English residents at Canton have occasionally had opportunities of taking a part in the formal dinners of the Chinese; but few have witnessed a solemn feast conferred by the Emperor, which may be described from an unpublished journal of the last embassy. “The ambassador informed the gentlemen of his suite, that he was going to perform the same salutation of respect, before the yellow screen, that he was accustomed to make to the vacant throne of his Sovereign in the House of Lords. We were directed to keep our eyes on him, and do exactly as he did. A low, solemn hymn of not unpleasing melody now commenced, and at the voice of a crier, the two imperial legates fell prostrate three times, and each time thrice struck the floor with their foreheads; a cranio-verberative sound being audible amidst the deep silence which prevailed around. The ambassador and his suite, standing up in the mean while, made nine profound bows. Thus far we had got very well over the ground, without doing that which no representative of *Chinese* majesty ever condescended to do to a foreigner, until Genghis Khân first *made* them. They here conceded to us the point on which they broke off with Count Golovkin, the Russian ambassador, though they yielded it to Lord Macartney.

“When the ceremony was over, the feast was brought in, and the theatrical entertainments commenced. The legates sat to the left, on an elevation of one step; and the ambassador and two commissioners on the same elevation to the right. The other Chinese grandees sat on the left, a little below the legates; and the gentlemen of the embassy to the right, below his lordship and the commissioners. The two lines thus faced each other down the room. As no chairs can be used where the Emperor is present, or supposed to be so, the whole party sat cross-legged on cushions, with sartorial precision; but the mandarins, being bred to the trade, of course had the advantage of us. The tables were low in proportion, and, when we were all seated, a number of attendants placed on each table, holding only two quests, a large tray which fitted it, and contained a complete course, of which four in all were served. The first consisted of a rich soup; the second of sixteen round and narrow dishes containing salted meats and other relishes; the third of eight basins of birds’-nests, sharks’-fins, deer-sinews, and other viands supposed to be highly nourishing; the fourth of twelve bowls of stews immersed in a rich soup. The quests helped themselves with chopsticks, small spoons of porcelain fashioned like a child's pap-boat, and four-pronged forks of silver, small and straight; and when they drank to each other, the warm wine was poured into little cups by the attendants, who at the same time bent one knee.

“At the other end of the hall where we sat, so as to be viewed by each person from his place down the two ranges of tables, proceeded the stage performances. The music was infernal, and the occasional crash of gongs might have roused Satan and his legions from their sleep on the sulphureous lake. Some pyrotechnic monsters, breathing fire and smoke, were among the dramatis personæ; but by far the best part of the scene was the tumbling,—really superior in its kind. The strength and activity of one man were particularly eminent. Leaping from the ground, he performed a somerset in the air backwards, and, after the first effort continued to revolve in this manner with such velocity, that his head and feet, the extremities of revolution, were scarcely discernible.”

An invitation to a private feast is conveyed some days before, by a crimson-coloured ticket, on which is inscribed the time appointed, and the guest is entreated to bestow “the illumination of his presence.” The arrangement of the tables is the same as at the imperial entertainment, but they are of the ordinary height, and the party are seated on chairs, two at each table, so as to see the performances on the stage. The material of the dinner is much the same as before described; but, previous to its commencement, the host standing up drinks to his guests, and then invites them to begin upon the dishes before them. At a certain period of the entertainment, towards the close, the whole party rise at once, and drink to their host. Before the dramatic performance begins, one of the actors presents to the principal guest a list of plays, consisting perhaps of fifty or sixty different pieces; but they have these so well by heart that they are ready to perform any one he may select. There is no scenery, and in this respect a great deal is left to the imagination of the spectators. The dresses, however, are extremely splendid, especially in heroical pieces, consisting of representations of different portions of their ancient history. The most objectionable part is the terrible din kept up by the instruments of music and the gongs, during those portions of the play which represent battles and tragical scenes.

The females of the household, mean while, who cannot take a part in the festivities of the table, look on from behind a trellis-work at one of the sides of the stage, with such of their friends of the same sex as may be invited on the occasion. A particular description of the Chinese drama will be given in its proper place; but we may observe here, that *dancing* is a thing almost entirely unknown to them, either on or off the stage. On one occasion, indeed, in the interval or space between the ranges of tables, we saw two children, showily dressed, go through a species of minuet, consisting of a regular figure to slow time, accompanied by a motion of the arms and head not ungraceful in effect.