

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

---

## The Chinese Wall

Review Author: Bienvenido Lumbera

*Philippine Studies* vol. 10, no. 1 (1962): 171–173

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

**THE CHINESE WALL.** A farce by Max Frisch. Translated from the German by James L. Rosenberg. Introduction by Harold Clurman. New York: Hill & Wang, Inc., 1961. 121 pp.

The recent revival of interest in Henrik Ibsen is not just another attempt to dust off a venerated monument. There is a growing indication that the contemporary vulgarization of the romantic agony on the stage is finally beginning to bore the theatre-goers as well as the playwrights. More and more one notes a veering away from the Freudian alleys of the soul to the path opened up by Ibsen when he broke away from the romanticism of the nineteenth-century theatre. The Ibsenist tradition has never quite died out even in our new self-centered theatre. Social consciousness in contemporary drama looks back to the modified Ibsenism of Bertolt Brecht's *Lehrstücke* or "learning plays". Brecht rejected the realist fallacy of creating an illusion of reality in the dramatization of a thesis. In his *Lehrstücke*, didacticism in the theatre is re-dignified through the disarming candor and dramatic craftsmanship with which he diagnoses the political ills of his time. In its frank affinity to the technique and approach of Brecht, Max Frisch's **THE CHINESE WALL** reveals its essentially Ibsenist roots.

Frisch's thesis is stated by the character whose presence unifies the play's 24 scenes:

For the first time in the history of man (for up till now the tyrant who sent his Rome up in flames was always simply a temporary and quite local catastrophe)—for the first time (and therefore, my lords, the example of history will help us no longer!) we are face to face with the choice, will there be a human race or will there not?

Originally written in German by a Swiss architect, who has also written fiction, **THE CHINESE WALL** makes effective use of the farce form which, in this instance, is itself a comment on the absurdity of the human condition as seen by the playwright. The *Angst* of the existentialist is unmistakable behind Frisch's seemingly capricious manipulation of incident and character. The play's despairing humor feeds on the same *Angst* that characterizes the most significant contemporary dramas from Europe. So much of the impact of such a sense of humor—"that peculiar bittersweet blend of ironic wit and profound despair", as translator James L. Rosenberg puts it—lies in its refusal to allow illusion, intellectual or theatrical, to blur the outlines of whatever problem it chooses to drag to light. Thus, Frisch follows Brecht in borrowing theatricalistic conventions from the Chinese theatre in order to keep his audience ever aware of the urgency of his discussion. And so the stage remains a stage and the actors wear masks and address the audience directly.

The title is ambiguous. It refers both to the tyrant's will to preserve his reign ("The Chinese Wall . . . is another one of those

constantly repeated attempts to hold back time, to dam up history...") and to mankind's desire to preserve itself (the Wall was "planned as a defensive rampart against the barbaric peoples from the steppes of Central Asia"). The play opens with a prologue spoken by the Contemporary, the spokesman for the playwright, for the modern intellectual, and for the entire human race. The action is Emperor Tsin She Hwang Ti's search for the subversive Min Ko. Known all over the empire as "The Voice of the People", Min Ko is an elusive figure whom nobody has seen but whose songs criticizing the builder of the Great Wall are sung by everybody. Hwang Ti's search, set in 214 B.C., becomes a metaphor for the delusions of present-day international power groups that seek political control over men even at the cost of rendering the human race extinct. Frisch makes this clear when he brings in such historical and literary figures as Philip II, Napoleon, Brutus, Pontius Pilate, Columbus, Don Juan, Cleopatra, and Romeo and Juliet, who appear briefly from time to time as maskers at the emperor's ball.

Counterpoint to the impotent rage of the Contemporary as the modern intellectual is the call to action by the idealist Mee Lan, the emperor's daughter who falls in love with this young man from another time. When the search for "The Voice of the People" culminates with the arrest of a mute, Mee Lan rails at the Contemporary's rationalizations about the futility of action:

You with your great formulas! You shrug your shoulders while a man is flayed alive, and light another cigarette... A mute, who is being tortured to death till he screams! Till he screams—a helpless, defenseless creature without a voice! And you hear only your own voice? I don't want to know the things you know. Why don't you cry? You with your sterile science! Why don't you cry for him?

It is significant that the close of the farce brings together the disillusioned intellectual and the idealist. At the climax of *THE CHINESE WALL*, the Contemporary finally acts—he offers himself to the emperor as "The Voice of People" and delivers a plea for an end to power politics that considers war as inevitable. Ironically, however, Hwang Ti denies him his chance at martyrdom. Charmed by the "poetry" of the Contemporary's plea, the emperor does not order his execution and instead awards him an imperial decoration. Later on, a revolution deposes the emperor and the princess is violated. In the last scene, the rejected martyr and the fallen idealist stand desolate amid the collapsed scenery on the stage:

The Contemporary: Look at me, the weak and the helpless!

Mee Lan: You have said what you had to say.

The Contemporary: And achieved nothing!

Mee Lan: And still you had to say it.

The Contemporary: Why? What for?

Mee Lan: This is the truth we have learned: You, the helpless, and I, the shamed and insulted, we stand here in our time, and the world rolls forward over us. This is our history...

In the incisive introduction to the play, Harold Clurman points out that Max Frisch does not attempt to solve the problem he presents: "It (the play) simply bids us attend. As a lament or farce it calls us to the *order of the day*. In this regard, it is less and more than a 'play'".

When assayed for its literary value, *THE CHINESE WALL* may not satisfy. However, its anguished probing of a peculiarly contemporary universal problem should engage us all in these our indifferent times.

BIENVENIDO LUMBERA

LAS TRES CATEGORÍAS ESTÉTICAS DE LA CULTURA CLÁSICA. By José O'Callaghan, S.J. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1960. 288 pp.

Father O'Callaghan, S.J., a Spaniard of Irish ancestry, offers in this scientific treatise a synthesis of the philosophy of Beauty from the viewpoint of the classical world. The work was awarded the *Premio Nacional Menéndez Pelayo* in 1958. The author sets out in quest of the answer to the problem: Is the well-known formula for beauty given by the Angelic Doctor (S.Th. 1, 39, 8c) his own personal discovery, or is it not rather one more formulation of a medieval tradition with roots going all the way back to classical antiquity?

The Thomistic text alluded to requires as essential constituents of beauty the elements of integrity or perfection (*grandeza*), proportion or harmony (*armonía*), and clarity (*claridad*). Father O'Callaghan divides his treatise into an introduction, a tripartite body and an epilogue. In the introduction he first analyzes the formulation of these three categories of beauty as contained in the philosophy of the patristic and the medieval periods, giving special emphasis to the Augustinian viewpoint. Then, in the last chapter of the introduction, he probes into the literature of Greco-Roman antiquity to discover there too more than traces of these same esthetic categories. Each of these areas is then extensively studied in the main part of the work following a set pattern of development: an analysis of the concept of each element itself, then a verification of its presence in the works of Greek philosophers and also Latin authors of the classical and post-classical periods. In the epilogue he states his conclusions, of which the most fundamental is that the formula for beauty employed by St. Thomas is a faithful reflection of a medieval tradition rooted in the ancient classical authors. It is a formula latent throughout the classical period yet even so it reveals that period's personal outlook