In passing through the streets it was impossible not to be struck with the silence and regularity of the crowds of spectators; although every countenance expressed curiosity, scarcely an observation was made; there was no pointing with fingers; and though the streets may be said to have been lined with soldiers at inconsiderable intervals, the exercise of their authority did not seem necessary to maintain tranquillity. The streets were narrow, regular, and paved with large stones, brought from some distance. Whatever taste belongs to Chinese architecture seems chiefly directed to the roofs; the pediments are in general elegant and highly decorated. Dwelling-houses were of one story, built of solid brick work. We crossed a bridge, over the river, the surface of which was scarcely visible from junks.

In the Hall of reception itself there was little to remark: indeed it had altogether the appearance of a temporary erection. We dined at the upper end, and the lower was occupied by the stage. Chinese dinners, with the succession of dishes served upon trays, one of which is placed before one or two persons, according to their rank, have been so accurately described, that I shall not pretend to enter into any detail. The custard, and the preserved fruits with which the dinner commenced, were very palatable: I cannot say that I much liked the bird-nest’s soup, it was too gelatinous and insipid for my taste; nor did the various additions of shrimps, eggs, &c. improve the compound: the shark fins were not more agreeable. The Chinese eat as well as drink to each other; and a Mandarin, who stood behind us, regulated the times of commencement, both in the dishes and cups of wine. The wine was heated, and had not an unpleasant flavour; it is not unlike Sherry. The dresses of the actors, and the stage decorations, were very splendid, and there was noise and bustle enough to satiate the eyes and ears; even those who understood Chinese were not able to trace any story in the performance, which seemed to be more of the nature of a melo-drama than comic or tragic representation. The part of a stag was the best performed in the piece, and when in front of the stage, from the shelter afforded by a group of flag-bearers, and the consequent concealment of the boy’s legs, illusion was sufficiently perfect. The instrumental music, from its resemblance to the bag-pipes, might have been tolerated by Scotchmen, to others it was detestable. Of the same description was the singing. Our admiration was justly bestowed upon the tumblers, who yield to none I have ever seen in strength and agility; their feats were executed with particular neatness. In splendour of appearance, the Mandarins did not stand any competition with the actors who were blazing with gold; it was suggested that their costumes were the ancient habits of the nation.

The dress of ceremony of the Mandarins, consisting of blue gauze or crape with some flowered satin beneath, is plain and not unbecoming; an embroidered badge, marking their rank, whether civil or military, is fixed upon their robe before and behind. The peacock’s feather, or more properly tail of peacock’s feather, answering to our orders of knighthood, is worn behind; two of these decorations are equivalent to the garter. The momentary rank of the person is not to be ascertained from his mandarin ornaments. A Mandarin with a white button sat next to the Chinese commissioners with only the intervention of a pillar, while one in a clear blue button sat below him, and one with a peacock’s feather walked about the court the whole time of the conference. The commission of present office would seem to fix the immediate rank.

There was no sign of extreme poverty among the people in the streets; on the contrary, the majority were clean and decently dressed, and their appearance bespoke them to be well fed; some of the younger were not ill looking.