

暗戀桃花源

"The Peach Blossom Land" -- Taiwan, 1992
directed and written by Stan Lai (Lai Shengchuan)

Based on an earlier play performed under the title Anlian Taohuayuan, which Lai translates as "Secret Love For the Peach Blossom Spring", this is a postmodern filmic representation of the Chinese diaspora on Taiwan. It 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." Unexpected 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.

In Brechtian fashion, Lai's film begins in a theater (sans overbearing "stage manager"). Sleek female figures grope their way through the dark walk-ways 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, entitled Anlian or "Secret Love". The young woman, Yun Zhifan (actress Lin Chin-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 effect a visit there.¹ 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 believe that the other has remained on the mainland.

Another set of actors then intrude 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 tomorrow (a Brecht-inspired, if not Brechtian device). Much argument ensues and we are unclear which side will be victorious (perhaps 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

¹ We assume that the Northeast is already occupied by the Communists, as "the land routes are all closed," although this is never stated specifically.

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 (AD 365-427) fifth-century story of the Taohuayuan ji (Tale of the peach blossom spring), in which the classical Chinese language intrudes amid a predominately farcical baihua narrative. Pre-modern 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."² Questions like: "Do you know where Wuling³ 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 surprising 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, in the minds of many people, something of a phantasmagoric Doppelgänger for or an ersatz version of China.⁴

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² 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 Tse-tung and/or the Communist Revolution. Certainly "chaos" can be a reference to the civil war of the 1940s between the Kuomintang and the Communists.

³ Wuling, in the present-day province of Hunan, was the place of origin for the protagonist of Tao Yuanming's Taohuayuan ji (lit. "Record/Tale of [a trip to] Peach Blossom [Stream's] Source").

⁴ Compare with the perspective of the narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston's novel China Men, when her Chinese American brother is steaming toward Taiwan on a US 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

Even the name of Taohuayuan is continually questioned throughout the film, when different accents are placed on one of the Chinese characters which 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? 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.⁵

Shortly thereafter, a young woman in her 20s wanders onto the set, ostensibly from off the street, continually calling the name of her boyfriend ("Liu2 Zi3ji4") 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)⁶ 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

ago. Taiwan was not China, a decoy China, a facsimilie." Maxine Hong Kingston, China Men (New York: Knopf, 1980), p. 294

⁵ Lai, "Synopsis", op.cit.

⁶ A popular centrist newspaper.

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 if Stan Lai saw them as a child on T.V. 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"⁷ 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.

⁷ "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.

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After the play is over, the white-haired director sits silently at a table. White cloth from the set flaps in the air and the two park swings from the scene in late 1940s Shanghai swing empty. Two women from the acting team switch on a song by Zhou Xuan, which continues to play until the end of the film. Then, smiling, they link arms and walk down a corridor toward the door. An older woman calls to the white-haired director, as if to tell him it is time to leave. The scene switches to the hair of "old" Mr. Jiang, which is being combed as he lays on a table. We get the impression he might be dead, but he moves slightly and we realize that this is not the morgue but a dressing room. Part of the lyrics to Zhou Xuan's song, which we were previously told were incomprehensible to the young Taiwanese nurse, except for their effect by making Mr. Jiang melancholy, are flashed on the screen as English subtitles finally: "Such delicate feelings...Like ripples on spring water...that float to your side...I wonder if you heard the sound?"

The actress who plays the woman calling Liu Ziji (known as Michelle) faces a mirror in the same room, doing her makeup. Then she's suddenly back in her role, wielding a knife in her right hand, looking up toward the sky, she exclaims with outstretched arms: "That year on Nanyang Street...there was a peach tree that blossomed. Liu Ziji, every petal had your name." She then scatters petals in the air, saying: "Every petal is your story." A stage worker who has taken a sympathetic interest in locating her boyfriend for her before says in a frustrated tone: "Miss, let's go..." She responds: "Liu Ziji! How could you become like this?", gets angry and throws petals at the stage worker, as if he were Liu Ziji. Then she cries out "As for me..." (er wo)? while spinning around rapidly and looking up towards the sky. Jiang's wife finds the newspaper with the ad on the front page and looks at it. The half prow of the boat from the operatic scene of the fisherman making his way upstream in the play of "Taohuayuan" is dragged by a rope along a modern vinyl floor through a florescent-light lit hall, while a male voice calls: "Michelle." It seems to be the younger director of "Taohuayuan". We then see the face of the young man from 1940s Shanghai. The same director taps him in a friendly manner on the shoulder (as if to awaken him from a daydream) as he (the director leaves). He then calls: "Bye, Uncle Wang" after him as he disappears down the hall toward the door. He gazes off, away from the camera, and we see Michelle spinning herself around in circles, still, crying: Wo... (me)....." A younger Taiwanese actress with a long coat on pauses in the hallway to look back. Michelle continues to spin herself in circles with her arms outstretched as the credits begin.

questions:

1. What do we learn about the Chinese civil war from this film?
1. How is the Chinese diaspora reflected in this film?
2. Would you describe this as "postmodern" art? Why or why not?

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