

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.

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Leiden, January 2014