On the 20th of February we were invited to a grand dinner at the house of a distinguished hong-merchant, of the name of *Mauk-qua*. This personage transacted business with the Company to an immense annual amount. The merchant resided at a splendid mansion, nearly adjoining the European Factories. His warehouses were very extensive, and occupied a large space of ground. About six o’clock the company began to assemble; it consisted of all the gentlemen of the Factory, the India captains and their principal officers, foreign merchants and Mandarins, the friends of Mauk-qua and others, in the whole to the number of eighty persons. We were all received in a large anti-chamber by Mauk-qua in person, to whom every stranger was introduced in due form. At seven o’clock we were shewn into the dining-saloon, which was lighted up with elegant lamps; and here I met again with my pleasant fellow-voyager and ship-mate, Hommagee, the Persian merchant, after a separation of many days. The table was covered with a profusion of costly delicacies, dressed according to the mode of several other nations as well as the Chinese. On one side of the saloon, the curtains opened, and discovered an elegant theatre richly decorated. The performers entered; and a play, or sing-sang, commenced. The music was loud and harsh; but the company in general paid much more attention to the exquisite dishes on the table than to the play, although the players exerted themselves to the utmost, to excite the notice and obtain the applause of their auditors. I confess that I, also, had so bad a taste, or was so hungry, that I could not discover the least beauty in the poetry, excellence in the acting, or harmony in the music, until I had somewhat allayed the appetite which the sight and smell of soups made of *birds’-nests* and *sharks’-fins* had occasioned.

These soups, as well as most of the Chinese cookery, were served up in small upright porcelain dishes. I tasted the soups, and found them palatable and highly seasoned; but, as they are said to be stimulants of a particular nature, I refrained from indulging my taste, and made my dinner of some fine fish, and the substantial English dishes of roast beef, and ham and fowls. Some excellent pastry and curious confectionary succeeded; and the feast was concluded with a desert of fruit, among which were fine large grapes, and deep-coloured Mandarin oranges of a most exquisite flavour. The wines were Madeira and claret; but the Chinese gentlemen preferred their own *sam-soo* to the European wines. The sam-soo is a strong fiery spirit, and is said to be very unwholesome to an European constitution.

I had now leisure to attend to the sing-sang, and the exertions of the sons of Thespis—“the brief abstract and chronicles of the times;” but I soon perceived that these heroes of the stage had never heard Hamlet’s instructions to the players, or, if they had, they had not profited; for “they so strutted, and bellowed, as if Nature’s journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably!” Yet there was a fable, a plot, and a catastrophe, to be distinguished even by us, who were totally unacquainted with the language. Could an intelligent Chinese discover as much in our most celebrated pieces; in our Hamlets, our Othellos, and our Richards? I am afraid he would be tempted to call them, as we did the sing-sang, “a tiresome bore!” Music, however, being the universal language of Nature, is as universally understood. But if the sounds we heard were delightful, or even tolerable, to the Chinese, their auditory nerves must have been very differently constructed from those which compose the European organs of hearing; for nothing could be more harsh and discordant, than the noise proceeding from Mauk-qua’s orchestra.

The fable of the piece represented, as I understood it from the action, and the information of those sitting near to me, as follows: A governor of a province at a great distance from the capital having a beautiful daughter, bestowed her upon the son of a Mandarin in his province, who was the next in authority to the governor, and who, under professions of the utmost devotion and friendship to his superior, concealed a heart full of baseness, envy, and avarice. He had no sooner obtained the daughter of the governor for his son, than he began to employ all his art and finesse to destroy the credit of his friend at court, and to render his authority contemptible in the country. Forged complaints were continually sent to the Emperor’s ministers of the mal-administration of the governor, and the oppression he exercised towards those over whom he presided. The son, whose disposition was the reverse of his father’s, with the utmost humility, endeavoured to check his schemes with intreaties, and even gentle remonstrances, sometimes hinting at the fatal consequences to his father and himself in case of a discovery; but without the least effect. At length the repeated complaints which the treacherous Mandarin continued to send to court reached the Emperor’s ears, who in consequence ordered the governor to come to Pekin to answer for his conduct. His false friend now threw off the mask, and boldly stood forth as his accuser, accompanied by others whom be had suborned, whose evidence bore down the assertions of the governor, who had relied upon the zeal and integrity of the Mandarin, but chiefly upon his own innocence, for his defence. He was condemned to lose his head, and the treacherous Mandarin was rewarded with his office. Hitherto his schemes had succeeded, and his utmost wish was obtained: for his whole aim was to succeed to the government by the destruction of his friend. His virtuous son was, however, inconsolable; and though his filial piety suppressed, it could not extinguish his emotions. There was one individual, a Mandarin also of some consequence in the province, who had silently observed the conduct of the false friend towards the governor, but not with indifference. When this person was told what had happened at Pekin, and that the traitor had been appointed governor, he immediately collected a certain number of the most considerable men in the province, and repaired to court with a petition in favour of the condemned chief. They arrived just in time; for the preparations for his execution were finished, and he on the point of being led to the fatal spot where it was to take place. The good Mandarin threw himself at the Emperor’s feet, loudly asserting the innocence of the victim; he produced his respectable witnesses, many of them known to the ministers for men of honour and probity. The execution was stayed; the prisoner pardoned, and reinstated in his government; and his vile accuser, who had remained at Pekin to enjoy the destruction of his friend, was seized, tried, and condemned to suffer death.

It was now that the son displayed his filial piety and heroic virtue; he found means to visit his father in his dungeon, changed cloaths with him, and remained in his place, while the basest of criminals left him to his fate, and fled to the Wilds of Tartary. The deception was not discovered by the officers of Justice, who led the son to the place of execution, where the finisher of the law took off his head with one dextrous stroke of his scymitar. The head actually fell on the stage, the body staggered a few steps, and fell also, covering the floor with blood. How this was done, I was not informed; but I was assured that the performer received no damage. Thus ended the Chinese Tragedy, the pious fraud having been discovered when it was too late. A kind of epilogue was recited in praise of filial duty, and inculcating obedience to parents, even to death.

Although poetical justice is not observed in this drama, the moral it enforces is popular among the Chinese. The passion of love is seldom the subject of their dramatic pieces; but conjugal infidelity is often brought on the stage, and exemplary punishment is inflicted on the guilty party.

When the play at the hong-merchant’s was concluded, I observed that two of his Mandarin guests were fast asleep; and a young Englishman had, by taking “potations pottle deep,” brought his spirits into such a pitch of riotous elevation, that he made more noise than the sing-sang, and was much more troublesome.