

Transnational Chinese Cinema

**Identity,
Nationhood,
Gender**



Edited by
Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu



Zhang Yimou's first film, *Red Sorghum*, took the Golden Bear Award in 1988 at the Berlin International Film Festival. Since then Chinese films have continued to arrest worldwide attention and capture major film awards, thus winning an international following that grows annually. With this increasing popularity, the Chinese film industry has attracted a sizable amount of foreign capital and has been involved in frequent joint productions. Internationalization on this scale at both the production and consumption levels has raised the question of what constitutes "Chinese cinema." In this collection, critics from various disciplines discuss the central topic of a national cinema and analyze the more recent emergence of "transnational cinema" in Chinese film studies. Applying different methodologies and approaches, they explore the interrelations of national cinematic style, global capitalism, the evolution of the modern nation-state, cultural politics, censorship, and gender identity.

Transnational Chinese Cinemas spans nearly the entire length of twentieth-century Chinese film history. Among the film artists discussed are Cai Chusheng, Xie Jin, Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Ang Lee, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Stan Lai, John Woo, and Jackie Chan. The volume opens with essays tracing the evolution of Chinese national cinema and transnational cinema in the mainland from the early decades of the twentieth century, through the pre-1949 period, the Mao era, and the post-Mao era, to the age of transnational capitalism at the end of the century. Other essays consider what have been the peripheral and marginalized traditions in relation to mainstream (mainland) Chinese cinema. They explore the construction of local, national, and transnational identity in the films of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Chinese diasporic communities. The final set of essays demonstrates that gender identity has been central to the formation of Chinese national cinema from its earliest days to the present. Femininity, masculinity, and sexuality have been an integral part of the filmic discourses of modernity, nationhood, and history.

This volume represents the most comprehensive, wide-ranging, and up-to-date study of China's major cinematic traditions. It is an indispensable source book for modern Chinese and Asian history, politics, literature, and culture and will be of great interest to teachers, students, and scholars of film studies, cultural studies, gender studies, comparative literature, nationalism, and transnational studies.

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Chapter 6

The Diaspora in Postmodern Taiwan and Hong Kong Film Framing Stan Lai's *The Peach Blossom Land* with Allen Fong's *Ah Ying*

Jon Kowallis

I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.

Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*

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Born in the United States but educated in Taiwan after the age of twelve, Taiwan "mainlander" Chinese director Stan Lai (Lai Shengchuan) might be better described as an American Asian than an Asian American. Already noticed by *Newsweek*, *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, he is certainly one of the most prominent theatrical innovators in East Asia today.¹ Recently, he turned from stage to cinema to produce his first full-length feature film, *The Peach Blossom Land* (Anlian Taohuayuan; lit., "Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Spring").² The film won first prize in the young filmmaker's division of the Berlin Film Festival and the Silver Medal at the Tokyo Film Festival (where a \$100,000 prize enabled him to finance a second film). *The Peach Blossom Land* later took first place in the Asian Film Festival in Singapore. This was a wholly unexpected response to a film most American critics would probably write off as "an art house hit." Who is Stan Lai and why all this fuss over what might seem, at first glance, an experimental film by a theater director?

After graduating from Furen (Fu-jen) University in Taiwan, Lai earned his Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Department of Dramatic Art, with a dissertation titled "Oriental Crosscurrents in Modern Western Drama" in 1983, a time when the term "Oriental" was still au courant at Berkeley. In 1982 he studied new techniques of actor-training under Shireen Strooker of the Amsterdam Werkteater, who was then visiting at Berkeley. Enthused about the techniques³ he had learned and armed with the vital qualification of the Ph.D., he returned to Taiwan to serve as artistic director and professor at the newly founded National Institute of the Arts, where he "did everything anew the right way" (according to Dunbar

Ogden, his old adviser at Berkeley) and currently teaches his own graduate students. Lai writes:

What drew me to Shireen's work was precisely the process of "making" a play that was radically opposed to conventional methods of approaching theatrical production. In a nutshell, I see conventional practice in America, in general, to be an attempt to assemble the divided pieces of production—acting, lighting, scene design, sound, etc.—into a final, cohesive whole. This process involves lots of unknown factors and chance—can an actor attain the certain quality of a certain role? Is the "chemistry" right? Will the scenic designer's ideas conflict with the director's? How will the actors adjust to makeup and costumes? The Amsterdam Werkteater's techniques employed by Shireen Strooker invert this process: Instead of pieces toward a whole, she takes the essence—some guiding thought or emotion—first, and from this genuinely heartfelt essence, the form and pieces of production begin to take shape. Though the end product is never predictable, this process eliminates much of the chance factors of conventional means. From the standpoint of the actors, they are not asked to "inhabit" a role, but rather to use *themselves* to *create* a role. From the standpoint of the designers and technicians, the ideas come by necessity, from the process itself.⁴

Lai also founded his own professional troupe in Taiwan, which he calls, with an American matter-of-factness, Performance Workshop (Biaoyan gongzuofang) and directed numerous plays before making the switch to film. He still intends to "move back and forth between theater and film," but judging from the unlikely critical success of *The Peach Blossom Land* and my hopes for his second feature, *The Red Lotus Society* (1994), chances are that his future will be more and more in cinematic arts, despite temporary protestations to the contrary. I say "unlikely" only because *The Peach Blossom Land* is so avant-garde and innovative, particularly when compared with the work of Mainland filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou and even Chen Kaige. In *The Peach Blossom Land*, historical and temporal frames are constantly switched on the audience to an almost irritating degree of frequency. Some of the sets are so contrived and theatrical that the audience is continually slapped with the "reality" that life is stage and stage is life, while all the time a pseudo real-life drama unfolds, much of it from a hospital bed in Taipei. Regarding this technique, Roswitha Mueller once observed:

The inorganic work of art, the object constructed out of fragments, has its own history. In an article "On Brecht and Eisenstein," Rainer

Friedrich pointed out that Brecht often used the term “montage” to contrast modern art with traditional art. The traditional Aristotelian concept of art, argued Friedrich, centers on the concept of mimesis as *natura naturans*, the productive process of nature. The rise of modern subjectivity in the Renaissance, Friedrich continued, did not do away with the concept of mimesis, but instead merely altered it. The artist was now considered *ut alter deus*, another god. The implication was that the artist no longer imitated nature but was the creator of another nature, the realm of art. The latter was subsequently considered a higher form of reality. Insofar as the aesthetic realm still presented itself as natural and the organic work of art was the norm, the moment of construction first entered on the basis of negating its own artificiality, its constructedness: “For the practical principle of the organic work of art is *ars est celare artem*, art as the concealment of art.”

The hallmark of the modern work of art, on the other hand, is divesting itself of the pretense of being nature and freely displaying itself as artifact. In that sense Friedrich contended that montage is the principle of the modern work of art. The emphasis montage places on the separateness of elements and on heterogeneity prevents the formation of an organic unity. In film, as Sergei Eisenstein has pointed out, it is the mechanical process itself that requires the cutting and juxtaposition of shots.⁵

In Brechtian fashion, Lai’s film begins in a theater (sans overbearing “stage manager”). Sleek female figures grope their way through the dark walkways behind the stage. We are shown the empty seats of an auditorium, as the director and actors talk to one another. Then we are presented with a mock-up set of a play about two new lovers in Shanghai at the end of the Second World War, titled *Anlian*, or *Secret Love*. The young woman, Yun Zhifan (actress Lin Ching-hsia) has family in Guilin and needs to return home just once more to see them, while the man, Jiang Binliu (played by Chin Shih-chieh) is from Dongbei (Manchuria) and longs to see his own family but cannot easily go there.⁶ The world for Chinese people has been radically uprooted, and even greater changes (the Communist victory in 1949 and the Taiwan diaspora) are clearly in store. These events separate the lovers, who both go to Taiwan, but each mistakenly believes that the other has remained on the Mainland.

Another set of actors then intrudes on the stage, insisting that the facility has been rented to them for the evening for a dress rehearsal of a play to take place the next day (a Brecht-inspired if not Brechtian device). Much argument ensues, and we are unclear which side will be victorious (perhaps



Fig. 12. Taiwan actors just don't seem to "get it right" in portraying a scene from late 1940s Shanghai. From Stan Lai's film *The Peach Blossom Land* (Anlian Taohuayuan), 1992.

an analogy to the Chinese civil war, which goes on and on with no final resolution?). The lines of dialogue in the Shanghai scene are delivered in high northern-style stage Mandarin, but the intrusion of the actors from the second troupe abruptly brings in the southern Mandarin "Taiwan 'si bu si' accent," another dose of reality for both the audience and the members of the first group of actors.

We are then introduced to the recurring reenactment (by the second troupe) of Tao Yuanming's (A.D. 365-427) fifth-century story, *Tale of the Peach Blossom Spring* (*Taohuayuan ji*), in which the classical Chinese language intrudes amid a predominantly farcical vernacular (*baihua*) narrative. Premodern stage techniques from traditional opera are used (such as waving blue paper to simulate a river's waves) in the protagonist's upstream journey by boat to a magical Never-never Land called the "Peach Blossom Spring," where he discovers other-worldly refugees "who have known nothing of the outside world since before the Han dynasty."⁷⁷ Questions like:



Fig. 13. A parody of Chinese antiquity and the “alternative reality” of Taiwan’s phantasmagoric existence as doppelgänger for Mainland China. From Stan Lai’s film *The Peach Blossom Land* (Anlian Taohuayuan), 1992.

“Do you know where Wuling⁸ is?” are met only with bemused incredulity. To make matters worse, the protagonist, an impotent fisherman called Old Tao (Lee Li-chun) feels that his disloyal young wife, Spring Flower (Ismene Ting), and her lover, Master Yuan (Ku Pao-ming), may have been reincarnated there to torment him (in the form of a white-gowned man and woman who look surprisingly like their counterparts back in the “real” world), so the traditional ideal of the bucolic and peaceful Peach Blossom Spring, far away from the troubles and strife of the world, has been skewed into a kind of self-made (or at least uncontrollable) hell, much like what Taiwan became for a number of the refugees from the Mainland. Then there is the hopelessness of finding any direction back: to the question “Where’s Wuling?” the incredulous woman in Peach Blossom Land responds: “What’s ‘Wuling’? Why would you want to get to Wuling?” The protagonist despairs of even describing Wuling to someone who has never been there.

Even though they both speak Chinese, all of the referents are different; just as Taipei has a Jingmei, but Taiwan has no Shanghai, Taiwan unintentionally became, for many people, something of a phantasmagoric doppelgänger for or an ersatz version of China.⁹

Even the name of Taohuayuan is continually questioned throughout the film, when different accents are placed on one of the Chinese characters that make up the name: “Tao HUA Yuan, TAO Hua Yuan, Tao Hua YUAN.” One thinks, perhaps of Tai-WAN Sheng, TAI-wan sheng, Tai-wan SHENG (“Taiwan Province,” the official Mainland designation for the island, skewed) and the perceived spiritual, if not intellectual, need for the “rectification of names”—is it really what it purports to be? And what say, if any, do its people have over this? Many of Lai’s word plays are a form of postmodern anarchistic linguistic play. Old Tao decides eventually to return “home” to ask his wife to join him in the Peach Blossom Land. Although the protagonist has enjoyed a prolonged period of uneasy physical safety there (one cannot call it a “life” in any real sense of the word), how much of a refuge is a refuge if you can never go back? Of course, this is the dilemma of modern man as well, not just the mainlanders on Taiwan. Lai writes:

[This] interruption creates chaos on the stage. The person in charge of the theatre cannot be found and each troupe tries to assume authority of the stage by performing fragments of the plays. As it goes, scenes of the tragic and the comic start to interact with each other, and opposite themes and styles begin to mesh and blend.¹⁰

Shortly thereafter, a young woman in her twenties wanders onto the set, ostensibly from off the street, continually calling the name of her boyfriend in Taiwan-accented Mandarin, which is not recognized by the actors of either troupe, although each assumes him to belong to the other. The viewer gradually begins to suspect that she and her elusive friend may represent Taiwan’s Generation X, members of which are attempting to lead their own lives outside of the reality created by their parents, but nevertheless must do so with the risk of either being engulfed by that reality or constantly marginalized by it.

Meanwhile, as *Secret Love* continues, now in the Taipei of the early 1990s, the aging Jiang Binliu, who was deeply in love with the woman in Shanghai and, despairing of ever finding her, has married a Taiwanese woman in 1963, now languishes in a hospital. An impetuous Taiwanese nurse discovers that he has run a front-page ad in *Zhongguo shibao* (*The China Times*, a popular centrist newspaper) asking for information on the whereabouts of the woman from Shanghai. Concealing it from his Taiwanese wife with some effort, the nurse presses him for personal details of the

romantic attachment and prods him about the failure of the Shanghai woman, Yun Zhifan, whom both of them now know to be somewhere in Taiwan, to appear. More time-frame switches back to the Peach Blossom Land, where characters degenerate into slapstick reminiscent of the Three Stooges (one wonders whether Stan Lai saw them as a child on television in Washington, D.C., where he spent his formative years). With frustration mounting upon frustration in the land of refuge—one also begins to wonder if the metaphor of the Peach Blossom Land might not extend to America, as well, the “new mainland”¹¹ to which many mainlanders wandered from Taiwan in the later 1950s and 1960s and continue to end up now.

After we have seen the protagonist’s Taiwanese wife lifting him into bed out of a wheelchair and caring for him tirelessly without complaint, after we have heard her describe to the nurse how he would never drink the Taiwan tea she prepared for him and how he would lapse for years into long, unexplained silences and pensive moods, finally the woman from Shanghai appears at the hospital room door, asking for “Mr. Jiang” (a homonym: Mr. “Rigor-mortis”? Mr. Jiang as in Jiang Jieshi—Chiang Kai-shek from the Mainland? We don’t know what the surname means, really, but the informed audience member probably has suspicions at this point, for the seasoned reader of Chinese literature often looks for double entendre).

At that point the nurse suggests that she accompany the wife downstairs to “pay the bill” (although the hospital stay is not over). The protagonist and the woman from Shanghai then compare notes on the last forty-plus years. She tells him she thought he remained in Shanghai and continually wrote him letters, which she must have had smuggled to the Mainland, since there was no legal mail service from either side of the Taiwan straits. Never receiving a response, her brother persuaded her to marry, “as one will grow old” without having done so. He gives her his own account, which is strikingly similar, questioning her on why it has taken so long (five or more days) for her to respond to his running ad, about which the nurse has goaded him repeatedly. She starts to fib: “I just saw it today—” but breaks off in mid-sentence, telling him she has always loved him, but that her current husband “is a good man,” whereupon she takes her leave. Jiang is left with his Taiwanese wife to face up to the question of his own mortality and his place in the world, with greater clarity, we hope.

Despite his skillful employment of the Brechtian techniques of “distancing” (*Verfremdungseffekt*), montage, and the trappings of the postmodern stage, what Stan Lai has produced still comes thematically, at least, under the rubric of the “literature of exile” produced by Bai Xianyong and other skilled Mainland exiles in the 1950s and 1960s. This is not to say that his film is dated or already passé but rather a reflection of the basic reality that

although the Chinese civil war may be over as an armed conflict, its consequences are far from resolved. The diaspora that has been created has spilled over not only to Taiwan but also to America and elsewhere.¹² Just as the Lai brothers in their youth tried to bring different Americans together, Stan has continued to bring the “two Chinas” closer. There is a somewhat Quixotic element in his endeavor, but that does not make it any less admirable.

Ah Ying (Banbian ren), a Mandarin film from Hong Kong¹³ by Allen Fong (Fang Yuping; Cantonese: Fong Yuk-ping) released in 1984 and based loosely on the life of the all too short-lived Taiwan director Ge Wu (Koh Wu), whom Allen Fong knew, deals with the intellectual diaspora in a way that exhibits more consciousness of class and educational differences between Chinese from both Taiwan and Hong Kong and introduces ruminations on the “applicability” of graduate study in America, as well, which some viewers may wish Stan Lai had done. For example, what does it mean, *Ah Ying* proposes, to live out one’s youth abroad in order to acquire knowledge that will supposedly benefit one’s own society and then find that knowledge inapplicable or only partially applicable on one’s return years later. Zhang Songbai, the character based on Ge Wu, is hard-pressed to use his knowledge of acting and theatrical sophistication to help Ah Ying, the young lower-class Hong Kong girl student who falls in platonic love with him. His own mortality (he was infected by a needle used for mass inoculations in the Taiwan army) prevents him from marrying her and benefiting her in that way as well.¹⁴ Just as his parents were deprived of a country, the diaspora has deprived this middle-aged intellectual of a family and a livelihood, despite his scholarly achievements, which are a result of his patience, and his own hard work. As the two protagonists of *Ah Ying* watch his Volkswagen bug (the ideals of the international youth movement of the 1960s?) being crushed into a small metal block in a Hong Kong junkyard, we get a sense of foreboding concerning Ge Wu’s own fate. These issues of the intellectual diaspora are also broached in modern Chinese literature in a number of the short stories by Lu Xun and other Chinese writers as well. How can the “returned” intellectual make use of what he has learned in a country where nothing he has learned from abroad applies?¹⁵

In a way, Lu Xun and Allen Fong extend the inquiry where Stan Lai cuts it off. On a personal level, the moral dilemma of the diaspora is how we deal with others while coming to terms with our own displacement (e.g., in *Schindler’s List*, Schindler is not really a “pure” German but comes from Moravia in the former Czechoslovakia¹⁶ and finds himself in Poland at the outbreak of the war. But the dilemma is how he places himself vis-à-vis other people, not the map). As T. S. Eliot’s confused speaker’s voice reminds us: “Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.”¹⁷ Rather than



Fig. 14. Would-be actress Ah Ying's life in "real world" Hong Kong, where she works as a fishmonger. From Allen Fong's film *Ah Ying*, 1984. Photo courtesy of Steve Horowitz and Fenghuang Motion Picture Company (Hong Kong).

conclude "there is no going back," which Stan Lai's own life disproves, his film concludes, we need to tell ourselves "our *qi* is here" and live as *Menschen* with that.¹⁸ The question of "going back" is largely irrelevant, which is what I think *Peach Blossom Land* demonstrates.

Ah Ying is also similar to *The Peach Blossom Land* in that it contains a play within the movie. The Cantonese-speaking actors put on a Mandarin-language play adapted from the short story "Jiangjun zu" (A race/people of generals) by Taiwan dissident writer Chen Yingzhen. "Jiangjun zu" is something of a Lu Xun-inspired story about members of a private marching band, which played at funerals, people from the lowest strata of Taiwan society.¹⁹ The fact that director Allen Fong (born in Hong Kong in 1947) included it within the movie says as much about his own goals in filmmaking at the time as it does about his own analysis of the role of the film itself. It is a tragedy based on the lives of unfortunates in a sick society. Fong and

Chen Yingzhen, like Lu Xun, hoped to “draw attention to this sickness and suffering, so that a cure might be sought.”²⁰ In a way, that is also what Stan Lai does, but Lai operates on a less graphic and more existential level. That is where we see more Brecht and less Lu Xun, at least in terms of technique, if not inspiration. As Peter Brook defines it:

Verfremdung has been described as ‘the key concept’ of Brecht’s theory of theatre. . . . Brecht’s term itself has been variously translated as ‘alienation’, ‘estrangement’, ‘eloignement’, ‘distanciation’, and ‘defamiliarisation’. As he described it, it employed elements of stage design, music and lighting as well as a gestic acting style in a conscious—and in some ways self-conscious—attempt to historicise characters and events. In this way the theatre-goer’s practically instinctual tendency to empathise with supposedly ‘eternally human’ characters and ‘universal’ situations would be frustrated, and the ‘single chain’ of a ‘timeless’ narrative necessary to a conventional illusion of reality would be interrupted. Instead of a unified and pacifying, or even simply ‘entertaining’ work of art, with all its aesthetic and ideological concomitants, Brecht wished for an epic theatre in which acting, music and design, conceived as a ‘bundle of separate elements’, would operate autonomously, but at the same time in a relation of commentary and contradiction with each other. The immediate effect of this separation (principally of actor and audience from theatrical character and incident) would be one of surprise, dismay and perhaps discomfort, as the audience’s unexamined assumptions about art and society took a jolt. Brecht’s audience would then be ‘verfremdet’, and would react, so Brecht says, in the following way: ‘I should never have thought so—That is not the way to do it.—This is most surprising, hardly credible.—This will have to stop. This human being’s suffering moves me, because there would have been a way out for him. This is great art: nothing here seems inevitable—I am laughing about those who weep on stage, weeping about those who laugh.’²¹

This technique, in turn, becomes Stan Lai’s tower of strength (though he employs this modernist technique in an ironic patchwork and, I would argue, a definitively postmodern way)—the device that successfully forces his audience to contemplate the drama, on one level or another, in a detached manner.

Of all its reviewers, David Thomson, in the announcement of the 1984 San Francisco International Film Festival, provides the most insightful assessment of *Ah Ying* when he writes: “*Ah Ying* is a film of much promise and many virtues—it is gentle, funny, observant, compassionate; it has a fine

sense of the great varieties of Chineseness in the world today, and of the precarious poise of Hong Kong; but it is most acute in its feeling for actuality turning inevitably into a composed story, of the raw seeming chosen.” Other reviewers, however, were all too quick to misunderstand the film as being “too realistic” and therefore less than satisfactory. In this, they failed to grasp the irony of its postmodern pastiche critique, which goes beyond simple realism. Some prominent critics, missing the various levels of intertextuality embedded in the film, produced accounts that were simply laughable to anyone who had even a rudimentary appreciation of the movie or had read Chen Yingzhen (the story had already been translated into English),²² such as Janet Maslin’s review in the *New York Times*, which concludes:

Like his own filmmaker-character, Mr. Fong seems convinced that merely transposing real experience to the screen is enough to hold an audience’s interest. The scenes involving Ah Ying’s family seem less artificial than the film school episodes, and have somewhat more drama to them. A family of about eight lives in a two-room flat, and in this setting Ah Ying is addressed simply as “Third Sister.” It’s not surprising, then, that she seeks the wider and more personalized recognition that an actress commands. By the end of the film, Ah Ying is triumphantly co-starring in a play with her revered teacher, he playing an old man and she a prostitute who, for some reason, seems to be dressed as a drum majorette.²³

Of course, Ah Ying is “dressed as a ‘drum majorette’ ” because she was portraying, on stage, a character in Chen Yingzhen’s short story “Jiangjun zu” who made her living in a for-hire marching band that played primarily at funerals. But I am reminded here of Rey Chow’s observation, “it remains the case that the ‘people’ of the ‘third world’ are invoked only in the form of an indistinguishable mass, while the ‘first world’ intellectuals continue to have names”²⁴ because I would submit that there is more to Ah Ying’s would-be acting career than a quest for “personal recognition.”²⁵ In part Ah Ying is seeking a way out of the class and gender traps of Chinese society in 1980s colonial Hong Kong;²⁶ in part she is facing an existential crisis and a star-crossed platonic love affair. Her solution is the attempt to redefine herself as a member of a larger Chinese community (i.e., one that embraces the cultural heritage of Taiwan, the international overseas Chinese community, and, by extension, that of Mainland China as well): this is part of a spiritual/intellectual development process that transforms her from an ordinary Hong Kong girl-fishmonger into a Chinese artist and intellectual and will ultimately remain with her longer than the material benefits accrued



Fig. 15. The art of survival at their first lesson: Zhang Songbai (Peter Wang) warns his drama class that to be actors, they may have to wait tables first. From Allen Fong's film *Ah Ying*, 1984. Photo courtesy of Steve Horowitz and Fenghuang Motion Picture Company (Hong Kong).

from a potential acting career. In a way, this is the crux of liberation from colonial status: identifying with a larger whole that is beyond the power of one's colonial masters to define. It is also the reason she learns to speak in Mandarin.

For these reasons, the "public" response to these two films was also markedly different. As already mentioned, mainstream critics have a hard time coming to terms with Fong. Although the two directors share an enthusiasm (Fong on screen and Lai off) for method acting, one critic even misinterprets this, writing off Zhang Songbai as "a knowing hipster who leads the class through encounter-group exercises and the like, and whose own ambition is to become a film maker."²⁷ And this was not the first time

Allen Fong had difficulties with the reception of his films. As a news item in the column “This Week” in the supplement to the *South China Morning Post* revealed:

A new, first feature film by a local director which has excited world interest would seem the ideal choice to open Hong Kong’s fifth International Film Festival. Or so you’d think. Unfortunately, there was an embarrassing snag to Allen Fong’s *Father and Son* [Fu zi qing]. It was produced by Feng Huang, which is a left-wing motion picture company, and that, decided the Urban Council, really wouldn’t do. So extreme was the reaction, in fact, that it was decided that *Father and Son* shouldn’t be included in the festival at all.

Apparently this riled many involved in the HKIFF, who considered the ruling arbitrary, unjust and more than a little ridiculous considering *Father and Son* had already been shown at the prestigious Berlin Film Festival and been invited to screen at the Melbourne, London—and possibly Cannes—Film Festivals later in the year. Eventually, emotions became so heightened that the Urban Council did an about-turn and lifted the ban—but by then it was too late. Insulted to the core, the Feng Huang people decided to withhold the film from the HKIFF and arrange their own local premiere and showings instead.

Fong was clearly made to suffer for his frankness and his associations, even in the “democratic” climate of Hong Kong. One wonders if the current slump in the career of this world-class and pioneering Chinese director may not be at least partially attributable to just such a reception. It is precisely that reaction which Lai seeks, successfully, to avoid through his use of the *Verfremdungseffekt*.²⁸ For although Lai does not challenge the status quo in Taiwan on the basis of class, he does do so, like his Mainland predecessor Cao Yu, on the basis of interpersonal relations (a key concept in Confucianism) and, unlike Cao Yu, identity (the lynchpin of much of twentieth-century Chinese political rhetoric). To pull this off as well as he has is no small accomplishment, albeit that his timing was certainly better than Chen Yingzhen’s. As Lai has written:

Taiwan in 1983, when I began creative work in the theatre, was pregnant with contradictions that were soon to evolve into political confrontations and acute social and cultural changes. Foremost among these contradictions was (and still is) the question of identity, not only the gross political questions, but the subtle questions of cultural identity and direction as well. . . . The precept for using improvisation as the key creative tool was, given the influx sociopolitical environment of

Taiwan, ready-made forms of arts were inadequate; art had to define and continually redefine itself, just as did the individual and Taiwan society as a whole. The philosophy behind the technique used was that improvisation would become a channel for one's inner concerns, and that under proper direction, individual concerns would give shape to collective concerns, and collective concerns, once discovered through the process, would give shape to the performance piece.²⁹

Central to Lai's approach to the Chinese identity crisis in Taiwan is his belief that political currents are external manifestations of more internal and personal contradictions. He continues:

Political events always effect the way we work as well as with what we work. In many ways, I feel that in a given society, political events are often the gross-externalized manifestation of issues that have been internalized on an individual level. In Taiwan, the "independence movement" hasn't affected the way we work as much as the inner forces that this movement expresses. In my view, the movement is a struggle to be independent not from anyone else but from ourselves. This attempt to break away from ourselves constitutes another way of searching to redefine who we are. This is happening on gross and subtle levels, in all facets of life in Taiwan, not just politics.³⁰

Given that even a mention of the Taiwan Independence Movement (Taidu) was once taboo in the controlled press of Taiwan, Lai's statement is certainly an indication of the political liberalization in process on the island today. Nevertheless, Lai's privileged position as a member of the Mainland elite gives him the license to do so with a minimum of controversy and to view the "independence movement" as an outgrowth of personal identity issues sidesteps the political ramifications of treating it as the outcome of historical forces and geopolitical events, which would seem more objective. It is clearly an intellectualized approach, one which harks back to Confucian notions of *neisheng waiwang* (an internal sage/an external king), which suggests either genuinely changing political climes or the ability to successfully "distance" oneself from the actualities of politics—an approach once a luxury for anyone on the island to adopt.

To conclude, then, it seems possible to say that although Allen Fong was the first, or one of the very first, directors to come to terms with changing perspectives on identity among the Chinese living on the periphery of the People's Republic of China, and did so with a degree of realism that has been thus-far unequaled, Stan Lai has brought the debate onto another level by viewing the question from a postmodern perspective of personal past/

present and self/society interplay. He invents a comical historical "other," which allows the audience to redefine the present by contrasting it with the past, but he eschews the Brechtian question of how to move from art to collective action. In the way that he employs the *Verfremdungseffekt* to demand both the actors and the audience come to terms with this as an existential dilemma, rather than just relating a story they may or may not personally "identify" with, he may in fact come closer to striking a more responsive chord in his Asian viewers than Allen Fong. Just as Fong's dying character, Zhang Songbai, the ghost of Ge Wu, given to soliloquies on his days as a struggling graduate student in America, attempts to address an international as well as a Hong Kong predicament, Stan Lai, with his resurrected and parodied Chinese past, addresses the hopes and fears of the Taiwan and also the overseas Chinese audiences with his multilayered rereading of history. But in the end Lai insists: "Basically, we aspire to channel the Taiwan experience, and the Chinese experience as a whole, toward the goal of revealing the human condition on a universal level."³¹ Only time will be the judge of who speaks with greater immediacy in that regard. That is the ultimate paradox for all literature and film produced during a situation of flux which attempts to address that situation with timely and meaningful relevance.

• Notes

Special thanks to Steve Horowitz, an unsung founder of Chinese film studies in the United States, for the stills from *Ah Ying*.

1. For a sample of articles, see *Newsweek*, February 29, 1988, 48; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 26, 1990, 20; *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1991, F1.

2. Stan Lai wrote and directed the film. It was produced by his wife, Ding Naizhu, with light and camera work by Christopher Doyle and original music composed by Fumio Itabashi and Kazutoki Umezu. The film opened in New York in 1993 as part of the New Directors/New Films series. It was reviewed (favorably) in the *New York Times* on March 25, 1993, C20, by Janet Maslin. A book on the making of the play and film has been published in Taiwan under the title *Wo anlian de Taohuayuan* [The peach-blossom spring I loved in secret] (Taipei: Yuanliu, 1992). The script and photos of the play were also published as a book, *Anlian Taohuayuan* [Secret love: The peach-blossom spring] (Taipei: Huangguan, 1986).

3. These resemble the Russian director Constantin Stanislavsky's (1863-1938) technique of psychological realism.

4. As quoted in Dunbar H. Ogden, *Actor Training and Audience Response* (Berkeley, Calif.: Oak House, 1984), 25.

5. Roswitha Mueller, *Bertolt Brecht and the Theory of Media* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 67.

6. We assume that the Northeast is already occupied by the Communists, as "the land routes are all closed," although this is never stated specifically.

7. In the original classical-language tale they are said to have "fled the chaos of Qin times" (*bi Qin shi luan*). See *Jianzhu Tao Yuanming ji* [An annotated collection of Tao Yuanming's works] (Shanghai: Hanfenlou, 1922), *ce 2, juan 5, 1b6*. The authoritarian Qin Shi Huang (First Emperor of the Qin) is sometimes used as a stand-in for Mao Zedong or the Communist revolution. Certainly "chaos" can be a reference to the civil war of the 1940s between the Guomindang and the Communists.

8. Wuling, in the present-day province of Hunan, was the place of origin for the protagonist of Tao Yuanming's *Taochuayuan ji* (lit., "Record/Tale of [a trip to] Peach Blossom [Stream's] Source").

9. Compare the perspective of the narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston's novel, *China Men*, when her Chinese American brother is steaming toward Taiwan on a U.S. army troop carrier during the war in Vietnam and the voice of the narrator tells us: "He watched the real China pass by, the old planet his family had left light years ago. Taiwan was not China, a decoy China, a facsimile." Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 294.

10. Stan Lai, *The Peach Blossom Land: A Synopsis* (Taipei: Performance Workshop, 1992).

II. *Na shi yige xin dalu* (that is a new mainland), I recall reading of America in the Chinese literature produced by exiled mainlanders in the 1970s on Taiwan when I studied there and first met Stan when he and his brother hosted the only St. Patrick's Day party in Taipei, to which they naively but good-heartedly invited Americans from both the Stanford Center and the Mandarin Center, always the cordial ambassadors of a divided China to a divided America, refusing to notice the division of the latter, just as the American government refused to recognize the division of the former.

12. Lai even says at one point: "Almost from the beginning it is obvious that the story of the play may in fact be the Director's (Ding Chung) own love story. [He is] subconsciously trying to re-enact his lost dream." Lai, *The Peach Blossom Land: A Synopsis*.

13. *Banbian ren* (lit., "Persons from the space along the sidelines") was distributed in the United States, beginning in 1983, with the title *Ah Ying*, the name of its female protagonist. Wang Zhengfang (Peter Wang) plays the male lead, and Xu Suying (Cantonese: Hui So-ying), the female. The film is linguistically quite sophisticated, using Mandarin, Cantonese, and Chaozhou dialects and English as well. Within the story, the Cantonese-speaking actors are moreover forced to struggle with learning Mandarin for the play performed within the film.

14. The close of the film hints that what he has taught her may ultimately help her get a career in acting, but this is only implied; we do not see it actually take place.

15. The narrator in “In the Wine Shop” claims: “I had become a complete stranger.” Lü Weifu, who ends up a private tutor to the children of a wealthy family, where he teaches only the Confucian classics, tells the narrator: “I don’t even teach mathematics; it’s not that I don’t want to teach it, but rather that they don’t want it taught.” See Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* [Complete works of Lu Xun], vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1991), 33.

16. “You have to remember,” said a boy whom Oskar would later save, “that Oskar had a German side but a Czech side too. He was the good soldier Schweik. He loved to foul up the system.” See Thomas Keneally, *Schindler’s List* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 233.

17. “[I’m] hardly a Russian . . . [I] come from Lithuania—pure German.” From *The Waste Land* (1922), part I, “The Burial of the Dead,” in T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1971), 37 (my translation).

18. I am using *Mensch* in the Yiddish sense of the word, meaning people who are decent human beings in that they treat others in a generous and understanding manner, regardless of personal stakes. *Qi* refers to life (lit., “life’s breath”).

19. For the text of the short story, see *Chen Yingzhen xiaoshuo xuan* [Selected stories of Chen Yingzhen] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1983), 50–63. Chen Yingzhen was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment in Taiwan in 1968 for sedition. He was released as part of an amnesty following the death of Chiang Kai-shek in 1976. In an interview granted me in Jingmei in 1976, Chen Yingzhen stated: “One of the reasons I became a writer had to do with my reading Lu Xun when I was in my early teens. Although I did not really understand him, I read him over and over again. And this also eventually accounted for my imprisonment.”

20. Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 4, 512.

21. Peter Brooker, *Bertolt Brecht: Dialectics, Poetry, Politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 62–63. I prefer the translation “distancing” for *Verfremdung*. Regarding cinematic adaptations of Brecht, see the study by Soviet woman scholar M. I. Turovskaia, *Na granitse iskusstva: Brekht i kino* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1985).

22. The first English translation of “Jiangjun zu” appeared in *Renditions* 19/20 (1983) under the title “A Couple of Generals.” It was reprinted in a substantially different version in Lucien Miller, *Exiles at Home: Short Stories by Ch’en Ying-chen* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1986), 69–82.

23. Janet Maslin, review of *Ah Ying*, *New York Times*, March 30, 1984, C7.

24. Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 20.

25. Richard Springer notes: “Like Brocka, Fong is interested in the lives of the downtrodden who are trying to escape the poverty of the ghetto. Brocka slashes at his theme like an angry participant in the drama. Fong feels the oppression as much, but he sits back calmly and more objectively, painting his canvas with delicate

strokes. Both are bucking the power structure, but Brocka is living more dangerously this year." *East-West Journal* (San Francisco), April 18, 1984.

26. Rey Chow errs in saying "Hong Kong currently has a democracy" (*Writing Diaspora*, 23). Hong Kong, at the time of her writing, was a British crown colony with very little pretense of actual self-government.

27. Maslin, review of *Ah Ying*, C7.

28. Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was himself quite accomplished in this as well (both on stage and off), slipping by persecution in Nazi Germany and the United States during the McCarthy period, when he was called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1948. Despite his support of the East German workers' strike in 1953, he managed to continue to operate his own theater ensemble for eight years in East Berlin, winning the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954.

29. Stan Lai, "Specifying the Universal," *The Drama Review* 38, no. 2 (1994): 33–34.

30. Lai, "Specifying the Universal," 37.

31. Lai, "Specifying the Universal," 37. Lai, as a creative artist, seems to be articulating precisely what Yingjin Zhang would term the "Liberal, Humanistic Position" on Chinese literature. See Yingjin Zhang, "Re-envisioning the Institution of Modern Chinese Literature Studies: Strategies of Positionality and Self-Reflexivity," *positions: east asia cultures critique* I, no. 3 (1993): 826–827.