A Brief View, *&c.*

Among the many interesting and valuable communications, for which Europe is indebted to the Jesuits and the other less enlightened and more prejudiced orders of the Catholic missionaries, who established themselves in China more than two centuries ago, very little is to be found respecting the taste of that extraordinary nation for lyric poetry, or theatrical exhibitions; and from the infrequency of European visitors, we are left almost wholly in the dark with regard to the nature of this kind of composition, as well as of the actual state of the drama, and indeed of that department of literature in general which is usually known by the name of *belles lettres*. Led astray by Chinese prejudices, and falling in with Chinese feelings, respecting their ancient books, these writers have so stuffed their communications with excessive panegyric on the beauties of the four *King*, and the wisdom and virtues of Yao and Chun, as to leave themselves no time to enquire into the modern state of general literature. We are told, indeed, by Pere Cibot,[[1]](#footnote-1) and the remark is copied from him by the Abbé Grozier, “that they would speak, in China, of a man of letters making good verses, just as they would speak, in France, of a captain of infantry playing well on the violin;” yet both the one and the other immediately contradict such a notion, by quoting several pieces of poetry, both ancient and modern, extolling their beauties, and endeavouring to shew their influence over the passions, and the estimation in which they have been held from the earliest periods to the present times. The truth is, the most ancient records that remain of China, consist of poetry. The very symbol by which compositions of this kind are designated, points out their early origin;—*shee*, a character compounded of a *word*, and a *hall* or *temple*, a place from which the magistrates anciently delivered instruction to the people—the *words* of *the temple*—being short-measured sentences, composed generally of four characters, so chosen as to be each of them very expressive and significant, and easily committed to the memory. The Book of Odes, one of the four most eminent and ancient of their classics, is chiefly composed of this kind of Verse.

It is not necessary, however, to dive into the depths of antiquity, or to have recourse to ancient compositions, in order to prove a very general predilection of the Chinese for epic and lyric poetry. The late *Kien-lung* amused himself with writing an epic poem, called Moukden, and two or three others of considerable length, besides several lyrical odes, songs, and epigrams, as half the teacups in the empire can testify; his unfortunate favourite, whose wealth and influence drew upon him the vengeance of the reigning emperor, wrote verses in his prison the day before his execution; and the Editor has in his possession the translation of a copy of verses, entitled “London;” written by a Chinese, who had accompanied a Gentleman to England, in the capacity of his servant, describing very concisely, but characteristically, what he saw, and more particularly, those things which contrasted with the manners and appearances of his own country.

It is not correct, therefore, to say that the Chinese have no relish for poetry. They cannot avoid liking it, for every symbol of their written language is poetical; each character presenting to the eye, and through it to the mind, the picture of the idea which it is meant to represent. It is true, some of the missionaries make a reserve in favour of *ancient* poetry: “the good old times” are praised in more countries than in China, and with as little knowledge of what their “goodness” consisted in; but Mr. Morrison, in his Chinese Grammar, quotes a Chinese author who seems to have sounder notions on the subject than either Pere Cibot or the Abbé Grozier: he compares the progress of poetry among his countrymen to the gradual growth of a tree: “the ancient *She-king* (the Book of Odes) may be likened to the roots; when *Soo-loo* flourished, the buds appeared; in the time of *Keen-ngan* there was abundance of leaves; but during the dynasty *Tang*, many reposed under the shade of the tree, and it yielded rich supplies of flowers and fruit.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In like manner the two writers above mentioned, Cibot first, and Grozier servilely copying him, pretend to say, that from the earliest periods in which theatrical exhibitions entered into domestic amusements, and the public entertainments of the court, the learned have not ceased to publish philosophical observations on the dangers of the theatre, and its baneful effects on public manners. “Plays (says one of these philosophers) are a kind of artificial fire-works of wit, which appear in the night of disorder; they debase and expose those who let them off, fatigue the delicate eyes of the sage, occupy dangerously idle minds, expose women and children who listen to them, give out more of smoke and stench than of light, leaving only a dangerous dazzling, and often cause dreadful conflagrations?”[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet in the same page we are told that the greater part of Chinese comedies and tragedies appear to be written to shew the deformity of vice and the charms of virtue. The writer might have added, that they are universally performed and encouraged from the court to the cottage; that the Chinese are so passionately fond of scenic representations, that in most houses of the great, a hall is set apart for the performance of plays; that no entertainment is ever given without a company of comedians to amuse the guests; that they constitute a part of all public festivals; and that foreign ambassadors are invariably entertained with theatrical representations:—he might further have added, that it is not true, as he asserts, that public theatres are put on a level with houses of prostitution and confined to the suburbs of cities.[[4]](#footnote-4) There is no such thing, in fact, as a public theatre in all China. A Chinese company of players will at any time construct a theatre in the course of a couple of hours; a few bamboos as posts to support a roof of mats, and a floor of boards, raised some six or seven feet from the ground; and a few pieces of painted cotton to cover the three sides, the front being left entirely open, are all that is required for the construction of a Chinese theatre; which very much resembles, when finished, one of those booths erected for similar purposes in Bartholomew Fair, but is far less substantial. Indeed a common apartment is all that is necessary for the performance of a Chinese play. They have no scenical deception to assist the story, as in the modern theatres of Europe; and the odd expedients to which they are sometimes driven by the want of scenery are not many degrees above Nick Bottom’s “bush of thorns and a lanthorn, to disfigure or to present the person of moonshine;” or the man with “some plaister, or some lome, or some rough cast about him, to signify wall;” thus a general is ordered upon an expedition to a distant province; he mounts a stick, or brandishes a whip, or takes in his hand the reins of a bridle, and striding three or four times round the stage in the midst of a tremendous crash of gongs, drums, and trumpets, he stops short, and tells the audience where he is got to; if the wall of a city is to be stormed, three or four soldiers lie down on each other to “present wall.” A tolerable judgment may be formed of what little assistance the imaginations of an English audience derived from scenical deception, by the state of the drama and the stage, as described by Sir Philip Sidney, about the year 1583. “Now you shall have three ladies walk to gather flowers, and then we must believe the stage to be a garden. By and by we have news of shipwrack in the same place; then we are to blame, if we accept it not for a rock. Upon the back of that, comes out a hidious monster with fire and smoke; and then the miserable beholders are bound to take it for a cave; while in the mean time two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers, and then what hard heart will not receive it for a pitched field.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Inigo Jones appears to be the first who invented *painted cloths* for moveable scenes, which were used at Oxford in 1605.

It is very true that stage players are not held in great respect by the Chinese; and Cibot had probably read the statute[[6]](#footnote-6) against civil or military officers of government, or the sons of those who possess hereditary rank, frequenting the company of prostitutes and actresses, which led him into the mistake of the juxta-position of their trading concerns, a mistake, the more likely to be committed, as he frankly owns he knows very little of the matter, and takes no interest in the subject. We must be cautious, however, in estimating the conduct of the Chinese from their moral maxims or legal precepts: there is no people on earth whose practice is so much at variance with their professed principles; as a striking instance of this remark, it may be observed, that the late Emperor *Kien-lung*, in the teeth of the above mentioned statute, took an actress for one of his inferior wives or concubines; since which, it is said, females have been prohibited from appearing on the stage, .and their places supplied by boys, and those creatures who are of neither sex. No women ever appeared on the Greek and the Roman theatres; but the characters in the dramas of the latter, as in those of China, were sometimes played by eunuchs. The soft and delicate female characters of Shakespeare had not the advantage of being played by a female during his life; Mrs. Betterton, about 1660, being the first, or about the first, female who played Juliet and Ophelia. It is observed in the prologue to the Moor of Venice, in introducing the first female who played Desdemona,

“ ’Tis possible a virtuous woman may

Abhor all sorts of looseness, and yet play.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

No prohibition, however, of females acting on the Chinese stage, appears in the code of laws; but it is enacted, that “all strolling players, who shall be guilty of purchasing the sons or daughters of free persons, in order to educate them as actors or actresses; or who shall be guilty of marrying or adopting as children such free persons, shall, in each case, be punished with a hundred blows of the bamboo”[[8]](#footnote-8)—and the same punishment is extended to the seller of free persons, and to females born of free parents voluntarily intermarrying with strolling players.

It has been said, that in Pekin alone there are several hundred companies of comedians, when the court is there, and that at other times they travel about from one city to another. A company generally consists of eight or ten persons, who are literally the servants or slaves of the master or manager. They travel about from place to place in a covered barge, on canals or rivers near to which most great cities are situated; these barges are their habitations, and in those they are instructed in their parts by the master. When called on to perform before a party, a list of the plays they are prepared to represent is put into the hands of the master of the feast, who consults his guests as to the choice to be made; this done, the dramatis personas are read over; and if it should happen that a name occurs therein, corresponding with the name of any of the guests, another piece is immediately chosen, in order that no offensive act or allusion in the play may be coupled with the name of the auditor. Perhaps, however, this restrained delicacy is only on paper, and not followed up in practice; just as the statute which prohibits musicians and stageplayers from representing, in any of their performances, “emperors, empresses, famous princes, ministers, and generals of former ages,” is perpetuallly infringed, such representations being, in fact, the favourite and most usual subjects of theatric exhibition. Indeed there is a saving clause, which says, that “this law is not intended to prohibit the exhibition upon the stage of fictitious characters of just and upright men, of chaste wives, and pious and obedient children, all which may tend to dispose the minds of the spectators to the practice of virtue.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

When the common people wish for a theatrical entertainment, they subscribe among themselves a sum sufficient to cover the expense of erecting the temporary theatre and paying the actors, which is said to be very moderate. De Guignes says, that the temples or pagodas are sometimes used for theatres,[[10]](#footnote-10) which is not impossible, as they are the common places of resort for gamblers, and the lodging houses of foreign ambassadors, and officers travelling in the public service. But neither in this respect would the Chinese be singular; our old *mysteries* and *moralities* were frequently played in churches. Taverns in China have also a large room set apart for the entertainment of guests with theatrical exhibitions; just as in England, companies of players had occasional stages erected in the yards of the principal inns, in Queen Elizabeth's time.

If the missionaries have communicated little information respecting the actual state of theatrical representations in China, the descriptions, which occasional visitors to that country have given of the actual state of scenic exhibitions, convey a tolerably correct notion of what they are: and they certainly are not of a nature to give us any very exalted notion of the state of the drama, or of the refinement of the people. The most singular and inexplicable part of the subject is, that those representations would appear to descend into lowness and vulgarity, in the inverse ratio of the rank and situation in life of the parties for whose amusement they are exhibited. Thus, at the court of Pekin, and in presence of his Imperial Majesty, Ysbrandt Ives, the Russian ambassador in 1692, was entertained with jugglers, posture-makers, and harlequins, while on his way thither, and not far from the Great Wall, the governor of a city entertained him with a regular play. “First,” says he, “entered a very beautiful lady, magnificently dressed in cloth of gold, adorned with jewels, and a crown on her head, singing her speech, with a charming voice, and agreeable motion of the body, playing with her hands, in one of which she held a fan. The prologue thus performed, the play followed, the story of which turned upon a Chinese emperor, long since dead, who had behaved himself well towards his country, and in honour of whose memory the play was written. Sometimes he appeared in royal robes, with a flat ivory sceptre in his hand, and sometimes his officers shewed themselves with ensigns, arms and drums, &c. and by intervals a sort of farce was acted by their lacqueys, whose antick dress and painted faces, were as well as any I have seen in Europe; and as far as was interpreted to me, their farce was very diverting, especially part of it which represented a person who had in his marriage been cheated by a debauched wife, and fancying her constant to him, had the mortification to see another make love to her before his face.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Mr. Bell, who accompanied the Russian ambassador to Pekin in 1719, describes the court amusements to consist of wrestling, sham-fights, tumbling, posture-making, and fire-works. At an entertainment given to the gentlemen of the embassy, by one of the Emperor’s sons, the amusements were somewhat better. Speaking of the comedians, he says, “There entered on the stage seven warriors, all in armour, with different weapons in their hands, and terrible vizards on their faces. After they had taken a few turns about the stage, and surveyed each other’s armour, they at last fell a quarrelling; and, in the encounter, one of the heroes was slain. Then an angel descended from the clouds, in a flash of lightning, with a monstrous sword in his hand, and soon parted the combatants, by driving them all off the stage; which done, he ascended in the same manner he came down, in a cloud of fire and smoke. This scene was succeeded by several comical farces, which, to me, seemed very diverting, though in a language I did not understand.”[[12]](#footnote-12) But the comedy performed at a tavern in Pekin, “by a company of players maintained by the house,” at an entertainment given to them by “a young Chinese gentleman,” afforded to all great pleasure; and “the performer's consisted of both men and women, well dressed, and of decent behaviour.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Lord Macartney, in his own journal, describes the wrestling, tumbling, wire-dancing, conjuring, and fire-works, that were exhibited at his introduction to the late Emperor Kien-lung, and seems to speak of them with great contempt, except the ingenuity with which the Chinese had displayed their art in clothing fire with all manner of colours and shapes. Their “wretched dramas,” as he calls them, are thus described. “The theatrical entertainments consisted of great variety, both tragical and comical; several distinct pieces were acted in succession, though without any apparent connexion with one another. Some of them were historical, and others of pure fancy, partly in *recitativo*, partly in singing, and partly in plain speaking, without any accompaniment of instrumental music, but abounding in battles, murders, and most of the usual incidents of the drama. Last of all, was the grand pantomime, which, from the approbation it met with, is, I presume, considered a first rate effort of invention and ingenuity. It seemed to me, as far as I could comprehend it, to represent the marriage of the Ocean and the Earth. The latter exhibited her various riches and productions, dragons and elephants and tygers and eagles and ostriches, oaks and pines, and other trees of different kinds. The ocean was not behind hand, but poured forth on the stage the wealth of his dominions, under the figures of whales and dolphins, porpesses and leviathans, and other sea-monsters, besides ships, rocks, shells, sponges, and corals, all performed by concealed actors, who were quite perfect in their parts, and performed their characters to admiration. These two marine and land regiments, after separately parading in a circular procession for a considerable time, at last joined together, and, forming one body, came to the front of the stage, when, after a few evolutions, they opened to the right and left, to give room for the whale, who seemed to be the commanding officer, to waddle forward; and who, taking his station exactly opposite to the Emperor’s box, spouted out of his mouth into the pit, several tons of water, which quickly disappeared through the perforations of the floor. This ejaculation was received with the highest applause, and two or three of the great men at my elbow desired me to take particular notice of it; repeating, at the same time ‘*hao! hung hao!*—charming, delightful!’[[14]](#footnote-14)

Mr. Barrow, in describing the amusements given to the Dutch ambassadors in 1795, from the journal of a gentleman in their suite, speaks of posture making, rope-dancing, “and a sort of pantomimic performance, the principal characters of which were men dressed in skins, and going on all fours, intended to represent wild beasts; and a parcel of boys, habited in the dresses of mandarins, who were to hunt them.”[[15]](#footnote-15) And again, after the whole court had been terribly frightened by an eclipse of the moon, an entertainment was given to the ambassadors, during which “a pantomime, intended to be an exhibition of the battle of the dragon and the moon, was represented before the full court. In this engagement, two or three hundred priests, bearing lanterns suspended at the ends of long sticks, performed a variety of evolutions, dancing and capering about, sometimes over the plain, and then over chairs and tables, affording to his Imperial Majesty, and to his courtiers, the greatest pleasure and satisfaction.” De Guignes also, who accompanied these ambassadors, describes this scene as a very puerile and ludicrous representation. “A number of Chinese,” he says, “placed at the distance of six feet from one another, now entered, bearing two long dragons of silk or paper, painted blue, with white scales, and stuffed with lighted lamps. These two dragons, after saluting the Emperor with due respect, moved up and down with great composure; when the moon suddenly made her appearance, upon which they began to run after her. The moon, however, fearlessly placed herself between them, and the two dragons, after surveying her for some time, and concluding, apparently, that she was too large a morsel for them to swallow, judged it prudent to retire; which they did with the same ceremony as they entered. The moon, elated with her triumph, then withdrew with prodigious gravity: a little flushed, however, with the chase which she had sustained.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

It would seem, however, that meanness and vulgarity are not the most objectionable charges to which the exhibitions of the Chinese stage are obnoxious; some of them being grossly indecent and obscene. An instance is mentioned by Mr. Barrow, of a woman being condemned to be flayed alive, for the murder of her husband; she appears on the stage not only naked, but completely excoriated: and he adds, that the European gentlemen at Canton, are sometimes so disgusted with the filthy and obscene exhibitions, as to leave the theatre.[[17]](#footnote-17) “The history of husbands deceived by their mistresses,” says M. de Guignes, “being frequently the subject of their comedies, there occur therein sometimes situations so free, and in which the actor exhibits so much truth, that the scene becomes extremely indecent”—and he mentions an instance of which he was an eye-witness, where the heroine of the piece “devint grosse et accoucha sur le théatre d’un enfant.” The piece was called the *See-hou* Pagoda, being the history of the destruction of the pagoda in ruins on that famous lake described by Mr. Barrow under the name of *Lui-fung-ta*, the temple of the thundering winds. “Several genii mounted upon serpents, and marching along the margin of the lake, opened the scene; a neighbouring bonze shortly after made love to one of these goddesses, who, in spite of the remonstrances of her sister, listened to the young man, married him, became pregnant, and was delivered of a child upon the stage, who very soon found itself in a condition to walk about. Enraged at this scandalous adventure, the genii drove away the bonze, and finished by striking the pagoda with lightning, and reducing it to the ruined condition in which it now appears.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

As scenes like these are stated to have thrown the audience into raptures, M. de Guignes very naturally concludes the real character of the Chinese to be vicious. We must not, however, judge too harshly on performances, which, for “licentious pleasantries,” we could fairly match them several hundred years after those of the Chinese were written. Warton has observed, that “gross and open obscenities” enter into our old mysteries or religious representations; that in a play of the “Old and New Testament,” Adam and Eve were both exhibited on the stage *naked*, and appeared in the subsequent scene with their fig-leaves; and Malone says, this kind of primitive exhibition was revived in the time of James the First; “several persons appearing almost entirely naked, in a pastoral exhibited at Oxford before the King and Queen, and the ladies who attended her.”

Mr. Barrow has conjectured, that the low and trifling amusements of the court, may have been introduced by the Tartars, as more congenial to their rude and unpolished manners, while the songs and recitative of the regular drama are more suited to the genius and spirit of the ceremonious Chinese. The two Mahomedans who visited China are silent on the subject; and Marco Polo only observes, that at the Emperor’s feasts were buffoons, and players on musical instruments, and posture-masters. At that time, however, a Tartar dynasty also occupied the throne.

As far as the mere spectacle is concerned, the several travellers we have mentioned could not well be mistaken. Some deduction, however, ought probably to be made, on account of their ignorance of the language. The absurdities that strike the eye they are capable of describing, but the dialogue of the regular drama, being utterly unintelligible, ceases to create any interest. What their merits and defects may therefore be, Europeans have hitherto possessed very slender means of forming a sound judgment. A garbled translation of a single drama by Pere Premare, a Jesuit, is the solitary specimen of this kind of composition in any European language, before that which is now offered to the public. It is called the Orphan of Chao, and forms one of a collection of one hundred plays, written under the dynasty of Yuen,[[19]](#footnote-19) in the fourteenth century. Voltaire, who adapted the subject to the French stage, considers it as a valuable monument of Chinese literature at that early period, barbarous as it is when compared with the dramatic art in Europe, but far superior to any thing that Europe could boast at the time it was written. He considers it at least equal to the English and Spanish tragedies of the seventeenth century; and observes that, “like the monstrous farces of Shakespeare, and of Lopez de Vega, which have been called tragedies, the action of the Chinese piece continues five and twenty years.”—“Monstrous,” however, as they may be, few Englishmen would give up the worst “farce” of Shakespeare, for the heavy monotony and blustering declamation of the best “tragedy” of Voltaire. He admits that “the Orphan of Chao,” notwithstanding the improbability of the occurrences, has something in it which interests us; and that, in spite of the innumerable crowd of events, they are all exhibited in the most clear and distinct manner—but these he considers as its only beauties; unity of time and action, sentiment, character, eloquence, passion, all, he says, are wanting. Some of them, it is true, are wanting in Premare’s translation, because he has omitted most of the poetry, or those parts which have been compared with the Greek chorus, and in which sentiment, eloquence, passion, are all expressed; that is to say, he has left out the very best parts of the play. Our countryman, Dr. Hurd, in his “Discourse on Poetical Imitation,” formed a very different opinion of this tragedy from that of Voltaire. He conceived that, it embraces the two essentials of dramatic poetry, unity and integrity of action—and a close connection of the incidents of the story; for, first, he observes “the action is strictly one; the destruction of the House of Chao is the single event on which our attention turns from the beginning; we see it gradually prepared and brought on; and with its completion the tragedy finishes. Secondly, the action proceeds with as much rapidity as Aristotle himself demands”—and having noticed its resemblance in many points to the Electra of Sophocles—“let me add,” says he, “an intermixture of songs in passionate parts, heightened into sublime poetry, and somewhat resembling the character of the ancient chorus.” Had Premare translated more of these lyrics, he would probably have found the resemblance still more complete.

The comedy of an “Heir in his Old Age,” is the simple representation of a story in domestic life—a plain “unvarnished tale,” in which Chinese manners and Chinese feelings are faithfully delineated and expressed, in a natural manner, and in appropriate language. Two things, however, must be borne in mind by the European reader, to enable him to enter fully into the spirit of this play—first, that filial piety is, among the Chinese, the first of virtues, and the lack of it, one of the worst of crimes; that it is the grand basis on which all the religious, moral, and civil institutions of the empire are founded; that the greatest misfortune in life is the want of a son to honour and console his aged parents, and to visit annually their tombs when dead—and, secondly, that to afford every means of procuring a son, a man may take inferior wives or concubines, who are generally. purchased from poor relations; such wives having no rights of their own, and their children being considered as the children of the first or legitimate wife, who call her by the name of mother, and are entitled to the same rights and privileges as her own children.

The *dramatis persona* of this play are made up entirely of the members of a family in the middling class of society, consisting of an old man—his wife—his second or inferior wife—his nephew-—his son-in-law—and his daughter. The old man, having amassed considerable wealth by trade, and having no son to console him in his old age, and to perform the obsequies at his tomb, had taken a second wife, whose pregnancy is announced in the opening of the play. In order to propitiate heaven to favour him with a son in his old age, he makes a sacrifice of all the small debts due to him, by burning the documents, which at the same time serves to quiet some scruples of conscience as to the mode in which part of his money had been acquired. He then divides his property between his wife and his married daughter, giving to his nephew, (a deceased brother's son), a hundred pieces of silver, and sending him away to seek his fortune, the wife, owing to an old quarrel with his deceased mother, leading him a most unhappy life at home. The old gentleman then sets out for his estate in the country, recommending his pregnant wife to the humane treatment of his family, and in the hope of receiving from them speedy congratulations on the birth of a son.

He is no sooner departed, however, when the son-in-law cannot conceal from the daughter his disappointment at the pregnancy of the old man’s second wife, as, if she brings forth a girl, he will lose half the family property, and if a son, the whole. His wife soothes him by a hint how easily she may be got rid of, and the old man persuaded that she had suddenly disappeared; and shortly after both the son-in-law and the audience are left to infer that she has actually contrived to put her to death. In the mean time, the old man waits the result in great anxiety; his family appear in succession to console him for the loss of his second wife, which he is reluctantly brought to believe. In the bitterness of his disappointment, he bursts into tears, and expresses strong suspicions of some foul play. He attributes his misfortunes to his former thirst of gain, resolves to fast for seven days, and to bestow alms publicly at a neighbouring temple, in the hope that the objects of his charity may treat him as a father. Among the beggars at the temple, his nephew appears, in the most hopeless state of poverty, being reduced to take up his lodging under the furnace of a pottery; he is insulted by the son-in-law, and reproached by the old wife; but his uncle, moved with compassion, contrives to give him a little money, and earnestly advises him to be punctual in visiting the tombs of his family at the approaching spring, assuring him that a due attention to filial piety must ultimately lead to wealth. The nephew accordingly appears at the tombs, performs the rights of oblation, as far as his poverty will admit, and invokes the shades of his ancestors to commiserate his distress, and to grant him their protection. He no sooner departs than the uncle and aunt appear, and express their indignation that their own daughter and son-in-law have neglected their duty, in not being there with the customary offerings; they observe that, from the earth being turned up, and paper burnt, that some needy person must have been there, and conclude it to be their nephew. The scene of the tombs, and the reflections to which it gives rise in the old man’s mind, have considerable interest; he reasons with his wife, convinces her that the nephew is more worthy, as well as nearer in blood, than the son-in-law; she relents, and expresses a wish to make him reparation; he appears, a conciliation takes place, and he is again received into the family. Soon after this, the son-in-law and daughter appear, with a great noise, and a procession of village officers, to perform the ceremonies; but are received by their parents with bitter reproaches for their tardy piety and ingratitude, and ordered never to enter their doors again. On the old man’s birth-day, however, they send to ask permission to pay their respects, when, to the utter astonishment and unbounded joy of the old man, his daughter presents him with his second wife and her son, now about three years of age, both of whom, it appears, had been secreted by the daughter, and supported, out of affection for her father, and unknown to the husband, who had supposed them to have been otherwise disposed of. The daughter is separated from her husband, and taken back into her family; a new arrangement is made for the disposal of the old man’s property, the daughter to have a third, the nephew a third, and the little son a third; and the piece concludes with expressions of joy and gratitude for the old gentleman having been blessed with “an heir in his old age.”

Such is the brief outline of the fable; the unity and integrity of action and design are strictly adhered to, and all the incidents are closely connected with the story, which turns entirely on the misery arising out of the want of an heir to perform the duties which filial piety demand, both to the living and the dead. The time employed in the course of the piece is three years, but the events follow each other in so natural a manner, and with such uninterrupted rapidity, that the time elapsed would not be perceived but for the age of the child brought forward in the concluding act. The several scenes and acts are as properly divided as those of an European drama; the sentiments are naturally expressed, often tender and affecting, and always friendly to virtue. The translator observes, that a few passages which were grossly indecent, have been omitted in the translation; the Chinese, with all their politeness, are coarse in their expressions; and we have seen that, from a too close adherence to nature and to facts, the scenic representations are often exceedingly gross and indelicate. “Ils mettent?” says De Guignes, “trop de la verité dans le scene?”

The lyrical compositions, which prevail more in tragedy than in comedy, certainly bear a strong resemblance to the chorus of the old Greek tragedy; like the chorus too, they are sung with an accompaniment of music. The translator seems to think that these passages are chiefly intended to gratify the ear, and that sense is very often sacrificed to sound; even if this were the case, examples of the same kind might be produced nearer home. Perhaps, however, their obscurity may be owing to the nature of the written language, in which associations of ideas are presented rather to the eye, or to the recollection, than to the ear, by a combination of signs or symbols, on the choice of which the force of the expression must depend. Mr. Morrison observes, that “without extensive knowledge of their ancient poetry, and the customs and manners of the country, it is very difficult to understand their poetical compositions. The very point and beauty of the piece often depends on some slight allusion, which a foreigner does not perceive; added to which, the style is peculiarly concise, and unusual words are introduced.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

The opening or prologue of a Chinese drama, in which the principal personages come forward to declare the characters of the piece, and to let the audience into the argument or story on which the action is to turn, bears a strong resemblance to the prologues of the Greek drama, and particularly to those of Euripides.

In comedy the dialogue is carried on in the common colloquial language, but in the higher order of historical and tragical plays, the tone of voice is elevated considerably above its natural pitch, and continued throughout in a kind of whining monotony, having some resemblance to, but wanting the modulations and cadences of, the recitative in the Italian opera; as in this too, the sentiments of grief, joy, love, hatred, revenge, &c. are, in the Chinese dramas, usually thrown into lyric poetry, and sung in soft or boisterous airs, according to the sentiment expressed, and the situation of the actor; they are also accompanied with loud music, the performers being placed on the back part of the stage.

Whatever may be the merits and the defects of the Chinese drama, it is unquestionably their own invention. The only nation from whence they could have borrowed any thing, is that of Hindostan, from whence they imported the religion of Budh; but as we know nothing of the Hindoo drama, except from the single specimen of Sacontala, translated by Sir William Jones, in a manner, it is said, sufficiently *free*; and as that drama differs more from the Chinese than the latter from the Greek, Roman, English, or Italian, there is not the slightest grounds for supposing that the one was borrowed from the other. There is, indeed, a characteristic difference between them; the one adhering strictly to nature, and describing human manners and human feelings; the other soaring beyond nature, into the labyrinth of an intricate and inexplicable mythology.

1. Mem. Chin. Tom, viii, p. 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Grammar of the Chinese Language, p. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mem. Chin. Tom, viii, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ut supra. Grozier, vol. ii, p. 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Malone’s Shakespeare, Vol. 2, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ta-tsing-leu-lee, p. 410. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Malone’s Shakespeare, Vol. 2, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ta-tsing-leu-lee, p. 410. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ta-tsing-leu-lee, p. 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Voyage à Pekin, Tom. 2, p. 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Harris’s Voyages, Vol. 2, p. 939. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bell’s Travels from St, Petersburg, p. 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bell’s Travels from St, Petersburg, p. 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Life of the Earl of Macartney, Vol. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Barrow’s Travels in China, p. 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Voyage à Pekin, Tom. 1, p. 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Travels in China, p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Voyage à Pekin, Vol. 2, p. 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This dynasty commenced in 1260, and ceased in 1333. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Morrison’s Chinese Grammar, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)