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## Sidebar: What's 'The Peony Pavilion'?

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"Paradise Interrupted" is inspired by "The Peony Pavilion," the most popular opera of the Ming Dynasty, and it alludes to the biblical Garden of Eden, where perfect love once was attainable. Set in a garden, the famous opera was first performed in 1598.

"The two women in these two stories both hope to get back to the gardens, which are paradise for them where they love and live without any worries," said Kunqu opera singer Qian Yi, who will play the leading role in "Paradise Interrupted." "The woman in 'Paradise Interrupted' is just like them, searching for the garden, an unattainable ideal."

Growing up in Hunan province, China, I knew the story of "The Peony Pavilion." Everyone in China did. Recently I spoke in Mandarin with Qian Yi, who came to international prominence when she starred in the Lincoln Center Festival's 1999 production of "The Peony Pavilion."

Written by Tang Xianzu, the opera tells of a young woman born into a prestigious official's family and caught in a bind, desperate for the freedom of love rather than an arranged marriage. "Just imagine, when you are 16 years old, you die and live, only for love," Qian Yi said. "This is an adorable opera."

This classic opera was significant because, for the first time in Chinese history, a work of art expressed the hope of breaking free from the feudal system. It was a fresh tonic for young women who were emotionally repressed. Even now, "The Peony Pavilion" inspires men and women who are longing for real love.

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