

# The Chinese Drama.

## Introductory.



HERE is no branch of Chinese art or letters that has received less attention from Western students than the Drama. Doubtless this is partly because the Chinese themselves, in spite of their intense love of the theatre, have treated the dramatic art and the theatrical profession with the scantiest respect, and have regarded dramatic compositions as unworthy of a place in the recognized classifications of the national literature; but it is also traceable to a common assumption that drama is a form of art which in China has never advanced to anything like maturity, and to which the Chinese have never made any contribution of high intrinsic value. Nevertheless, whatever the final judgment of the world may be regarding the literary or artistic merits of the Chinese drama, the subject is not one which should be neglected by any student of Chinese life and thought, if only on account of the enormous popularity and great influence of the theatre among all classes of the people. It is surprising to find how meagre are the accounts of the Chinese stage which have been given us even by writers whose whole active lives have been spent in close contact with the people and who have devoted themselves with enthusiasm to the study of the Chinese mind and character. A. Wylie, in his well-known *Notes on Chinese Literature*, dismisses the whole subject with the words "As dramatic works do not find a place in the native book-catalogues, it is unnecessary to enlarge on the subject here." The author of *Village Life in China* very properly included a chapter on the "Village Theatre" in a work which was professedly a study in sociology; but he prefaces his remarks with the significant admission that he had never witnessed an acted play and had no first-hand knowledge of the Chinese stage. Little wonder is it that in the next sentence he unwittingly gives indubitable evidence of that lack of first-hand knowledge which he so candidly admits. Most Chinese plays, he declares, are so extravagantly long that they may be spread over many hours or even over several days. He adds, with amusing exaggeration, that "the most indefatigable European" could not listen to the entire performance of a single play without becoming "utterly exhausted." These and similar judgments have been repeated by others and have obtained great currency in the West.

As a fact, the vast majority of Chinese stage-plays are much shorter than the average European play. The source of the misunderstanding is to be found in the circumstance that although the individual plays are short, they follow one another in very rapid succession; and as there is no "curtain" and no change of scenery (for the adequate reason that in the old-fashioned Chinese theatre there is no scenery at all) it is not surprising that an uninstructed foreigner, having witnessed the performance of two or more complete plays, is apt to go away with the impression that he has seen no more than a single play, and perhaps only a portion of that.

In these few pages it is impossible to present a complete account of the Chinese stage. All that is attempted here is to give a brief description of the theatre in the towns and country districts, a bare outline of the development of the drama through successive ages, and a rapid survey of contemporary movements in the direction of dramatic reform.



—CHAO YÜN (趙雲) OR CHAO TZŪ-LUNG (趙子龍), a famous general of the period of the "Three Kingdoms" (Third century A.D.).