

# Peony Pavilion

Mūdān Tíng 牡丹亭

**Completed in 1598 by Tang Xianzu and widely performed and printed thereafter, *Peony Pavilion* was among the first Chinese plays to explore the philosophical dimensions of passionate love. An instant success, scenes from the play entered the core repertoire of Kun Opera, the oldest continuously performed Chinese operatic form and now a UNESCO Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.**

**T**ogether with the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) *zaju* drama *Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji*) and the story of the Butterfly Lovers, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, *Peony Pavilion* ranks among the famous romantic comedies in the corpus of traditional Chinese song-drama. Also known as *The Return of the Soul* (*Huanhun ji*), *Peony Pavilion* was written by Tang Xianzu (1550–1616), the most innovative dramatist of his era. Rather than letting musical and prosodic considerations constrain his compositions, Tang treated song lyrics not so much as mere libretti but as a poetic medium in its own right. Inspired by the aesthetic of Yuan *zaju* drama, which combined poetic and colloquial elements, Tang conceived of a fresh and often complex poetic language while juxtaposing scenes of great emotional delicacy and depth with episodes of hilarity and military valor.

Completed in 1598, staged in 1599, and widely published in the 1600s, the fifty-five-scene play follows the

story of Du Liniang as she experiences sexual awakening with a young scholar in a dream (scene 10), draws a self-portrait and composes a poem on a silk scroll to

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Peonies from “Book of Grasses and Insects,” in the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* by Chieh Tzu Yuan Hua Chuan, 1679–1701.



commemorate her beauty (scene 14), dies of lovesickness (scene 20), is sent back to the world by the Judge of Hell (scene 23), has her portrait recovered by the scholar Liu Mengmei (scene 24) and meets up as a ghost with Liu, the real incarnation of her dream lover (scenes 28–32), cajoles him into resurrecting her corpse (scene 36), and eventually convinces both her stern father and the emperor to accept her marriage to her dream lover (scene 55).

As Tang Xianzu announced in his famous preface to the play, the song-drama aimed to explore the mysterious power of authentic passion (*qing*) to transcend the conventional limitations of the natural world on the one hand, and to be accommodated and integrated within to improve upon the social contract on the other hand. In endowing a female heroine with the capacity to imagine a deeply sexual and yet profoundly pure love, Tang drew on established notions of women as the emotional gender (*duoqing*) but newly invested such a disposition with socially regenerative powers. An instant success in private and commercial performance venues, *Peony Pavilion* struck a chord with both popular and elite audiences. Gentry women in particular deeply identified with the romantic and literary aspirations of the heroine. Such sentiments culminated in the *Joint Commentary to Peony Pavilion by the Three Wives of Wu Wushan* (1694).

Select scenes from the play quickly became fixtures in the operatic repertoire, particularly in the melodious string- and wind-based Kun opera (Kunqu), the oldest continuously performed operatic genre in China and since 2001 a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Since the late 1990s several major theatrical productions with renowned directors (Peter Sellars, Vienna, 1998; Chen Shizheng, New York, 1999; Guo Xiaonan, Shanghai, 2000; Bai Xianyong, Suzhou, 2004) have rekindled interest in Kun opera in China and abroad with new versions of *Peony Pavilion*. Filmic and novelistic adaptations of *Peony Pavilion* in Chinese and other languages underscore the renewed appeal of genuine passion in an age of mediated experiences.

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## Further Reading

- Birch, C. (Trans.). (2002). *The Peony Pavilion: Mudan ting, Second Edition*. With an introduction by Catherine Swatek. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Swatek, C. (2002). *Peony Pavilion onstage: Four hundred years in the career of a Chinese drama*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.

