TADEUSZ ŻBIKOWSKI

On Early Chinese Theatrical Performances

Different theories have been advanced concerning the beginnings of the theatre in China. Some of them are connected with the shamanistic dances in worship of gods and demons[1]. Some scholars connect the origin of Chinese theatre with the early puppet shows[2]. Other scholars associate the birth of the Chinese theatre with the performance of dances in the royal palace and with the jesters at the court. Thus, during the Ch'un-ts'iu period, a clown from Ch'u, called Meng 孟, disguised himself as a minister who had died some years before. This seems to be the earliest record concerning play-acting in China[3]. I do not want to enter here upon an analysis of these theories or commit myself to any specific point of view, but shall only attempt to give a brief description of a somewhat later stage in the development of the Chinese theatre, represented by the so-called *pai-hi* 百戲 performances of the Han period.

First of all, the term *pai-hi* deserves a semantic analysis. The word *pai* 百 does not require a detailed explanation. The primary meaning is 'one hundred' but already in the pre-Han period we find the extended meaning 'a great quantity of, various'. The second part of this compound, the character *hi* 戲 was at different periods used in connection with other terms to denote various forms of theatrical performances, for instance *hi-kü* 戲劇, *hi-k'ü* 戲曲, *tsa-hi* 雜戲, *hi-nung* 戲弄, *nan-hi* 南戲. It even occurred in terms having little if any connection with the theatre at all. An exact understanding of this word is therefore of primary importance.

The graphical form of the word *hi* seems very interesting as a factor revealing the real substance of many styles of the Chinese classical theatre. One of the meanings of the graph given in the *Shuo-wen kie-tsï* is *ping* 兵 'weapon'. The commentary of Tuan Yü-ts'ai 段玉裁[4] suggests that the meaning 'amusement' was derived from a primary meaning 'weapon', because one could both fight with weapons

[1] Wang Kuo-wei 王國維, *Sung Yüan hi-k'ü k'ao* 宋元戲曲考 (1912) *in Wang Kuo-wei hi-k'ü lun-wen tsi* 王國維戲曲論文集 (Peking 1957), pp. 4—5.

[2] Sun K'ai-ti 孫楷弟, *Kuei-lei-hi k'ao-yüan* 傀儡戲考原 (Shanghai 1952), pp. 37—123.

[3] Chou Yi-pai 周貽白, *Chung-kuo hi-kü shï* 中國戲劇史 (Shanghai 1953), pp. 20—27.

[4] Cp. Ting Fu-pao 丁福保 *Shuo-wen kie-tsï ku-lin* 說文解字詁林 (Shanghai 1937), fol. 5684ab.

and also amuse oneself doing so. However, as the meaning 'weapon' is only given in the *Shuo-wen kie-tsï* and is not attested in literary or historical texts of the Han period, we can hardly base any theory on this explanation. The normal meaning of the word *hi* during Han dynasty is 'play, sport'[5], and thus, the term *pai-hi* probably denoted various kinds of performances. It should be emphasised that these shows were chiefly performances of physical skill and strength[6]. This fact suggests that originally there was no dramatic plot in the *pai-hi* performances.

Three groups of sources supply us with data about the development of form and content of the *pai-hi* theatrical performances. They are:

1. Historical works, especially the *Shï-ki* by Sï-ma Ts'ien, the *Han-shu* by Pan Ku, the *Hou-Han shu* by Fan Ye, together with other historical materials compiled not long after the fall of the Han dynasty.

2. Some literary works of the Later Han period, the *Si-king fu* (*Prose-poem on the Western Capital*)[7] by Chang Heng (ca 78—139) and a fragment from the *P'ing-lo-kuan fu* (*Prose-poem on the P'ing-lo tower*) by Li Yu (ca 56—139), preserved in the T'ang encyclopedia *Yi-wen lei-tsü* (ca 640)[8].

3. Scenes from *pai-hi* performances engraved on tomb-reliefs of the Later Han or early post-Han period which were excavated in 1954 in Yi-nan district, Shantung. A full report on these findings, with plans and photographs, was published by the Nanking Museum and the Cultural Department of the Shantung Province[9]. A preliminary report was published in the monthly "Wen-wu ts'an-k'ao tsï-liao"[10].

"The *pai-hi* performances began during the Ts'in-Han period" — says a compendium of the emperor Yüan (reigned 522—5) of the Liang dynasty[11]. Since the *pai-hi*

---

[5] For this information I am indebted to Dr. A. Waley, who kindly read the paper in its draft-form.

[6] It is worth noticing that in the later development of Chinese theatrical forms the performances called *hi* contained acrobatics, fighting or conjuring tricks, while the other forms, which were based on singing and dialogue, were differentiated by such terms as *k'ü* 曲 or *kü* 劇. By way of example we find the terms *ma-hi* 馬戲 and *Ts'in-hi* 秦戲, but never **ma-k'ü* 馬曲 or **ma-kü* 馬劇, and on the other hand one never says **k'un-hi* 崑戲 but *k'un-k'ü* 崑曲. This differentiation must have some connection with the special meaning of *hi* during the Han period.

[7] Chang Heng 張衡, *Si-king fu* 西京賦, in *Wen-süan* (Sï-pu ts'ung-k'an ed., Shanghai 1937) 2.30b—33a.

[8] Li Yu 李尤, *P'ing-lo-kuan fu* 平樂觀賦, cp. *Yi-wen lei-tsü* 藝文類聚 (Sung photolithographic ed., Shanghai 1959), 63. 5b—6a.

[9] Tseng Chao-yü 曾昭燏, Tsiang Pao-keng 蔣寶庚, Li Chung-yi 黎忠義, *Yi-nan ku hua-siang shï-mo fa-küe pao-kao* 沂南古畫像石墓發掘報告 (Shanghai 1956), 68 pp. + 108 tabl.

[10] *Shan-tung Yi-nan Han hua-siang shï-mo* 山東沂南漢畫像石墓, in *Wen-wu ts'an-k'ao tsï-liao* 文物參考資料, 1954/8, pp. 35—69.

[11] *Liang Yüan-ti ts'uan-yao* 梁元帝纂要, quoted in *T'ai-p'ing yü-lan* (Yang-chou 1808), 569.4a.

were a very composite form of entertainment, it is probable that some of its elements already existed before Ts'in and that new elements were introduced later on. This surmise is corroborated by an analysis of the various forms of the *pai-hi* performances, which may be divided into five groups:

1. Animal shows (with actors impersonating animals);
2. Wrestling;
3. Jugglery, acrobatics and conjuring tricks;
4. Singing, dancing and musical performances;
5. Dramatic representations (rare).

The first group, representing the impersonation of animals by actors, is the oldest. The origin of these performances is closely connected with peasant beliefs and rural cults. The main feature of the animal shows — the Chinese term for them is *siang-jen* 象人 — is the performance of men in the disguise of various animals, often purely fabulous.

In the 15th chapter (*On Ritual*) in the *Hou-Han shu* we find a short description of a countryside ceremony for the expulsion of the demon of pestilence from the royal city. It runs as follows: 先臘一日大儺謂之逐疫其儀選中黃門子弟年十歲以上十二歲以下百二十人爲倡子皆赤幘皂製執大鼗方相氏黃金四目蒙熊皮玄衣朱裳執戈揚盾十二獸有衣毛角 .... 因作方相與十二獸舞嚾呼周徧前後省三過持炬火送疫出端門 .... "One day before the sacrifice of the end of the year the great *no* [is celebrated], called expulsion of epidemical disease. The ritual of it [is the following]: From among the apprentices of the inner Yellow Gate of the Palace, aged between ten and twelve years, one hundred and twenty are selected to act as lads; [they are dressed] with red bonnets and black coats, and they carry large handdrums. The *fang-siang-shï* [with] four eyes of gold and covered with bearskins, [wearing] black coats and red skirts, grasp their lances and wield their shields. [There are also] twelve animals with feathers and hairs, and with horns... Now the *fang-siang* [are set to] work. [Together] with [those] twelve animals they jump about screaming, making three tours round [about the inner Palace buldings] in front and behind, and with their torches they escort the pestilential disease out of the front gate..."[12].

This ceremony was very popular in the countryside; it originated from peasant beliefs and had nothing in common with the ritual and the ceremonies of the imperial court. Performances based on peasant dances and customs were disregarded by the orthodox court officials, who called them *san-yüe* 散樂 'dispersed music', that is informal music not included in the orthodox musical tradition. When animal shows were included in the court performances, they were at first also called *san-yüe*,

[12] *Hou-Han shu* (Chung-hua shu-kü ed., Shanghai 1927), 15.7b—8a. This chapter was written by Sï-ma Piao (240—306) and annotated by Liu Chao (502—556).

and it was only when other elements were added to the performances that the term *pai-hi* was used for them.

The Han sources show that in most cases the actors were disguised as animals, and either performed some simple actions on the stage or simply passed in front of the spectators.

Thus in Chang Heng's *Prose-poem on the Western Capital*[13] we read about "dallying leopards and dancing bears, white tigers beating the citharas (*se*) and green dragons blowing the bamboo-flutes (*ch'i*)... A giant beast, a hundred *sin* [high] performs [the art of] *man-yen*... Bears and tigers stand up [on their hind legs], grasp [each other and] embrace. [Then] black apes run in and climb into high [trees]; from every side strange animals enter and big birds hop to-and-fro. A white elephant with her young one passes by, [their] lowered trunks coiled. A scaly sea-monster transforms itself into a dragon, whirling and coiling around... [The great monster] *Han-li* opens widely its jaws [and instantly] changes itself into a fairy-chariot, pulled by four deer in a row. The chariot is covered with a wonderful baldachin made of nine red irises... [After this, a thousand-year-old moon-toad] *Ch'an-ch'u* [and an old] tortoise [appear]. Actors who can swim well represent a [water]-snake. Strange and fantastic views instantly change and transform into new shapes".

Li Yu's *Prose-poem on the P'ing-lo tower*[11] also describes some plays belonging to this category, as follows: 有仙鴛雀其形蚼虬騎驢馳射狐兔驚走朱儒巨人戲謔爲耦禽鹿六駮白象朱首魚龍曼延嵔嵷山阜龜螭蟾蜍挈琴鼓缶 "A genius (*sien*) rides on a bird (*ts'io*) and drifts in the air. Ass-riders enter and draw their bows. Frightened foxes and rabbits flee away. Then dwarfs and giants matched in pairs cut jokes and make fun of each other. Wild deer, the awful monster *Liu-po*, a white elephant with a red head, fish and dragons [perform the continuous transformation of shapes] *man-yen*. On the lofty, rocky mountains tortoises, dragon-monsters and [the moon-toads] *Ch'an-ch'u* beat the citharas (*kin*) and drum earthen pots".

From these two quotations we see that the main feature of the animal shows was not only the performances of men disguised as animals, but also the transformation tricks played by them. Thus in the presence of the spectators, a fish might be changed into a dragon or another animal.

One of the commentators on the *Wen-süan*, Sie Tsung († 243) 薛綜 provides further details about the forms of disguise used. The commentary informs us, for instance, that people who acted as genii were fully disguised (*kia-hing* 假形) so as to look like gods. Actors impersonating bears, leopards, tigers and dragons disguis-

---

[13] Hereafter abbreviated to *West. Capital*. I give my own translation, but the reader is also referred to the translation by E. von Zach, *Die chinesische Anthologie* (Harvard-Yenching Institute Series, XVIII), Cambridge, Mass. 1958, vol. I, pp. 14—16.

[11] Hereafter abbreviated to *P'ing-lo*.

ed only their heads (*kia-t'ou* 假頭). Thus, not all persons appearing in the *pai-hi* performances were completely disguised; some of them wore only masks, the so-called 'false heads'. This may have had some influence on the development of the animal mask in the later Chinese theatre.

In this connection the Han tomb-reliefs which were recently excavated in Yi-nan district, Shantung, assume particular importance. One of them shows men disguised as animals[15]. They show, for instance (Plate I, lower left-hand corner), a strange bird, probably a sort of phoenix. Before the bird stands an actor who holds a fairy-tree (Plate II, lower right-hand corner). A huge monster waves a flag in one hand and leans on a crooked stick (resembling a snake) with the other, while he strides across the stage (Plate II). Below the monster there is a group of men surrounding a great fish which according to the descriptions quoted above could at any moment change into a dragon or some other monster. Further to the left we see a dragon (perhaps a dressed-up horse) on the back of which an acrobat performs tricks with a long lance. The three animals pulling the chariot (Plate I) are also made to look like dragons. The artists who engraved the scenes on stone had probably not enough space to show the whole variety of the *pai-hi* performances, and therefore confined themselves to the most characteristic aspects of the spectacle.

Disguise seems to be of a very early origin; it must have developed from rural legends and customs of the Chou period, and its more advanced forms, the so-called *yü-lung man-yen* 魚龍曼延 (also written 蔓衍), were, as Li Shan († 689) 李善 states on the strength of the *Han-shu* in his commentary to *Wen-süan*[16] (there is no corresponding passage in the *Han-shu* it-self), invented and introduced into the *pai-hi* programme by Emperor Wu of the Western Han dynasty (140—86 B.C.).

We cannot discuss here the details known of the animal shows, but it appears that their highest technical development took place during the first centuries of our era. Later on, performances of this kind gradually lost their popularity, and only scanty remains can be traced in some forms of modern local opera.

The second group of performances belonging to the *pai-hi* were wrestling contests and displays of military skill. This group, although less varied than the first one, is very important from the point of view of its function in the historical development of the *pai-hi* performances.

One of the indispensable features of the *pai-hi* programme was the so-called *kiao-ti-hi* 角抵戲. The two terms, *kiao-ti-hi* and *pai-hi* were often interchanged. It seems that the *pai-hi* performances had another source in military competitions and wrestling contests performed in the presence of the emperor and his guests. The most popular form of the wrestling contests, as already stated, was represented by the *kiao-ti-hi* or 'horn-butting-sports'. The origin of this form of wrestling is rather uncertain. The wrestling is mentioned in the *Han-shu*, in the *Biography of Emperor Wu*

---

[15] The plates are reproduced from the monthly "Wen-wu ts'an k'ao tsï-liao", 1954/8; cp. 10.

[16] Cp. *Wen-süan*, (ed. Sï-pu ts'ung-k'an) 2.31a.

(*Wu-ti ki*[17]). More light on it is shed by the fabulous explanation in Su O's 蘇鶚 *Su-shï yen-yi* 蘇氏演義[18]. Although this was lost very early and was only reconstructed during the composition of *Yung-lo ta-tien* encyclopedia in the early years of the XVth century, yet the data supplied by it are almost entirely corroborated by related passages in the *Han-shu* and its commentaries. The explanation in *Su-shï yen-yi* is as follows

秦漢間說蚩尤牛耳鬚如劍戟頭有角與軒轅鬥以角抵人人不能向冀州舊樂名蚩尤戲其民兩兩三三頭帶角而相觝卽角觝之戲.... 武帝元封三年作角觝戲以享外國朝獻

"It was in Ts'in and Han times that it was said that Ch'ï Yu had ears like an ox, his beard [looked] as swords and spears, and he had horns on his head. During the fight at Hien-yüan he was butting people with his horns, and they could not oppose him. In the prefecture of Kichou [there was performed] an old play, called *Ch'ï-yu-hi*. Commoners [matched] in pairs and wearing oxen-horns on their heads fought butting one another. This was [the entertainment called] *kiao-ti-hi*... In the third year of the Yüan-feng era (107 B.C.) Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty introduced the *kiao-ti-hi* [wrestling] to please the foreign [guests], who had come to the court to pay the tribute..."

We can see from the above citation, that this form of wrestling originally contained a dramatic theme, namely the struggle of the Yellow Emperor against the rebel Ch'ï Yu.

It is easily conceivable that already during the Han dynasty when wrestling was included in the *pai-hi* programme, its dramatic background had been forgotten, and it became merely a form of sport, just a spectacular wrestling competition. The *Su-shï yen-yi* corroborated by the *Han-shu* (cp. 17) gives a rather precise date for the introduction of the *kiao-ti-hi* wrestling into the programme of the *pai-hi* performances. It was in the year 107 B.C.

Of course, this was not the only form of spectacle belonging to the group of wrestling contests in the *pai-hi* programme. Both Chang Heng's *West. Capital* and Li Yu's *P'ing-lo* mention besides the *kiao-ti-hi* at least two or three other forms of competitions in military skill. Li Yu mentions in his *P'ing-lo*: 習禁武以講捷厭不羈之遐鄰 "the training of the emperor's bodyguards [that they could] defeat the most trained and skilful [competitors coming from] far and near".

Chang Heng refers to a more theatrical form of those contests. Let us here mention only the tragedy of Huang-kung from Tung-hai, which we shall separately analyse below.

---

[17] *Han-shu*, ed. Han-fen-lou, Shanghai 1930, fol. 6.23b. 元封三年 (107 B.C.) 春作角抵戲 "In the third year of the Yüan-feng era in spring the *kiao-ti-hi* were performed".

[18] Cp. *Ku-kin chu, Chung-hua ku-kin chu, Su-shï yen-yi* 古今註，中華古今註，蘇氏演義, Commercial Press, Shanghai 1956; *Su-shï yen-yi*, p. 26.

This part of the *pai-hi* programme, except for the *kiao-ti-hi* wrestling in its pure form, which was introduced at the end of the second century B.C., seems to be of very early origin. If we recall the interpretation of the character *hi* as given above and the importance of military training for the ruling class, we shall realise that wrestling contests were probably one of the earliest groups represented in the *pai-hi* programme.

The third group of the *pai-hi* performances is very varied and consists of different sorts of acrobatic and athletic shows, jugglery and conjurer's tricks.

First of all let us consult the descriptions in Chang Heng's *West. Capital* and in Li Yu's *P'ing-lo*. Chang Heng writes as follows: "Wu Huo lifts [heavy] tripods; [the acrobats from] the Tu-lu country climb [high] masts, [others] jump through a rolled up mat pierced with spears and look like swallows bathing [in the air] with their chests almost touching the sharp spear points. Juggling with balls and swords was performed with great skill and rapidity. [Two acrobats] walk on a rope and meet each other. [Then] the sword-swallowing and firespitting [tricks are performed]. [A conjurer] causes clouds, fog and darkness fall, [with a stick] he draws a line on the ground [and the line] becomes a rivulet, rolling its waters from [the river] Wei to [the river] King. [After a while] a great theatre-chariot is pulled in, [on which] a high flag-pole is set up, with lads demonstrating their acrobatic skill [on its top], [jumping] up and down, waving their bodies to-and-fro in the air. Suddenly their bodies fall down, but are stopped by the heels; it looks as if falling down they held the mast with their heels".

Almost the same performances, although in different order, are spoken of by Li Yu in his *P'ing-lo*: 戲車高橦馳騁百馬連翩九仞離合上下或以馳騁烏獲扛鼎千鈞若羽吞刀吐火燕躍鳥峙陸高履索踊躍旋舞飛丸跳劍 "[There is] a high flag-pole [set-up on] a theatre-chariot that is being [slowly pulled on by] a hundred horses formed in even rows. [Acrobats] wave their bodies at the height of nine *jen* (approximately 25 metres), they separate and meet together again, [jump] up and down. There are acrobats displaying their skill on horseback. Wu Huo lifts tripods [weighing] a thousand *kün* as if they were feathers; there are sword-swallowers and fire-spitters. [Some acrobats fly over the ground like swallows, others stand on one leg like birds or high on a rope jump a bird's dance, hopping and whirling around. [Afterwards we see] juggling with balls and swords."

The acrobatic shows just spoken of are also found on the Han reliefs recently discovered in Shantung. The first part of the relief (Plate I) has a fortunately preserved picture of the so-called theatre-chariot, so that we can see what it was really like. It would be difficult to imagine the structure of the chariot, if we had to rely only on the very scanty descriptions supplied by the literary works of the Han period. The chariot consisted of an ornamented platform-box placed on a pair of wheels. A high pole was erected in the centre of the box. On the top of the pole was placed a small platform on which an acrobat performed his displays while the chariot was moving on. To make the show more attractive the chariot was usually dragged

by three or more horses dressed to resemble dragons or other strange beasts. The acrobatics were more difficult to perform while the chariot was moving.

In the same picture we see two women performing acrobatic feats on horseback. One of them is standing on a galloping horse, the other having grasped the saddle with both hands is waving her legs in the air.

The second fragment (Plate II) represents three acrobats dancing on a rope, one of them standing on his hands and another one performing swift movements with a lance held in his hand. He is standing on the back of a dragonlike horse. Below the rope-dancers, swords are set up, so that when falling down they would be pierced by them.

The third part of the relief (Plate III) shows feats of jugglery. The juggling of swords and balls is performed by the actor in the upper left-hand corner (Plate IV). Beneath him there is an actor who sets seven disks in motion with a whip (Plate V). In the middle of the picture there is an athlete who holds in his hand a long pole with a platform on its top. Three acrobats are jumping and dancing on the platform (Plate VI).

Some further examples of this sort of *pai-hi* performances could certainly be found in the historical records and literary works of the Han period.

It is possible that the acrobatic shows appeared later than the animal shows and wrestling contests, and that they were mostly of foreign origin. First of all, we have no written or other form of evidence that acrobatic shows were performed before the Han dynasty. Neither in the court ceremonies and entertainments nor in the country enjoyments did this sort of display take place. On the other hand, some of the proper names used by Chang Heng in connection with this sort of performance, the country name "Tu-lu" 都盧 and the name of the athlete, Wu Huo 烏獲, seem to indicate a foreign origin of these displays.

Wu Huo, famous for his strength, was an official under king Wu of Ts'in. The fact that he served in Ts'in, the borders of which extended far to the west, and that his name does not look like a pure Chinese name, suggests that he could have been of foreign (Central Asiatic) origin.

The term Tu-lu 都盧 calls for some toponomastic researches. There is a notice in the *Chapter on Geography* of the *Han-shu*[19] that Tu-lu kuo 都盧國 was a country placed 10 months of sea-travel from the Ho-p'u 合蒲 district, which was then situated in the present Kuangtung province[20], and two months of sea-travel from Huang-chï kuo 黃支國, which is thought to be situated in the south-eastern part of the Indian Peninsula. Thus, the *Tu-lu kuo* is supposed to be situated in the vicinity of the present Tagaung town in Burma[21]. Therefore we can say that

[19] *Han-shu, Ti-li chï*, ed. Han-fen-lou 1930, Shanghai, küan 28hia, fol. 37a.

[20] Cp. *Ti-ming ta-tsï-tien* 地名大辭典 (Commercial Press, Shanghai 1931), p. 291.

[21] Chang Süan 章巽, *Wo-kuo ku-tai-ti hai-shang kiao-t'ung* 我國古代的海上交通 (Shanghai 1956), p. 14.

the acrobats used to come to the Chinese court from the extreme southern regions bordering on their country.

There is also further evidence that acrobats and jugglers were coming to China from foreign countries. A passage in *Ta-yüan-chuan* in S ï - m a T s ' i e n ' s *Shï-ki*, which describes a Chinese expedition to the country of An-si (Parthia) states the following:[22] "when the Chinese envoy was leaving for his country, the ruler of An-si sent with him his envoy, who accompanied the Chinese party to China in order to see and admire the greatness and wealth of the Chinese imperial court. The envoy brought to the court the eggs of a great bird (probably of an ostrich) and jugglers from Li-hien 黎軒 (Alexandria)... At that time (105 B.C.) the emperor set out on a journey to inspect the country under his rule in the eastern coast region and took with him all the guests from the foreign countries... Then they were shown fine wrestling contests, theatre performances and other wonderful things... From that time on, the art of theatre performances started to develop quickly; from year to year they increased in number and changed in forms..."[23].

It would be possible to cite more examples corroborating the theory of a foreign origin for the acrobatic displays. I think, however, that what has been said above will suffice to prove our thesis.

Thus, the acrobatic, juggling and athletic displays appeared in the programme of the *pai-hi* performances only in the middle of the Western Han period, and probably all of them were of foreign origin.

The fourth group of the *pai-hi* shows has been defined as singing, dancing, and musical performances. It is obvious that some elements of this category were also included in other forms of the *pai-hi* displays; dancing and music sometimes accompanied the shows and parades of animals (the first group of plays); dancing was also an element in some acrobatic shows. But in the fourth group singing, dancing and music played the most important part. The plays belonging to this group, although of early origin, do not seem to have been very numerous, at least according to the descriptions of the *pai-hi* performances in C h a n g H e n g ' s and L i Y u ' s prose-poems. It is possible that in the eyes of the poets the plays of this group were very much alike, so that their different forms were not discerned in the descriptions of them. C h a n g H e n g says about this group of performances: "Immortals and fairies gather; Nü-ying and O-huang (the daughters of the legendary emperor T'ang Yao) take their seats and intone the song; their voices sound clearly and distinctly, the melody vibrating in the air. (The immortal sage) Hung Yai stands in front of them and holding in his hand a baton adorned with feathers conducts the orchestra. His dress is made of glistening feathers".

---

[22] S ï - m a T s'i e n, *Shï-ki, Ta-yüan chuan* (T a k i g a w a K a m e t a r ō's ed., reprint, Peking 1955), 123, 28—29.

[23] The reader can also consult the translation of the whole *Chapter on Western Regions* in Н. Я. Бичурин, *Собрание сведений о народах обитавших в Средней Азии в древние времена*, Moscow 1950; vol. II, pp. 160—161.

Li Yu is even less informative in this respect than Chang Heng. He writes: 方曲既設逍遙俯仰節以鞞鼓 "Then the tunes from various regions are played, the dancers lightly bow and raise their bodies in a dance, the rhythm is beaten on small waist-drums".

The Yi-nan tomb reliefs represent the arrangement of musicians in the old Chinese music-band (Plate II, III). There are seventeen musicians playing. The most important group of instruments is that of the percussion instruments. Eight musicians, that is nearly a half of the whole band, beat the various percussion instruments. In the first row we see five musicians beating small drums. Nearby there is a man beating a big drum and in the rear two musicians play the *pien-k'ing* 編磬 and the *pien-chung* 編鐘 instruments. The second and the third row, except for the *cheng* 箏 player, are reserved for the wind instruments. We see there a *hün* 塤 'ocarina', *pai-siao* 排簫 'row-flutes', *sheng* 笙 'ocarina', and some other wind instruments.

Such a composition of the orchestra accompanying the *pai-hi* performances sheds light on the origin of the performances belonging to the fourth group. The existence of numerous percussion instruments, especially of the *pien-k'ing* and *pien-chung* class, points to a connection of this group of the *pai-hi* performances with the ritual ceremonies of the Chou court. This also refers to other instruments, such as the earthen ocarinas (*hün*), *pai-siao* (flutes), *cheng*; all of them had been already in use at the court of the Chou kings[24].

Similarly, the persons taking part in the song-and-music performances described by Chang Heng, namely the sisters Nü-ying and O-huang as well as the legendary conductor Hung Yai, are well-known personages of Chinese legendary antiquity. This also corroborates the thesis of a purely Chinese and relatively early origin of the performances belonging to the fourth group.

The most interesting plays included in the *pai-hi* programme and very carefully studied by all scholars investigating the origin and development of Chinese theatre belong to the fifth group, i.e. dramatic performances. It is true that they contain elements taken from the other performances described above, or perhaps they were performed as a kind of wrestling or dance without a single word enuntiated, but what distinguishes them from those other performances, is the dramatic plot they are based upon. Such performances can be considered the embryo of the Chinese theatre.

Chang Heng in his *West. Capital* describes the following play which can be included in this group: "[He] draws [lines] on the ground [and they change and] become a rivulet that flows down from the [river] Wei to the [river] King. He, Huang-kung of Tung-hai, with his scarlet sword pronounces some conjuring formulas, [but

[24] In connection with the antiquity of Chinese musical instruments I think it useful to refer the reader to the book by Yang Yin-liu 楊蔭瀏 *Chung-kuo yin-yüe shi-k'ang* 中國音樂史綱, Shanghai 1953, 342 pp. On pages 50—54 of this book there is a list of instrunents used in the period of Chou.

in spite of this) a white tiger sits on his back, crushing him. Huang-kung will die, there is nothing that can save him. The man who carries evil in his heart and is gnawed by internal insanity, will not escape his fate".

The plot about Huang-kung of Tung-hai must have been very widely known in the Han period, so that it could be written up as a story some centuries later in *Si-king tsa-ki*[25], an anthology of old anecdotes. The story of Huang-kung preserved there runs as follows: 余所知有鞠道龍善爲幼術向余說古昔事有東海人黃公少嘗爲術能制蛇御虎佩赤金刀以絳繒束髮立興雲霧坐成山河及衰老氣力羸憊飲酒過度不能復行其術秦末有白虎見於東海黃公乃以赤刀往厭之術既不行遂爲虎所殺三輔人俗用以爲戲漢武帝亦取以为角抵之戲焉. "This is what I know from an expert in conjuring and magic art, a certain Ts'ü Tao-lung who told me old stories. [He said] that there was a man of Tung-hai [who was called] Huang-kung. From his youth he devoted himself to the art of sorcery. [Afterwards he] could tame snakes and ride tigers. A gold scarlet sword hung at his belt, his hair was bound with red silk ribbon. When he stood up, he produced clouds and fog; when sitting, he created mountains and rivers. When old age came and his body lost its strength and became limp, he gave himself up to drinking wine in excess, and thus he could not again effectively practise his conjuring art. At the end of the Ts'in dynasty a white tiger appeared in Tung-hai. Then Huang-kung with his scarlet sword went to repress it, but the conjuring art of Huang-kung was gone, and therefore he was killed by the white tiger. The people of the San-fu region (the centre of the present Shensi province) made use of this story to compose a theatre play. The emperor Wu of the Han dynasty also utilised it in a play of the *kiao-ti-hi* style".

The identity of these two themes is doubtless. They existed in two different forms, and (as very rarely happens) the theatrical form supplied the plot for the literary form. The story of Huang-kung was probably the first story staged in the history of the Chinese theatre. Plays belonging to the fifth group appear very rarely indeed at this time. There were perhaps some other performances belonging to this group, but because of lack of more satisfactory materials I shall have to limit myself to this one example of dramatic representation.

The above analysis shows the full complexity of the early Chinese theatrical performances. A similar complexity is also to be seen in modern performances of the classical operas.

The *pai-hi* performances have up to now been rather neglected by the historians of the Chinese theatre. A detailed analysis of those performances may prove to be very helpful for the full understanding of the birth and development of the Chinese theatre and even of its drama.

---

[25] *Si-king tsa-ki* 西京雜記, cp. Sï-pu ts'ung-k'an ed., 3. Ia.

To make the picture of the Han theatre more complete, we should devote some place to a description of the buildings, stage, audience, décor, and other accesories of the Han *pai-hi* performances.

The performances were usually held in front of the so-called *kuan* 觀 (tower). In Ch'ang-an (cp. Chang Heng's *West. Capital*) as well as in Lo-yang (cp. Li Yu's *P'ing-lo*) the performances took place in the neighbourhood of the P'ing-lo tower. It is a very interesting fact that the *kuan* where the shows took place had identical names in both capitals. This suggests that P'ing-lo kuan was the name of the place where the *pai-hi* were performed. Unfortunately we cannot find any remark on the *pai-hi* performances being held in other cities (the Han tomb reliefs make no reference to the localities where the shows took place). This was probably due to the fact that the performances were connected with the imperial court, as they very often were given in honour of foreign guests. Thus it may be assumed that the term *p'ing-lo kuan* 平樂觀 at that time denoted a theatre-place.

The places where the performances were held were usually situated on the outskirts of the capital, outside the city walls. There was no stage at all, and the shows were given on a wide open arena. Almost precisely as with the old Greek theatre, the stage, although of much greater dimensions, was situated in the middle, below the seats for the audience, which towered around it. The arena used as a stage was usually surrounded by three kinds of seats, from which the performance could be watched. The seats were called: *kuan* 觀 (a tower) *chang* 帳 (a screen, tent) and *t'an* 壇 (a terrace).

The décor and the technical tricks used in the performances would require a separate and thorough study. Here I want only to point to well-known facts, since it is but rarely that scholars interested in the development of the Chinese theatre pay any attention to those matters.

The descriptions of the *pai-hi* performances in Han literature contain many references to those aspects of the shows. If necessary the spectators could behold on the arena: "lofty peaks of the holy mountain Hua and numerous hills covered with green plants. Everywhere would grow divine trees and animated plants with red fruits. Then the clouds would gather and snow-flakes begin to drift in the air, at first very scarce and small and then heavy and thick. High in the air there were towering numerous pavilions and terraces. Men throwing down big stones imitated thunders. When the number of thrown stones increased, the sound of the thunder would become louder and louder and recall the authority and might of Heaven. Then a holy mountain would appear, lofty in its shape. Fine is its view from behind. Suddenly the strange monster Han-li would open widely its jaws and transform itself into a fairy-chariot, pulled by four beautiful deer and covered with a flowery baldachin made of nine irises. Then clouds and fog would come down and it would be completely dark..." (quoted from Chang Heng's *West. Capital*).

As we can see, various technical tricks were already known in the Chinese theatre at the beginning of our era. The décor was moved to the arena when the spectators were already in their seats, as was done not so long ago in the Chinese classical opera.

Something is needed to explain how such massive and bulky objects as mountains and lawns covered with plants could be quickly moved on to the stage. The Chinese performed all this by means of chariots, which were variously designated according to their specific function.

Thus we meet with at least two kinds of chariots, *ch'e* 車. There was the *hi-ch'e* 戲車 or 'theatre-chariot', described above. It was used by the acrobats to demonstrate their skill and abilities. The other form was *sien-ch'e* 仙車 or 'fairy-chariot'. It was usually drawn by horses disguised to resemble deer or any other wild animals, and on its platform a group of actors dressed as fairies and immortals played on various instruments and sang songs. These two forms of chariots were already depicted in the above descriptions of numerous shows forming the programme of the *pai-hi* performances.

There was also a third type of chariot, namely the so-called *shan-ch'e* 山車 or 'mountain-chariot'. The term applied to this may be a corruption of *sien-ch'e*, or it could denote a special sort of chariot with a spacious platform on which various parts of décor could be moved on the arena.

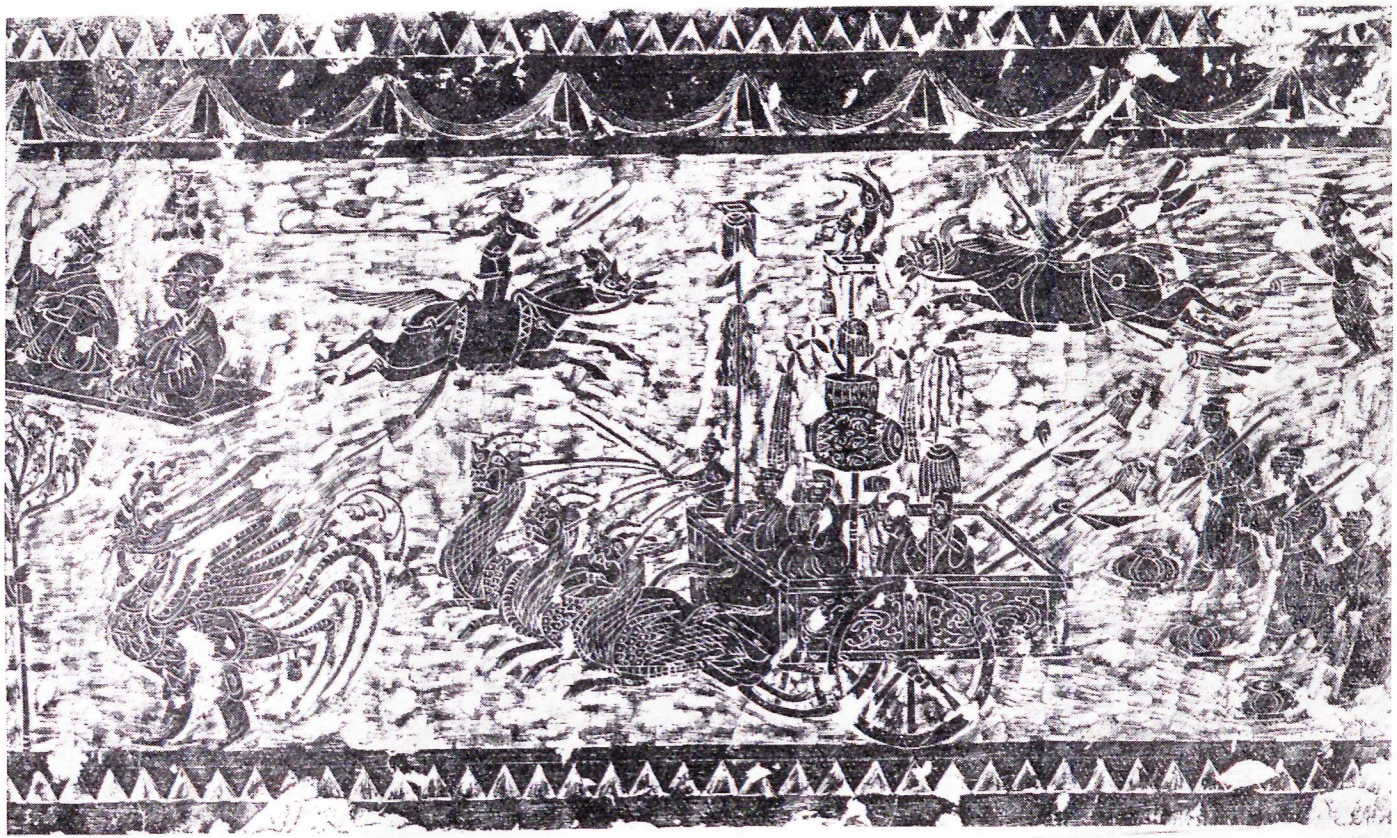
The methods of producing snow-flakes, fog and clouds are still unexplained. There are two possibilities as far as snow is concerned: either it was thrown down from the tops of the buildings, or from the chariots. The snowflakes could have been made of scraps of white silk. The clouds and fog were probably emitted by machines mounted on chariots.

To imitate the sound of thunder, big stones and pieces of rock were gathered at the tops of towers, and then either were thrown down or rolled about on the upper terraces.

It would be possible to enumerate many other instances of *pai-hi* tricks. However, I do not intend to enter upon a description of details, but rather to describe briefly the most important aspects of the *pai-hi* performances.

I fully realise that many problems, such as the methods of recruiting and training the actors, the domestication of animals, and many others, have not even been mentioned in this short paper. It would also be of some interest to outline the development from the *pai-hi* theatre to the later (including the contemporary) forms of the Chinese classical theatre. There is no doubt that many analogies and parallels could be established.

To sum up, we may say that fairly well developed and variegated forms of performances of different origin existed in China as early as the Han period. Moreover, these early forms are undeniably to be considered as the beginnings of the Chinese classical theatre.



圖二十七　中室東面石刻（右部）

PLATE I

PLATE II