

The Metamorphosis of Tianxian Pei: Local Opera under the Revolution (1949–1956)

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This compelling and multifaceted book introduces audiences to *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* (*Tianxian pei*), a local opera that is as universally known in China as it is unknown in the West. Wilt Idema uses the reform of the traditional version of the opera as an example of the complex transformation of dramatic works during the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Unlike the well-documented creation of *The White-Haired Girl* and other “revolutionary classics,” the reform of traditional operas into Party-friendly shows has largely escaped systematic analysis. Idema's text offers much to scholars interested in traditional opera and its reform under the Chinese Communist Party. While Idema sees his book as divided into two discrete parts, I believe it is best conceptualized in three sections. In the first, Idema provides an in-depth analysis of the reform of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, tracing the show's evolution from an obscure local opera to a truly national phenomenon. The second part of the text consists of translations of the original and revised versions of the opera. Translations of essays and letters concerning the revised operas, mostly contemporary to the revision, provide the final third of the book.

Idema's translations of the original and revised operas represent an excellent source for literary scholars and are a valuable resource in their own right. Highly readable but still maintaining the essence of the original texts, these translations benefit from a wealth of contextual explanation in Idema's footnotes. These explanations are especially important for the original version of the opera, which is filled with obscure allusions to classical tales. The translated essays and letters concerning the opera's revision are a diverse set filled with unexpected finds; the passionate defence of traditional opera penned by Kang Sheng, now infamous for his role in the Cultural Revolution, is particularly enlightening.

While Idema's translations are superb, it is his careful recreation of the opera's revision in the first part of the text that makes this book required reading for scholars of culture under the PRC state. As was typical during this era, the revision of the opera was a complex process with multiple artists engaging in several rounds of collaborative work. Tracking the evolution of the opera is a prime example of the true detective work that is so often required of scholars working on PRC history. After a quick run-down of the opera Idema discusses theatre reform in the early 1950s, stressing how Zhou Yang and other Party cultural leaders threw themselves behind the reform of traditional opera. As Zhou argued, shows based on myths and true to the historical record were to be welcomed, while shows that promoted superstition or strayed too far from reality in the service of political messages should be banned. Here Idema reminds readers against a monolithic view of theatre reform: reformers typically wished to improve all aspects of theatre, and were not only interested in the political uses of culture.

Following Zhou Enlai's call for the reform of drama in 1951, the Party dispatched cultural workers to reorganize drama troupes, a process that left no form of traditional opera untouched. In the case of the Huangmei opera *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, Idema details how the initial revision of this largely unknown traditional opera unexpectedly became a smash hit in Shanghai, leading to a film version and stardom for its leading actors. Reforming the opera was no simple matter, and so

Idema has to unravel multiple rewrites by multiple authors in order to recreate the revision process, his task further complicated by the fact that these authors make conflicting claims over the show's authorship. During their revisions, the show's authors made a number of changes to fit the PRC's emerging political culture. The characters of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, for example, were recast to fit the new class-based roles that had been offered to the regime's rural citizens. Clearly influenced by *The White-Haired Girl* and other land reform operas, the show's hero became a poor peasant, while the moneylender was transformed into a villainous landlord.

Sadly and predictably, the success of the opera and its film did not bode well for its creators and actors in later years. The film's director, for example, committed suicide after being labelled a Rightist in 1957; the show's leading lady would do the same in 1968 after it was labelled a "poisonous weed." And although the show re-emerged after the Cultural Revolution, it is unclear what its future holds. In the meantime, Idema is to be commended for bringing both the traditional and revolutionary versions of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* to the attention of Western audiences, as well as elucidating how a traditional opera was transformed into a revolutionary classic.

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