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An interview with Jennifer Wen Ma and Qian Yi, co-creators of Paradise Interrupted

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Ng Yi-Sheng

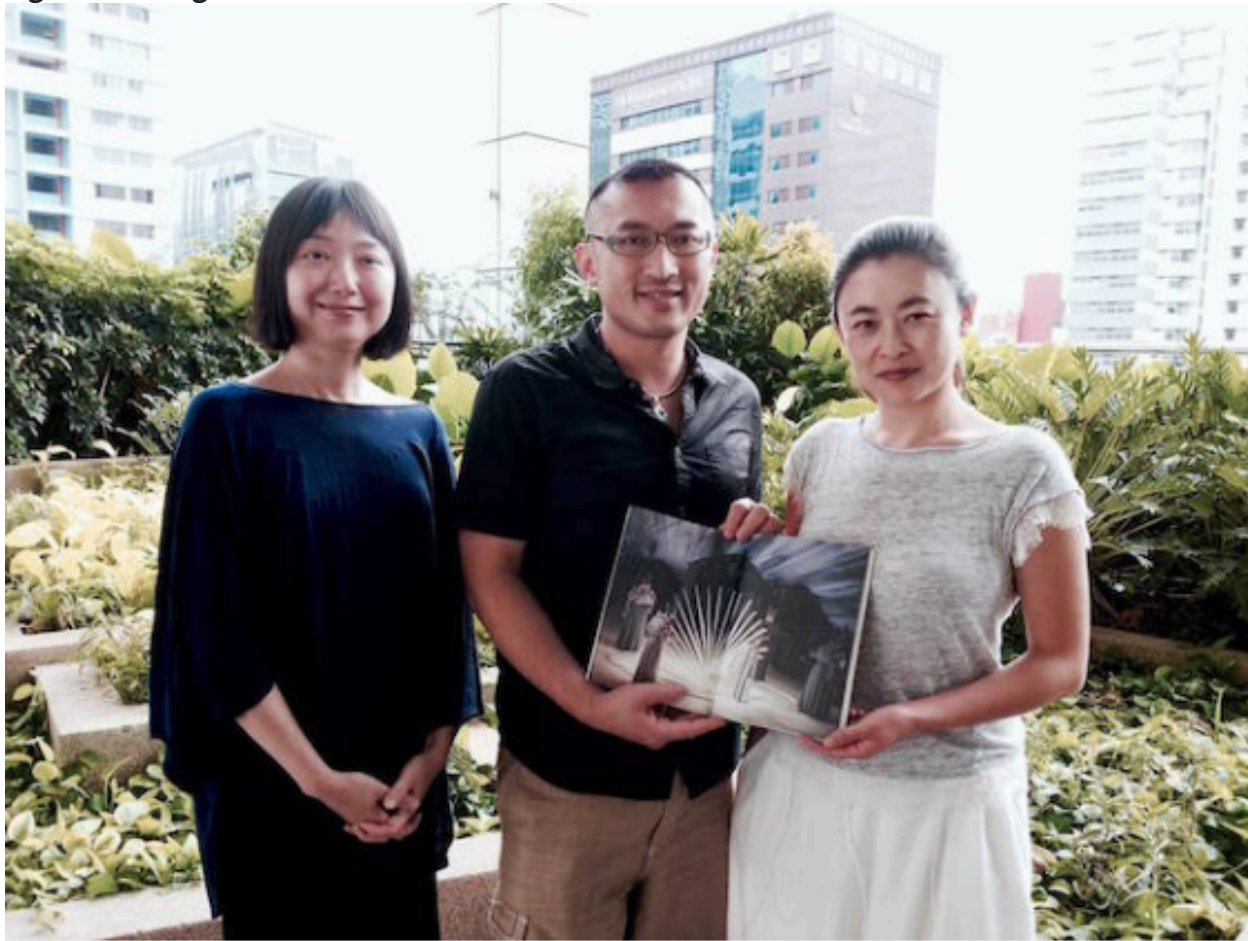


Photo (from left to right): Qian Yi, Huang Ruo, Jennifer Wen Ma

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ARTIST FEATURE: Hear what the revered visual artist Jennifer Wen Ma and opera princess Qian Yi have to share with us on their journey in the creation of *Paradise Interrupted*. (Interview available in both Chinese and English)

马文：

在《惊园》这部戏里，你可以看到几个意想不到的元素的融合，艺术上的亮点，视觉和听觉上、传统和现代，还有东西方的融合。这是一个融合，我们并不是很简单地把元素拼贴在一起，而是从设想、故事思考、音乐的写作和视觉的展现，我们都是先深入消化了元素，再从内心拿出这个崭新美丽的艺术品给大家。

钱熠：

我的出身是传统的昆曲艺术训练出来，很高兴这次可以和艺术家导演马文、作曲家黄若一起工作。我亲眼经历怎么可以把一个传统的东西让它发芽、推动，再把它往前走。我们立足在传统上面，又往前迈出了好几步，所以传统不是一个死去的東西，不是一个博物馆的东西，它是可以往前走的，是可以在大家的努力下推动，继续往前发扬，往前再遇见新的机遇让它不断地重生，不断地往前走。

我有很长一段时间不知道要怎么对待自己处理自己，不知道怎么样再表演了，好像那个flow已经没有了，后来慢慢地随着年龄的增长，再回去和老师学习，我的确找到了很多滋养。有很多那些基本传统的手、眼、身、法、步是可以滋养你的。滋养我了以后要怎么样真正地呈现出来，就是这出戏。

在我生命的这个接口上，我遇见了这些艺术家，给我一个机会、一个舞台，把我所学到的东西，把我曾经失去的，得到的东西，再呈现出来，我很幸运。

马文：

我觉得这个戏给钱熠很大的挑战。歌声唱法就很难，因为这不是一个昆曲，是个新歌剧，她用的是她昆的嗓子，来唱另外一个当代崭新的曲子。再加上这个舞台不是一个传统的舞台，它对演员的要求很高。她所用的元素是昆的，所以

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她也要从表演上出发，但她所做的表演和表达方式是不一样的，展现透露内心的信息也是不一样。

而这就要看艺术家的造就了，如果是一个好的艺术家，她在面对这个挑战时，可以沉淀，可以停一步，想一想，那自然而然她自己的东西就会出来。我就一直看到钱熠在这段过程中，能有猛劲的上去，也有停顿，甚至是往后退一下，然后让自己立点，那种滋润的东西可以很自然的产生出来，这就展现了传统和现代的火花。

因为很多我的设计、想象的，黄若写的，没有艺术家在舞台上展现的话，那就是零的，那就变成死的东西，不是活生生的，必须有舞台的展现，那是个非常有灵性的，再多的排练、设计、想象，都不能代替在场上灵性的展现，这就是表演艺术家的造就。

当初《惊园》就是来自一个与传统的碰撞。四年前，我和一些年轻的昆曲表演艺术家在我的一个艺术装置里合作一部昆曲的折子戏，我告诉他们这是一个很当代的空间，我们不要拘于传统的细节上，稍微解构一下，稍微放开一下。当时一位年轻的女演员就说，不可以。因为这场戏已经完美了，一个字一个调一个动作都不能改！

我当然理解她的意思，因为那是几百年，一代一代艺人做出来的，确实每一个动作传神肯定是非常完美的。可是作为一个活着的艺术创作者来说，我觉的这个态度不也就致死了这个艺术形式了吗，像是放置在美术馆里的恐龙骨头了？你就没有再新了吗？就不容许你再创新了吗？

自己作为创作者，我马上就有了这个疑问，有一个种子，我就从哪里开始。我就和朋友灯光设计师萧丽河说我要做一个探索，我想戏剧和装置或许可以有一些新的火花，她就引荐我认识钱熠。见到后我就知道找到人了一一懂得传统，爱传统，但是明白它是需要放得开。知道艺术的精华是在于心里面的，而不是指头尖儿上的，而是更深的东西。

钱熠：

我们遇到了很多的挑战。这些挑战是机遇，汤显祖就像一座很伟大的大山在我们的面前，滋养了我们，让我们站在巨人的肩膀上再跨前一步。我很感激我是华人的后代子孙。我们的祖先给我们留下了许多宝贵的东西。我们不能只是一只手拿着，我们可以运用它，走我们自己的路。就像马文讲的，我们这个戏的中心思想就是这个女人最终找到了自己的声音，这个声音是她自己的。但是摸索的时候，她爬了各种各样的山，她掉进了各种各样的泥沼里头，摔跤，她经历了各种苦难，人生的各种苦难，但是她最终找到了自己的声音。

马文：

这不仅仅是象征性的、处于概念上的，而这个主人公就是在寻找声音，怎么用自己的声音唱自己的歌。希望《惊园》这部戏会带个观众一个新的启发。

English translation

Jennifer:

You can see an unexpected melding of elements in *Paradise Interrupted*, from visual to sonic, traditional and contemporary, east and west, and these fusions are the artistic highlight of the work. We did not simply put all these elements together; from inception to storyline, from music composition to visual presentation, we first deeply digested all these elements before we creating a totally new work of art with a sincere heart to present to everyone.

Qian Yi:

My background is traditional kun opera training, I am very glad to work with artist and director Jennifer Wen Ma, composer Huang Ruo on this project. Through this journey of discovery, I experienced how something traditional can be injected with a new life and how we can push and move it forward. We have moved a few steps forward on this work that is based upon tradition, hence tradition is not something dead or a museum piece- it is able to move forward with everyone's efforts and continue to develop and be given a new life.

For a long period of time, I was lost and unsure of how I should perform again, it seemed like I have lost the 'flow' in acting. As I grew older, I went back to learn from my teacher again and found traditional Chinese opera training nourishing. After that, the question is how do I present what I have learnt and embodied in this opera. At this cross road, I met these artists who have given me a chance, a stage to present what I have learned, what I have lost and gained on stage and I am very fortunate for that.

Jennifer:

I feel that this show has given Qian Yi a big challenge. The singing method or the voice, are ultimately not kun opera but a brand new one as she uses her kun opera voice to sing contemporary operatic songs. The stage unlike the traditional stage, demands a lot from the performers. Even though kun opera is her starting element point, she has to perform and present differently from the tradition which includes expressing the nuances of her emotions differently.

This is the making of a great artist. When faced with such challenges, a good artist will pause and contemplate to allow her own artistic creation to intuitively evolve.

In the process, I observed how Qian Yi fearlessly charged forward but also at times paused or take a step back to stand on her own solid ground. Qian Yi's mastery of the rigorous classical movements and openness to experimentation allowed her to bring in brand new expressions to this opera. This is the creative spark resulting from the melding of the traditional and the contemporary.

Without Qian Yi's stage presence and artistry, what Huang Ruo and I designed, wrote or composed could not come to life. This inspiring performance she gives is what a great artist is made of.

Paradise Interrupted started with a clash with the traditional. I was collaborating with a few young kun performers to present a short opera excerpt in one of my installation works. I told them that since this is a contemporary work and space, we should not be restricted by tradition and we can deconstruct and be open in our approach. Then there was a young singer who told me no and that this traditional art form is perfect, every tune and movement could not be changed.

I understand where she comes from, because that particular opera work is a few hundred years of tradition, passed down from generations to generations of performers who have perfected its and every movement. But as an art practitioner, I thought, hasn't this attitude sentenced this art form to death, or at least imprisoned it to a museum, like a dinosaur bone. Is there no room for the new and creativity?

It placed a question on my mind and became the seed that I started with. I told my friend lighting designer Lea Xiao that I want to do an exploration. I believed that combining theatre and installation art forms could spark new creativity. Lea introduced me to Qian Yi and as soon as I met her, I knew she is the right person I have been looking for. Someone who knows and loves the traditional art form, and yet is willing to be open and explore further. She understands that the essence of an art form is in its soul, something deep and not superficial.

Qian Yi:

We met with a lot of challenges but these are opportunities at the same time too. Tang Xian Zu is like a great mountain in front of us. His works has inspired us and allowed us to stand on the shoulders of a great giant and move forward. I am grateful to be a Chinese descendant as our ancestors have given us a lot of invaluable heritage. We cannot just hold them in our hands, we have to make use of it and open a new path in front of us. Like what Jennifer said the theme of this opera is about a woman who has finally found her own voice. But during the search, she has scaled many mountains, fell many times in the mud before getting up again. She experienced all kinds of difficulties in life but at the end, she truly found herself.

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Jennifer:

This is not merely conceptual and symbolic. It is also a literal journey, finding one's own voice to sing one's own songs. We hope that *Paradise Interrupted* can inspire the audience with this spirit.



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