The drama, as might be expected, constitutes a popular form of Chinese literature; though it labours under great imperfections, and is not regularly exhibited on any public theatre as in this country, its professors are merely invited to private houses, and paid for each performance. The sovereign himself does not bestow any patronage on the art, beyond hiring the best actors when he wishes to enjoy their wit or talents. No entertainment, however, given by the prince or any great man, is considered complete without a dramatic exhibition; and every spacious dwelling, and even the principal inns, have a large hall set apart for the purpose. Among less opulent individuals, a subscription is occasionally made to bear in common the expense of a play. It is reckoned that several hundred companies find employment in Pe-king; and along the rivers and great canals, numerous strolling parties live in barges.[[1]](#footnote-1) A troop usually consists of eight or ten persons, mostly slaves of the manager, who accordingly occupy a very mean place in public estimation. To purchase a free child for the purpose of educating him as an actor, is punished by a hundred strokes of the bamboo; and no free female is allowed to marry into that class.[[2]](#footnote-2) To this contempt for the performers, as well as to the low standard of the drama among the Chinese, who seem to view it merely as the amusement of an idle hour, may be ascribed the depressed state in which it continues to exist. The dramatic poet has liberty and employment, but he has not honour, which seems equally necessary for the production of any thing great in the arts. Scenery and stage effect, which indeed the places of performance would render very difficult to produce, are never attempted. A theatre can at any time be erected in two hours: a platform of boards is elevated six or seven feet from the ground on posts of bamboo; three sides are hung with curtains of cotton cloth, while the front is left open to the audience.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Under these humiliating circumstances, there do not seem to have arisen any great names, to which the Chinese people can refer with pride, as national dramatists. Numerous pieces have, however, been produced, particularly under the dynasty of the Tang. A collection has been formed of 199 volumes, from which are selected a hundred plays, supposed to comprehend the flower of this class of productions.[[4]](#footnote-4) Of these only five have been translated, namely, two tragedies, “The Orphan of Tchao,” by Father Premaré, and “The Sorrows of Han,” by Mr Davis ; and three comedies, “The Heir in his Old Age,” by the latter gentleman, “The Circle of Chalk,” by M. Stanislas-Julien, and “The Intrigues of a Waiting-maid,” by M. Bazin. This, no doubt, is but a small portion of so great a mass; yet, as it consists of favourite productions, chosen by judicious translators, the Chinese drama will not probably have cause to complain of being judged according to such specimens.

On perusing even the best of these compositions, we at once discover that the dialogue is nearly as rude and inartificial as the scenery. Instead of allowing characters and events to be developed in the progress of the piece, each performer, on his first entry, addresses the audience, and informs them who and what he is, what remarkable deeds he has performed, and what are his present views and intentions. On these occasions he speaks completely in the style of a third person, stating, without veil or palliation, the most enormous crimes, either committed or contemplated. The unities, which have been considered so essential to a classic drama, are completely trampled under foot; and even the license as to time and place, to which Shakspeare has accustomed a British audience, is far exceeded. The Orphan of Tchao is born in the first act, and before the end of the drama figures as a grown man. In the “Circle of Chalk,” a young lady in one scene receives and accepts proposals of marriage; in the next, she appears with a daughter aged five years. The tragedies labour under a much more serious defect, in the absence of impassioned and poetic dialogue. The performer, in the most critical and trying moments, makes no attempt to express his sorrows in corresponding language. Action alone is employed, which affords a genuine, indeed, though not very dramatic indication of the depth of his feelings. The hero, in the most tragic scenes, strangles himself, or stabs his enemy, with the same coolness as if he had been sitting down to table. This defect may probably be connected with the national character; with that stately reserve maintained, especially by public men, studious of decorum, and continually under the eye of jealous superiors. This seems the more probable, since, in private life and to intimate friends, they sometimes give utterance to their emotions with considerable warmth. These dramas, however, cannot be read without some interest. The incidents are affecting, the situations striking; there is a continued movement and action; one impressive scene closely follows another, without those long speeches and languid intervals, which can scarcely be avoided by writers who must fill up a drama expected to occupy a certain portion of time and space.

The “Orphan of Tchao” includes a plot of so much interest, that it was adopted by Voltaire as the basis of a successful tragedy. A tyrannical minister, abusing the favour of his sovereign, satiates his vengeance on a hated rival, whom he not only puts to death, but extirpates his family, to the number of three hundred. An infant boy, however, is rescued, and reared by the family-physician as his own son, in which character the youth becomes a favourite of the murderer. On his reaching the age of twenty, the supposed father discloses the secret of his birth to the youth, who then becomes an instrument in avenging the wrongs of his house. The disclosure gives rise to the most striking scene in the play, and one marked by more than usual animation. Tching-yng, the physician, having prepared the youth by a figurative representation of the history of his family, then proceeds:—

“It is now twenty years since this happened, and the Orphan of the House of Tchao must be now of the same age, and never thinks of revenging his parents; what, then, does he think of? He is handsomely shaped, is above five feet high, knows letters, and is very skilful in the exercise of arms. What is become of his grandfather in the chariot? All the family have been cruelly massacred; his mother was hanged, his father stabbed, and hitherto no revenge has been taken. Sure they do him wrong, when they talk of him as a man of courage.

“*Tching-poei*. My father, you have talked to me a long while, and 1 seem to be in a dream, for I can comprehend nothing that you speak of.

“*Tching-yng*. Since you are yet ignorant of my drift, I'll speak more plainly. The barbarous man in red is Tou-ngan-cou, Tchao-tun is your grandfather, Tchao-so is your father, the princess is your mother, I am the old physician Tching-yng, and you are the Orphan of the House of Tchao.

“*Tching-poei*. How! am I the Orphan of the House of Tchao? Alas! you kill me with grief and rage.

[*He falls down in a fainting-fit.*

“*Tching-yng*. My young master, recover yourself again!

“*Tching-poei*. Alas! you have almost destroyed me. [*He sings.*] If you had not told me all this, how could I have learnt it? My father, sit down in this chair, and suffer me to salute you.

[*He salutes him.*

“*Tching-yng*. I have this day restored the House of Tchao, but, alas! I have destroyed my own. I have plucked up the only root that was left.

[*He weeps.*

“*Tching-poei sings*. Yes, I swear I'll be revenged on the traitor Tou-ngan-cou.

“*Tching-yng*. Don't make such a great noise, lest Tou-ngan-cou should hear you.

“*Tching-poei*. I’ll either die myself or destroy the traitor. [*He sings.*] My father, don’t disturb yourself; to-morrow, when I have seen the king and all the grandees, I’ll kill the villain with my own hands.

[*He sings, and describes the manner in which he will attack and kill him*”[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the Sorrows of Han, the interest is produced by a young lady, who, in spite of the intrigues of a treacherous minister, is introduced into the palace, entirely captivates the monarch, and becomes his favourite queen. The defeated statesman avenges himself by communicating the secret of her beauty to the Khan of the Tartars, who is thus induced to demand her in marriage, with the threat of war in case of refusal. The embassy arrives, and the transaction is concluded in the following cool and summary manner:—

“*Emperor*. Let our civil and military officers consult, and report to us the best mode of causing the foreign troops to retire, without yielding up the princess to propitiate them. They take advantage of the compliant softness of her temper. Were the Empress Leu-hou alive,—let her utter a word,— which of them would dare to be of a different opinion? It would seem, that for the future, instead of men for ministers, we need only have fair women to keep our empire in peace.

“*Princess*. In return for your majesty’s bounties, s it is your handmaid’s duty to brave death to serve you. I can cheerfully enter into this foreign alliance for the sake of producing peace, and shall leave behind me a name still green in history. But my affection for your majesty, how am I to lay aside!

“*President*. I entreat your majesty to sacrifice your love, and think of the security of your dynasty. Hasten, sir, to send the princess on her way.

“*Emperor*. Let her this day advance a stage on her journey, and be presented to the envoy. Tomorrow we will repair as far as the bridge of Pah-ling, and give her a parting feast.”

Yet, it must be confessed, that afterwards, in private, he laments his loss in very affecting terms:—

“Did I not think of her, I had a heart of iron. The tears of my grief stream in a thousand channels. This evening shall her likeness lie suspended in the palace, where I will sacrifice to it. Since the princess was yielded to the Tartars, we have not held an audience. The lonely silence of night but increases our melancholy. We take the picture of that fair one, and suspend it here, as some small solace to our griefs. Hark! the passing fowl screamed twice or thrice; can it know there is one so desolate as I? Yon doleful cry is not the note of the swallow on the carved rafters, nor the song of the variegated bird upon the blossoming tree. The princess has abandoned her home. Know ye in what place she grieves, listening, like me, to the screams of the wild-bird?”

Again, however, when intelligence is brought that the object of his tenderness, on arriving at the banks of the Amour, has plunged into the waters, and that the khan, affected by her fate, has delivered up the guilty minister, the tidings are received with the same business-like apathy.

“Then strike off the traitor’s head, and be it presented as an offering to the shade of the princess. Let a fit banquet be got ready for the envoy.”

These dramas are interspersed with stanzas of poetry, introduced often on the most critical occasions, like the songs in an English opera. These were injudiciously omitted by Premare; but Mr Davis has given some specimens, and M. Stanislas-Julien has translated all those which occur in his piece. In the impassioned scenes of deep tragedy, these effusions cannot be considered as natural or seasonable; yet they are often possessed of merit. The following stanza, put in the mouth of the Khan of the Tartars, though not very likely to be sung by that person, is not devoid of beauty:—

“The autumnal gale blows wildly through the grass, amidst our woollen tents,

And the moon of night, shining on the rude huts, hears the lament of the mournful pipe;

The countless hosts, with their bended bows, obey me as their leader;

Our tribes are the distinguished friends of the family of Han.”

With regard to the poems in the “Circle of Chalk,” it may be remarked that they form integral parts of the dialogues from which they scarcely differ in character; and also that, but for the special indication that they are poetry, they could not be distinguished from the prose.

The comic dramas have the same structure, and nearly the same defects with the tragic. They do not display those varieties and nice shades of character, nor those sallies of humour, which enliven the European; but they are, nevertheless, diversified with striking incidents, and exhibit a genuine picture of Chinese life. They are, in fact, novels in a dramatic form, and the observations on the former species of composition will apply to them. The incident with which the “Circle of Chalk” terminates has a striking similarity to that of the judgment of Solomon. A circle of chalk is formed round the child, of which the two female claimants are desired to take hold, and each draw it towards herself: and she who succeeds in wresting it from the other is to be adjudged the mother. The real parent proves her claim to that character, by refusing to subject the infant to so dangerous a predicament. The coincidence is probably accidental, and the description in the Sacred Volume is much happier and more effective.

1. Davis’ Heir in his Old Age, Pref. p. 9-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Davis’ Heir in his Old Age, Pref. p. 14 &c. Morrison’s Miscellany, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Davis, as above, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Davis’ Sorrows of Han, Pref. pp. 7, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Du Halde, vol. iii. p. 232--3-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)