

The Essentials: Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY STAN LAI

1992, DVD, MANDARIN CHINESE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

107 MINUTES, COLOR

By Carol Stepanchuk

“A modern classic for its timeless themes and structural originality” —Goodreads

Stan Lai (Lai Shengchuan) is one of the most celebrated playwrights working in the Chinese-speaking world. His work over three decades has charted the course of modern Chinese-language theatre in Taiwan, China, and other Chinese-speaking regions.

Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land (SLPBL) is a film representation of Lai's stage play first performed in 1986. The plot of SLPBL melds a medieval comedy and a contemporary love story through twists and turns when two drama troupes, trapped at the same theater and pressed for rehearsal time, share the stage, working out their two plays simultaneously.

Action mimics live theater, and the film captures—as deliberately written in the script—unpredictable occurrences, set malfunctions, and staff meltdowns. As a film rendition, moreover, the luxury of being able to do retakes results in perfectly orchestrating the imperfections of a stage play.

The many layers of this film make it a welcome addition to classes on literature, history, writing, and language. Fluctuating between scenes set in Shanghai and Taipei, a rural village and a utopian paradise, the underlying moral and philosophical dilemmas addressed by the film ultimately transcend culture, time, and place. These ideas also highlight what is unique about mainland China and Taiwan through the exposition of history, societal expectations, and myth.

For classroom use, SLPBL becomes even more relevant as an “essential,” as Lai's forthcoming book set *Selected Plays of Stan Lai* brings this work and his plays overall to an English-speaking readership.¹

Synopsis and Teaching Suggestions: Lifting the Curtain

Can we get some light in here . . .

The cast of the first mini-play, *Secret Love* (SL), enters the stage; star-crossed lovers Jiang Bingliu and Yun Zhifan spend their last night together at a moonlit park in Shanghai (1948) vowing to meet again as Zhifan departs for her home in Kunming, and Bingliu wonders when he will get back to visit his home in Manchuria. “You are a cloud that drifts in the sky, a meteor that lights the darkness,” sings Bingliu.

The languid scene of two people in love contrasts against the humor-infused script of the next vignette—the competing stage rehearsal of *Peach Blossom Land* (PBL) and the quarreling antics of an unhappy married couple at home. Disgruntled husband Tao struggles to twist the cap off a wine jug . . . he complains, “What kind of home is this, what kind of town—what kind of bing (pancake) is this, what kind of knife is this!” His wife, Spring Flower, saunters in with a packet of herbal medicine to help with infertility issues, although neither admits that they are at fault. Spring Flower dallies with landlord Yuan, who comes in for a “visit,” and the use of his gift of new bedsheets



Stan Lai. Source: Stage & Studio with Dmae Roberts website at <https://tinyurl.com/2yy8hfyw>.

becomes an ingenious prop in the hands of this trio. Acrobatic leaps and sheet games ensue, and Yuan urges Tao, a fisherman, to catch bigger fish upstream. Tao argues that it's not that easy, so much depends on skill and luck . . . but, in the following scene, Tao pantomimes rowing upstream through the rapids, moaning about his broken life.

Gags and slapstick are an integral part of *Peach Blossom Land* and catapults viewers beyond cultural and language barriers. Students might compare this humor with vaudeville, physical comedy and today's prank-inspired reality shows. They might express their own comedic and acrobatic flair to selected scenes. Live theater/set effects can also be compared and contrasted with other media—for example, animation (an area vastly familiar to students). What if the play were reimagined as a graphic novel? As for students of Chinese, the colloquial dialogue (Mandarin) in both mini-plays is straightforward and concise, and with the English translation soon available, will provide an excellent oral language tool.

Middle Ground

The film narrative shifts as the director and manager argue about contracts and stage details. A new set for *Secret Love* is revealed—a hospital room in Taipei where Jiang Bingliu, old and dying, is cared for by a chatty nurse and his attentive wife. Why, the nurse wonders, have you placed an ad in the newspaper for a missing person (Yun Zhifan)? Careful not to reveal anything to Jiang's wife, she asks, “Isn't your life full enough?” Meanwhile, an emotionally distraught woman interrupts the actors, walking throughout the theater and shouting for “Liu Ziji, Liu Ziji!”

The rehearsal for PBL unfolds next as Tao, having traversed the rapids, passes a grove of lusciously colored pink peach trees. Tao, reliving the “Record of Peach Blossom Spring,” a 300-word poem by Tao Yuan-Ming (c. 365–427), arrives in a utopia. To Tao's chagrin, however, two of the immortals have exactly the same appearance as Spring Flower and Yuan—their kind and compassionate personalities eventually win over the brooding Tao, and they become a harmonious trio. Tao ultimately leaves this bucolic place to return home, hoping to bring others to the miraculous land.

For literature survey courses, this section of the film offers an excellent introduction to one of the most significant pieces of classical Chinese poetry, “Record of Peach Blossom Spring,” often memorized by middle school students in mainland China and Taiwan. What are the implications of Lai's use of utopias—both in PBL and postwar Shanghai?

Instructors can encourage research into the idea and depiction of utopia and the historical timeframe surrounding an artist's/author's creation of such places in selections culled from world literature. Sir Thomas More's 1517 work of fiction and sociopolitical satire *Utopia* and Edward Bellamy's 1888 *Looking Backward* constitute superb potential Anglo-American points of comparison.



Still photos from the film production. Left: the young lovers Chiany Pin-Liu (Shih-Chieh King) and Yun Zhifau (Brigitte Lin). Right: Spring Flower (Ismene Ting) and Old Tao (Li-Chun Lee). Source: IMOB website at <https://tinyurl.com/vkedt49z>.

Intersections

An intermission occurs as actors from both plays run into each other—directors accuse each other: “Your comedy is tragic”; the other responds, “Your tragedy makes me laugh.” A solution is arranged, and yellow tape divides the stage as the rehearsals move on simultaneously. The same lines are spoken in unison by both teams of actors—what was intended as contrast is mirrored as complementary. Actions are intertwined and intertangled in a seamless tapestry of word and motion.

Verbal accessibility occasionally leads to the breakdown of language as first heard in the stuttering between Tao and Yuan early in the film. Seen here, communication created in the intersection of the two plays—between the lines—also leads to an implosion of meaning and comprehension. This philological deterioration coincides with aspects of China’s postmodernism movement in the mid-1980s–1990s. Language becomes destabilized, and, whereas once considered a vital cultural force, now breaks apart. Contemporary artist Xu Bing describes this deconstruction as an “in-between” experience, falling in the cracks between meaning and nonsense—an unpredictability that might lead to a new awakening of self. Using such examples as steppingstones, students can explore the fluid shifts of language and its possible cultural and political implications in literature, drama, and art.

The Last Scenes are Rehearsed Independently of Each Other . . .

PBL: *Spring Flower now lives with Yuan (Tao has not been seen since his journey upstream). “Day in and day out, nothing but diapers,” Spring Flower complains, “what kind of home is this!” Yuan curses Spring Flower, “Why do you burn spirit money for Tao? We need to rid his shadow from this house!” And then more urgently, “His spirit is right here in this room!” Spring Flower and Yuan see Tao’s visage and scream. Tao, however, is flesh and blood, and recounts his journey upstream on the river and his long period of reflection leading to a spiritual awakening. Though he wants to take Spring Flower to this place, he understands circumstances have changed. A baby cries and is tossed from one to another among the trio, until Tao, baby and staff in hand, cries out helplessly.*

As for the woman who calls repeatedly for Liu Ziji—no one answers.

Who is Liu Ziji? What are the implications for including the mysterious quest for Liu Ziji? In actuality, Liu Ziji was a nobleman from times past who, hearing of PBL, went to find this place but to no avail, having died en route of illness, his quest unfulfilled. Viewers can debate how this personage impacts the overall resonance/meaning of the play.

SL: *Zhifan, now in her senior years, answers Bingliu’s ad. Unbeknownst to each other, Bingliu and Zhifan were both living in Taiwan. As before, they*

wondered how they could find each other in the massive city of Shanghai but not in Taipei. Bingliu remembers Zhifan’s long braids—she responds that they were cut when she married a long time ago. Their stories now recounted, their hands tenderly touch; Zhifan turns and slowly walks away.

This movie was released in 1992—the same time as the 1992 Consensus, which set a diplomatic basis for semiofficial cross-strait exchanges between mainland China and Taiwan. The SL story poignantly highlights migration from mainland China (1948) and relocated livelihoods in Taiwan (1980s–1990s). People were acutely aware of issues of integration and independence—would Hong Kong’s “One Country, Two System” policy be a workable template for Taiwan? Could the utopian visions of SLPBL be interpreted as a promise of a middle ground?

A Bit More . . .

To help students traverse beyond China-focused themes with which they may or may not be familiar, a look into the creative aspects of the film medium and storytelling in general can be beneficial in stirring their imaginations and helping explore cross-cultural and thematic comparisons.

- Communication in the film/play was done through letter writing, newspaper ads, and word of mouth. How would this story be set in today’s world of social media? What problems might be resolved; what new problems might occur?
- The director’s own comments on the nuts and bolts of writing can inspire students in their own creative process. One of the most important aspects of writing a play, Lai says, is determining why this scene comes first and that scene second. This is an opportunity to discuss what the scenes are building to and how the arc of one character’s journey affects the arc of the whole story.

Overall, by interfacing this film in Asian and global curricula, students can develop a deeper understanding of Chinese and East Asian history, literature, and philosophy; through listening to spoken dialogue in Mandarin enrich their own language skills; and, at the very least, be introduced to the sound and texture of a language that is the most widely spoken native language in the world. The play’s longstanding popularity among all generations is also a testament to the continued relevance of its multifaceted themes—a true classic to be infinitely valued in any and all classroom viewings.

Thank you to Dr. Anne Rebull, lecturer on Chinese film, opera, and culture at U-M Asian Languages and Cultures Department, who generously offered content and teaching suggestions used in undergraduate settings.

The 1992 film version of SLPBL is available on DVD at select library

collections (including the University of Michigan—cataloging currently in progress). Recordings of theatrical performances are also accessible through library collections. See <https://tinyurl.com/2rk7v3cp>. ■

NOTE

1. Stan Lai was an artist in residence at the University of Michigan's Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies (LRCCS) during March 2019. He made a special appearance at the public screening of *SLPBL*, a feature event for CHOP (China Ongoing Perspectives, see the essay below). Due to popular demand, additional film showings were scheduled for classrooms, and a U-M student acting group performed the play as part of its stage repertoire. See this link: <https://tinyurl.com/2sz5cn4d> for information on his selected works forthcoming with the University of Michigan Press.

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Curating a Film Series

By Liangyu Fu

The idea of the CHOP (China Ongoing Perspectives) film series grew out of an informal pilot event, where *Mainland* (2017, directed by Miao Wang),¹ a documentary film about Chinese teenage study abroad students, was screened at the University of Michigan (U-M) Shapiro Library. It attracted colleagues across campus units who work with international students as well as members from a larger community. It was originally planned as a one-shot event, but its success demonstrated the need for our campus to have an ongoing curated series for documentaries on the Chinese-speaking world.

In an effort to serialize documentary film events, the concept of CHOP was proposed to the U-M Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies (LRCCS) and the Asia Library. CHOP officially started during the 2019 Spring Festival celebration with a public screening of *The Search for General Tso* (2014, directed by Ian Cheney), a film about the making of an American Chinese culinary icon. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in winter 2020, we have adjusted the format of on-site screening to online synchronous screening.

Co-organizers Carol Stepanchuk (LRCCS) and I have adopted a collaborative approach to run the CHOP series. First, all the ideation process, film selection, and event planning are conducted jointly between us. Second, we partner with the LRCCS research community to match the theme of the film with local intellectual resources. We keep LRCCS research profiles in mind when identifying films to be presented, as all the screenings are accompanied by lively and in-depth conversations with U-M experts. Moreover, we work closely with the Askwith Media Library to secure Licenses of Institutional and Public Performance Rights and Digital Site Licenses for the selected documentaries.

In terms of film selection for CHOP, an overarching consideration is how to create better synergies among the film, the public, and the scholarly expertise. Accordingly, the following selection models have been developed and incorporated into the planning of CHOP:

1. Select critically acclaimed documentaries about current affairs. We screened *Long Time No See, Wuhan* (2020, directed by Takeuchi Ryo) as an effort to address public curiosity about the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and to promote DEI value in the face of escalated anti-AAPI hate crimes.
2. Form the “theme semester” and select films based on the chosen theme. For example, we designated the winter semester of 2020 to focus on “youth and aging.” Therefore, we selected *A Way Out* (2016, directed by Zheng Qiong) on fears and hopes of young Chinese and *Please Remember Me* (2015, directed by Zhao Qing) on Alzheimer’s among the aging population in China.

3. Select works that can be integrated into other academic events on campus. The movie featured in the previous essay, *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* (1992), was selected from Stan Lai’s masterpieces to be screened during his residence in Ann Arbor in March 2019 as LRCCS Distinguished Visitor. It was a special feature of CHOP due to its nondocumentary status.

During the LRCCS “Global Chinese Food” conference, we chose *Soul of a Banquet* (2014, directed by Wayne Wang), a best fit for the theme of the conference. It tells a life story of Cecilia Chiang, who introduced authentic Chinese food to America.

4. Design “mini series” based on individual directors or themes, and select films surrounding them. Currently two “mini-series” are being planned. One of them will feature Hao Wu, an award-winning independent filmmaker, and three of his recent works (*People’s Republic of Desire* on China’s online universe, *All in My Family* on LGBTQ parenting, and *76 Days* on the pandemic in Wuhan). The other one will focus on the Cultural Revolution.

It is worth mentioning that whenever possible, CHOP provides opportunities for students and the community to engage directly with directors of the selected films. During the *chunyun* (Spring Festival travel season, the so-called “largest annual human migration in the world”) period this year, *Last Train Home* (2009), a documentary about Chinese migrant workers’ experience traveling back home for the Spring Festival, was featured in an online CHOP event. We hosted Director Lixin Fan at the Q&A session, moderated by a U-M faculty expert on labor politics in China. Despite traveling in Tibet for his current documentary project, he connected with the audience through Zoom, discussing his filming experience, the life changes over a decade of the workers represented in the film, and his observations on new trends in the Chinese labor market. ■

NOTE

1. For a review of *Mainland* by Carol Stepanchuk, see *Education About Asia* 23, no. 2 (2018): 71–72.

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