

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 黄梅 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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,<sup>5</sup> 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!<sup>6</sup>

Because of her weaving skills, Dong Yong's miracle-working companion was eventually identified as Weaving Maiden.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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 Scholar-tree 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<sup>10</sup> 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<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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 *luanpan* 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.”<sup>21</sup> As the genre developed its repertoire of plays, it also enriched its repertoire of tunes.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

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