SUCCESSFUL men are said to be ruined by success. With Mei Lan Fang the adage, ‘Nothing succeeds like success,’ is much more apt. He is gloriously free from those ailments so frequently created by prosperity; yet he is undoubtedly the most famous Chinese actor. His name is known across the world; in China it is always mentioned when superficial reference is made to the stage, or when Chinese make explanatory remarks to uninitiated foreigners about the Chinese theatre. Stray books by tourists and others on matters general appertaining to China contain reference, however slight and inaccurate, to Mei Lan Pang. When he visited Japan he received an unsurpassed ovation. Japanese girls went ‘Mei-mad’ over him, as Mr. M. T. Z. Tyau remarks in passing commentary on the Stage in the East in one of the chapters of his book, China Awakened. He has played before, met, and been fitted by presidents and generals. He has received one hundred and fifty medals from leading lights as tokens of their esteem. All this praise, expressed and implied, has left him untainted by pride.

The other morning at one o’clock, after the performance of Lo Shun, one of his best pieces, was over, Mei Lan Fang gave the writer a delightful reception behind the screens. The greeting which he extended to this foreigner could not have been more friendly or charming. Although Mei had been acting before some three thousand people for nearly two hours, winning the usual amount of hushed attention and enthusiastic applause, he was as fresh as if he had newly completed a gentle game of tennis. The greenroom of the Kung Wu T’ai, the theatre in which he was appearing,—situated on a side road just off the Rue du Consulat,—was cold but roomy. It was reached by a longish walk, known only to the initiated: a climb down a sort of fire-escape ladder, a fifty-yard progression along a kind of private lane, and an entry up a sloping passageway. The show had just ended, and Mei had to remove his gaudy garments, but in four minutes he turned up, jauntily throwing on his jacket-waistcoat as he did so, and advancing in a mild hail-fellow-well-met manner.

He shook hands first à la chinoise, then in foreign style. He has two or three good interpreters and secretaries, and it was the full intention of the writer to engage him, suitably and humbly, in conversation through them. But as Mei was so exceedingly willing to be friends, and spoke in such easily distinguishable tones, there was no question as to whether he was to be answered in English or Chinese. So the conversation was a very cheerful one. Mei was naive enough to inquire whether he acted well or not. He was sufficiently unoriginal to remark that the foreigner spoke good Pekingese. Mei had seen the Italian opera, but this proved a tall topic and one was glad to be off it. It is rather hard for an Englishman who cannot fathom more than a word or two of the Italian
opera or much more of the Chinese to conduct a conversation with the foremost Chinese actor on the former subject. In parenthesis it is to be noted that three fourths even of Chinese who go to the Chinese theatre cannot understand even hear a great deal of what is being said. This is due to one of four causes or to all: (a) the discrepancy between dialects; (b) the din of the orchestra; (c) the high falsetto employed; and (d) the poor acoustics.

This may seem a remarkable fact, but the maxim that when you go to the theatre you must leave your mind behind is fairly reasonable. It is not necessarily the mind that must be appealed to at all times. There is something soothing about the Italian opera, and similarly so with the Chinese theatre, provided of course in regard to the latter that the lo, or gong, remains silent, which is certainly a difficult condition to get unless some bright member of the audience contrives to steal it or have it mislaid! In this connection it should be said that, much as the foreigner hates the noisy clanging of the theatre gong, sometimes the Chinese in the audience hates it more. He will close his ears with his hands, and mutter words regarding the superior attractions of a cinema.

Mei Lan Fang intends to visit America next year. The writer told him he ought to go to England. He grew enthusiastic over the idea.

If audiences in Europe were given the chance to see Mei Lan Fang in his graceful stage-parts, their interest in China would be stimulated. He would act the role of an ambassador. Good feeling between the East and West would be assisted. He possesses so many of the attributes of the best Chinese. His decorum on the stage and off is perfect; his cleverness is obvious; his good-will is evident in his various attempts to give the utmost possible satisfaction at all times when he is acting.

‘The humble enjoy continual peace, but in the heart of the proud is envy and frequent indignation.’ There is not much of the latter with Mei, but a great deal of the former. He appeared on that occasion in the greenroom a model of self-respecting humility far removed, of course, from emphatic self-depreciation, which would have been completely out of place. Characteristic of him was his action in personally dashing for a cigarette and lighting the match for his guest. None of the numerous attendants who were at beck and call was summoned to procure them. His manners, as has been said, are without fault, and his natural shyness, even if it is not now very pronounced, is sufficiently apparent to increase one’s interest in him.

His part, as all who know his name are aware, is that of impersonator of feminine roles. For this he is well qualified by his build. The Apollo type of man is often regarded as what he frequently is — rather flabby. Mei is not. His smooth countenance and appearance on the stage of being indistinguishable from a fascinating Chinese damsel are considerably assisted by paint and powder, as is inevitable. Behind the screens he is a most pleasant Chinese gentleman with a masculine air pronounced enough to absolve him from being considered effeminate. His attitude is one of keenness, wide-awakeness, and especially sympathy. Of the latter he has much; many sums have been devoted by him to the relief work in Japan and to other charitable funds. His determination not to appear in any way conceited is another evidence of his sympathy, which is in no small measure conveyed by his eyes, which are large, mobile and animated.

An opinion exists that the profession of acting is a degraded one in China.
Sir Henry Irving's knighthood is cited as an example of what could not happen there. Actors the world over are usually of a poor and lowly origin. This much one may admit, but not that they are lower than in the West when it comes to a discussion of 'stars.' There is just as great a tendency to write panegyrics about actors in China as in England. Mei Lan Fang, for example, had a father, grandfather, and uncle all of whom made themselves well-known by their theatrical skill.

The second greatest actor in China, also a female impersonator, who is obviously cut out to be Mei's successor, is Ch'eng Yen Ch'iu. He is only twenty-one and is of the fifth generation of the family of a high Councillor of Chien Lung, one of China's greatest Emperors. After Ch'eng Yen Ch'iu has had his period of supreme rule among popular actors, it will probably be Lu Mu Tan who, in turn, will step into his shoes. Lu Mu Tan is still only about seventeen or eighteen, and is the son of a retired official. Mei Lan Fang has expressed much approval of the manner in which this young actor performs. He is smaller than Mei, but there is time for him to grow. His humility is not yet so wonderful as that of Mei. But all these three most celebrated actors have a much greater humility than the real Chinese actresses seen as a rule. The chief Chinese actresses in Shanghai perform at the Kung Wu T'ai. It is the only one of the seven big Shanghai theatres — there are of course numerous smaller ones — in which actresses appear. Fen Chu Hua, Chang Wen Yen, and Lu Lan Chun seem to have a too high appreciation of their importance, to judge from their expressions and their less spontaneous smiles.

Sufficient, however, has been said to show that it is absurd to claim that Chinese actors all enjoy a mean status. Foreigners in Shanghai who care to study the Chinese stage are lucky: it is the second-best place for doing so, Peking of course being first. Take the three actors named above, for example. None is at present in this city, but all have been within the past six months. Mei returned to Peking on January 22, Ch'eng about three or four months ago, and Lu went from here to Tientsin some time in the autumn. All will probably return ere very long, although Mei certainly will not come back for a while, except perhaps to act here on his way to England or America. Lu Mu Tan is the one most likely to return first. He is to be watched. He acted for several months last year in the Ch'un Hua (Spring Flowers Theatre) Wu T'ai in Chapei, and may do so again.

Mei's plays are mostly either chronicle-histories or fairy tales. He seems to prefer the latter. They suit best his capacity for imitating a winsome maiden who performs wonderful deeds. His sword dance or fight with a clam in Lien Ch'ing Feng is engrossing. He piroettes about the stage engaged in imaginary combat with this mysterious habitant of the underwaters. Another beautifully dressed 'girl,' hidden behind the great shells which she holds before her in her part as clam, endeavors to snap up Mei by catching him between her large forceps. The sword is imprisoned several times but always escapes again. Mei retreats to the back of the stage in a zigzag direction, gradually vanishing and ever growing dimmer through a maze of thin gauze hung from the roof in layers, followed by the clam. Fishes bob about across the stage and the undersea aspect is well represented. Both return slowly and the clam is mortally wounded at the last, while Mei plucks from behind the now open shell-encasements an elixir — which is symbolized by a pink silk handkerchief — which is to save 'her' mother's life.