

## 七十六

In a play by a friend  
was a Peach Blossom land  
where a cuckolded fisherman  
discovered first hand  
a place with no conflict  
where all lived in peace  
how could he walk away  
knowing his calm would cease?



## Chapter 76 – Stan Lai ( 賴聲川 ) - preeminent Chinese playwright

In Chapter 15, I wrote about a play my good friend, Stan Lai ( 賴聲川 Lài Shēng Chuān) wrote in 2008 called *The Village* ( 寶島一村 Bǎo Dǎo Yī Cūn.) It took place in a military dependent village ( 眷村 juàncūn) in Taiwan over four generations starting in 1949 and told a story that not many people who are not Chinese know much about. In 2023 Stan wrote *Idea Was Here* ( 艾迪亞曾經在此 Àidíyà céngjīng zài cǐ,) about a 1970's coffee house where we used to perform. After 50 years, the bands got together again.



“Secret Love - Peach Blossom Land” ( 暗戀桃花源 Ànlàn Táohuāyuán) in 1986 was Stan’s first major success. The English title of the play is most often abbreviated as “Peach Blossom Land” since that title seems to work better in English. The play starts off as two young lovers in mid-1940’s Shanghai prepare to return home to see their families. His family was from Dongbei (northeastern China) and her family lived in Yunnan in China’s southwest. The young man, 江濱柳 Jiāng Bīn Liǔ, had written a stack of love letters to his true love, 云之凡 Yún Zhī Fán, which were intended to be read one letter each day until the young lovers were reunited. For this young couple and so many others at that time in China, the Chinese Civil War got in the way, and they were not able to reunite.

The original story of the “Peach Blossom Land” by Tao Yuan Ming (陶淵明), was written in the Six Dynasties Period (421 CE) and is one of the earliest “Shangri-la” stories on record. Stan Lai took some wonderful liberties with Tao Yuan Ming’s story. The fisherman in Stan’s play was being cuckolded by his wife who was having an affair with their landlord. As the Peach Blossom story unfolds, it is being constantly interrupted by the “An Lian” story. “An Lian,” the tragedy, weaves its way in, over and around “Tao Hua Yuan” (which Stan tells as a slapstick comedy). The two plays perform a wild dance on the same stage as each play tries to complete rehearsals for their upcoming performances. A third story is, of course, the story of the two theatre companies preparing to perform. Somehow, although all three stories and even the dialogues overlap and intersect one another, in the end, there is resolution to each of the three stories. Audiences in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and China are all familiar with the loss that came with the KMT moving to Taiwan in 1949. Fathers, sons, brothers, and husbands had no idea when they landed in Taiwan that it would be 30 years before they could reconnect with their loved ones. Many never did. Like the fisherman who left Peach Blossom Land, the mainlanders who came with the KMT must have yearned to return, but the door was sealed and the majority on both sides had only memories. Parents died. Husbands and wives remarried. Children grew up with no father or sometimes a new family when Dad failed to return. As China gradually reopened, searches were begun, contacts were made, and families began to reconnect. The KMT soldiers were my parents’ age. The generation who never got to know their mainland families were Stan’s age. *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* was performed in English for the entire summer at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2015. Stan Lai was born in Washington D.C. His father was a diplomat at a time when Taiwan was the only “China” recognized by much of the world. Taiwan’s official name in English is still “The Republic of China.” When Stan arrived in Taiwan as an 11-year-old, he could barely speak Chinese, but his parents were adamant that he and his brother learn their “mother tongue” and they were enrolled in local schools. By the time Stan graduated from Jian Guo High School (臺北市立建國高級中學), his Chinese was almost as good as his English. Stan had one foot planted in the west and the other in Taiwan. After Jian Zhong, Stan received his BA in English literature from Taiwan’s Fu Jen Catholic University (輔仁大學). Following two years of mandatory military service in Taiwan, Stan returned to America for his graduate work, earning his PhD. in Dramatic Arts from UC Berkeley in 1983.



At the heart of Stan Lai's theatre company, Performance Workshop 表演工作坊 Biǎoyǎn Gōngzuò Fāng is improvisation. I remember sitting in on one of Stan's classes at Stanford University in Palo Alto as his class was brainstorming ideas for a play (in English) that started out with the name, *Stories for the Dead*. By the time I got to see the play in Beijing (in Chinese), the play's name had been changed to *Like Shadows* (如影隨行 Rú Yǐng Suí Xíng.) Stan recently told me the play is now called *Bardo Blues*.

In 2000, Stan Lai shook the theatre world with his seven and one-half hour long *Dream Like a Dream* (如夢之夢 Rú Mèng Zhī Mèng.) When I first saw the play in 2002 in Hong Kong, I sat in the center of what would have been the stage in a normal theatre in the round. The theatre was square with two levels for performing on all four sides. But with "Dreams", each member of the audience was given our own rotating seat in the center of the "stage" and we watched the play performed in 8 spaces where the audience would normally sit. Small "stages" were created on all four sides and on two levels. At around the half-way mark, the audience was given a dinner break, and then returned for the final four hours. *Dream Like a Dream* was booked solid for every performance in Hong Kong. When it returned to Hong Kong in 2019, it was every bit as popular when performed at the new Freespace in West Kowloon. This time we watched it over a two day period. In addition to the "Lotus Pond" seats in the middle with

the revolving chairs, there was now a seating area above the play where one can read surtitles in English and Chinese and watch some amazing stage effects on a giant screen while the play is happening.

Stan directed *Dream of the Red Chamber* for the San Francisco Opera (libretto by David Henry Hwang, music by Bright Sheng) in 2016 and created *Nightwalk in the Chinese Garden*, in which he wove elements from the 16th century Chinese classic, *The Peony Pavilion*, with early 20th century California history in a play created specifically for the Huntington Library's Chinese Garden in 2018.

I haven't seen the final play I want to mention, but I have read the script more than once. *Ago* (曾经如是 Céng Jīng Rú Shì) would be more literally translated as "Thus, therefore", *Ago* is a journey involving a small community of Tibetans living in Yunnan, talking animals, basic elements, enlightened beings, spirits, Wall Street tycoons, hookers, drug dealers, musicians, and cooks. Characters transform themselves seamlessly from life on the Tibetan high plateau to doing business on the 88<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. All kept in check by "Time", "Chance", and "Space."

In the June 2020 issue of the IATC journal/Revue de l'AICT, writer Yu Kuo-Hua said that "*Ago* is about migration." He then suggests that in the play, "Lai poses the crucial question: What are people seeking when they undertake the journey of migration?"

Perhaps Stan is reminding us that we're all migrants in this crazy world which we inhabit. Whether we migrate physically, spiritually, or merely in our dreams, we all leave the mundane to inhabit worlds which we don't control. In Stan Lai's plays we can't help but migrate through time and space, to take on new identities through his characters and sets. We yearn for that "Shangri-la" we might encounter around the next corner or over the next hill. As we walk through each new door, however, we leave something behind us and like Stan's fisherman, and like James Hilton's Conway, we discover that those doors may have closed behind us.

