

# The Metamorphosis of Tianxian Pei: Local Opera Under the Revolution (1946-1956) by Wilt L. Idema.

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## **The Metamorphosis of Tianxian Pei: Local Opera Under the Revolution (1946–1956) by Wilt L. Idema (review)**

Josh Stenberg

Asian Theatre Journal

University of Hawai'i Press

Volume 33, Number 2, Fall 2016

pp. 504-506

10.1353/atj.2016.0054

REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

*Reviewed by*

*Josh Stenberg*

*THE METAMORPHOSIS OF TIANXIAN PEI: LOCAL OPERA UNDER THE REVOLUTION (1946–1956)*. By Wilt L. Idema. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2015. 344 + x pp. \$45.00

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*Tianxian Pei*, translated throughout this text as *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, is a well-known Huangmei opera. Popular in the PRC since its performance at the 1954 East China Theater Festival, its success led to an iconic film the following year, an adaptation that in turn influenced the stage as well as spawning innumerable televisual and cinematic imitations. The Huangmei opera is a version of the legend of Dong Yong, one of the Twenty-four Exemplars of Filial Piety, a narrative known since the second century BCE and recorded in many versions in oral literature and popular literature. Idema treated the prerevolutionary history of the narrative and translated texts in his 2009 work *Filial Piety and Its Divine Rewards: The Legend of Dong Yong and Weaving Maiden with Related Texts*. Along with similarly structured books on such narratives as *White Snake*, *Meng Jiangnü*, and the *Butterfly Lovers* (*Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*), *Filial Piety* contributes to a monumental corpus Idema is establishing for the study of central Chinese folklore narratives and early Chinese performance texts in English translation.

With this follow-up work, Idema tracks the Dong Yong narrative into the modern era. In the prerevolutionary Huangmei performance as known through extant scripts, Dong Yong, an impoverished scholar, must sell himself to buy a coffin in order to give his father a proper burial. Meanwhile, intrigued by the human world, an immortal girl, Seventh Sister, is punished by her father, the Jade Emperor, for her immoral longing. As punishment, she has to descend to earth for a period and, in the guise of a human woman, contrive to have Dong Yong wed her. Then, aided by her heavenly sisters, she accomplishes **[End Page 504]** an amazing feat of weaving, for which Dong Yong is rewarded by a diminution in his contract of indenture. That term concluded, they set off for Dong Yong's home. But instead of accompanying him, the immortal,

having fulfilled her karmic duty, must return to heaven. Dong Yong, though initially dejected, is blessed by this heavenly alliance, and his virtue earns him imperial praise and high office. The script concludes with Seventh Sister returning to earth to present their son to Dong.

The titular metamorphosis refers to the process by which this story of Dong Yong's filial piety rewarded was turned, through two major rounds of rewriting, into a tale of class struggle and romantic love in response to early PRC culture and theatre directives; it also echoes the transformation the heroine undergoes to live among mortals. Adapters in the early PRC (the translation here is of a 1955 edition, reflecting changes made in response to certain critiques of the 1954 festival version) altered the social status of the protagonists (the scholar becomes a peasant, the heavenly maiden takes on the guise of a girl of the people), demonized the previously fatherly landlord to whom Dong Yong sold himself, excised comic ribaldry and some of the auxiliary deities, and so on. Seventh Sister is motivated not by immoral lust but by wholesome curiosity and the tedium of the heavenly realm; her descent to earth is an unpermitted escapade rather than a punishment. Calls for her return above are met with spirited resistance, and she is finally vanquished only by threats to harm her beloved Dong Yong. This version ends with her leaving a message promising to return in order to present their son to him, thus omitting the riches and glory showered upon Dong Yong in earlier versions (and which were presumably unsuitable rewards for a character of the 1950s suggesting the awakened proletarian). In this way, while retaining much of the structure, the story of filial piety turns in its post-revolutionary incarnation into a tale showing how devoted love can defeat the machinations of class oppressors and struggle against the very will of oppressive heaven.

As with other recent works by Idema, *Metamorphosis* is a hybrid between a monograph and a sourcebook. The first half of the essay section...

## China

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