city. They grew to depend on shadow shows to furnish an enjoyable diversion from the world beyond their sheltered homes. To satisfy the varying interests of the audience the shadow showmen had to produce a variety of types of plays: dramas of romance, of the supernatural, of the comic. The repertoire of the more advanced companies grew to include as many as several hundred plays, each or about a half-hour long.

Shadow shows were perfectly fitted for the type of staging required by the shadow companies. The whole show





#### BEHIND THE SCREEN

A highly skilled shadow showman as he stages a combat between a dragon and a tiger. The figures used in this ancient theatrical art are intricately carved, and stained in various tints so that the shadows they cast, seen by the audience on the other side of the screen, are colored and realistically detailed. In the right-hand corner of the picture the shadow figures can be seen as they hang on a wire in the order they are to be used in the evening's performance. (Photograph reproduced from "Chinese Shadow Shows" by Gertrude Wimsatt through courtesy of Harvard University Press.)

designed to lend emotional undertone to scenes of violence, sorrow, or happiness in which words would be cumbersome or absurd.

#### SHADOWS BEGIN TO FADE

Because of their unique function as domestic drama, shadow shows began to lose their popularity when the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911 led to a new concept of a woman's role in society. The taboos against appearing in public places began to disappear. Girls were given equal educational opportunities with boys, and the freedom to go where they wished led women to take a more active part in the activities of their cities and communities. The change was more rapid in the cosmopolitan centers than in the provincial areas, but before long even the most rural of towns was affected by the social changes taking place. There was soon little need for the women of China to depend on the shadow show to bring them the vital breath of the outside world.

Other reasons of course played their part in the decline of shadows. With the introduction of the motion picture, the shadow show lost its interest for those who preferred the more sophisticated entertainment provided by the "electric shadows"—the name the Chinese first gave to the motion picture. As fewer people called the shadow shows into their homes, fewer youths chose to become apprentices to learn the skill of animating the figures. Fewer and fewer people remained who could transmit the art

of the shadow to the coming generation.

It is difficult to establish how many shadow-show companies still exist in China. In 1932 a visitor to Shanghai reported that all traces of the art had disappeared from cities that had formerly been shadow centers. In one or two of the centers shadow shows were reduced to seasonal entertainment, appearing on holidays and at festivals. It is safe to say that if they are to be seen in China today special arrangements have to be made by those familiar enough with the art to know where to locate the few surviving companies.

#### COMMUNISTS REVISE DRAMA

It is also likely that those few shadow shows that may still survive will have been affected, as have all Chinese arts, by the revising policy of the Communist government's Ministry of Cultural Affairs. This policy is explained by Mei Lan-fang, a famous Chinese actor, in an article written for a propaganda magazine published in Hong Kong. Mei explains that the Ministry is making revisions in all Chinese drama to remove the "backward, reactionary overlay it [drama] acquired in feudal and later in semi-feudal China."

Mei goes on to cite examples of themes that are considered "good" and those that are considered "bad" by the revising board. He writes: "Examples of good old plays which we continue to value highly are *The Fisherman's Revenge*, a forthright tale of a labouring man's battle against tyranny, *Mu*

*Lan in the Army*, depicting the high patriotism of China's counterpart of Joan of Arc, and *Fighting the Chin Invaders*, showing the Chinese people's resistance against foreign invasion." Mei explains that a "bad" theme is found in a play that "projects a concept of personal virtue that is quite compatible with attachment to alien rulers against one's own people. Both performers and audiences in new China see that this is a harmful distortion of the proper relation between public duty and personal sentiment, so they no longer like the play."

It is interesting to note that Mei mentions that the play *The White Snake*, whose shadow-figure cast is on exhibition in the Museum, was one of the old plays that was revised erroneously by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. "Inexperienced revisors," writes Mei, "with a dogmatic, unhistorical and unrealistic approach changed the snake-spirit in the *White Snake* into an ordinary girl. Such errors have been criticized and corrected."

The decline of the shadow show and the revised repertoire imposed upon the surviving companies reveal the pace with which profound changes are being wrought in the 20th-century world. An art that originated before the birth of Christ has been affected by the social and political events of the past fifty years more drastically than during all preceding centuries combined. Thus, if the Museum's shadow figures of the Pig-Headed Companion and the White Snake Maiden were returned to China today they would probably be reduced to lamp-shade ornaments for Hong Kong tourists, as was the fate of many of their colleagues. By being taken out of their land of birth by Dr. Laufer, these shadow figures may prove to be two of the few survivors of the days in China when the frequent sound of a high violin and the murmur of excited voices meant that shadows were playing their magic in a courtyard.

#### Daily Guide Lectures

Free guide-lecture tours are offered daily except Sundays under the title "Highlights of the Exhibits." These tours are designed to give a general idea of the entire Museum and its scope of activities. They begin at 2 P.M. on Monday through Friday and at 2:30 P.M. on Saturday.

Although there are no tours on Sundays, the Museum is open from 9 A.M. to 6 P.M.

The prickly acacia tree of semidesert regions in north and northeast Africa provides a diet for camels, despite its large thorns. In Kordofan an extract from its seeds is used in tanning leather for camel trappings. In several regions the gum of the tree is collected for export. The work is a principal industry of nomadic tribes.





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