2. Superstitions and Customs of the Chinese

*(Continued from Vol. II. Page 360.)*

“Those who run races in the dragon boat; or those who go to see plays on the religious festivals of the Heathen—Sin.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The above festival[[2]](#footnote-2) is observed during the fifth moon, in honor of Keŭh-yuen, a virtuous statesman, who drowned himself during the Dynasty Chow, (about 2300 years since,) to avoid the displeasure of his sovereign. As soon as the people heard of his death, the boatmen flew in every direction in search of his corpse. On this festival there is offered to the dragon (the god of the rivers,) rice, &c. morning and evening. The boats used, on this occasion, are very long, and some pull from eight to one hundred oars. It is an holiday at the public offices; and the festival is kept on all the rivers of the empire. After the races, the boats (on account of their length) are buried in the mud, where they remain till the following year. This festival is principally kept up by the different public officers, who frequently stake considerable sums of their boats.—The plays in China are mostly performed on religious occasions, either in honor of their gods, or the anniversary of their temples, as well as on their annual festivals. Before they commence their plays, the musicians go to the temples, where they play one or more tunes, when they bring away with them a small altar, with incense burning, place it on the stage, which is a temporary building of building of bamboo; where they again play a few tunes: this is done to invoke their gods to be present during their plays. These plays are generally performed in front of their temples. Once a year plays are performed in the market, when, as before mentioned, they bring their go is from the temples with music. This is highly esteemed by the Chinese, as the gods are supposed to preside over the affairs of the market, and to cause equity and justice in men’s dealings. After any calamity, as fire, &c. it is usual for the people in the neighbourhood to raise a sum for the performance of a set of plays, which is done as a mark of gratitude for the late mercies they have experienced. On other occasions, the tradesmen of the different callings, by turns, go from door to door to collect the yearly subscriptions, and decide, and not the priests, on the numbers of plays to be performed at each festival; as well as when temples shall be repaired or ornamented. The duty of the priests is merely to attend to reading prayers, &c. and not to secular concerns. They profess to be superior men, having renounced the world and all prospects of gain—and taken to a life of abstinence. Their appearance, however, often indicates, that they are any thing but superior men! being indolent and filthy in the extreme.

A set of plays are held for three or five successive days, during which they perform twice every day. They generally commence about two o’clock and continue till about five. In the evening, at seven, they again commence, when they continue till about eleven. The third rate players, which generally perform at Macao, are allowed one hundred dollars per day, exclusive of food, oil for lamps, &c. A company of players consist of from forty to fifty men. Country players and boys, whose principle performance consists in feats of agility, perform for only forty or fifty dollars per day. The first rate performers do not perform for less than one hundred and fifty dollars per day, exclusive of all expenses. There is an office at Canton for registering the different companies; and every company, on leaving the city, gives in a notice, intimating to what part they are going, by which means, letters on business, from any part of the province, are immediately attended to.

A list of the number of plays performed annually at Macao, will enable the reader to form some idea of the extent of theatrical performances in a province, or throughout the empire.

At the military, (or water-lily temple) during the 3d, 5th and 7th moon, twenty two plays are performed, which amount (independent of the expenses of fitting up the theatres) to Spanish Dollars 2200

Temple to the god of fire—(lately opened,) six days, 600

Ma-kŏ temple, (or the lady of the celestial chambers) during the 3d moon, eighteen or more plays, according to the number of European ships that arrive in the inner harbour of Macao. These plays are said to be defrayed by the Linguists, 2000

T’oo temple, (to the gods of the land) during the 2d moon, seven days 350

Temple for the universal redemption of orphan spirits, during the 11th moon, five days 500

At the Hoppo office, (in the market place) on the 2d of the 2d moon. On these occasions the government regulation is only twelve dollars per day for the whole company; which is allowed by the Mandarins. The managers frequently receive considerable presents. This national play is observed at all the public offices, on the same day, throughout the empire, four days 100

A-hwang-keae, seven days 300

Amounting (exclusive of the expenses of fitting up and preparing the stages) to, Spa. Dols. 6050

1. It may be necessary to remind the reader, that these extracts are taken from a Roman Catholic Chinese publication; and the notes and illustrations added by the author of the communication. Ed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Viz. of the dragon boat. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)