

An Actor Prepares¹

One day I was watching Mei Lan-fang performing Mu K'o Chai (穆柯寨) on the stage. One row behind me a spectator with a Tientsin accent pointed at the star and spoke to a lady companion, "He must be now 57, yet he had such quick reactions. Look at his eyes, so sharp and penetrating. Must be born that way!" I heard the praise about the actor's splendid eyes and could not but recall what Mei's aunt, old Mrs. Ch'in, had told me. That very night, I popped the question to Mr. Mei:

"Mrs. Ch'in once said that when you were young, your eyes were spiritless. Yet today I heard people in the audience praising your eyes. How did you manage to bring about this transformation?"

"It was true that I was not a robust young man," Mr. Mei said, "and my eyes were a little near-sighted. What my Auntie said about my eyes was quite true, drooping eyelids and all. Whenever I stood facing the wind, my eyes would water. I could not move my eyeballs with ease. For actors, the eyes occupy a very important position among the five organs. The audience often comments by saying so-and-so has an expressive face and so-and-so's face is wooden. The difference actually lies in the eyes. It's simply because the eyes are the only mobile feature in the face and therefore the most important for expression. Many famous actors possess eyes that dart with brilliance and yet preserve an inward strength at the same time. When I was young, my relatives and friends who took an interest in my career were all concerned about my eyes and thought they might jeopardize my future. I, too, was often distressed. I never imagined that my eyes' defects could be corrected by raising pigeons, an outcome that took me completely by surprise. . . .

"The pigeon is not only lovely to look at, but also good to listen to. Some pigeons have whistles attached to their tails. Thus when a squadron of them flies over, the whistles produce sounds of different pitches, some loud and clear while others are soft and lingering. It all depends on the owner. If he mixes the pitches right, you will really have a heavenly choir.

"The whistles are beautiful and delicate things. Some are made of bamboo, some bottle-gourd and some ivory, worked into various shapes, with the signature of the creator on them, like pieces of carving carrying the signatures of their artists. I used to make collecting pigeon whistles a hobby, gathering quite an extensive collection over the years.

"To serve these little creatures is no mean task. At the break of dawn, around 5 or 6 a.m., I have to get up. After washing myself, I hurry to open the pigeon cells and cleanse them thoroughly. Then I feed the pigeons with food and water. After completing these daily chores, it's time to open the cells and let the pigeons out. I let the strongest squadron out first. After a while follow the second and the third, and so on continuously. After these veterans have had enough exercise in the air, they begin to circle in teams, indicating their desire to descend. But I want them to lead and train the novices, so I direct their traffic with a bamboo stick, stopping them from descending right away. Then I begin to throw the new pigeons into the sky one by one so that they can mix with their more experienced brethren. After they have lined up in a new formation, I make them come down and let them rest upon the roof for a while, direct them to their respective cells, and feed them with food and water once more. I repeat this routine several times a day. To serve a fleet of pigeons is more complicated than to serve human beings. . . .

"What I have told you is the normal procedure of pigeon-raising in Peking. What good has it done to me physically? An awful lot. First, I have to rise early. My lungs benefit

¹Translated by Stephen C. Soong from *My Forty Years on the Stage* (舞台生活四十年), the life story of the celebrated artist Mei Lan-fang (梅蘭芳 1893-1961), as told to Hsu Chi-ch'uan (許姬傳).

Material not available due
to copyright restrictions.

PIGEONS painted on glaze, attributed to Giuseppe Castiglioni, known to Chinese as Lang Shih-ning (郎世寧), the renowned Jesuit priest who served as court painter to Emperor Ch'ien-lung.

from the fresh air inhaled in the dawn. Secondly, when the pigeons fly high in the sky, from down below I have to strain my eyesight to tell which ones belong to me and which ones to others. How difficult that is can be left only to one's imagination. My eyes have to follow their trails as they recede further and further away, as if reaching the end of the horizon and beyond the clouds. And I don't do it for one day either, but for days and days on end until my eyes are improved and corrected without my knowledge. Thirdly, when I use a heavy bamboo stick to direct the traffic of the pigeons, I have to rely on the muscles of my arms. By waving the bamboo stick regularly, I can feel my arms strengthen, and gradually the muscles on all parts of my body became much better developed. . . .

"That I love to raise pigeons has become well-known to my relatives and friends. After I gave up this hobby, one day a very dear friend, Mr. Feng Yu-wei, happily told me, 'Wan-hua², I bought a piece of antique by accident and it must have a special appeal to you. It is only fitting that I present it to you as a souvenir.' As he spoke, he produced a painting of a pair of pigeons in a square glass-paneled frame. The background was black, the pigeons were done in white, their eyes and claws in red, standing together on a piece of light blue Yunnan marble. They were painted in the Western style and looked so lively that they could almost move. At first I thought it was painted on paper and framed like an ordinary piece of painting. He explained it to me, however, that it was actually done on glaze, somewhat like the way they paint a snuff bottle. Judging from the style and décor, it must have been more than a hundred years old. It was said that it belonged to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung period and was done by the Italian painter, Giuseppe Castiglioni (郎世寧). Since there was no signature, we could not determine its authenticity. But its vintage and antiquity made it a lovely sight to look at. I thanked him for his consideration and took it home with me to hang on the wall so that I could gaze at it. This souvenir has been with me from north to south for more than twenty years, never parted from me, and is still hung on the wall of my home today. . . ."

²Wan-hua (晚華), Mei Lan-fang's courtesy name.