From their Music, let us proceed to their Poetry, and Eloquence. These Arts must be of great Antiquity in *China*, it being generally observed, that in all Countries Poetry and Oratory have been cultivated long before other Sciences were even thought of; and that the first Histories of all Nations were composed in Verse, as the best Way to hand them down to Posterity, especially when Writing was not in Use.

Besides the ancient Books of the *Chinese*, some of which are in Verse, the Poems of *Kyu-i-wen* are extreamly delicate and sweet. Under the Dynasty of the *Tang*, *Li-tsau-pe* and *Tu-te-mwey*, did not yield to *Anacreon* and *Horace*. In short, in China, as formerly in *Europe*, the Philosophers are Poets; and among all their celebrated Writers, *Tseng-nan-fong* is the only one who has not written in Verse; for which Reason he is compared to the Flower *Hay-tang*; which would be perfect, were it not insipid[[1]](#footnote-1).

To understand well in what the Excellency of the *Chinese* Poetry consists, it is necessary to be skilled in their Language; but as that is no easy Matter, we cannot give the Reader a very good Notion of it. Their Compositions of this Kind are somewhat like the Sonnets, Rondeaux, Madrigals, and Songs, of our *European* Poets: Their Verses are some long, some short; that is, have more or fewer Words in them, their Beauty consisting in the Variety of their Cadence and Harmony. They ought to have a Relation to each other, both in the Rhime and Signification of their Words, which have among themselves a Variety of Tones agreeable to the Ear. They have another Kind of Poetry without Rhime, which consists in the Antithesis, or Opposition of the Thoughts, insomuch that if the first Thought relates to the Spring, the second shall concern the Autumn; or if the first concerns the Fire, the other shall relate to the Water; which Manner of Competition has its Difficulties, and requires some Skill. Nor are their Poets destitute of Enthusiasm: Their Expressions are often allegorical, and they know how properly to employ the Figures that render the Stile more lively and pathetic[[2]](#footnote-2).

Nevertheless, their Rhetoric is almost intirely natural; they being acquainted with very few Rules proper to adorn and embellish the Diction: They content themselves with reading the most eloquent Compositions; therein observing the Turns that are most likely to affect the Mind, and make such an Impression as they aim at.

Their Eloquence does not consist in a certain Arrangement of Periods, but in lively Phrases and noble Metaphors, as well as bold Comparisons; and, chiefly, in Maxims and Sentences taken from the ancient Sages; which being expressed in a sprightly, concise, and mysterious Stile, contain a great deal of Sense, and Variety of Thoughts, in a very few Words.

Their Logic, which is refined to such a Pitch in *Europe*, is in no better a State. They have invented no Rules to bring Argumentation to Perfection, and shew the Method of defining, dividing, and drawing Consequences. They follow nothing but the natural Light of Reason; by which only, without any Assistance from Art, they compare several Ideas together, and draw Consequences sufficiently just[[3]](#footnote-3).

With these Helps the *Chinese* have published a vast Number of Books on all Sorts of Subjects; as, Agriculture and Botany, the liberal, military, and mechanical Arts, Philosophy and Astronomy. But, they have been of most Use to them in composing their Histories, Plays, Books of Knight-Errantry, Romances, and Novels. These last are not unlike those to be met with in *Europe*; with this Difference, that ours generally consist of nothing but Love-Adventures, or ingenious Fictions, which corrupt the Mind at the fame Time they divert the Fancy: Whereas, the Chinese Novels are commonly very instructive, as well as pleasant, containing Maxims for the Reformation of Manners, and almost always recommending the Practice of some Virtue. These Stories are often intermixed with four or five Verses, to enliven the Narration[[4]](#footnote-4). *Du Halde* has inferred three or four Pieces of this Kind by Way of Specimen.

Plays must be very common in *China*, since, as hath been already observed[[5]](#footnote-5), they are acted at every considerable Entertainment: But neither the three Unities, of Action, Time, and Place, nor the other Rules observed by the *Europeans*, to give Regularity and Grace to these Sorts of Works, are to be Sound in them. The whole Design of their Authors being to divert their Countrymen, and move their Passions; to inspire them with the Love of Virtue, and an Abhorrence of Vice; they think it sufficient if they succeed thus far. They make no Distinction between Tragedies, which do not differ from their Novels, excepting, that Persons are introduced speaking on a Theatre. In the printed Plays, the Names of the Persons are seldom set down; because they always begin by telling the Spectators who they are, and the Parts they are to act.

A Company of Comedians consists of eight or nine Actors, who have each their proper Parts allotted, much like the *Italian* Comedians and *French* Strollers: Frequently, the fame Player acts several different Parts; other wife, as the Chinese represent every Incident, and in the Dialogue Form, the Company would be too numerous: But then the Spectator is liable to be puzzled. This might be remedied by a Mask; but Masks are seldom used, except in Interludes; and are worn only by Villains and the Chiefs of Robbers.

The *Chinese* Tragedies are intermixed with Songs; and they often break-off Singing, to recite two or three Phrases in the usual Manner of speaking. It shocks an European to see an Actor fall a-singing in the Middle of a Dialogue: But it must be considered, that among the *Chinese*, the Singing is to express some great Emotion of the Soul; such as Joy, Anger, Grief, or Despair: For Instance, a Man who is filled with Indignation against a Villain, sings; another, who animates himself to Revenge, sings; a third, who is ready to make himself away, likewise sings.

The Songs in some Plays arc difficult to be understood, especially by *Europeans*, because full of Allusions to Things unknown to them; and Figures of Speech which they have much ado to comprehend. The Airs belonging to the Songs of the *Chinese* Tragedies are but few, and, in the Impression, they are placed at the Head of the Songs; which are printed in large Characters, to distinguish them from Prose.

The Tragedies are divided into several Parts, which may be called Acts: The first is named *Sye-tse*, and resembles a Prologue or Introduction: The Acts are called *Chê*, which may be divided, if one will, into Scenes, by the Entries and Exits of the Actors.

For a Specimen of the *Chinese* Plays, the Author has inferred a Tragedy, intitled, *Chau-shi-ku-eul*, that is, *The little Orphan of the House of* Chau. It was translated by *de Premare* the Jesuit, from a Collection of an hundred of the best Plays composed under the Dynasty of the *Ywen*, (or *Western Tartars*) and contains an hundred Volumes divided into four *Tau*. It is the eighty-fifth of the Collection, and begins the thirty-fifth Volume. There are but five Actors, although near a Dozen Persons speak, if we reckon the Guards and Soldiers[[6]](#footnote-6).

1. *Du Halde’s China*, vol 1. p. 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The same, vol 2. *p.* 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The same, vol 2. *p.* 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The same, vol 2. *p.* 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See before, *p.* 83. e. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Du Halde’s China*, vol 2. *p.* 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)