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Local Opera under the Revolution (1949–1956)

Wilt L. Idema

The Chinese University Press

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Sha Tin, N.T., Hong Kong
Fax: +852 2603 7355
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Preface

This volume originated as a sequel to my 2009 work on Dong Yong, *Filial Piety and Its Divine Rewards*. Once I started looking into the modern stage adaptations of the legend of Dong Yong's meeting with an immortal, I was amazed by the number of available scripts, especially of the Huangmei Opera version of *Tianxian pei* (Married to a Heavenly Immortal). These scripts allowed me to follow in great detail the transformation of the play in the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The subsequent national and international success of the cinematic adaptation of the play had resulted in a considerable number of writings by the involved scriptwriters, actors, and directors that make it clear that the rewritten opera required a complete rethinking of both its staging and its performance. Together with the writings by contemporary critics, these works inform us, in great detail, about many of the issues involved in the refashioning of local opera in order to meet the requirements of the Communist Party's vision of China's socialist modernization in the early years of the People's Republic. This is a subject that is only now beginning to attract a growing number of scholars.

While I was pleasantly surprised by the number and the quality of writings about the play by those who were involved in its rewriting and performing, to my surprise I also noticed how little attention the play or the movie *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, despite the immense popularity in China, received in Western scholarship on China. Bringing together issues about the modern rejection of traditional morality, the reform of traditional opera in modern times, and the cruelty of the Revolution toward its own ardent supporters, *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* offers a unique window on the cultural history of China in the twentieth century.

Following a general introduction, this book consists of two parts. In the first part I present a detailed study of the process of revision of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* in the early 1950s, followed by full translations of both the traditional Huangmei Opera play and a representative edition of the revised play to allow the reader to evaluate both the nature and extent of the changes in the revision (some readers may prefer to read the translated plays before

they turn to the account of the process of revision). The second part presents a selection of contemporary articles by scriptwriters, directors, performers, and critics. These allow a detailed understanding of the meanings attached to many of these transformations and at the same time introduce a number of the technical and artistic issues in the performance, as perceived by those most directly involved.

By now almost everyone who was directly involved in the revision of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* and its performance in the 1950s has passed away, and I have made no attempt to track down the few survivors and interview them. Confronted by the richness of the materials that are readily available in print, I also have not engaged in local archival research. Fortunately, many of the participants in the revision of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* have been very open in some of the articles they wrote near the end of their lives. One important document that could have resurfaced from archival research, however, would be Sang Hu's original script for the cinematic adaptation. It is not known whether this original script survives, and if so, where it might be found.

An obvious defect of this study is my neglect of the musical aspects of the play. All contemporary observers, even the most critical, praise the appeal of its melodies. Unfortunately, I am completely unqualified to discuss this aspect of Huangmei Opera.

Wilt L. Idema
Leiden, January 2014

Acknowledgments

During my last several years teaching at Harvard I co-taught, with my colleague David Der-wei Wang, a so-called "core class" entitled "Old Tales for New Times: The Appropriation of Folktales in Modern and Contemporary China." In this class we looked both at the development of each of the Four Great Folktales in premodern times and at the ways in which these same stories have been reinterpreted and adapted by modern and contemporary Chinese intellectuals, novelists, playwrights, and film makers. While co-teaching this class with David, I learned much about the intricacies involved in the rise and fall in popularity of each of the stories against the backdrop of the changing political and cultural environments in twentieth-century China. If David had not happily agreed to co-teach the course, I never would have been able to write this book.

As in my other books on traditional Chinese folktales and genres of narrative ballads and prosimetric literature, the core of this book consists of translations. All translations are my own, with the exception of Qiao Zhiliang's "Memories of Directing *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*," which was translated by Tarryn Li-min Chun. Tarryn also helped me with many terminological questions related to modern theatrical jargon. My translation of Shi Hui, "Notes about Directing *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*" was earlier published in *The Opera Quarterly* 26, nos. 2–3 (2010), a special issue dedicated to Chinese opera movies and edited by Paola Iovene and Judith Zeitlin, from whose editorial interventions I greatly benefited.

As I became fascinated by the many incarnations of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, I discussed the topic with my Harvard colleagues at the time, many of whom provided useful pointers. Here I would like to mention in particular Eileen Chow, who patiently answered my ignorant questions about Chinese film. During my visits back to Leiden, Anne Sytske Keijser did the same. As always, the staff at the Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard and the staff of the East Asian Library at Leiden University went out of their way to help me locate relevant materials. My graduate student Sun Xiaosu, who turned out to

be much more effective than I am in locating materials on the Web, was also of great assistance.

Of the many other people who assisted me in my research at one moment or another I can only mention a few. Professor Zhao Shanlin kindly introduced me to his colleague Professor Li Yizhong, who answered my questions about his father's original script for the movie. Frank Kouwenhoven introduced me to Professor Lam Ching Wah, who answered my repeated questions about Huangmei Opera in the 1950s. Professor Xu Lan gave me a copy of her copy of the 1954 text of the revised version of the play. Tina Mai Chen and Li Jie both quickly replied to my questions about the importation of Eastern Bloc fairy-tale movies into China in the early 1950s.

In 1970 I spent the summer in Hong Kong at the Universities Service Centre pouring over newspaper clippings from the Union Research Institute about the reform of professional storytelling in the PRC in the early 1950s. Following my return to the Netherlands later that year, an unexpected twist in my career soon steered my research interests away from modern and contemporary China. While researching the transformations of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* in the early years of the PRC, I was very much aware that I had come full circle but was straying beyond my comfort zone. I would not have been able to complete this project without the assistance of the persons and institutes listed above, as well as many others, and hereby want to express my heartfelt thanks to all of them, named or unnamed. Needless to say, all remaining errors on the following pages are my own.

Wilt L. Idema
Leiden, January 2014

I. Introduction: The Legend, the Play, and the Movie

Following the Communist conquest of the Chinese mainland and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese movie industry (studios, distribution, and cinemas) was quickly nationalized.[1] Like all other media, film was expected to serve the Revolution. As a result, the majority of movies produced in the 1950s celebrated China's struggle for national independence against foreign foes and inside China the struggle of the laboring masses against their masters. Against this background, the blockbuster success in 1956 and thereafter of the 1955 movie *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* (*Tianxianpei* 天仙配; released as *The Marriage of the Fairy Princess*, but also referred to as *The Heavenly Match* or *The Fairy Couple*) is even more remarkable. The movie was based on the legend of the filial son Dong Yong 董永. But filial piety (*xiao* 孝), the foundational value of traditional Chinese society, by this time had already been decried for almost half a century as the source of all of China's trials and tribulations. Moreover, the movie, closely based on the Huangmei 黃梅 Opera play of the same title, and starring the Huangmei Opera performers Yan Fengying 嚴鳳英 (1930–1968) and Wang Shaofang 王少舫 (1920–1986), was not an example of the realistic staging preferred by socialist realism—the Soviet-inspired dominant doctrine in the arts. From the very beginning, both its scriptwriter Sang Hu 桑弧 (1916–2004) and its director Shi Hui 石揮 (1915–1957) conceived of the movie as "a fairy-tale film with song and dance."

The Huangmei Opera play *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* was a great success at the East China Theater Festival of October 1954.[2] At that time Huangmei Opera was not a prestigious form of traditional opera. Rather, it was only a minor form of local opera that was hardly known outside its area of distribution in and around Anqing in Anhui province. The movie was not only extremely popular with audiences throughout the PRC, but also throughout the Sinophone world outside of the PRC, where its impact on the movie industry may have been even greater than it was in the PRC itself. *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* inspired the Hong Kong and Taiwan movie industries to produce many Huangmei Opera–style musicals, the

most famous of which was the Shaw Brothers' 1963 production *Love Eterne*, an adaptation of the popular legend of Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 and Zhu Yingtai 祝英台. Due to *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, Huangmei Opera became popular throughout China and transformed Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang into instant celebrities. But Director Shi Hui committed suicide in 1957 after becoming a victim of the anti-rightist movement, and leading lady Yan Fengying committed suicide in 1968, a victim of the Cultural Revolution, when the movie was attacked as "a great poisonous weed." To this day, the authorship of the play on which the movie is based continues to be a matter of controversy.

The fate of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* provides a unique window on the history of Chinese theater and cinema in the early years of the PRC. The many versions of the script allow us to follow development of the play in the context of the rapidly changing cultural and ideological climate. Statements by scriptwriters and critics provide us with a detailed picture of their ideological and artistic concerns, and statements by directors and actors allow us an inside view of how theater professionals adapted their performances to the needs of the times.

The Legend of Dong Yong

The origin of the legend of Dong Yong can be traced back to the second century AD.[3] On stone carvings from this period Dong Yong is depicted as a filial son, concerned about the well-being of his ailing father. Pictorial sources from a somewhat later date show Dong Yong seeing off an Immortal Maiden who returns to heaven after helping him to pay off his debts. In the early third century the famous poet Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232) provided a summary account of the legend of Dong Yong in one of his poems. These lines may be rendered as follows:

> When Dong Yong's family fell on hard times,
> In his father's old age, all money was exhausted.
> He took out a loan in order to provide for him,
> And hired himself out so as to buy delicacies.
> When creditors arrived at his gate in numbers,
> He was at a loss as to how to send them off, but
> Heaven's God was moved by his utmost virtue,
> And a divine maiden worked the loom for him.[4]

Brief prose accounts of the legend are found in collections of biographical sketches of filial sons, a genre that flourished in the fourth to sixth centuries, and in collections of miracle tales of the same period. In these slightly later versions, after Dong Yong sold himself into slavery for three years in order to provide his father with a decent funeral, the divine maiden is sent down from heaven to become Dong Yong's wife for one hundred days to help him quickly pay off his debts.

In late imperial China anyone with only a smattering of literacy knew the legend from the account in the *Twenty-four Exemplars of Filial Piety* (*Ershisi xiao* 二十四孝). This book, intended for young children, provided a short prose version, followed by a four-line poem for easy memorization; the text itself was accompanied by a full-page illustration. The currently available version of the *Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety* was edited during the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368), but comparable collections may have been circulating from as early as the tenth century. The book is still widely available (also on the Web and in a large variety of adaptations into modern Chinese). Its account of the legend reads as follows:

Selling One's Body to Bury One's Father

> Dong Yong of the Han was so poor that when his father died he sold his body into servitude and buried him with borrowed money. When he set out to repay his debt through labor, he met a woman while on the road. She offered to become his wife, and together they arrived at his master's house. The latter ordered her to weave three hundred bolts of double-threaded silk and then they could return home. She completed the task within one month. While on the way back home, when they arrived at the spot where they had met in the shade of a scholartree,[5] she said goodbye to Yong and disappeared.
>
> To bury his father he needed to borrow money;
> Out on the road he ran into an immortal beauty.
> Weaving silk she paid off his debt to his master;
> His filial piety managed to move Heaven above![6]

Because of her weaving skills, Dong Yong's miracle-working companion was eventually identified as Weaving Maiden.[7] Weaving Maiden is the Chinese name of Vega (in Lyra), who is, according to Chinese lore, the wife of Buffalo Boy, the Chinese name of Altair. Because following their marriage the couple neglected the duties implied by their names, the Heavenly Emperor placed

them on opposite banks of the Heavenly River (the Milky Way), allowing them only one meeting each year on the night of the seventh of the Seventh Month, when magpies form a bridge for them across the Heavenly River. In late imperial times, however, Dong Yong's companion was often called Seventh Sister and was identified as the youngest of the seven daughters of the Jade Emperor, the eldest of whom was said to be married to Buffalo Boy. In some versions of the legend, in yet another attempt to remove the suggestion of infidelity on the part of Weaving Maiden, Dong Yong is described as an incarnation of Buffalo Boy.[8]

The legend of Dong Yong was also adapted as ballads and plays. The earliest ballad on Dong Yong, a long poem in lines of seven syllables, was found at Dunhuang among a huge pile of manuscripts that had been stashed away in a side chamber of a grotto temple and bricked up shortly after 1000 AD. In this ballad Dong Yong and the Immortal Maiden have a son, who was born following the Immortal Maiden's return to heaven. When the son, who is raised by his father, becomes aware of the identity of his mother, he requests help from a diviner to find her. After he finds his mother, she becomes furious at the diviner and gives her son presents that destroy the diviner's means of preternatural knowledge. In some later versions of the narrative, these presents also eventually turn against the son. The earliest known stage version of the legend may date from the thirteen or fourteenth century. Onstage, two scenes were very popular: first, while on his way to his master, the meeting of very virtuous Dong Yong with the Immortal Maiden who boldly proposes marriage; and second, the parting scene when, following completion of his shortened period of servitude, the Immortal Maiden informs Dong Yong that she will leave him then and there. Although the legend of Dong Yong was originally associated with Shandong, later versions moved the action to Xiaogan in Hubei.[9]

In the complete version of the play as a *chuanqi* 傳奇 the son and daughter of Dong Yong's owner, now surnamed Fu 傅, were also assigned major roles. The son of Old Master Fu is a lecher who tries to rape the Immortal Maiden but he is swiftly punished by her magic; the daughter of old Master Fu studies weaving with the Immortal Maiden, marries Dong Yong following her departure for heaven, and raises the child of Dong Yong and the Immortal Maiden as her own. This *chuanqi* circulated under a number of titles beginning in the sixteenth century. It has not been preserved in its entirety, but we do have a detailed summary which dates to the eighteenth century:

Dong Yong, whose style is Yannian 延年, hails from Dong's Scholartree Village of Danyang County in Runzhou. His mother had died during his infancy. His father had been a transportation commissioner, but eventually he returned home and passed away. Because Dong Yong is too poor to provide his father with a proper funeral, he sells himself to the prefectural magistrate Fu Hua 傅華 as a bonded laborer. [Fu] Hua is living in his home village in retirement; he loves to do good works and pities [Dong] Yong because he is so filial, so he provides him with all of his needs, whereupon [Dong] Yong returns home with the money. Because of his filial behavior the Astral God of Great White[10] reports [Dong] Yong to the Emperor Above, who ascertains that Seventh Sister, the Weaving Maiden, has a karmic affinity with [Dong] Yong, so he orders her to go down to the mortal world for one hundred days to help him repay his debt. When [Dong] Yong is on his way to Fu [Hua] he meets the Immortal Maiden in the shade of a scholartree. She lies to [Dong] Yong and tells him that she has lost her husband and wants to become his wife because she is destitute. [Dong] Yong adamantly refuses, but the Star of Great White transforms himself into an old man who strongly urges [Dong] Yong to comply with her request; he also makes the scholartree answer his question and act as their matchmaker. So [Dong] Yong believes the match is heavenly ordained and they go to Fu [Hua] as a couple.

The Immortal Maiden claims that she can weave ten bolts of brocade in a single day and night. Fu [Hua] does not believe her, but gives her an extra supply of thread to try her out. Because the other Immortal Maidens help her to weave, the ten bolts of brocade are finished by dawn, and their dazzling colors are greatly admired by Fu [Hua], who now treats [Dong] Yong as a guest. Fu [Hua]'s daughter Saijin 賽金 becomes the Immortal Maiden's best friend, but Fu [Hua]'s son is a mean knave who tries to seduce the Immortal Maiden, whereupon she slaps him in the face.

When the period of one hundred days is up, the Immortal Maiden and [Dong] Yong take their leave of Fu [Hua]. She tells [Dong] Yong to present the dragon-phoenix brocade she has woven to the court, informing him that this will make his career and provide him with fame. She also shows him the poem in the brocade, saying, "Your marriage with Fu [Hua]'s daughter will originate with this." Thereupon she disappears on a cloud. [Dong] Yong informs Fu [Hua] what has happened and Fu [Hua] realizes that this miracle was due to his filial piety, so he gives his daughter to [Dong] Yong to be his wife.

> When [Dong] Yong takes the brocade to the imperial palace, by edict he is elevated to the rank of Top-of-the-List[11] for Presenting Treasure. When he parades through the streets [of the capital], the Immortal Maiden, after handing him a son, immediately disappears. [Dong] Yong names his son Si 祀, and gives him the adult name Zhongshu 仲舒. When the boy grows up, he is exceptionally intelligent. Because on one occasion people make fun of him for having no mother, Si visits [the famous diviner] Yan Junping 嚴君平. Junping tells him to go to Great White Mountain on the seventh night of the Seventh Month: "Wait until seven maidens pass, and then the seventh person, who is dressed in yellow, is your mother!"
>
> When he does as he was told, he indeed meets his mother. Giving him three gourds, she says: "Two of these are for you and your father, and one is for Junping." After Si returns home, he gives one gourd to Junping. Suddenly flames burst forth from the gourd and burn all his secret books on Yin and Yang. This is because she was angry with him for having divulged the secrets of heaven.[12]

This play, which seems to have circulated widely (under a variety of titles), exerted a major influence on the ballads and operas of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and thereafter. In some of the late ballads and operas the story ends with Dong Yong presenting to the Throne the brocade woven by the Immortal Maiden and receiving a high title as a reward. Other versions include a more or less detailed account of the search by Dong Yong's son for his birth mother, their reunion, and its consequences. The stage version that was popular in Huangmei Opera in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that is translated in this volume, belongs to the former category. By that time, the play was popular enough to have been published in two woodblock editions.[13]

In imperial China filial piety was considered a foundational value that provided the basis for an orderly society. The May Fourth Movement of the 1920s, however, witnessed an all-out attack on filial piety, which was deemed to be the root of everything that was wrong with China.[14] Such attacks were directed in particular at the traditional family system, which, the reformers and revolutionaries claimed, demanded unquestioning obedience by the younger generations to the elder generations, and denied personal happiness for the sake of family welfare and prosperity.[15] An endless stream of short stories, novels, plays, and movies revealed how young people in the "old

society" were not allowed to follow their hearts because their callow parents were motivated by financial concerns in arranging their marriages. The struggle for "free love" (the freedom to choose one's own marriage partner) was a major theme in the modern literature of the 1920s and 1930s.[16] But the struggle that freed young men and women from the shackles of the patriarchal family and turned them into individuals also made them available for mobilization by the political parties and their state-building projects.[17] All modernizing movements in twentieth-century China supported "free love" and a reformed marriage law. One of the first major campaigns in the PRC of the early 1950s was the campaign to reform marriage. Marxist ideologues consistently hailed the desire of young people to be able to decide on their own marriage partners as a progressive force in history. Once the traditional marriage system was thoroughly discredited, filial piety, as the natural affection of children for their parents, made a modest comeback. However, it would never regain its position as a foundational value. As such, it was replaced by class struggle and nationalism.

Huangmei Opera

With the exception of several small skits, all forms of traditional Chinese theater are opera, that is, the action onstage is almost continually accompanied by orchestral music and the actors frequently move back and forth from prose dialogue to arias. The main difference between the Western and Chinese traditions of musical theater is that in the Western tradition new music is composed for each new play (with the result that operas and musicals are associated with their composers and only rarely with their text writers), whereas in the Chinese tradition the writers of new plays compose their songs to preexisting tunes (with the result that in China individual operas are associated with their authors). Therefore, in terms of the Western operatic tradition, all Chinese operas are ballad-operas.[18] Moreover, in the Chinese tradition operatic genres are distinguished on the basis of their body of music. For instance, *zaju* 雜劇, which originated in North China in the thirteenth century and flourished until the middle of the fifteenth century, made use of a maximum of four hundred melodies from that area. *Xiwen* 戲文 and its successor *chuanqi*, which arose in the Jiangnan area, made use of several hundred different melodies from that area. Each melody had its own metrical schema, specifying the number of lines and the length of each line. The writing of arias for *zaju* and *chuanqi* required considerable literary skills, and both genres were eventually established as minor genres of elite literature.

Zaju disappeared from the stage after the sixteenth century, whereas *chuanqi* continued to be widely performed in a wide variety of styles until well into the eighteenth century. The most prestigious of these local styles was *Kunqu* 崑曲, which was associated with the economic and cultural center of Suzhou and spread from there. Because *chuanqi* were very long, one might choose between a performance of the entire play (which could take up to two days), a performance of the main play (providing a selection of the major scenes), or a performance of selected highlights. In due time, such highlights (*zhezixi* 折子戲) might develop into more or less independent plays, which could survive onstage even after the original *chuanqi* was lost. By the early twentieth century, the *Kunqu* repertoire had been basically reduced to such highlights.[19]

There also existed genres of drama that for their songs relied on verse in seven-syllable lines, which could be easily memorized and, if need be, improvised by the actors. Moreover, every couplet was sung to the same basic melody (*banqiang* 板腔; melody matrix), which would, however, be varied according to the character, occasion, and mood. Combinations of specific basic melodies and local dialects resulted in a bewildering variety of regional genres of local opera.[20] Modern handbooks list up to four hundred genres of regional opera, but because these genres enjoyed little or no literary prestige they underwent constant development; as old genres faded away, new genres were constantly emerging well into the twentieth century. These regional operas probably have histories at least as long as those of *zaju* and *chuanqi*, but they only became popular beginning in the eighteenth century when they were dubbed *luantan* 亂彈 (cacophony) by disapproving drama critics. The best-known representative of these many genres of regional opera is Peking Opera, which features not one basic melody but two (*xipi* 西皮 and *erhuang* 二黃), and also includes a number of songs borrowed from *chuanqi* (as performed in the *Kunqu* style) and other sources. As soon as Peking Opera was established as the major form of theater in the capital at the end of the nineteenth century, it was also performed in other cities, such as Shanghai.

Huangmei Opera was a regional genre of opera that was popular in the Anqing countryside beginning in the late eighteenth century. At that time, it was known by many different names (the name Huangmei Opera was adopted as late as 1953). Its basic melody is known as Huangmeidiao 黃梅調 (Huangmei tune), named after the city of Huangmei in easternmost Hubei. Huangmei is presumed to be the place of origin of this basic melody. Various local traditions attempt to explain how it moved from eastern Hubei to the neighboring province. Originally, the repertoire of Huangmei Opera consisted

only of simple skits, but by the middle of the nineteenth century performers of Huangmei Opera started to add full-length plays to their repertoire. *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* is one of these "thirty-six big plays."[21] As the genre developed its repertoire of plays, it also enriched its repertoire of tunes.[22] In the early decades of the twentieth century Huangmei Opera slowly acquired an urban audience, and beginning in 1926 it was also performed in the city of Anqing itself. This probably had as much to do with the ongoing urbanization and the migration of farmers to the cities and towns during that time as with the changes in the stagecraft and repertoire of Huangmei Opera.[23]

The accompanying orchestra in Huangmei Opera originally consisted of only a drum and gongs. String instruments were added at a relatively late date in the 1940s, when Huangmei Opera was performed by fully professional troupes. The basic way to perform the "Main Tune" of Huangmei Opera is called "level verse" (*pingci* 平詞). To express anxiety and agitation, the Main Tune may be performed at a quicker tempo, which is referred to as an "eight-beat." An even quicker performance is referred to as a "fired-up manner" (*huogong* 火工). The "tune of the immortals" is, as the name suggests, used when the gods and immortals enter onstage, whereas the "underworld tune" is used when the ghosts make an appearance or in scenes of impending doom and desperation. The "colorful tune" was originally the tune of a lively local four-line folksong. For special purposes other melodies could be used, such as the "Five Watches Tune," which was popular all over China in many variations. Further musical variety was achieved by duets (the "paired beat"), choral singing, and choral refrains.[24]

Although regional genres are distinguished by a basic melody and dialect, they share their stagecraft and repertoire with other genres. Huangmei Opera is no exception. The traditional version of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* is clearly derived from the sixteenth-century *chuanqi* as it was performed locally in the *Qingyang* 青陽 style. As Huangmei Opera continued to develop in the first half of the twentieth century it freely borrowed from the stagecraft of other genres, such as Peking Opera. This process of borrowing was accelerated after 1949 in the context of the theater reform of the early 1950s.

Theater Reform

China's reformers and revolutionaries in the first half of the twentieth century shared a strong belief in the power of the theater to shape the audience's way of thinking.[25] Beginning in the very first years of the twentieth century new plays were composed to spread the gospel of nationalism and feminism.

Initially, the genres used for these purposes were still traditional genres, but soon Western-style "spoken drama" (*huaju* 話劇) became the preferred medium. Chinese students in the West and Japan in the early decades of the twentieth century encountered Western drama during the heyday of the social problem plays, best represented by Ibsen and Shaw. Such plays were performed on a box stage in a realistic, even naturalistic, manner. Although this type of drama enjoyed modest success among educated audiences in the major coastal cities in the 1920s and 1930s, it hardly appealed to larger audiences and could in no way compete in popularity with the many genres of regional opera that flourished during this period. These decades also witnessed efforts by Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1877–1962) and Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961) to enhance the status of Peking Opera by positioning it as China's "national theater" (*guoju* 國劇), which in every aspect was the counter image of Western-style "spoken drama." While doing so, they also attempted to raise the status of Peking Opera from a form of low-class entertainment with strong links to prostitution and religion (superstition in the eyes of modern intellectuals) to an art on the same level as painting or calligraphy.[26]

Although some theater activists continued to call for the use of traditional genres to spread a modern message among the masses throughout this period, their impact was limited. This changed, however, with the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937. After China's coastal cities were occupied by Japanese troops, the Chinese government moved inland, as did many universities. In order to appeal to a largely rural and uneducated audience, Nationalists and Communists alike turned to traditional regional genres of opera to spread their respective messages.[27] Many rousing plays on ancient heroes fighting barbarian invaders needed little revision to stimulate patriotism, and plays featuring young women eloping with their lovers were reinterpreted as expressions of the perennial desire of young men and women in traditional society for "free love" (that is, the freedom to choose one own marriage partner, without parental interference). Whereas many modern intellectuals had earlier been very negative about traditional Chinese drama, which in their opinion taught the old values of filial piety, female chastity, personal loyalty, and subservience, they now acquired a more positive attitude, not so much envisioning the abolition of traditional opera but rather its reform. They maintained that traditional drama should be allowed to exist as long as it shed its backward (or, according to Marxist terminology, "feudal") repertoire and practices and wholeheartedly served the modernizing agenda of the nation-state.[28]

Once the PRC was established, the new authorities undertook the self-

imposed task of theater reform as soon as circumstances allowed. The Bureau for the Reform of Traditional Opera was headed by activist and playwright Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968).[29] Subsequent to a national conference on the reform of traditional theater in November 1950, a "Directive Concerning Work on the Reform of Traditional Theater" was promulgated on May 5, 1951. And following a Beijing theater festival, which showcased new and revised plays from all over China in a variety of genres, in the fall of 1952 the cultural czar of the moment, Zhou Yang 周揚 (1908–1989), declared:

> We advocate the reform and development of our national drama in accordance with the people's best interest. We are determined to do away with that part of China's dramatic heritage which is reactionary, poisonous and harmful, but to preserve and develop all that is progressive, healthy and beneficial to the people. … We encourage technical brilliance in artistic creation, because such technical brilliance is the result of long and hard work on the part of artists to present life truthfully. But we are opposed to technique which is formalistic, affected, lifeless.[30]

In this speech Zhou Yang also gave the final word on a debate that had been raging throughout the preceding two years (1950 and 1951) on the proper use of myths and folktales, as well as historical subject matter, in new and revised operas.[31] Facing pressures to make their work serve politics, many playwrights turned well-known stories into direct illustrations of contemporary government policies and had their historical or mythical characters voice political slogans of the day, a tendency that later would be characterized as "anti-historicism." Tian Han's second-in-command, Yang Shaoxuan 楊紹萱 (1893–1971),[32] who himself had written a play on the legend of Buffalo Boy and Weaving Maiden and argued that such subjects could be arbitrarily adapted to comment on contemporary issues, became the whipping boy when Zhou Yang sided with those who had argued that one should not stray too far from the original plot and characterization and should pay attention to the historical circumstances of the original event:

> Whether it is a question of giving expression to modern or ancient life, the highest principle in art is truthfulness. Historical truth allows of no distortion, no concealment or whitewashing. However, those who oppose historical truthfulness, like Comrade Yang Shao-hsuan, seem incapable of understanding this fundamental principle. … They fail to grasp the fact that attempts to describe historical figures as if they possessed a modern

> working-class ideology are something quite different from viewing history and writing about it in the light of modern working-class ideology.[33]

Reacting against Yang's claim that "myth" (*shenhua* 神話) was only a matter of form and had nothing to do with content, Zhou distinguished between myths and folktales on the one hand and superstitious tales on the other hand in the following terms:

> A great many folk stories take a positive attitude towards the world and are impregnated with popular character, whereas superstition is always negative and generally serves the interests of the ruling class. … Folk tales often depict man as unyielding before fate and finally triumphing over it in the world of imagination; superstition, on the contrary, preaches fatalism and retribution. … Consequently, mythology always encourages man to break away from his enslavement and seek after the life of a real man, while superstition aims at making him a willing slave glorying in his bondage.[34]

In this way Zhou Yang set clear guidelines for those who were revising traditional plays, especially plays on legendary topics. In view of these guidelines it should come as no surprise that all who were involved in the later revision of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* would stress that Dong Yong's fate corresponded to historical fact and that the tale of Dong Yong and Seventh Sister was a "myth" and not an expression of superstition. In my translations of these statements I have, however, preferred to render *shenhua* as "fairy tale" as that term seems to better fit the character of the tale.[35]

The theater-reform campaign was only one of the many campaigns conducted in the early years of the People's Republic. Like the other campaigns, this campaign aimed to reform the theatrical institutions and people and to impose Party control.[36] In the following years theaters were nationalized and private companies were increasingly replaced by state-run companies.[37] Although actors may have enjoyed a higher status as state employees, they lost much control over their own performances, as these were now expected to be based on written-out scripts and to be supervised by a director.[38] The repertoire of each genre of regional theater, beginning with Peking Opera, was collected and scrutinized to determine which plays would be forbidden, which could be retained with some changes, and which were basically acceptable. Plays that showed resistance to foreign aggression and class oppression, that propagated love for the motherland, for freedom, and for labor, or that

displayed the good qualities of the people could be retained, but any play that gave expression to the "feudal slave morality" or propagated primitive, violent, or lascivious behavior was to be rejected.[39] Long training sessions were organized in which actors, playwrights, and managers studied Marxism with Party cadres and engaged in the practical details of the reform. National and regional festivals were organized in various regions and organizations showcased the results of these activities.[40] But 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.

The Revision of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*

Huangmei Opera was not represented at the Beijing theater festival of 1952. In the years immediately following the establishment of the PRC Huangmei Opera was a local phenomenon limited to Anqing, and its surrounding countryside. In Anqing two major companies performed both traditional plays and new works. But the systematic reform of traditional theater impacted Anhui, and Zeng Xisheng 曾希聖 (1904–1968), who served as Party secretary of Anhui province from 1952 to 1962,[41] played an active role in the reorganization and rewriting of Huangmei Opera. In 1952 a major training session was organized in the provincial capital of Hefei. This session, bringing together actors and actresses, managers and cadres from all over the province, lasted for forty-seven days. The Huangmei Opera plays performed during this session created quite a stir, even attracting the attention of some influential figures in Shanghai. This resulted in an invitation to have Huangmei Opera performed in Shanghai later that year. The Anhui provincial authorities thereupon organized a work group in Anqing to prepare for this event. One of the plays that was revised in this context was the scene "Meeting on the Road" (*Luyu* 路遇) from *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*. In this scene Seventh Sister who has descended to the mortal world, shows up in front of Dong Yong when he is on his way to the house of Landlord Fu and she eventually forces the unwilling Dong Yong to marry her. The social status of Dong Yong was changed from that of a student to that of a poor peasant, and the Immortal Maiden joins him not because she has been ordered to do so by the Heavenly Emperor in order to reward Dong Yong for his conspicuous display of filial piety, but because she had fallen in love with the honest and sincere young peasant who was down on his luck. The rich man who provided

Dong Yong with the money for his father's burial was now characterized as a rapacious landlord.[42] This scene was performed to great acclaim in Shanghai in November 1952. On that occasion the role of Dong Yong was played by Wang Shaofang, whereas the role of Seventh Sister was performed by the young actress Pan Jingli 潘璟琍 (1936–1988). Another piece that was performed on this occasion was a little skit entitled *Collecting Pig Fodder* (*Da zhucao* 打豬草),[43] starring the actress Yan Fengying.[44] When in April 1953 the Anhui provincial authorities established the Anhui Provincial Huangmei Opera Company in Hefei, Yan Fengying was one of the first performers to be reassigned from Anqing to Hefei. Other Huangmei Opera actors such as Wang Shaofang performed for the Chinese troops in Korea during the same year.[45]

The success of this revision of "Meeting on the Road" in Shanghai and elsewhere may well have inspired Lu Hongfei 陸洪非 (Hong Fei 洪非, 1924–2007) in the next year to prepare a revision of the complete text of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal.* Lu Hongfei based his revision on the oral version provided by the veteran actor Hu Yuting 胡玉庭 (1898–1958).[46] The initial reaction of Lu's superiors to his script was dismissive (after three months their only reaction was "This lacks a theme!" [*meiyou zhuti* 沒有主題]),[47] but the play was performed to great acclaim in August and September 1953 in Anqing[48] and was selected by the Anhui authorities as one of their submissions to the East China Theater Festival of October 1954 (September 25 to November 2), again in Shanghai. In order to make the best showing possible the Anhui Provincial Huangmei Opera Company was strengthened by many of the finest Huangmei Opera performers, including Wang Shaofang. Direction of the play was entrusted to Li Liping 李力平 (1919–2002) and Qiao Zhiliang 喬志良 (1921–2005). This in itself was a major innovation as in the past traditional plays had been performed without a specialized director.[49] Li Liping had a theatrical background in modern "spoken drama" and his presence initially met with quite some opposition from the performers. In a short article in his memory Li Liping is credited in particular for challenging Yan Fengying to rethink her character as a peasant girl once she descended to earth and to adapt her performance according to this analysis.[50] Qiao Zhiliang hailed from Nanjing and had been trained as a Peking Opera actor. His career up to the early 1950s had taken him to the major cities in southern China during the Anti-Japanese War and the Civil War. During his wartime engagement in Chongqing he met his future wife Liu Huixian 劉慧嫻, and slightly later at Nanwenquan the couple had made the acquaintance of the famous popular

novelist Zhang Henshui 張恨水 and his wife. In 1952 Qiao Zhiliang participated in the summer training session in Hefei and thereafter changed from actor to director. He and his wife played a major role in the transmission of Peking Opera performance techniques to Huangmei Opera performers.[51] At the same time, specialists like Shi Bailin 時白林 (b. 1927) and Wang Zhaoqian 王兆乾 (1928–2006) developed and codified the music of Huangmei Opera.[52] When *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* was eventually performed in Shanghai, it met with a huge success. The performance was rated as excellent, and both of its leading performers, Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang, received a first prize for their acting. The script, direction, and music also received first prizes. As a result, *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* was selected as one of the reformed operas to be made into a movie.

The pre-1949 *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* told the story of the filial son Dong Yong. The available printed editions of the pre-1949 version of the play begin with a scene in which Dong Yong unsuccessfully tries to borrow some money from his aunt and uncle, leaving him no recourse when his father dies but to rely on his own strength by selling his body into servitude. The plays ends with a number of scenes in which Dong Yong travels to the capital and presents the silk woven by Seventh Sister to the emperor, whereupon he receives a high position, Seventh Sister brings him his son, and he marries the daughter of his former owner. The play shows the progression of a son who loses his father and becomes an orphan to a son who becomes a father himself and also achieves everything a man might desire in traditional society. In between these opening scenes and the concluding scenes the play contains extended descriptions of the Immortal Maidens watching the mortal world,[53] the meeting of Dong Yong and Seventh Sister while he is traveling to the mansion of his owner, their arrival at the mansion, the weaving of the brocade, and their parting after they leave the mansion when the ordained one hundred days of their marriage are over. Remarkably, the printed versions jump from the weaving of the ten bolts of silk to the departure of Dong Yong and Seventh Sister from the Fu Mansion.

In the version dictated by Hu Yuting, which is based on the play as performed in the 1940s, the scene of the night-long weaving is followed by scenes in which the immortal sisters measure the silk before they depart, Seventh Sister hands the silk to Dong Yong, and Dong Yong presents it to Old Master Fu. Old Master Fu then burns the contract by which Dong Yong sold himself into servitude and proceeds to adopt Dong Yong and Seventh Sister as his own children. Subsequently there follows a scene in which Young

Master Fu tries to seduce Seventh Sister, but he is frightened into virtue by Seventh Sister who calls down from heaven the Lord of Thunder and Mother of Lightning. Eventually, Old Master Fu sends Dong Yong and his wife home when his one hundred days of servitude are over, but before doing so he treats Dong Yong to a parting meal and provides him with travel money. It is clear that the printed versions of the traditional play are also based on such a story, because by the time Dong Yong and Seventh Sister are on the way to his old home, they describe Old Master Fu as their adoptive father and they are loath to depart. As Hu Yuting's version is based on the performances, it tends to provide a somewhat fuller dialogue. It also does not shirk from adding supernatural elements. We already mentioned the role of the Lord of Thunder and Mother of Lightning. When, earlier in the play, Dong Yong is writing his sales contract, four gods are present onstage to hail his filial piety. Of course, after 1949 such elements would be condemned as expressions of "feudal superstition."

In the revised version of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* "The feudal superstition of 'Dong Yong moving Heaven by his filial piety' was dumped"—the word "filial piety" is barely mentioned at all in the printed editions of 1954 and 1955, and it is completely avoided in later versions (for instance in the 1979 edition). The play was turned into not only an illustration of class struggle in the old society, but also a model of young people's struggle for free love and its unavoidably tragic outcome in the old society. The popular nature of the play is stressed by stating that the play was based on the text as orally transmitted by the actor Hu Yuting, but it is obvious that Lu Hongfei and his predecessors also had access to the printed version of the old play.[54] Although most articles devoted to the revision of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* stress the ideologically inspired changes to the plot and the characterizations, more recent scholarship draws attention to the artistic nature of the changes in terms of characterization, plot and language, and stagecraft. The main characters in the play acquire a more clearly defined individuality, and the plot is more focused on limiting the action to a few major scenes. The tragic nature of the separation after one hundred days is no longer undercut by the later happy ending. In the process of revision, the language of the play acquires a more literary character without, however, losing its directness and ease. All of these elements are combined to enhance the play's appeal outside of its original rural audience.[55]

Married to a Heavenly Immortal as performed in Shanghai in 1954 omitted the opening scenes of the old play (in which Dong Yong tries to

borrow money from relatives) as these could be read as portraying a lack of solidarity among the poor, but it still began with the scene of Dong Yong (now a poor peasant rather than a student) selling himself into servitude[56] and, echoing the political climate of the time, it depicted the landlord class in the blackest of terms.[57] The play then has Seventh Sister leave heaven on her own authority once she falls in love with Dong Yong, and it continues with her seduction of Dong Yong, their arrival at the mansion of his owner, and the weaving of the brocade. The Jade Emperor, who ordered Seventh Sister to descend to earth, is now only a threatening presence, and the role of the Astral Lord of Great White is eliminated as his functions are taken over by the God of the Soil. The ideology of class struggle made it impossible to retain the scene of Old Master Fu adopting the couple. But even though Young Master Fu is still depicted as lusting after Seventh Sister, the scene in which he tries to seduce her but ends up groping his own sister is deleted, most likely because such folksy bawdiness was offensive to the puritanical mindset of the times. Also, instead of a scene in which Dong Yong and Seventh Sister tearfully leave their good patron, we now encounter a scene in which Seventh Sister outwits the rapacious landlord who tries every trick in the book to force his serfs to remain (and to enslave them for the rest of their lives). In the long final scene Seventh Sister has every intention of sharing with Dong Yong the simple life of a peasant, but she is called back to heaven by her father who threatens to kill Dong Yong if she does not obey, leaving her no option but to bid farewell to her husband.

The version of the revised play that was printed in 1955 omits the opening scene in which Dong Yong sells himself,[58] as it, like the movie, begins with Seventh Sister's elopement from heaven. Because the emphasis of the play has shifted even more to the theme of the struggle of young people for free love, the negative characterization of the landlord class is somewhat toned down (in the 1954 version Old Master Fu is contemplating sending Dong Yong to his death in order to obtain the lifelong service of Seventh Sister, but we do not encounter this scheme in the 1955 version), whereas the marital affection between the young couple, looking forward to the birth of their baby, is very much stressed. This time Lu Hongfei makes a considerable effort to individualize the characterization of the immortal sisters (for instance, the shy and anxious Second Sister versus the experienced and supportive Third Sister).[59] Although the movie drastically shortened the arias, this script greatly expanded the arias and also enhanced their literary tone by removing some unhappy similes.

The revision of plays may well have been easier in the case of a genre of traditional opera like Huangmei Opera which by the late 1930s had only just begun to be performed on urban stages. The involved actors and actresses, whose status had been changed from riffraff at the margins of society to state employees, were probably only too eager to cooperate, and there was no established community of experts and aficionados who might have wanted to decry the changes as ill-advised and contrary to the nature of the genre. Be that as it may, Lu Hongfei and his successors managed to turn an exemplary tale of filial piety into an exemplary tale of the struggle for free love while retaining most of the scenes that must have made the play a success onstage.

The version of the revised play as published in 1955 certainly was not the definitive version. The script continued to be adapted and edited, even though the changes thereafter were less drastic. The success of the movie resulted in adaptations of the stage version, and the adapted version was criticized by high-ranking cultural bureaucrats when the play was performed in Beijing in the fall of 1956, resulting in yet further rewritings.[60] In the version of the play that was printed in 1979, for instance, the major change is that Dong Yong is not informed that Seventh Sister is pregnant on the eve of the couple's departure from the Fu Mansion; he discovers that his wife is expecting during a rest on their way back after they have left the mansion. This later version of the play takes care to tie up some loose ends in the plot that remained in the earlier versions. It reveals the continuing influence of the movie on the stage versions when, near the end of the final scene, a divine warrior appears onstage to summon Seventh Sister back to heaven, unlike in the earlier versions in which a disembodied backstage voice suffices.[61]

The Movie

The earliest Chinese attempts at producing movies took place in Beijing in the early years of the twentieth century, but we have to wait until the 1920s for the development of lively film production. Most of the studios at that time were located in Shanghai, which would continue to be the center of China's film production during the following several decades. As in the case of many other national film industries, fledgling companies, in order to be assured of sympathetic audiences, often tried to play it safe by adapting well-known and popular local stories. Stories that were most widely known were traditional operas. One of the earliest successful opera adaptations was the 1927 version of the famous love story *The Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記).[62] In due time these "operatic films" (*xiqu pian* 戲曲片) became an established genre

in Chinese movie making.[63] Such operatic films include both documentary registrations of stage performances and movie adaptations of operas. As in the case of Hollywood adaptations of Broadway musicals or Italian operas, in the latter case the "operatic film" requires a reinvention of the action as a movie. This reinvention tends to be even more drastic in the Chinese case. Whereas traditional opera was and is performed on a bare stage (with the use of no, or only minimal, scenery), the movie adaptations are set in realistic indoor and outside settings. Although the acting, dialogue, and arias may retain many of the features of the stage performance, in movies they are performed in fully realized sets. This not only creates certain limitations, but it also allows for many new possibilities of expression—scenes which once could only be evoked in words can now be visualized.

One of the phenomena accompanying the reform of traditional opera in the early 1950s was the production of many operatic films. The majority of these were simple recordings of stage performances, but some were inventive adaptations. The most successful of these was *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* 梁山伯與祝英台), a 1954 adaptation of the Shaoxing Opera (*Yueju*) version of the famous love story between the young student Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, a girl who dons male dress in order to pursue a higher education at an academy outside of her home.[64] Like Huangmei Opera, Shaoxing Opera (*Yueju*) was a very new genre of traditional opera. Performed by all-female troupes, it became popular in Shanghai in the late 1930s.[65] A revised version of the Shaoxing Opera *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* was performed to great acclaim at the 1952 theater festival in Beijing.[66] The cinematic adaptation of the play has the distinction of being the first full-length color movie shot in China by Chinese. It was directed by Sang Hu (1916–2004), a successful director in the 1940s who had studied color movies in Moscow in the early 1950s. Sang Hu had also produced the script for *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*.[67]

Married to a Heavenly Immortal, starring Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang, was shot in black and white by the Shanghai Film Studio.[68] The project was entrusted to Shi Hui and Sang Hu, both of whom had ample experience as director and scriptwriter.[69] The director Shi Hui had been a highly popular *huaju* and movie actor in Shanghai in the 1940s, and he went on to direct a number of notable films during the first years of the PRC.[70] From the very beginning Shi Hui's intention was to reinvent the play as a movie.[71] This ambition was shared by Sang Hu, who signed for the script of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*. Sang Hu stated in 1956: "*Married to a Heavenly Immortal*

is a fairy tale. That is why a movie provides even greater possibilities to use various means for its enrichment. From the very beginning we decided to treat the movie as a fairy tale with song and dance and not in the manner of a documentary registration of a stage performance."[72] One of their most drastic changes was to drop the original opening scene where Dong Yong sells his body and to replace it with a cloudscape, moving on to the heavenly palaces and focusing on Seventh Sister who longs for love in the mortal world.[73]

Sang Hu based his movie script on the play script as prepared by Lu Hongfei,[74] but he and his colleagues apparently believed that they were working on the "folk version" and Lu's name was not listed in the credits.[75] Sang Hu basically kept to the plot of Lu's script, but the limited length of the movie, as compared to that of the play, forced him to cut much of the dialogue (and accompanying action). Sang Hu also edited the arias, rearranging many of the lines (by his own account he reduced the songs from 468 lines to 278 lines).[76] Because he dropped the opening scene of Dong Yong selling himself into servitude he tried to stress the moral character of Dong Yong in "Meeting on the Road" by emphasizing his concern for the well-being of Seventh Sister if she were to follow him to the Fu Mansion. He also turned the character of Fu Guanbao 傅官保, the son of Old Master Fu, into that of Zhao Gui 趙貴, Old Master Fu's old and obsequious majordomo.[77] The movie broke up many of the long scenes of the play by cutting to scenes elsewhere in the cosmos or in the same house. Whereas the 1954 version of the play in the scene of the Immortal Maidens observing the world below eliminated the entrances onstage of the fisherman, woodcutter, farmer, and student, and the bridal procession, the movie once again showed these figures through the use of wide angle shots. And when Seventh Sister and the other Immortal Maidens are busily weaving throughout the night, Dong Yong is now shown pushing the mill[78] in a detail added to the movie to stress the relentless exploitation of farmhands by landlords.[79] The movie also freely made use of special effects, for instance in the scenes set in heaven, in the episode of the speaking scholartree, and in the final scene when a divine warrior appears to transmit the orders of the Jade Emperor, whereas in the play a backstage voice had sufficed.[80] The melodious nature of Huangmei Opera music was stressed by eliminating the drum.[81]

Operatic movies are rarely discussed in Western studies of PRC movies from the 1949–1966 period, and if they are discussed at all, attention tends to be focused on either *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* or *Fifteen Strings of Cash* (*Shiwu guan* 十五貫), an adaptation of a revived *Kunqu* play that was

also released in 1956.[82] If *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* is mentioned at all, the information may be misleading, for instance when (perhaps inadvertently) it is suggested that the movie was a success primarily outside of the PRC.[83] But even though *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* may not have been a highly innovative film, its lack of conspicuous political propaganda must have been very welcome to PRC audiences at the time. Yan Fengying was endearing as the vivacious and forward Seventh Sister, and Wang Shaofang put in a creditable performance of the "honest and sincere" (*laoshi* 老實) Dong Yong.[84] The relative newness of Huangmei Opera also meant that its acting style had not yet acquired the elaborate codification one encounters in some other genres, thus making their acting far more natural than that in, for instance, Peking Opera. The sudden tragic outcome of the love story must have aroused great sympathy. The music and songs appealed to audiences throughout the Chinese world.[85] The aria sung by Seventh Sister and Dong Yong when they leave the Fu Mansion at the end of his term of servitude and set out for their own cottage to spend a happy life together is a popular song to this very day.[86]

The movie *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* was released in February 1956. By the summer of 1958 the movie had been seen by more than 140,000,000 people in the PRC, many of whom saw it multiple times.[87] The movie established the nationwide popularity of Huangmei Opera and overnight turned Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang into national stars. To understand this spectacular success one must keep in mind that the only foreign films that were shown in China at the time were movies from the Soviet Union and its allies that were characterized by the same heavy-handed political propaganda as the overwhelming majority of films that were produced in the PRC during these years.

The Stars

Despite the contributions by Lu Hongfei, Qiao Zhiliang, Shi Bailin, Sang Hu, Shi Hui, and many others, one of the most important factors in the conspicuous success of both the play and the movie among Communist cadres and audiences at large must have been the seductive charm of Huangmei Opera music and the extraordinary talent of the play's leading actress Yan Fengying.[88]

Yan Fengying was born in Anqing as Yan Hongliu 嚴鴻六, but grew up in the Tongcheng countryside during the Anti-Japanese War where she picked up many local songs. Her father also taught her to sing Peking Opera. From the age of 12 she began to sing Huangmei Opera, and at the age of 15, following her first public performance, she ran away from home to avoid drastic

punishment by the village elders and joined a professional Huangmei Opera company. A smart learner, she distinguished herself by her personal charm, acting technique, supple voice, and extensive memory.

Yan Fengying became quite a sensation in Anqing in 1946, but her fame brought her to the attention of unsavory elements. At one point a local militia commander installed her in his home as a concubine, but she could not stand the abuse of the other women in his household and was released when she tried to commit suicide by hanging herself. Later, she was abducted by a local crime boss. This time she was released after she tried to commit suicide by swallowing a golden ring. In the unsettled times of the late 1940s she eventually moved to Nanjing, where she joined a Peking Opera troupe and survived by doing all kinds of odd jobs. She returned to Anqing in 1951, participated in the Anhui provincial training session in 1952, and was assigned to the newly founded Anhui Provincial Huangmei Opera Company in 1953.[89]

Yan Fengying's co-star Wang Shaofang hailed from Nanjing. From a family of strolling players, he was originally trained as a Peking Opera actor, first performing onstage at the age of 9. While spending time in Anqing, he also learned to sing Huangmei tunes, but it was not until 1950 that he became a full-time Huangmei Opera actor. His cooperation with Yan Fengying began in 1954, when he was transferred to the Anhui Provincial Huangmei Opera Company.[90] In a discussion of the acting styles of Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang, Li Liping concludes that Yan Fengying's strength was her identification with her characters, whereas Wang Shaofang's strength was his technique.

The Aftermath

Due to the huge success of the movie *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* Huangmei Opera immediately became popular all over China. Huangmei Opera companies from Anhui toured throughout the country[91] and many places outside of the province established their own Huangmei Opera troupes. A handful of ambitious bureaucrats, a small band of enthusiastic young cultural cadres, and a generation of gifted performers almost overnight succeeded in developing a new genre of traditional Chinese opera that met the needs of the times. Even though in many respects the new genre was created by a small group of ideologically inspired composers, playwrights, and actors, it could also be touted as popular and traditional as it drew on older and rural subjects and tunes. In contrast with other forms of reformed traditional opera,

Huangmei Opera was not tainted by associations with the old elite (as was the case for *Kunqu* and Peking Opera) or with bourgeois commercialism (as was the case for Shanghai's Shaoxing Opera). Nor was Huangmei Opera disqualified by a conspicuous pre-Liberation relation to local religion ("feudal superstition" in the terminology of the time) or to male and female prostitution. And whereas some other genres of reformed traditional opera did not appeal to a national audience due to their complicated music or regional dialects, Huangmei Opera was performed in a language close to the national standard and the arias were sung to simple melodies that could easily catch on. In addition, the increasingly beautiful costumes and gorgeous stage scenery, as well as the absence of open political indoctrination in the plays on premodern topics, resulted in the massive appeal of the genre in Chinese communities both inside and outside of the PRC.[92]

The success of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* as a movie stimulated the production of other Huangmei Opera movies in the years between 1959 and 1963. Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang costarred once again in *The Female Prince-Consort* (*Nü fuma* 女駙馬) in 1959. The play on which this movie is based was a reworking of a traditional script by Wang Zhaoqian that had been further revised by Lu Hongfei, and became one of the most popular Huangmei Operas of all time.[93] In 1963 Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang played the leading roles in *Buffalo Boy and Weaving Maiden* (*Niulang zhinü* 牛郎織女), a PRC–Hong Kong coproduction. Another 1963 PRC–Hong Kong coproduction was *The Shady Scholartree* (*Huaiyin ji* 槐陰記), a wide-screen color remake of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, now performed by a younger cast.[94] But Hong Kong and Taiwan movie makers had earlier already started to make their own Huangmei-style musicals. This culminated in the Shaw Brothers' 1963 production of *Love Eterne*, an adaptation of the legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai. In 1963 the Shaw Brothers also produced their own remake of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* as *Seventh Sister* (*Qixiannü* 七仙女; released as *A Maid from Heaven*).[95]

But the very success of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* seems to have worked as a curse for those closely involved in the production of the play and the movie. The first political victims were the directors. Li Liping was classified as a rightist and sent down for reeducation through labor in 1957, and was fully rehabilitated only in 1978. Shi Hui's fate was even more dramatic. His next project was a poorly conceived and poorly executed disaster movie. During the period of political relaxation in late 1956, known as the Hundred Flowers Campaign, perhaps emboldened by the spectacular success of

Married to a Heavenly Immortal, he was one of the first to speak out pulicly against the tight political control in the film industry,[96] only to become a victim of the anti-rightist movement of 1957. However, he refused to appear for criticism sessions, and when at the end of that year he disappeared, it was rumored that he had fled to Hong Kong to resume his acting career under an assumed name. A year later it was revealed that he had committed suicide by drowning himself.[97] Li Liping and Shi Hui were not the only people connected to *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* to run into trouble in 1957; Wang Zhaoqian was also classified as a "Rightist."

Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang continued to perform in many highly successful plays and movies for the next ten years. Yan Fengying, in particular, who had married in 1956, received many awards and was appointed to a variety of (mostly honorary) positions. She faced some criticism in 1957–1958 but survived that period without a major impact on her career. However, along with practically everyone else who had been active in the production and performance of Huangmei Opera, she became a target of criticism during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). As a diva and darling of the Party and the government establishment, she was even more harshly "struggled against," and she eventually committed suicide in 1968. She could have been saved, but she was denied timely medical care.[98] Needless to say, *Marriage to a Heavenly Immortal* was condemned as a "poisonous weed" during these years and became the object of a province-wide criticism campaign in Anhui in 1970, when Wang Shaofang and Lu Hongfei were paraded out as "living targets" at each criticism session. This judgment on *Marriage to a Heavenly Immortal* was reversed after the Cultural Revolution in 1978, and the movie was released once again.[99] Many sequels have now appeared in which Dong Yong and Seventh Sister are eventually reunited. A statue of Yan Fengying in her role of Seventh Sister has been erected in Hefei, probably China's first public monument in memory of an actress.[100] The reputation of Yan Fengying continued to grow over the last decades as she became the subject of many books and biopics. In 2010 the story of her life was adopted as a Huangmei Opera entitled *Yan Fengying*. Wang Shaofang was also starring again in his great roles, but his reputation was tarnished by persistent allegations that his statements against Yan Fengying in the early days of the Cultural Revolution were the cause of her death ("Dong Yong killed Seventh Sister!").

Sang Hu, though never admitted as a member of the Communist Party, continued to thrive throughout the troubled decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond, despite the political changes during those years. He went on to script

and/or direct a number of important movies before 1966, including China's first 3D movie. He did not escape criticism during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, but he was one of the earliest directors to shoot movies again in the later years of the Cultural Revolution. For instance, in 1972 he directed the movie version of the ballet adaptation of *White-Haired Girl*. He went on to garner prizes for the movies he directed during the reform period of the early 1980s.[101]

Throughout his life Lu Hongfei claimed authorship of the revised version of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, but as late as 2000 others were contesting the extent of his contribution to the revision of the play and putting forward names of other people who had made contributions as large as, or even larger than, those of Lu. Lu retained the services of a lawyer, who advised him not to go to court but to publish "the facts," which then called forth tongue-in-cheek support and partial rebuttals by some of the persons involved in the revision of the play in the early 1950s, when no one could have yet foreseen the spectacular success that the play and movie would eventually enjoy.

Of course, these questions of authorship involve more than issues of personal pride. The sons of Yan Fengying went to court in 2005 to claim their mother's (and therefore their) ownership of her personal rendition of the tunes in the film version of *Marriage to a Heavenly Immortal*, seeking part of the profits from the release of *Marriage to a Heavenly Immortal* on DVD.[102]

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In recent years the story of Dong Yong and Seventh Sister has repeatedly been adapted for television as multi-episode dramas. As before, these adaptations tend to focus more on Seventh Sister than on Dong Yong.[103] But filial piety, once vilified as the root of China's backwardness, is now once again hailed as a positive value as the Chinese government attempts to construct a harmonious society within the borders of the PRC and to present China's culture to the outside world through its Confucius Institutes.[104] In recent years, the *Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety* has been repeatedly reprinted in the PRC.

Epilogue

In 1997 the well-known female novelist Wang Anyi 王安憶 (b. 1954) wrote a short story entitled *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* (*Tianxian pei*).[105] The story is set in a remote post-Cultural Revolution mountain village. When a

young man who had hoped to leave the village and pursue a career elsewhere is killed in an accident while digging a well, the village head comforts the boy's parents by arranging a "ghost marriage" between the young man and a female soldier in the People's Liberation Army who had died during the Civil War of 1945–1949 and had been buried by the villagers. But soon afterwards representatives of the central authorities, urged on by the female soldier's former lover, now a high-level retired officer, demand the restitution of her bones so that she may be reburied and honored as a martyr of the Revolution. And so the short-lived "marriage" of the village boy trapped in his situation and the rich girl who ran away from home in order to join the Revolution comes to an end. The story may be read in many ways, but it is almost certainly also intended as a fable about the often violent and tragic history of China in the twentieth century, highlighting the short-lived alliance between the Communist Party and the peasant masses and the Party's betrayal of the countryside in the decades following the Cultural Revolution.[106]