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INTRODUCTION

To any one who is for the first time in a Chinese theatre, it seems indeed a mad house. There, everything is extraordinary : the stories enacted are not within our every-day experience. Have we ever known of a servant who sacrifices the life of his own child in order to save the life of his master ? Where is the general nowadays who cuts off his own arm in order to fool the invading army and win a victory for his country ? In the Chinese theatre the actors behave in a very curious way. To denote a character, the faces are painted in dabs of red, green, black and white in a manner that no human being ever appeared. The language of the stage, both in expression and tone, is never heard in real life. The devices used to create illusion are not of the usual kind. Some, though childish, are yet understandable ; such as an oar to represent a boat or a flag an army. Some appear to be quite absurd—for instance, a chair to represent a bridge, a table a mountain. But when it comes to the point that the waving of a whip in different styles may mean the action of a warrior mounting, or dismounting, or charging across a field on horseback, or when flags according to the action of the play may stand for a troupe of men or a fleet, then the goings-on seem to be beyond sense and reason. Yet with all these peculiarities, the actors are in earnest and the audience serious. Therefore, we may be permitted to ask how much is true in the following wise saying : " Those in front of the stage are fools, but those on the stage lunatics."

WHAT ARE THE DRAMATISTS TRYING TO DO AND WHY DO THEY ACT IN SUCH A STRANGE MANNER ?

In order to understand why the Chinese drama is constructed as it is, we must first find out what the dramatists are trying to do. We cannot

page 220

do this better than to quote from some of the Chinese theorists on drama as well as from successful dramatists.

1.—In the year Shakespeare died, Chang Chin-su collected and published "One Hundred Best Plays of the Yüan Dynasty." In its preface he differentiated the work of a practical playwright from that of a mere literary writer. Of the former he said : "Whatever he may choose to characterise, his minute and perfect imitation must make us feel that we are facing the situation ourselves and forget entirely that it

is only a fable, a fabrication. He makes us so joyful that we twirl our moustaches ; so angry that we clench our fists ; so sad that we shed tears ; or so filled with admiration that we raise our eyebrows."

2. —In the original preface to " Thirty Short Stories of the Ming Dynasty " re-published in 1922, there appear the following words :

" Among all sorts and conditions of humanity, if there is one deed or incident worthy of being remembered, we ought to perpetuate it in writing and revive it on the stage. Actuality and accuracy do not concern us ; at any rate, drama is manipulation and pretence. Yet do we not feel worshipful when the faithful and filial are imitated before us ; or feel frightened when seeing the treacherous and cunning ? Our hearts cool down like ashes when we see the tortured and pathetic ; our blood burns like a flame when we see the glorious and noble. Drama can inspire, or advise, or warn, or encourage. It is a sermon on the fundamentals of life, preached in a playful mood."

3.—One of the Yüan dramas that enjoys a lasting popularity is "The Guitar." The story tells of a scholar who, whilst poor and unrecognized, loved and was happy with his wife. Later he deserted her in order to marry the daughter of a high official. Soon after he won first honours at the Final Literary Examinations in Peking. The wife, after years of misery and waiting, begged her way to the capital by singing and playing on her guitar. There is a happy ending because of the peculiar Chinese marriage custom, which permits a man to have a secondary wife. Its author, Kan Che-chun, states in the prologue : "To entertain is easy. If a play does not better the traditions or cultural life of a people, no matter how good its style may be, it is worth nothing."

4.—Between 1580 and 1590, Tang Yi-chun wrote his famous "Four Dreams." One was about a man who achieved all his secret desires and passed his life in luxury and pleasures, all in the short, space of a dream, not long enough in which to boil a pot of rice.

Another is about a girl who painted the portrait of her ideal lover after meeting him in a dream. She died longing for him and revived only when her soul found him in real life.

The author justified these fantasies by saying : " Men of this world do not know everything about it. We are too much restricted by our



Pa Tsa Miao (八蠟廟). A heroic play in which an abducted woman is rescued from her captors, who are slain



Mei Lang Fang, one of the most famous of present-day Chinese Actors, who always plays the part of a woman.

common sense. When we say such and such is impossible according to reason, we are overlooking of what wonders human passion is capable."

5.—Just after the Manchus' conquest of China, the best and most famous historical play of all Chinese dramatic literature was written. "The Fan of Peach-blossoms" tells, besides its contemporary historical incidents, the story of a courtesan who was loved by a scholar. In their first meeting he gave her a fan and then he went away to his country's defense. In his absence, a man of position and wealth desired her and tried to get her by violence. She, in despair, attempted to kill herself by dashing her head against a wall and her blood incidentally stained the fan. She did not again meet the scholar, but a friend of both, an artist, painted and transformed the drops of blood on the fan into peach-blossoms. Kung Yung-ting who wrote this play had a purpose as he says in the introduction: "The function of plays is to correct society and awaken the world. My play is about real events; some of the persons are still living. The songs and dances on the stage are nothing but guiding posts and mirrors for the spectators. I desire that this play will make the audience not merely sad and tearful, but also hurt and brokenhearted; thus a sick world may yet be saved."

6.—Li Yu wrote ten comedies between 1650 and 1668. In giving new turns to a hackneyed plot, he took special delight. For instance, the villain is not supposed to wed the heroine of a play, but Li Yu wrote this fantastical comedy:

A very ugly man desired a wife, and through tricks, deceit and a matchmaker, he succeeded. As in China a groom does not have to face the bride until the ceremony, this man's wedding was successful up to the moment of the ceremony, but no further. Three times he tried; three brides ran away after looking at him. Then one day, a magician by one touch transformed him into a most handsome man and lo! three charming women fought to possess him.

Li Yu, telling the public not to take the stage too seriously, said: "No stage marriage is made in Heaven." From the foregoing passages, we may draw a few conclusions.

1. The primary function of drama is to entertain. It is not mere amusement such as we derive from watching a circus performance, nor mere intellectual pleasure such as we experience by listening to an interesting lecture. Drama makes, or ought to make, us laugh or weep, clench the fist or tear the hair. In short, it must appeal to the emotions. This first principle the Chinese dramatists well understand.

2. But a good play should do more than entertain. Let us ask ourselves this question. Have we ever had a feeling, even only once in our life, that by watching a noble play, nobly acted, we have come to have a better opinion of our own capacity for doing good; or that the great experiences through which the people in the play were forced to pass and

by which they were made better and nobler, might have been our own? Have we felt that even without sermons, without lectures, without instruction, we could, on account of the play, know more about men, about human nature, about the inevitable ways of humanity, about what is right and wrong

under every day circumstances, and what is right and wrong under exceptional circumstances ?

The opportunity to instruct the public while entertaining them has stirred a few Chinese dramatists to such enthusiasm as to talk about saving the sick world. This mania is by no means confined to Chinese dramatists. Ibsen, Shaw, Pinero and the Women's Temperance League of China have tried it with varying success.

3. While the Chinese dramatists are aiming at entertaining and instructing through the stage, they give to their plays an individual touch or emphasis. This attitude is not impersonally humanistic like that of Ibsen or Galsworthy, but frankly humanitarian. For they clearly say to themselves : " If a play does not better the cultural life of a people, it is worth nothing." Their mood is not imitatively realistic, but systematically playful, for their definite conviction is that "drama is manipulation and pretence "; therefore, for them, characters on the stage do not need to behave and talk like human beings. In other words, Chinese dramatists have a different philosophy of art, and a different philosophy of life.

THE PLAYFUL MOOD

It is this playful mood that gives rise to the many seeming absurdities, the peculiar technique and the strange conventions of the Chinese drama. "Let us pretend," says the dramatist. " Let us pretend," agrees the audience ; and the sure consequence is that the Chinese dramatist is less bound by common sense or strict logic ; that he has more freedom to use his material ; that he can forego imitation in all matters not essential to the illustrativeness of the fable ; that he may standardise and conventionalise forms, appearances and actions which are changeable, external or temporary. Let us make this clear point by point.

TECHNIQUE.

In the first place no exposition is used, as exposition in modern drama is understood. Here we have no French maids and butlers, who, whilst prolonging their duties of dusting the furniture, tell each other of their master's recent misfortune or their mistress's new flirtation. Here we do not use the telephone to make the audience aware of all our desires, feelings, and past adventures. Here we need no distant relatives who are expected to arrive unexpectedly to find out what is going on for the audience's benefit. Here we do not meet a sympathetic confidante to

whom we may impart our inmost secrets for the twentieth time without boring him in the least. Not that it is unnecessary to make clear what has happened. The audience must know before they can understand what is going on. But the method in the Chinese drama is direct and simple. A character just walks to the footlights, points his sleeves at himself and declares : " I, so and so, a rich merchant of Peking " and so on. Not only his name and occupation he may announce, but often he gives a

complete biography of himself, telling what sort of fix he is now in and what steps he is going to take next. Childish, is it? What difference does this make? A fable is not less convincing because it is childish.

Secondly, the time element is disregarded. An experienced Western writer knows that for an actual hour in life he should allow at least fifteen minutes on the stage. Commonly, he makes something happen during that time. Occasionally, to indicate the passing of time, he may lower the curtain for half a minute. As a result, a play must be stuffed with uninteresting matter or the continuity of the dramatic action interrupted. What a bother anyway! But in a Chinese play, a character may sit down, and take a nap in the early part of the evening, and when he stands up again, it is already dawn. Or he may be fanning himself on one of the bright, hot days of summer: by changing a fan for an umbrella, he is protecting himself from a heavy snowfall in severe winter. Or he is in the springtime of youth and is leaving his sweetheart behind to join the army. As he immediately makes his next entrance, he may have already become an elderly gentleman with flowing beard.

Thirdly, geography is ignored. On the New York stage, no character can go to and return from Long Island during the play, except between acts. In many Western screen dramas, the climax depends for its thrilling effect upon how much faster a hero can go the same distance on horseback than a villain in a motor car. Alas! Such is not demanded here, where, if a man wishes to go from the marriage ceremony to the divorce court, he has only to cross the stage from right to left, or from left to right. A man who is thousands of miles away may go back to the land of his birth by a simple exit and entrance. A tourist, starting out in Shanghai, by circling the stage two or three rounds, may find himself in Moscow. We may therefore go to any place in no time, any place on the earth or even below it. Why, in these matters, such as exposition, the passing of time and change of locality, does not the Chinese dramatist attempt any imitation? Because, he thinks, they are not vital to the illustrative quality of his fable. In fact, he gains by disregarding them. Not hindered by exposition, he can plunge into the heart of drama at once: giving no consideration to time and locality, he can compose a series of short scenes of varied and contrasted emotions, rapidly following each other to a noble climax. At worst he achieves effectiveness, perhaps at the expense of completeness. At best he obtains concentration on

page 224

the heightened moments of pathos and humour which are inherent in the incident." The Orphan" furnishes an example.

History is closely followed in this play. A General was persecuted by his enemy, who had the favour of the Court. The General and his family were put to death—except one child whose whereabouts were known only to two trusted servants. A search was ordered and the reward for the child's head was high. The younger servant, in order to gain the reward while at the same time preserving the life of his master's heir, proposed to substitute his only child for the orphan. In the presence of his master's enemy, to whom he reports the "secret," the younger servant whips the elder servant to make him tell where he has hidden the child. The substitute is found in a village house and killed. For this treachery and disloyalty the elder servant waits in the market-place to be beheaded. The dramatic irony is at its highest when the younger servant offers a cup of farewell wine to the condemned man,

and thousands of bystanders shout and point at him as the most black-hearted traitor, and as a warning to all who love and trust their servants. Indeed there is not one moment in which the play is not brightly dramatic.

CONVENTIONS.

With such rapid movements and quick changes of scene, it is obvious that realistic scenery and authentic costuming are impracticable. But how can we know that we are in a palace, not a camp; that a man is mounting steps, not crossing a bridge ; that he is a king, not a beggar ; that he is a living terror, not a ghost ? How are we told which is which and who is who on the Chinese stage? The answer is that we must understand stage conventions. The painting of faces is a convention, old and universal. But it was on the Chinese stage that face-painting acquired definiteness in representing a character. It serves the same purpose as the masks in the Greek dramas and as the type casting in the motion picture. It enables us to tell instantly what sort of creature a person is. A red face usually denotes a sacred personage like the God of War or a great emperor ; a black face means an honest, but rough man ; a white face is that of a treacherous, cunning, but dignified person ; a mean fellow is represented as having a white nose. Different shades of character are suggested by different combinations of these colours. Other colours are used occasionally, as gold for gods, and green for devils. Heroes and women are the only ones permitted to show their natural colour, with, of course, subtle beautifications.

Again, the clothes are made symbolical. They are in accordance with the characters rather than with the supposed circumstances. A barbarian carries a piece of fur round his neck in summer as well as winter. A beggar wears a silk coat with a gaudy-coloured checker-board design. A monarch's costume is always a yellow robe with embroidered dragons.



Magnificent Costume of a General on the Chinese Stage.

A warrior's hat is invariably bedecked with two peacock feathers. Especially in the case of female characters are dress indications extremely important, the reason being that they paint their faces in the same way. The gay woman is a mass of jewels and brilliantly coloured silks, whilst the virtuous is ever clad in simple black gowns.

But most important of all, is the suggestive, imaginative acting. If a man waves his whip in one way, it means he is galloping his horse ; if in another way, he is understood to be dismounting. The actors, however, do not imitate the natural movement or motion of a horse in order to suggest its presence. Like Chinese painters who do not paint water by copying its appearance, but by executing a few conventionalised strokes to suggest its stillness or force of flow, the Chinese actor interprets actions and emotions also by conventionalised strokes. The women wriggle ; the heroic youth dashes ; whilst the bearded father always walks with deliberate steps. A slight hop means crossing an imaginary threshold. Bringing the hands together closes an invisible door. A few strokes of the paddle in the air carries one down the stream. A pair of yellow flags conveys one in a stately carriage. A screen is a screen, but when we are made to understand that men are entering a gate, we know the screen stands for a city wall. Such is convention in Chinese acting.

CONSTRUCTION

So far as the form or construction of the Chinese drama is concerned, it is frank artificiality. On the one hand, it disregards non-essentials : that is to say, things to a Chinese dramatist do not emphasize or confuse the moral which he wishes to point out. Thus exposition is thrown to the winds. Time and location are taken liberty with. On the other hand, it standardises and stylises actions and appearances that are changeable and temporary. Thus, historical accuracy in manners and dresses is not observed. Imitative scenery is unnecessary. All these results are possible only because we have agreed, like good-natured children who play horses with sticks, "Let us pretend." By taking full advantage of such artificiality, as well as by the fact that a woman's role is generally impersonated by a man, a fanciful romantic melodrama was written, which has delighted the Chinese for many years. It is called " The Flower Boats."

During the moon festival, two students who were good friends, saw two beautiful maidens on another flower boat. Naturally, they all fell in love at first sight. At night, one student, Chang by name, went near the other boat to sing a love song to his maid. In a moment of ecstasy, he fell into the river ; but, destined later to become a great man, he was carried by the current across the lake and washed ashore. The younger student, Li by name, disguising himself as a woman, sold himself to the governor, the father of his lady love. No sooner had he found a chance to

page 226

make love to her than he was discovered and exposed by an ugly maid, the only villain of the play. The governor whipped him to death, as he thought, and threatened to punish his daughter in the same manner. However, the daughter was saved by her mother. She then disguised herself as a man and ran away to her aunt in a distant city, accompanied by a faithful old servant and the ugly maid. When passing a mountain, a tiger attacked the party and killed the maid. The disguised daughter was rescued by a group of scholars who were going to the capital to take the annual literary examination. They, mistaking her for a fellow scholar, insisted on taking her along. What was her name ? She knew no man's name, except Li and replied that this was her name. In the meantime, the real Li, the student, had been placed in a coffin, to be buried in the woods. On the way, however, he revived and made noises that frightened away the grave diggers. The Prime Minister, who happened to pass the woods at the time, opened the coffin and saved him. Afraid of what might happen, Li kept quiet about his disguise. The kind old man adopted him as a daughter. What was his name ? He knew no woman's name except that of his lady love and such he called himself. At the capital, the lady who assumed Li's name was awarded the first honour in literary achievement, while the long missing scholar, Chang, won the second. The Prime Minister liked Chang because he was manly and proposed to wed his adopted daughter to him. At the ceremony when the groom and the bride met for the first time, lo! a young man was married to another young man, his friend. In the end everything became straightened out.

HUMANITARIAN PURPOSES.

An interesting play this is indeed. A significant play it is not. It is a good example of clever construction, but a bad representative of the contents of a Chinese drama. If the purpose, as we said, is humanitarian, then the dramatist must take a larger view of life, see the better side of humanity,

idealise all sentiments and perpetuate triumphs that only ennobled natures are capable of. This is saying a great deal. Has the Chinese dramatist tried to attain such results and how far successful has he been ?

ALL PHASES OF HUMAN LIFE DRAMATISED.

One thing impresses us most, the rarity of romantic love as a theme for drama. Romantic love, of course, is a great theme. Perhaps the Western playwright is right when he thinks that if a man is really capable of true love, capable of stupidly giving all his best to another without considering in the least his own benefit, this man has a noble soul and may do great things in other respects. But about such matters the

page 227

Chinese, in life or on the stage, are remarkably inarticulate. In the hands of the Chinese dramatist romantic love is considered as only one of the desirable sentiments and is never emphasised out of proportion. More often it is treated in a satirical spirit as illustrated by the following plays :

"At the Cemetery" is a satire that cuts and hurts. A young scholar heroically left his wife to seek his fortune. All the money and letters he sent to his wife were intercepted by his villainous uncle. Moreover, she was informed that her husband had died of plague and been buried in the family plot. After ten years he returned as an official. Instead of going directly home, he indulged in a display of wealth and achievement by pretending to worship his ancestors at the cemetery. There he discarded his official dignity by flirting with a charming young woman, to the annoyance and envy of his attendants and followers. When the two were at last alone and could bare their hearts to each other, she turned out to be his faithful wife who had come to place a new wreath on the tomb that was supposed to contain his own body. The result in the play is painfully amusing.

Much kinder is the farce, "Under the Yoke of a Brick," based on the universal belief that a husband is always afraid of his wife. In this play whenever the wife had a tantrum, she disgraced her husband by ordering him to kneel on the street with a brick on his head. He had a chivalrous old schoolmate, who, in order to rescue his friend from this eternal slavery, went so far as to fight the wife, hand to hand. The husband was rescued, but alas! without that brick, he was not happy. So he went back for it !

From a conviction that life is greater than romantic love, the dramatist proceeds to idealise all sentiments. In the larger range of human relations wherein the human passions manifest themselves, he has a much wider choice. In Western dramas women play an important part, sometimes the important part. But with the Chinese it is the exception, not the rule, and in many Chinese dramas not a single female character makes an appearance. Here is a wider scope than love offers. A General willingly rushes to death to bring victory to his country ; a servant gladly bears the severest hardship to shield the name of his master ; a devoted mother stands every sacrifice; the faithful wife resists every temptation; or the dutiful son braves every danger, all for their beloved ones. In such incidents that

call forth the best in humanity the dramatist has choice material and is sure to make an ennobling appeal.

"The Third Mrs. Wang" is a domestic drama. Mr. Wang died a very poor man. His old servant refused to serve another master and his youthful wife refused to re-marry so that she might be left free to bring up and take care of Mr. Wang's son by a former marriage. Hardships were many, but she remained cheerful and untiring at her spinning wheel which yielded the only income for their livelihood. But the boy, like all boys, preferred playing to learning and the mother's well-intended

page 228

attention to the son was unkindly interpreted by gossiping neighbours as hard-heartedness, natural with all stepmothers. One day the boy defiantly told her that he was not her son and she had no right to ill-treat him. Hurt and humiliated, she could not explain matters to an innocent boy, but an old servant told him the whole truth, whereupon the boy knelt before his mother and entreated her to spank him once more, just to show her mother love.

The dramatist with his mirror of life reflects not only the relation between man and woman, but the relation of the subject to the ruler, the son to the father, brother to brother, and of friend to friend, with equal, if not greater, emphasis. In his moral scale, loyalty and filial piety weigh as heavily as felicity or chivalry. The devotion of the "Third Mrs. Wang" to her step-son is noble, so it is an appropriate theme. The loyalty of a servant sacrificing his own son to save the son of his master as in "The Orphan" is noble, so it too is an appropriate theme. The relations of life brought into a Chinese play are so various and the manifestations so many, that one is tempted to say that the Chinese drama begins where the drama of the West ends.

A GREAT PERSONALITY.

In the choice of material, the dramatist's method is as particular as his range is wide. In teaching by example, he stresses far more the personality than the fable. He examines the names of history, or observes men on the street, or constructs images of the mind, till he finds a personality. Then he searches for a noble incident illustrative of that personality and his task is to dramatise the incident. But it is not by the story, but by the force and grandeur of a personality that he seeks to elevate and enthrall a sluggish audience. The drama of the West concerns itself with the interpretation of human nature which invariably leads to conflicts. It consists of conflicts, whether between mankind and supernatural powers, or between two strong wills, or between one's duty and inclination, or between a helpless individual against society and surroundings. Drama must be true to life, and life itself is a continuous struggle. This is the Western point of view. When a Western dramatist writes a sociological play, his way of persuasion is that of a young man who challenges another with some known fact and says to him : "It's up to you to explain."

But a Chinese dramatist is more frank and direct. In the first place, he is not satisfied with human nature, commonplace and indifferent as it is. He makes friends with great personalities, to find out if

their nature is not better than that of ordinary men. It is ennobled human nature which he wishes to bring to the knowledge of the world. Further-more he is anxious to encourage virtue and prohibit vice ; he does not take time or trouble to portray the conflict, but immediately presents the

page 229

triumph of right. His way of persuasion is that of a kind old uncle who tells a tale to make a point, the children not being allowed to question the tale. It is this occasional disregard of logic and reason, this omission of details, this heightening of moral intentions, that must account for the apparent extraordinary quality of some of the incidents dramatised on the Chinese stage.

The Chinese drama has been compared with the Elizabethan. True, the ways of the one theatre resemble in many respects the ways of the other, although each has its own special characteristics. For instance, the following description of the Elizabethan stage, audience and actors, which I have taken from "A History of English Literature," written by Prof. William Allan Neilson, formerly of Harvard, and Prof. Ashley Horace Thorndike of Columbia, can be applied to the Chinese stage with very little modification :

The Theatres. "Of the public playhouses, The Theatre and the Curtain were built in the fields to the north of the city. They were wooden buildings, usually nearly circular in form, with tiers of galleries surrounding the roofless pit. The stage was a platform projecting into the pit, and was without scenery, footlights, or a front curtain. Curtains in the rear concealed an inner room which was used for hiding and discovering persons or furniture. Over it was a balcony and on either side a door. On the front stage the actors were very close to the audience, which surrounded them on three sides. The stage gave little or no indication of locality ; it stood for any place, indoors or out ; and when the scene was finished and the actors had retired, it might represent an entirely different place for the next scene. The balcony overhead, which might represent an upper room or the walls of a city or some other elevated place, and the curtained alcove, which might represent a cave, study, or shop, or other interior, furnished means to indicate particular localities. Chairs, beds, and other pieces of furniture were sometimes brought down in front ; and whatever remained there at the close of the play—whether furniture or the bodies of the slain—must be borne off before the eyes of the spectators."

Actor and Audience. "There were no women actresses, and women's parts were always taken by boys. Boys played Juliet and Cleopatra as well as the fairies in 'Midsummer-Night's Dream.' A great deal of money was spent on costume, though there was no regard for historical accuracy. A manager would often pay more for a velvet cloak than for the manuscript of a play. We hear of all sorts of dresses including 'one gown to go invisible in.' The spectators in the pit paid a penny and stood throughout the performance. The galleries had benches and boxes for which higher prices were charged ; and gallants sometimes had stools on the stage itself. Performances were by daylight in the afternoon, and the same play was never two days running. The so-called private theatres, like that in Blackfriars, were indoor rooms, lighted by candles

page 230

and with seats in the pit. Later they became more fashionable than the outdoor playhouses, and were

patronised by those who could pay the higher rates of admission."

CONCLUSION.

Among the sights that are familiar to the Chinese theatre-goers are the parallel couplets conspicuously written on the front pillars of the stage. They are often only a literary nick-nack wherein scholars show their ingenuity by wording two sentences in neatly balanced contrasts ; yet some of them express ideas worthy of thorough reflection. One such couplet that comes to mind seems to be no less than a concise statement of the Chinese view of the theatre.

1. Don't think life a mere performance on the stage. So long as the moral conscience maintains its sway, the faithful and perfidious, the good and the evil must always realize the judgment which they deserve.
2. Why regard illusion as a living reality in the world ? As soon as the players make their exit, the tragic and the comic, the parting and the reunion, must instantly become a vanishing dream.

These words proclaim the two fundamental aspects of the Chinese drama—its humanitarian purpose and its playful mood.