

CHINESE DRAMA

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CHOU DYNASTY DRAMA

Drama arose from ritual dances miming certain stories. These dances, often closely connect-ed with production and fertility, formed the main part of many sacrificial ceremonies. As these ancient rites frequently took the form of primitive dramas, it is to them that we must look for the origin of Chinese drama. *The Book of Songs* and the *Chu Tzu* shed some light on this question. At first the performers were witches or shamans whose purpose it was to please the gods, and they were succeeded by clowns who performed dramatic dances to entertain men. Clowns appeared very early in China, but did not become generally popular till the Warring States Period. They were proficient dancers, musicians, jesters and acrobats, whose influence on later drama was considerable.

YUAN DYNASTY

The main literary achievements of the Yuan dynasty are linked with the northern music. Lyrics set to the northern tunes were known as *san chu*, while the operas which used them were *tsa chu*, the celebrated Yuan drama. *San chu* are songs with lines of irregular length, somewhat akin to *tsu*. Most of the Yuan plays have four acts, occasionally more; though if the plot is an involved one, over twenty acts may be used. Apart from *san chu* and plays, this dynasty produced little good literature.

The two greatest dramatists of the Yuan dynasty are Kuan Han-ching and Wang Shih-fu.

Kuan Han-ching was a native of Tatu, present-day Peking. He was probably born at the time of the overthrow of the Golden Tartars, in 1234 or thereabouts, and died at the beginning of the fourteenth century. He had a wider experience of life than most of the literati, and his familiarity with ordinary townsmen enabled him to understand folk art and the life of the man in the street, so that in his work we sense his closeness to the common people.

Kuan Han-ching was the most prolific of the Yuan dramatists, and one of the most brilliant. He wrote on a wide range of topics, and the main themes of his plays are positive and clear. No matter whether he is dealing with corrupt officials or petty tyrants, heroes, beautiful girls or talented scholars, all his plays breathe defiant resistance to oppression.

Snow in Midsummer is one of his best works. The central theme of this play is the iniquity of the ruling class, and the main attack is directed against the injustice caused by foolish bureaucrats. The heroine, Tou Ngo, has great courage and strength of character. Before her execution she sings:

*You think Heaven knows no justice, men no pity?
Almighty Heaven will listen to men's prayers.
Once, in Tunghai, for three years no rain fell,
Because a good daughter-in-law was unjustly treated.
Now your district's turn has come.
Because officers here have no concern for justice,
The common citizens cannot tell the truth!*¹

The plot is well integrated and highly dramatic, the language simple and moving.

The Butterfly Dream, *The Wife-Snatcher* and *The Riverside Pavilion* show us the over-weening pride of the rich and mighty, who could not be called to account for murder and boasted of the fear they inspired. *Rescued by a Coquette*, *Gold Thread Pool* and other plays reflect the sufferings of singsong girls and their fighting spirit. Broad humanity and realism are evident in all these works.

Wang Shih-fu was a native of Yichow in present-day Hopei. The exact date of his birth is not known, but he is believed to have been active at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries. After serving for a time as an official, he retired to live as a hermit.

He did not write many plays, and his masterpiece is *The Western Chamber*. Many Yuan dramatists attacked the feudal marriage system under which marriages were determined by money or social position and true love was cruelly suppressed, but *The Western Chamber* is the most outstanding work of this type.

Though the main theme of this play is the love between a scholar named Chang and Ying-ying, a girl of good family, the two most striking characters are Ying-ying and her maid Hung Niang. Ying-ying's personality was described in some detail in Tang dynasty stories, but Wang Shih-fu has added finishing touches to it. Hung Niang, however, is entirely his own creation. Intelligent, lively and brave, she has a strong sense of justice and plenty of fight. When her mistress cross-questions her sternly about the lovers, she gives a confident answer, conscious of being in the right.

*Why pry and probe any more, ma'am?
The proverb says: "Grown girls
Should not stay long at home". ...
He is a brilliant scholar,
She the most lovely young lady. . . .
If you force her to leave Master Chang
You will disgrace your house!
She is your own flesh and blood —
Think it over well, ma'am!*

Mischievous, ingenious Hung Niang has been a favourite with play-goers down the ages. Another reason for this play's popularity is its masterly construction and its language sparkling with life.

Other plays by Wang Shih-fu, such as *Beautiful Spring Hall* and *A Tumbledown Cave*, are inferior works.

In addition to Kuan Han-ching and Wang Shih-fu, there were many lesser Yuan dramatists, of whom we may mention two. Pai Pu (1226-1310) was a native of Chenting in present-day Hopei. His best work, *Rain on the Plane Trees*, while dealing with the tragic love of Emperor Ming Huang and Lady Yang, exposes the luxury and licence of the feudal rulers. This play shows penetrating psychological insight, and is skilfully constructed. Ma Chih-yuan, a native of Peking, lived slightly later than Pai Pu. His most representative work, *Autumn in the Han Palace*, tends to idealize Emperor Yuan of Han, but presents us with a noble heroine in the person of Wang Chiang, contrasting her courage and patriotism with the ineptness and cowardice of the military and civil officials.

A number of stirring Yuan dramas, such as *Distributing Grain at Chenchow*, are anonymous.

Many Yuan dynasty playwrights, including the four just mentioned, also wrote *san chu*. Other writers who specialized in this genre include Chang Yang-hao, Liu Chih, Feng Tzu-chen, Sui Ching-chen, Kuan Yun-shih, Hsu Tsai-sze, and Chang Ko-chiu who may be taken as a representative figure.

Chang Ko-chiu, a native of Chingyuan in present-day Chekiang, was probably born in the seventies of the thirteenth century and died in the forties of the fourteenth. He wrote over seven hundred verses, the majority of them dealing with natural beauty, as in this description of Tungpo Mountain in Chekiang:

*In the pine-scented breeze beside the small pavilion
A lyre plays a song of immortals.
The jade hareⁱ shivers in the autumn wind;
The chilly monkeys wail upon wild branches;
White clouds stretch to the horizon
And the moon is small.*

Sometimes he also wrote satires on current abuses:

*All men hate poverty,
All delight in riches. . . .*

*So they paste their essays into purses,
And turn their homes into houses of ill repute!*

His language verges occasionally on the pedantic, but he did not deliberately turn his back on common speech.

San chu continued to be written after the Yuan dynasty, becoming, indeed, one of the most popular poetic forms.

The foregoing is necessarily a brief summary only of the literature of the sixth to fourteenth centuries. During this period great poetry and fine essays were written, and unprecedented advances were made in fiction and drama. Owing to the decline of the hereditary landowning class and the growth of large towns and cities, new ideas and subjects were introduced into literature, and new forms and images were created. These factors combined with the development of the Chinese language to make these eight hundred years a fruitful period in the history of Chinese literature.

Early Ming Dynasty

Early Ming literature, and notably drama and fiction, developed further from the standard reached in the Sung and Yuan dynasties.

The *tsa chu* continued the traditions of the Yuan drama, while the Southern Drama made new progress and produced such famous long operas as *The Tale of the Lute*. These operas set to Southern music were known as *chuan chi*.

Kao Tse-cheng, the author of *The Tale of the Lute*, was a native of Yungchia in present-day Chekiang, who was born early in the fourteenth century and died in its seventies. Conventional in his outlook, he believed that the theatre should help to uphold feudal morality. He had a sense of justice too, however, and was able to give a realistic picture of the truth, so that the impact of *The Tale of the Lute* on those who see it is not what its author intended. By contrasting the poor and the rich he has shown us the real society of his time: the pride and extravagance of great officials and landowners are contrasted with the sufferings of the people whom they oppressed so cruelly. Of the principal characters, Miss Niu, Tsai Yung's second wife, is relatively insipid and weak; but Tsai Yung's vacillation is most strikingly presented, and his first wife, Chao Wu-niang, is even more brilliantly depicted. In the scene "Feeding on Husks," her selflessness and nobility of character are powerfully brought out. During her husband's absence, she is alone to look after his parents, but because there is a famine she can feed them only by eating husks herself.

*The tears roll down my cheeks;
My heart is a tangled skein;
My legs will barely support me —
What fearful times are these!
Unless I eat these husks
I cannot stay my hunger,
But how can I swallow husks?
I had better die before them
That I may not know when they perish.
I can see no hope —
Nothing can save us!*

Her mother-in-law, who suspects her of eating well in secret, sheds tears when she finds Wu-niang trying to swallow husks, and the great merit of *The Tale of the Lute* is that readers or spectators are equally moved. The play's virtues far outweigh its shortcomings.

Four other famous plays of this time are Chu Chuan's *The Thorn Hairpin*, *The White Rabbit* (or *Liu Chih-yuan*) by an unknown author, *The Secluded Chamber* (or *Praying to the Moon*) attributed to Shih Hui, and *Death of a Dog* attributed to Hsu Cheng. All these plays have a positive message, for they praise

constant lovers, attack arranged marriages and the crimes of landowners and tyrants, and preach brotherly love.

LATER MING

Ming playwrights carried forward the traditions of the Yuan dynasty. Most of the earlier dramas had been based on folk legends, and if these were unfamiliar or unacceptable to the general public the author changed certain episodes or characters to suit the popular taste. The contents of most of the later plays, however, were of interest only to scholars. The themes changed, and with them the ideas expressed. Considerable independence of thought was shown. Indeed, we often find fun poked at the time-honoured concept of sage rulers and worthy ministers. There are modifications too in the form, language and music, which become more marked towards the end of the dynasty. The chief playwrights of this period were Hsu Wei, Yeh Hsien-tsu, Chen Yu-chiao and Meng Cheng-shun.

Hsu Wei, the most outstanding, was a native of present-day Shaohsing in Chekiang, who lived from 1521 to 1593. The growth of democratic ideas in China is very evident in his plays, which oppose feudal traditions, emphasize the importance of individuality and demand emancipation. His works include *The Story of Mulan*, *The Successful Woman Candidate* and other plays remarkable for their strong spirit of revolt. They ridicule cruel, avaricious officials and the prudish, rigid rules of the monasteries, and show sympathy for women of ability and scholars persecuted for resisting the authorities. The dialogue is vivid, realistic and spirited. Though not entirely the language of common speech, it is a distinctive style achieved by the author after years of hard work. Hsu Wei ignored many of the conventions regarding musical accompaniment and form, and his plots are weak because his plays are primarily dramatic poems.

After the middle of the Ming dynasty the *chuan chi* underwent changes too. Folk-tales ceased to be the main subject matter, and the authors often chose their themes from history or contemporary life. The best-known dramatists were Liang Chen-yu, Shen Ching, Tang Hsien-tsu, Kao Lien, Sun Jen-ju and Li Yu, of whom Tang Hsien-tsu and Li Yu hold the highest place.

Tang Hsien-tsu (1550-1617) was a native of Linchuan in Kiangsi, and a courageous official who was not afraid to offend the powerful and noble. He was influenced by the democratic ideas of the time. His chief works are *The Governor of the Southern Tributary State*, *The Purple Hairpin* and *The Peony Pavilion*.

The Peony Pavilion, his greatest work, is an attack on feudal morality in which Tang Hsien-tsu reveals the harm done by the feudal family education and extols love which is stronger than death. His heroine Tu Li-niang is a significant character, for she represents all the girls deprived of love and happiness. She sings with feeling:

*What a riot of brilliant purple and tender crimson
Among the ruined wells and crumbling walls!
What an enchanting sight on this fine morning —
But who takes delight in the spring? . . .
Clouds drift and flutter down, at dawn and dusk
Over the green pavilion and painted barges,*

*Across the misty waves in wind and rain;
But those behind silk screens
Make light of this fine season.*

(From "The Girl's Dream.")

Because her lament for the spring, which was in fact a lament for herself, expressed the feelings of thousands like her, she became one of the best-loved heroines in the classical theatre. Her story has inspired countless readers, especially young people, and given them the courage to fight for their happiness. The effectiveness of this play owes much to the beauty and freshness of the language.

Tang Hsien-tsu's other works, while inferior to *The Peony Pavilion*, breathe the same spirit of revolt. At the heart of his descriptions of immortals, ghosts and dreams is an intense hatred for social injustice, and this accounts for the rich vein of satire in his works.

Li Yu (1590-1660?) was a native of Soochow. He wrote over thirty works, the foremost of which is *The Loyal Citizens*. This play describes the resourcefulness and courage of the citizens of Soochow and their allies in their tussle with the wicked Wei Chung-hsien and his henchmen at the end of the Ming dynasty. In spirited terms, the author describes the people's wrath:

*The fury spreading from Soochow over the country
Is unparalleled in history.
The public indignation cannot be curbed;
Nothing can check it now.
Though the officials are fierce as wolves and tigers,
The people's roar for justice
Has shaken heaven and earth;
Soon dark clouds will be swept away!*

As Li Yu was over thirty at the time of this riot, he may well have taken part in it himself. *Fighting Against Taxation* deals with the mass resistance to taxation in 1601 in Soochow. These are some of the finest chuan chi of the Ming dynasty. They deal with the most burning topics of the day, and Champion the cause of justice.

Mention should also be made of such later Ming writers as Yuan Hung-tao, who op-posed the imitation of the old, the songs, fiddle ballads and drum ballads popular among the people, and the tales written in the style of the story-tellers' scripts.

The slavish imitation of the ancients popular in the period before this now aroused the opposition of many scholars, notably of the three brothers Yuan Tsung-tao, Yuan Hung-tao and Yuan Chung-tao. Influenced by the democratic thought of the time, they opposed taking the old classical writers as models and strongly condemned the use of ancient phrases, believing that a writer should cultivate his own individual style. They express independent ideas and unrestrained emotions in frank and natural language.

They sit in dung heaps chewing offal and relay on powerful patrons to bully honest folk, like most family retainers in Soochow today. Remembering a few stale anecdotal stories, they boast of their great learning; using one or two clichés, they call themselves poets. (Yuan Hung-tao's *Letter to a Friend*.)

This is a merciless blast at the plagiarists of the time! As some of these works were empty or vulgar, Chung Hsing, Tan Yuan-chun and others advocated the use of far fetched expressions to remedy these defects, but since this was not an ideal solution, their writing too had a good many shortcomings. Only Chang Tai succeeded in combining the best features of the two schools. When China was overrun by the Manchus he suffered many hardships and lived deep in the mountains. He has left us *Reminiscences of Tao An* and other works.

The hsiao chu of the Ming dynasty are the popular songs belonging neither to the Southern nor the Northern Music, most of which were composed by folk artists. As the people loved them, they spread very widely. Most of them deal with simple, honest love, or describe the sufferings of constant lovers:

*Dew-drops like pearls upon the lotus leaves —
In my folly I long to thread them!
You are inconstant as water
Which flows off and back again;
My cruel, faithless lover,
You chop and change with the wind!*

A characteristic of these songs is their simple intimate language. Scholars of the time who studied them were able to a certain extent to overcome the growing artificiality of san chu.

The drum ballads and fiddle ballads were a combination of recitation and singing. The drum ballads were popular in the north, the fiddle ballads in the south. One of the best examples of the latter is the Ballad of Twentyone Dynasties by Yang Shen. There are many good drum ballads too. The Ballad of Times Past by Chia Ying-chung casts doubt on the orthodox interpretation of history, and refutes some of the lies of the ruling class. Kuei Chuang at the end of the Ming and beginning of the Ching dynasty wrote a work akin to drum ballads called Eternal Sorrow to extol the overthrow of the Mongol dynasty and rebuke the traitors who sold their country to the Manchus. He also pours scorn on "sages and worthies," including Confucius and Mencius.

*How ridiculous that that old scribbler Confucius
Should keep harping back to bones already dead
Two hundred and forty years before!
And stranger still that that old wrangler Mencius
Should keep trying to impress men
With the Five Emperors and Three Kings!*

Thanks to its advanced ideas, vivid language and pleasant music, this work remained popular for many years.

CHING DYNASTY

After the middle of the seventeenth century there were few essayists or poets of the first rank, but this was the great age of the novel and drama. The masterpieces of this period were: Strange Tales of Liao-chai by Pu Sung-ling, The Palace of Eternal Youth by Hung Sheng, Peach Blossom Fan by Kung Shang-jen, The Scholars by Wu Ching-tzu, and The Dream of the Red Chamber by Tsao Hsueh-chin.

Pu Sung-ling (1640-1715) was a native of Tzuchuan in Shantung, who met with little success in the state examinations and remained a private tutor all his life. He is the author of many works, best known for his Strange Tales of Liao-chai.

The Strange Tales of Liao-chai takes its material from stories about ghosts and super-natural beings, as well as the amazing adventures of men. Through these tales Pu Sung-ling satirized rapacious officials, denounced the examination system, showed his sympathy for the sufferings of the people and the hard lot of women, and applauded true love and the defiance of convention. Some of his best stories are The Cricket, Wang Tzu-an, Lien Cheng, The Chrysanthemum Spirit, Madam Chou and The Dream of the Wolf. The Cricket deals with a time when high officials liked to keep fighting crickets and forced their subordinates to find good specimens for them. When a minor functionary failed to produce a good fighter he was cruelly beaten; so when he finally procured a champion he put it away carefully, meaning to present it to his superior.

When his nine-year-old son saw the father was out, he uncovered the pot on the sly. At once the cricket jumped out and sprang about so nimbly that it eluded his grasp. He finally grabbed it, but in doing so pulled its legs off and crushed it so that soon after it died. Then the frightened boy ran crying to his mother, and when she heard what had happened her face turned deadly pale.

*"You young rascal! You'll be in trouble when your father comes home!"
The child went off in tears.*

Soon the father came back, and when he heard his wife's story he felt as if he had been turned to ice. In a passion he searched for his son, who was nowhere to be found until at last they discovered his body in the well. The father's anger then changed to grief. He groaned and longed to kill himself. Husband and wife sat in their thatched and smokeless cottage facing each other in silence, at their wit's end.

In this story the boy's spirit takes the form of a cricket, and after his father presents this to his superior it proves such a good fighter that all the officials through whose hands it passes are promoted and make their fortune, even Cheng Ming being rewarded. Pu Sung-ling gives a lively description of how crickets

are caught and how they fight, incidentally painting a graphic picture of the misery of the common people and the capriciousness of the officials upon whose whims their well-being depends. Though the story contains elements of the supernatural, it has deep significance and emotional appeal.

Pu Sung-ling also wrote some popular ballads in simple humorous language, dealing with political and household affairs. His writing is realistic, and his characters are full of vitality.

The chief dramatists of the Ching dynasty were Li Yu, Hung Sheng, Kung Shang-jen and Chiang Shih-chuan, of whom Hung Sheng and Kung Shang-jen were the greatest. Hung Sheng (1645-1704) was a native of Hangchow. His masterpiece, *The Palace of Eternal Youth*,ⁱⁱⁱ deals with the story of Emperor Ming Huang of the Tang dynasty and Lady Yang. He sings of the love which triumphs over death:

*True lovers are immortal;
Thus, though the fairy mountain is far away,
True love can reach it.
Love transcends life and death,
And lovers will meet at last. . . .*
(From "The Lovers' Reunion.")

He also lays a grave charge against place-seekers and officials.

*Courtiers and ministers
Have learned a new servility,
Flocking to fawn on the mighty
As country folk flock to a fair. . . .
Yet none dare tell the emperor
That these vermilion roofs and brilliant tiles
Are stained with the people's blood!*
(From "The Writing on the Wall.")

As the characters in this opera are from all walks of life, it gives us a colourful pageant of Tang history. The plot is superbly constructed in the main, the imagery is fresh and beautiful, and the music is delightful; but the dramatic effect of the whole is weakened by certain superfluous episodes in the second half which the author inserted in order to bring Lady Yang and the emperor together in paradise.

Kung Shang-jen (1648-1718) was a native of Chufu in Shantung. He lived in relatively straitened circumstances, and while working on water conservancy came into fairly close touch with the labouring people. His major work is *Peach Blossom Fan*, and he also collaborated with Ku Tsai on *The Smaller Lute*.

Peach Blossom Fan portrays the harrowing events at the time of the fall of the Ming dynasty. The love story of a scholar and a courtesan is used to reveal the reasons for China's defeat, the chief of which was, in the author's opinion, the despicable selfishness of great officials and landowners, who ground down the people, persecuted honest men, and sold the country to the Manchus. The scene "In the Prison" sheds light on the injustice and confusion of those times:

*Moonlight floods the azure sky,
Heart-rending groans fill the air;
New ghosts in the corners of the cells
Complain, dripping with blood. . . .
The dungeon is filled with wailing,
And fetters clank at night. . . .
Do not look down on learning:
All the best scholars
Must undergo tribulation. . . .
These prison cells
Are filled with academicians.*

By this means Kung Shang-jen exposes the chaos in the government, and the way in which traitors persecute genuine patriots. It is quite dear on which side his sympathies are. Peach Blossom Fan is a great historical drama with many typical characters set against an authentic background. The plot is compact, the dialogue brilliantly varied and expressive.

After Hung Sheng and Kung Shang-jen died, the chuan chi gradually declined and its place in the Chinese theatre was taken by different local operas.

CHING DYNASTY

Local operas, which do not include tsa chu and chuan chi, can be traced back to the Ming dynasty; but they reached full vigour by the eighteenth century. During this period chuan chi were appreciated by a small section of the upper class only, while the great majority of the people enjoyed local opera. The two chief centres were Peking and Yangchow.

Though local operas sometimes contain conservative ideas and elements of superstition, in the main they voice what was in the people's minds, their accusations and cries of revolt. Many of them express sympathy for humble folk and hatred for the rich and great; they often give the part of an emperor to a clown, and ruthlessly expose the luxury and savagery of the ruling class.

Most local operas take historical themes. And though the authors are generally unknown they must have included men of genius, for these plays are often magnificently dramatic and, have a deep educational significance. Good examples are *The Fisherman's Revenge*, which tells the story of Yuan Hsiao-chi, one of the heroes of *Water Margin*, and *The Battle of Wits* describing the Battle of the Red Cliff in the Three Kingdoms period. Sometimes subjects were taken straight from life, as in *Borrowing Boots*, a popular play which ridicules the selfishness and hypocrisy of some townfolk.

After the Opium War local operas became even more numerous.

During this period, the fifth stage in the development of Chinese literature, poetry and essays were relegated to a secondary position, while fiction and drama came to occupy increasingly important places. The tendentiousness of works of literature became more and more marked.

19TH CENTURY

In drama, while such classical forms as *tsa chu* and *chuan chi* were declining, local operas were growing increasingly popular. Carrying on the best traditions of earlier operas like *The Fisherman's Revenge* and *Borrowing Boots*, different localities produced a number of lively plays, often filled with the spirit of revolt or criticism of current abuses. By the time of the 1898 Reformation, Wang Hsiao-nuag had written operas on historical themes to foster patriotism. Thus in *Lamenting at the Ancestral Temple* he describes how when the king of Shu decided to surrender to Wei in A.D. 263, his son Liu Shen killed himself after uttering the following protest:

*Drums thunder in my ears
As my father approaches General Teng.
I cannot bear to see
A king kneeling before his horse.
Would I could kill all traitors!
Today ends our imperial house;
Fiercely I draw my sword,
Preferring death to dishonour!*

New operas on contemporary themes now became an important part of the Chinese theatre, and played an active role in the political struggle. At this time, too, responding to the political needs of the times, modern plays of the Western type gradually appeared. By the 1911 Revolution there were many repertory companies, among them the Friends' Society, the Spring Sun Society, the Spring Willow Society and the Evolution Club, all of which made their contribution to the Chinese theatre. The plays they produced reflected to a certain extent the popular demand for revolution.

The literature of the period of the democratic revolution also reflected the conflict between the new bourgeois culture and the old feudal one. But since the world had already entered the era of imperialism, the young Chinese capitalist class could not put up a strong fight; thus the bourgeois thinkers of this period showed a striking tendency towards reformism, and the writers did not attain very high standards. Not till the new democratic revolution was inaugurated after the May the Fourth Movement was there any marked advance in Chinese literature.

ⁱ From the *Selected Plays of Kuan Han-ching* published by the Foreign Languages Press.

ⁱⁱ Refers to the moon, where the legend says a jade hare lives.

ⁱⁱⁱ Published in English by the Foreign Languages Press.