



Wilt L. Idema, *The Metamorphosis of Tianxianpei: Local Opera Under the Revolution (1949–1956)*

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Notes, bibliography, index. Hardcover, \$52.00. ISBN 978-962-996-593-8.

TIANXIAN PEI, which Idema translates as *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, is one of the key dramas from the Huangmei opera tradition, which took form in the mid-eighteenth century around the Anqing area of Anhui, central-eastern China. Its story concerns the adventures of an immortal princess who steals away from heaven to try out life on earth alongside the mortal Dong Yong. He, meanwhile, has sold himself into indentured servitude to pay for his father's burial, and the couple undergo various vicissitudes together prior to the immortal's return to the heavens. Seen in this way, a drama about the relationship between a pampered member of the immortal ruling classes and a classic symbol of Confucian filial responsibility might not seem well-suited to the needs of those seeking to establish a new pathway for revolutionary cultural life immediately after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. And while Huangmei opera was certainly well enough liked by rural folk in its home region, it was hardly one of China's better known or most richly endowed dramatic genres. Indeed, in the early 1950s it was only recently urbanized, and its musical and other expressive resources remained relatively constrained as compared to those of better-known genres like Beijing opera and Cantonese opera that were already widely performed across the nation and even overseas.

Idema's richly detailed account addresses this seeming conundrum, charting exactly how this unlikely opera became a prominent part of the PRC's cultural reality during its early years. He provides a full introduction to the history of the play, the

Huangmei opera tradition, the often fraught process of theater reform, and the key personnel involved both in remaking the opera onstage and in shaping and disseminating a series of film adaptations that rapidly spread *Tianxian pei* across the new nation and beyond (chapter 1). Idema then looks in more depth at the rewriting process, providing translated scenes from pre-1949 versions of the drama (chapters 2 and 3 respectively). At times, I hoped to see the texts in their original Chinese too so that I could reflect in a more grounded way on the style and flavor of the original and on the act of translation itself.

In chapter 4, Idema provides a translation of a 1955 version of the text of the opera, and he completes the book with a fascinating set of translations of numerous contemporaneous documents by those involved in the reform of opera, those responsible for creating film versions, and a range of those who critiqued early versions of the work, among them notorious secret police chief Kang Sheng. It turns out that Kang, known also to musicologists for his behind-the-scenes support of the traditional seven-stringed zither *qin*, much preferred more traditional performances; his review placed *Tianxian pei* into the category of “revised bastard mongrels” (266).

The book as a whole forms a significant and richly presented case study in the reform of China’s traditional opera, necessarily a major theme in writing on Chinese drama and on twentieth-century cultural life more generally. The links to the wider sociopolitical sphere are well drawn, and so the topic is eminently approachable by newcomers to Chinese opera. It is also extremely welcome insofar as Huangmei opera has not been written about as much in Western languages as compared to some of China’s other opera traditions. Idema’s book thus functions as an effective introduction to that genre.

If I still have an area of discomfort after reading this study, it is one that applies to the field rather than specifically to Idema’s new contribution. I believe we collectively share a tendency to treat the lyrics as a privileged component of the opera and, at times, as an apparent whole in themselves, rather as if the lyrics are the opera. But Chinese opera is far from being a form of literature. It’s fundamentally designed not to be read but to be seen and heard in performance. How actors sing, move, become illuminated by stage lighting, or dress, sigh, and gesture is potentially as much a contribution to the building of meaningful expressive communication as the sung or spoken text. A full account of the metamorphosis of a Chinese opera, then, would be one that starts from the assumption that such a topic inevitably incorporates the opera’s music; its costuming and makeup; props, scenery lighting design; movement, stance, and gesture. Without disregarding analyses that consider a single component, as here, we also need to work toward studies that effectively confront Chinese opera’s inherent performativity and its multi-sensorial, artistic actuality.

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