While it has quite slipped my mind who made the statement that "the art of professional criticism is not unknown in China," the writer, who was referring to things theatrical, told a vivid truth. However, when a play possesses real merit, the advertisement, along with the unscrupulous critic, will, by sheer force of circumstance, avoid writing the customary untruth! Those who were fortunate enough to attend the performance of Mr. Ch'eng Yen-chiu's Wên Chi Kuei Han, or "Wên Chi's Return to Han," on the evening of November 6 last, were handsomely rewarded in that the following press and publicity notices turned out to be true: "The episodes, well chosen, are closely interwoven. ... An emotional response will be aroused in the spectator. ... Mr. Ch'eng Yen-chiu,* has attempted an impersonation difficult in both singing and acting, and will offer many songs. ... Old poetry will be set to p'i-huang, tunes. ... with the result that the play may be considered for all time a work of extraordinary merit. ..."

Before considering the play by episodes, a summary of the story and a few comments may be made on the work.

The rôle of Wên Chi was impersonated by Mr. Ch'eng Yen-chiu, who, it may be said, acts and sings this difficult part better than any other living actor in China to-day. The drama is set in a period well towards the beginning of the third century of the Christian era.

*Further information about the actor may be found in the following publications: The China Journal, Vol. V, No. 4, October, 1926 p. 171-174 Asia, December, 1927 p. 1034, bottom column 1 North-China Daily News, 1928, October 12, November 2, November 7.
Ch'êng Yen-chiu, the well-known Female Impersonator of the Modern Chinese Stage.
THE HISTORICAL DRAMA, "WEN CHI'S RETURN TO HAN"

A brief resume of the play follows: While Li Chiao, 李催, and his henchmen were causing internal strife in the realms of Han, the 南單于 king of the southern Hsiung-nu ordered Prince Tso Hsien, 左賢王, to lead far into Han a mighty army. The Prince, however, suffered defeat at the hands of Li Chiao's party. On learning of the battle, Wên Chi, a woman of high birth, and her maidservant fled. They were taken captives by the Hsiung-nu horsemen, who brought her into the presence of their Prince. The latter took her as his consort. During the twelve years she lived amongst the barbarians, she gave birth to two sons. Ts'ai Yung, 蔡邕, felt deep pity for the aged man, because the latter had no sons to carry on the family line; and, therefore, sent Chou Chin, 周近, with gold into the land of the Hsiung-nu to purchase Wên Chi's freedom.

The drama, based mainly on historical events and also adhering, in most particulars, to orthodox Chinese stage conventions, was written for Mr. Ch'eng. It is hoped that as time goes on the actor will bring most, if not all, of his plays up to the excellent standard of this one.

In giving the episodes the writer has attempted to keep each distinct by considering each time the stage is empty as the end of an episode, although at times there are such a confusion of actors, some remaining at the footlights from one scene to another, that in one or two instances there arises doubt as to whether what seems to be two episodes should not be counted as one.

The word, "enter," is not repeated with the name of each character as he comes on. Here it may be well to note that the play always opens with an empty stage, the actors invariably coming through the left door and leaving by the right exit, unless they are supposed to return from whence they came, in which case they go back by the same door as that by which they entered.

The play, which begins at 9.40 p.m., contains the following twenty-five episodes:

I. Four barbarian generals, who, one by one, strut forward, turn their backs to the audience; then, together face about and announce their names.

II. The king of the Southern Hsiung-nu, his face painted mostly white and streaked with black to denote his treacherous character, declaims, while the same four generals as one and four supernumeraries, each carrying a long narrow banner on a pole that conventionally represents any required number of common soldiery, stand to either side. He orders to the field Prince Tso Hsien, who arrives accompanied by four banner carriers and eight spearmen.

III. The Chinese host, consisting of eight banner carriers, four generals, and General Li Chiao, cross (after a messenger brings news) the stage.

IV. Mr. Ch'êng Yen-chiu, as Ts'ai Wên Chi, enters with the quiet dignity of a refined Chinese woman to sit and declaim lines directly to the audience, all the while moving her long sleeves with grace. Mr.

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Wu Fu-ch'in, 吳富琴, as the maidservant, later comes dressed in the costume of the conventional and vivacious hua-tan, 花旦, type: long vest and trousers. An aged manservant places on the table the ch'în, 琴, the orchestra, which is in full view to the right of the stage, meanwhile playing a melodious composition. Singing the style of music, known as the southern pang-tzu, 南梆子, Wên Chi, while fingering the instrument, discovers from a discordant note that calamity has befallen them. She, continuing her song, prepares to flee along with her maidservant, who shoulders the ch'în. Stringed instruments, namely the hu-ch'în, 胡琴, èrh-ku, 二胡, yüeh-ch'în, 月琴, and hsien-tzu 弦子, accompany the voice. Later, the excitement of flight is accentuated by the use of brass instruments and the resonant tappings on the pang-ku, 槌鼓, a drum about ten or eleven inches in diameter made of cowhide.

V. Before a curtain, depicting a wild and mountainous country, the Hsiung-nu army, composed of four banner carriers, eight spearmen, four generals, and Prince Tso Hsien, meet in a grand mêlée the Chinese forces, which consist of four banner carriers, four swordsmen, four generals, and General Li Chiao. Cymbals, other brass instruments, and drums help to increase the "din of battle," while at other times the noise is increased by the deep voice of the great drum and the loud tones of the chi-na, 唬呐, a conical pipe of redwood fitted with a brass mouthpiece.* While the Prince and Li battle at close quarters and the armies surge back and forth, often in dizzy circles, four terrified refugees, who may represent, by convention, hundreds or thousands of people, flee across the stage. Wên Chi, accompanied by her maidservant, sings as she runs about in a circle, this being the conventional manner of representing her flight over a great distance. The women are captured by four Hsiung-nu soldiers.

VI. Wên Chi and her maidservant are brought by the four soldiers into the presence of Prince Tso Hsien, who sits in state with four attendants and an officer standing by him.

VII. Four barbarians bring on trays bridal gifts to Wên Chi, who, knowing what a deep humiliation it is for a Chinese to wed a barbarian, refuses the Prince's suit. So well, however, does the maidservant counsel her mistress, that Wên Chi sadly gives her consent. The maidservant, consulting the officer, sees to it that Wên Chi gains as many advantages as possible.

VIII. The Prince, attended by four banner carriers, enters singing. He is told by the officer that the Chinese woman will wed him.

IX. General Li, four banner carriers, and four generals cross the stage.

*This definition and the information concerning the pang-ku, mentioned in episode IV, have been taken from the Rev. A. C. Moule's "List of the Musical and other Sound-Producing Instruments of the Chinese," in the Journal of the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Vol. XXXIX.
A Scene from the Play "Hung Fu Chuan," or "The Red Duster." This Play is one of Ch'eng Ten-chiu's special Vehicles.
X. Nine attendants and four barbarian generals stand to the side as the king of the Hsiung-nu, who, in characteristic stage manner, declaims directly to the audience.

XI. Four attendants, four banner carriers, and the officer stand on either side of the Prince.

XII. Before a curtain, representing a mountain defile and a hut, the latter being hung with a tiger skin, enter four courtmaids, a girl bearing a peacock fan, Wên Chi, and her maidservant, the last two wearing fur hats, from which depend fox-tails, the conventional mark of a barbarian. To the ssu p’i yuan pan, 西皮元板, melody, she sings: “Cattle and sheep fill my vision; gales swirl about the desert sands. With aching heart, I must, in the end, to a barbarian be espoused. Swallowing my shame, I contrive to steal the right to live....Whither fly the clouds, there will be my home.” The Prince, attired as a bridegroom, and accompanied by his officer and four attendants, joins Wên Chi, with whom he sits at the banquet table.

XIII. Five attendants stand while Ts’ao Ts’ao, seated, makes known his desire to purchase Wen Chi’s freedom. He sends forth Chou Chin with gold.

XIV. The maidservant and Wên Chi’s two sons, all wearing the conventional hats with fox-tails, cross the stage.

XV. Two boxes of gold (which are actually a tin and a bamboo hat box, covered by strips of embroidered cloth), each carried by two attendants, precede Chou Chin, who, clad in a travelling cape and singing, brandishes a whip, which shows that he is riding on a horse.

XVI. The king of the Hsiung-nu is seated, attended by five menials, when Chou Chin, with his four attendants, who carry the gold, enter. The king, fearful of the prowess of Ts’ao Ts’ao, agrees to give Wên Chi her freedom. On Chou’s exit, the Prince is summoned and informed of the royal decision.

XVII. Wên Chi’s maidservant and the Prince meet, the latter handing to the former the royal decree, which grants Wên Chi her freedom to return to Han.

XVIII. Wên Chi reluctantly takes leave of her sons. Placing her arms about them, she, distraught with grief, declaims in heart-rending lines her sorrow. Forehead contracted in pain, she cannot tear herself away. “Mother, do not go!” cry the children, whom she finally persuades to leave the room. After the maidservant promises to care well for the boys, both women shrouding their faces in their long sleeves and weeping bitterly, say farewell.

XIX. The king and his four attendants on horseback see Wên Chi off. The woman is accompanied by eight attendants bearing standards, four soldiers with tridents, four court maids, and the carrier of the peacock fan. (Hereafter, this entire group will be referred to as the retinue). On Chou’s entry with whip in hand, the king, offering Wên Chi wine, wishes her well.
XX. Two minor Hsiung-nu officials, one rôle being taken by the inimitable ch'ou, 丑, or comedian, Ts'ao Erh-kêng, 曹二庚, converse together.

XXI. It is nightfall and trees and rocks are blanketed with snow. Three stage hands, who have no connection with the play, arrange the carpet. Chou and the entire retinue enter. Wên Chi, garbed in a magnificent ermine cloak and brandishing a whip, moves about while the retinue also shifts its position, this being the conventional means of denoting travel on the road. All the while the heroine sings in slow tempo, 西皮, as follows: “Also I hear the neighing of horses and the moaning of wind o'er the ground. Deeply do I regret that I cannot bear to leave my two barbarian sons. My feet begrudge each step that takes me from them farther.” Needless to say, here as elsewhere, when Mr. Ch'êng sings in his rich mellow voice, every good point, such as enunciation, expression, legato, diminuendo, crescendo, and the softest of tones are enthusiastically applauded by the shouting of hào, 好, meaning “good,” and by the clapping of hands.

XXII. The party still on the road, Chou, brandishing his whip, declaims as he walks in well measured equestrian strides with the retinue. The parted curtains reveal a camp at night. All leave the stage except Wên Chi, who sits by the red lamp on the table. Resting her elbow there and putting her cheek against her hand to suggest, by convention, that she is slumbering, she remains silent for some time. Then, in the deep silence of the night, she gets up and declaims as, with rhythmic grace, she advances and withdraws. Emotion, gesture, and the figure ennobled by the measured sweep of the ermine cloak combine to create, especially when grief is expressed in soft plaintive tones, a grandeur that constantly suggests noble moments in Shakespeare: such is true art. From over the sandy wastes, float the eerie notes of Mongol bugles, reviving in the woman her desire for her sons. Singing a Mongolian theme set to erh-huang, 二黄, music measures, she sighs: “... and starved is my heart for my sons. ... with mountains high and deserts vast between us. ... In the depth of the night, I dream of your coming hither to me; in dreams, clasping your dear hands, comes a joy, comes a sadness. ... Pained is my heart. ...” The Chinese audience considers this a great moment of the play. In the morning, the fan bearer and four court maids awaken Wên Chi.

XXIII. Chou, Wên Chi and the retinue meet the comedian-official, who kneels to the woman.

XXIV. The parted curtains reveal the grave of Ch’ao Chûn, 昭君, another Chinese beauty, who had been given to the barbarians, but who had committed suicide. In the background rise hills over which sinuously climbs a mighty wall. Having knelt as a mark of respect, Wên Chi, recalling the sad lot of Ch’ao Chûn, felt surging in her breast more bitterly her own sorrows. She turns to the grave, and sings passages in fan- erh-huang, 反二黄, which is the musical style to express the deepest grief, as follows: “At the sight of your grave, I weep; so, famous
Wén Chi singing at the Grave of Ch'ao Chün.
Wên Chi and Her Two Sons. Her Maidservant Stands on the Right.
beauty, give ear to me. I, Wên Chi, come to pour for you libations and to recount my dolorous tale. ...By my beauty have I been brought to grief. ...I ask Great Heaven why it decrees that you, that I, suffer similar fates. ...Pity, that you are abandoned in this grave to watch alone the dismal dusk.” The actor sometimes faces the grave, sometimes the audience, the retinue meanwhile remaining seated on the ground. Much of the singing is accompanied by noble gestures and posturings with whip and ermine cloak. A melodious composition is played by the orchestra between the songs, bells and drums adding much to the effect. In the grand finale of this moving scene, the audience as of one accord give the actor an ovation.

XXV. To Ts'ao Ts'ao, who is seated with four attendants standing about him, Wên Chi, accompanied by her four court maids and the fan bearer, bows. Wên Chi, homeward bound, sings and flourishes her whip from side to side. Still facing the audience, she gracefully makes her exit.

In the foregoing outline an attempt has been made to give an idea of the action of the play, which is now said to be also presented by Cantonese actors.

Although one is grateful for such an evening’s entertainment and hesitates to be critical in small matters when everything has been so well done, yet one cannot but suggest that more care exercised in the management of the stage would add much to the pleasure of most spectators. For instance, while it is an accepted custom to permit, during an actual performance, outsiders in civilian clothes to watch the play from the sides of the stage, the management and the actor might insist that in such transcendent scenes as the song at night be sung without spectators in full view marring the picture. Also, the front curtain, unsightly with advertisements and a picture of a mammoth cigarette tin, might be discarded. May not an actor of first degree insist on using a plain front curtain or an embroidered one? As for scenery, that is a hotly contested point. While practically no settings were used in old plays in the not very distant past, now the public demands, not only scenery, but elaborate scenery. Thus, is it hoped that actors who can afford to do so will have executed for their own use scenery which is not so crude as at present is used by every actor in China without exception.

The public should be, and is, grateful to Mr. Ch’êng Yen-chiu for producing Wên Chi Kuei Han, which gives one courage to hold his ground against those who would disparage even the best vocal art of the present-day female impersonator and the high type of play which such an artist offers.