INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to provide an introduction to the dramatic works of Chu Yu-tun (1379–1439). Chu Yu-tun was probably China’s most important playwright of the fifteenth century. He certainly was the most prolific as he wrote no less than thirty-one tsâ-chû. As a member of the Ming imperial family, Chu Yu-tun was in a position to have all his plays printed during his lifetime and all these tsâ-chû have been preserved in their original edition. These plays well merit our attention, both for their intrinsic literary qualities and for the light they shed on the development of the genre. The dramatic form employed by Chu Yu-tun had experienced its golden age during the Yüan dynasty. Actually, tsâ-chû is often considered the representative literary genre of that dynasty, and tsâ-chû from later ages have suffered from relative neglect—western sinologists up to now have hardly written anything at all on Ming (1368–1644) or Ch’ing (1644–1911) tsâ-chû. In the case of Chu Yu-tun this neglect is certainly not justified, as he was not only a very prolific, but also a proficient and, at times, excellent playwright.

Chu Yu-tun’s productivity creates its own problems. As this book is the first western language monograph on the subject, I have preferred to be complete in the coverage of his works. For each tsâ-chû I discuss, I provide as a rule a scene by scene summary, because I do not only want to present an abstract of its story, but also wish to bring out its construction as a play. Wherever possible, I try to locate those elements that may have contributed to the effectiveness of the text in performance. Depending upon the nature of the play, I either focus on the variety of pageantry, or on matters of plot and characterization. Especially in the latter case, I illustrate my argument by extracts in translation, which may also serve to demonstrate to some extent the qualities of the songs and prose-dialogues. Chu Yu-tun’s plays belong to a number of distinct subgenres of tsâ-chû, and I have therefore grouped his works together according to function and theme. Once this has been done and the plays have been arranged in chronological order (which is possible because most of his works carry either a preface or a colophon), it becomes clear how in each case he adapted the theatrical tradition he inherited. In the case of the deliverance play, Chu Yu-tun revolted against the established convention in order to make its contents fit its function. Searching for a perfect embodiment of the virtue of loyalty, he time and again tried his hand at the scholar and courtesan play. In his prefaces to the plays we encounter his reflections on this continuous experimentation with nearly all aspects of drama as he knew it, and I therefore amply quote from them. The discussion of each and every tsâ-chû by Chu Yu-tun means there is scarcely any space available for in-depth analysis of a few selected plays, and so the desire for completeness may well have resulted at times in superficiality, but I hope that my treatment will bring out
the internal coherence of Chu Yu-tun’s dramatic oeuvre and provide a context for the better appreciation of his finest works.

This is not a literary or intellectual biography of Chu Yu-tun. Chu Yu-tun’s collected san-ch’ü have been preserved, as have a number of his shih-poems, but this aspect of his literary output will not be considered in this study. I also lack the specialist knowledge to place the intellectual content of his plays in the context of the ideological history of the first century of the Ming dynasty. For the political history of his period the reader may now be referred to Edward L. Dreyer’s Early Ming China. For these various reasons the first chapter on “Life and Times” has been kept as short as possible. The second chapter “Play and Text” is a preliminary attempt to assess the position of Chu Yu-tun’s oeuvre in the development of tsa-chü; it contains many materials which are superfluous to the specialist in the field of Chinese theater history but for other readers may be helpful for a fuller understanding of the remaining chapters. The main body of this study is constituted by the chapters three to eight, which are devoted to the systematic description of Chu Yu-tun’s dramatic oeuvre. To bring out its characteristics still more clearly, I have added a chapter entitled “The Plays of Chia Chung-ming”, which is devoted to the works of the court playwrights who immediately preceded Chu Yu-tun. Those who prefer to do so may, of course, read this chapter following chapter two and before proceeding to the description of Chu Yu-tun’s oeuvre. A final chapter is devoted to the evolution of Chu Yu-tun’s critical fate in later ages. Matters of modes and suites I have relegated to an Appendix.