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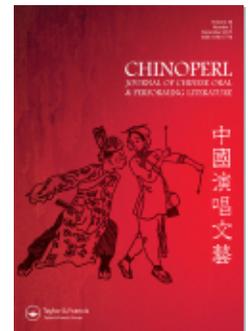
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*The Metamorphosis of Tianxian pei : Local Opera under the Revolution (1949–1956)* by Wilt L. Idema (review)

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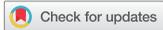
The total number of these works, which by now easily runs over twenty volumes, is stunning, but also raises the question who these countless translations are intended for and what purpose these translations actually serve. In the case of *The Resurrected Skeleton*, for instance, most scholars of Chinese literature and philosophy will already know the *Zhuangzi* tale, if not by reading the original text then through Stephen Owen's *Remembrances*.<sup>3</sup> As such one might wonder: is being familiar with the singular, classical text not enough?

Idema's answer to this question is obviously no and it is worth reminding ourselves of why this is so. By insisting on translating text after text and offering us not only a single, tasteful classic but also the multiple, sometimes less elevated variations upon a classic, Idema invites us to investigate the Chinese tradition, not simply as a series of unique canonical texts written by the literati few, but rather as an immensely variegated, often riotous, and at times delightfully scatological chorus of different voices. As such, a volume such as *The Resurrected Skeleton* invites us not to abandon the idea of a shared tradition, but rather, by exploring the multiple generic and ideological variations upon a single, brief anecdote, it asks us to discern the incredibly diversity that together constitute a multiplicity of Chinese traditions.

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*The Metamorphosis of Tianxian pei: Local Opera under the Revolution (1949-1956)*. By Wilt L. Idema. 356 pp. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2014. Cloth \$52.00.

Since its consolidation in Yan'an in the early 1940s, the Chinese Communist Party has tapped into a rich repertoire of popular stories, imbuing familiar characters and narratives with new meanings in order to create a revolutionary popular culture. The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 led to remarkable transformations in the theatrical and cinematic representations of human relations. These changes, which involved all aspects of performance, ranging from acting and music to characterization and plot, and affected all regional forms of traditional opera, were neither abrupt nor entirely new. The socialist state, however, went further than preceding regimes in seeking to not only transform repertoires and acting conventions, but also to change the process through which theatrical texts were revised, as well as the ways in which the work of actors and playwrights was organized.

*The Metamorphosis of Tianxian pei: Local Opera under the Revolution (1949-1956)* traces the rewriting of one immensely popular play in the Huangmei regional style, *Tianxian pei* 天仙配, or *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, in the early years of the People's Republic. It details how an old tale of filial piety

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 33–50.

became a play—and then a movie—that celebrated the struggle for free love, earning its place as one of the most memorable romances of New China. The first two chapters offer an account of the historical antecedents of the play and introduce Huangmei opera (*Huangmei xi* 黄梅戲; a local form popular in the Anqing countryside, Anhui province, since the late eighteenth century), as well as the controversial process of opera reform. The remaining three chapters consist of delightful, often witty translations of traditional and revised versions of the script (Chapters Three and Four) and of the essays responding to its stage and film adaptations (Chapter Five). The case-study approach proves extremely fruitful in illuminating the intricate history of 1950s Chinese theater reform and the contributions of actors, playwrights, directors, cadres, and critics to this collaborative enterprise. The translated scripts vividly show which elements endured and which were deemed inappropriate to the demands of the present. Statements by various theater professionals, some published in the 1950s and some released decades later, offer a surprisingly wide range of opinions.

The cultural history of post-1949 Chinese performing arts is still being written, as scholars are reconstructing the rich diversity of local practices and the often contrasting agendas of artists, critics, and cadres working on the ground. Idema argues that the changes the play underwent were motivated by a variety of factors, including audiences' desire for novelty, the influence of other media, and the development of new acting conventions, musical styles, and singing practices. In the author's words,

even if politics were clearly in command, we would be belittling the theater-reform movement if we only focused on its political and ideological aspects. The theater reform also aimed to do away with all 'backward' aspects of traditional theater, to ennoble it, and to make it more beautiful than ever. (p. 13)

Moreover,

[m]any changes are made merely to follow the fashion of the times. ... Even without any explicit policy of theater reform, those versions of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* that were intended for performance on the modern urban stage would have been shortened considerably, would have enlarged the orchestra and diversified the musical repertoire, would have embellished the stage with more or less elaborate scenery, and would have enlivened the action with dances and special effects. ... After all, irrespective of political persuasion, practically all Chinese were eager to modernize their culture, or at least they were eager to benefit from all the amenities of modern technology and fashion while enjoying those selected aspects of traditional culture that they wanted to continue to enjoy. (pp. 65–66)

Filial piety, as Idema reminds us, was singled out as the root of all of China's social evils in the early twentieth century, and constituted one of the ideologically "backward" aspects of traditional opera that ought to be sanitized. In the revolutionary discourse of the time, filial piety meant the obligation to obey parents, take care of them, and arrange funerary rituals after their death—even at the cost of one's

own health, freedom, and life. Not only that: filial piety had also come to epitomize stifling reverence for the authorities of old, hence lack of creativity and inability to foster innovation. Filial piety entailed, among other things, marrying the person chosen by one's parents. The attack on this core traditional value, therefore, went hand in hand with the criticism of arranged marriage and the celebration of free love.

The identification of marriage and heterosexual romantic love, it bears reminding, is relatively novel not only to China but also to other places in the world. In 1950s China, however, love-based marriage became a central revolutionary value celebrated and propagated through popular stories, plays, and film. Suffice to think, for instance, of the 1950 film version of another famous drama, *Baimao nü* 白毛女 or the *White-Haired Girl*, in which the marriage between the protagonist and the PLA soldier is more central to the narrative than in any other version of the story. The 1955 revised script of *Tianxian pei* translated in Chapter Four includes sentences such as “Darling, when you and I go back home as husband and wife, that is the happiest event in the world” (pp. 170–71) and “‘The husband will plow, his wife will weave’: joy without limit!” (p. 180), suggesting a vision of happiness that few would associate with socialist China.

The metamorphosis from a play on filial piety to one on free love is discussed in Chapter One (“Introduction: The Legend, the Play, and the Movie”), which traces the narrative core of *Tianxian pei* back to stone carvings of the second century AD depicting the protagonist Dong Yong as a model filial son. Later poems, short prose accounts, ballads, *zaju*, and *chuanqi* plays, albeit different in several details and especially in the ending, share a similar plot: a student too poor to pay for his father's burial sells himself to a nobleman, Old Master Fu, trading three years of indented labor for silver and cloth. The Heavenly Emperor, deeply moved by such a paragon of filial piety, sends his daughter, Seventh Sister (the Weaving Maiden), to help to free him from the bondage. She strikes a deal with Master Fu: if she can weave ten rolls of brocade, Dong Yong's time of service will be reduced to one hundred days. With the help of her heavenly sisters, she succeeds at the task and after one hundred days, they are free to depart from Master Fu's house. In spite of their reciprocal affection, Seventh Sister has to return to heaven. Dong Yong presents the brocade she has woven to the court, receives a high title as a reward, and ends up marrying Master Fu's daughter. In the traditional versions, Dong Yong obtains everything a man could desire, even a son that Seventh Sister delivers to him, while the latter returns to her immortal life.<sup>1</sup>

What changed the most in the 1950s theatrical and film scripts discussed in Chapter Two (“Rewriting the Play”) were the identity of the protagonists and their motivations for action. Dong Yong is no longer a student but a poor peasant. Master Fu is no longer reasonable and well-meaning but rather an exploitative villain. Most mentions of filial piety are deleted, and any suggestion of harmony between the nobleman and the laborers replaced by class antagonism. The love between Seventh Sister and Dong Yong comes to play a central role. Overall, the focus shifts from Dong Yong to Seventh Sister, “who becomes a rebellious daughter and loving wife and who sheds all traces of

<sup>1</sup> For more on the traditional versions of this legend, see Wilt L. Idema, *Filial Piety and Its Divine Rewards: The Legend of Dong Yong and Weaving Maiden with Related Texts* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009).

her obedience and high status to become a vivacious and inventive peasant girl” (p. 44). Seventh Sister almost appears as the epitome of the “modern woman”—free, strong, and self-determined, acting out of her own initiative and feelings. Most crucially, she descends to earth no longer because she is told to do so by her father, but rather because of her empathic love for Dong Yong. Moved by the peasant’s poverty, she steps out of her sheltered world to help him, embodying a notion of romantic love centered on solidarity and compassion. The epilogue of the play was at the center of extensive debates, and several possibilities for a happy ending were proposed and eventually dropped. In the 1955 version translated here, the Jade Emperor threatens to hurt Dong Yong if his daughter does not return to Heaven and she follows his order, not out of mere obedience to her father but due to her desire to protect her husband from his wrath.

The theater reform of the 1950s was but one episode in a long history of adaptation and rewriting, for

[w]hat distinguished the rewriting of plays in the Communist areas (and after 1949 throughout Mainland China) from earlier attempts at rewriting was not the desire to modernize traditional theater by infusing it with a new message, but the strict control imposed from above and the desire not only to rewrite the content but also to reeducate the actors and to reform all aspects of the organization of the theater. (pp. 33–34)

Among the debates that followed new performances of the play, especially noteworthy is a 1951 discussion on whether adapted plays should be faithful to the reality of the times in which they are set or rather reflect current policies. Could references to contemporary campaigns such as “Resist America, Aid Korea, and Safeguard World Peace” be introduced in the performance of old plays? (p. 40). Very soon the view prevailed that adapting old plays for new times did not mean to reinterpret old stories in contemporary terms. Zhou Yang, who was at the head of the Central Propaganda Department, especially deplored adaptations that discounted the gap between the time in which the story was set and the historical present, condemning as inappropriate anachronisms all references to current events. New rewritings, in his view, ought to reflect historical reality—that is to say, the CCP’s reading of the historical past. As far as *Tianxian pei* was concerned, the revised play had to reflect the aspirations of the peasant masses in feudal China. Theater reform was thus presented as an effort to restore traditional plays to their pristine forms. Since filial piety was not considered as an original expression of the common people but rather a later distortion by the ruling classes aimed at instilling submission in the poor, it had to be expunged and replaced by solidarity among the downtrodden. Post-1949 adaptations, in short, aimed at stripping the play down to an allegedly original form that reflected the aspirations and feelings of the people.

A variety of other issues are touched upon in this rich chapter and further illustrated by the translated texts, such as the relation between script and performance, the emergence of new styles of acting and a new emphasis on movement and dance, the relations between directors and actors and their changing roles, and the ways in which the movie released in 1956 affected later performances. Performance is ephemeral by definition. Only isolated songs and scripts of the most frequently performed scenes survive of the pre-twentieth-century adaptations (pp. 41–43), and

even twentieth-century scripts merely preserve incomplete traces of the actual staging (p. 69). Details concerning changes in performance, scenery, costume, choreography, and singing emerge from the writings of the lead performers Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang as well as those of directors Qiao Zhiliang and Li Liping, all translated in Chapter Five. In an essay published in 1956, Yan Fengying recounts how she learned to perform *Seventh Sister* as a “village girl” in a way that was both “verisimilar” and “beautiful” (p. 209), and how she strove to develop “marital feelings” for her fellow actor Wang Shaofang so as to perform them more convincingly on stage (p. 211). Published reminiscences by the directors emphasize that they urged actors to rely more on experience and real-life observation than on existing conventions (pp. 57, 222–23). Both the actors’ and the directors’ emphasis on character identification and expression of inner emotions reflect the prestige enjoyed by the “Stanislavski method” in the 1950s (p. 58).<sup>2</sup>

The 1956 movie, based on a script by Sang Hu and directed by Shi Hui, was not meant to be a documentary of a performance but rather a creative adaptation for a different medium. One of the most successful instances in the genre of “operatic films,” it spurred new revisions of the play and some of its features were incorporated into the 1956 stage production. These changes, however, were later criticized as a “failed attempt at ‘moviefication’,” (p. 64) and were undone in the 1957 version, which became the standard script. Nonetheless, new revisions continued to be introduced in later performances and considerable differences continued to exist between staged and printed versions, a fluidity that was perhaps more prominent in such minor regional genres as Huangmei opera than in more prestigious forms such as *Jingju* 京劇 (a.k.a., Peking opera) or *Kunqu* 崑曲.

If the pleasure of past performances is inevitably lost, much is offered in this book that makes up for it. It is nothing but sheer pleasure to read the brilliant translations of the scripts, with their alternating of comical moments with lyrical and tragic ones, the vivid portrait of the immortals’ longing for the mortal world and the witty exchanges between the protagonists, including a tree that can speak. The essays translated in the last chapter provide insights into the considerations that shaped decisions at various steps of the revisions, shedding new light on the complexities of 1950s Chinese performing culture. One striking aspect of these writings is that they detail the work on the ground pointing out both the qualities and the inadequacies of specific performances, scenes, and gestures. The self-critical assessments by playwrights, directors, and actors, and the critics’ reactions help clarify what was considered a “good performance” at the time.

*The Metamorphosis of Tianxian pei* shows the inadequacy of any monolithic model of an all-powerful Communist Party in control of cultural production, detailing the efforts of professionals who were devoted to their trade and, proceeding by trial and error, sought to improve their work and capture new audiences. The combination of textual history and detailed discussion of the process

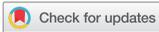
<sup>2</sup> On the impact of Stanislavski’s method on Chinese theater, also see Anne Rebull, “Locating Theatricality on Stage and Screen: Rescuing Performance Practice and the Phenomenon of *Fifteen Strings of Cash* (*Shiwu guan*; 1956),” *CHINOPERL: Journal of Chinese Oral and Performing Literature* 36.1 (July 2017): 46–71.

of revision followed by translations and generous bibliographical notes makes this book not only an ideal tool for classroom use but also a must-read for anyone interested in Chinese theater, literature, and history, specialists and non-specialists alike. The book opens up the way for new histories of gesture and acting conventions in local opera that similar case studies will hopefully address further. Given its main focus on the textual renditions of the script and its illuminating discussions of acting conventions and choreography, the book provides an excellent basis and point of departure for studies exploring the musical aspects of the opera, as well as the more medium-specific aspects of the film.

Professor Idema is the author of an impressive range of academic studies and annotated translations. As mentioned in the Preface, he began his career as a student of modern and contemporary Chinese literature focusing on the reform of professional storytelling in early 1950s PRC, but soon afterwards his interests shifted toward traditional vernacular literature. His work testifies to how fruitful it is to think across conventional periodization, shedding light on how and why the stories of the past endure and continue to matter in the present. *The Metamorphosis of Tianxian pei*, finally, makes a compelling case for translation: it shows that translation ought to be valorized even more by publishers and by academic institutions as a fundamental component of scholarship and knowledge production about Asia.

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*Ershi shiji xiqu gaige de sanda fanshi* 20 世紀戲曲改革的三大範式 (Three Paradigms of Reforming Traditional Theater in the Twentieth Century). By Li Wei 李偉. 407 pp. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014. Paper RMB 42.00.

Li Wei's *Ershi shiji xiqu gaige de sanda fanshi* 20 世紀戲曲改革的三大範式 (Three Paradigms of Reforming Traditional Theater in the Twentieth Century) makes a major contribution to the field of modern Chinese theater. It deserves to be read carefully by students and scholars of Chinese literature and culture worldwide. The book is published by Zhonghua shuju (China Books) in the prestigious book series *Zhonghua xijuxue* 中華戲劇學 (Chinese theater studies), edited by the renowned theater scholar Ye Changhai 葉長海.

Li Wei achieves an almost impossible task of systematically theorizing a truly complex range of activities usually lumped together under the umbrella term *xiqu gaige* 戲曲改革 (reforming traditional theater). Li's theory is that there are three paradigms for such reforms throughout twentieth-century China. The Mei Lanfang Paradigm, represented by Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961), Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904–1958), Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1875–1962), and Weng Ouhong 翁偶虹 (1908–1994), approaches traditional theater reform from the perspective of *Jingju* 京劇 (often translated inadequately as “Peking opera”) artists and traditional intellectuals and emphasizes technical conservation (*jishu shoucheng* 技術守成). The Tian Han Paradigm, represented by Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968),