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The Diaspora and the Nation: A Cultural Poetics of Re-membering in Lai Shengchuan's Taiwan Trilogy

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Taiwan's recent history has been characterized by a remembering and a rewriting of the past. Commenting on Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha points out that memory is the necessary and sometimes hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity. Remembering, he writes, "is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (Bhabha 1994, 63).

Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) begins his famous preface to the first collection of his short stories *Outcry* 吶喊 with an observation on dreams and memories that would seem to make the two converge:

> At the time I was young I, too, had quite a few dreams, later forgetting most of them, but yet not thinking that [forgetting those dreams was] a pity. What is referred to as remembering, although it may make one happy, can at times also make one feel alone. What is the point of keeping the threads and strands of one's spirit still linked to times of loneliness which have already passed? My trouble, in particular, is that I cannot forget completely, and that portion [of

> those memories] which I cannot forget completely has become the source of the stories in the present collection "Outcry" (Lu 1991, 1:415).

In this passage dreams and memories are at first equated, but then the equation is skewed, as though they have actually become antagonists. The dreams of youth become a subset of the memories which may haunt one at middle age.

Like Lu Xun, Taiwan director and playwright Lai Shengchuan 賴聲川 (1954–) draws heavily on memories and reconstructed vignettes of the past. But in his two films *Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Land* 暗戀：桃花源 (1992) and *The Red Lotus Society* 飛俠阿達 (1994), and in his stage-based gala musical *Dreamers* 夢想家 (2011), Lai reconstructs a collective past, a past which embodies not his own personal Taiwan or his own autobiographical experiences, but rather one which speaks for the whole nation and situates it within the diaspora, not as a subset of the Chinese diaspora, but rather as a capsule central to the diasporic experience. From another perspective, Lai brings Taiwan back to center stage. As Tu Wei-ming 杜維明 (1940–) and other articulators of the idea of a "cultural China" might put it, he turns the periphery into the center.

What is this discourse specifically? None other than the mythic re-telling of the flight to Taiwan, both by mainlanders and by Taiwanese in *Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Land*, and the remembering of the era of martial law by a generation so young that the importance of the challenge becomes all the more paramount in terms of the passage of time (in *The Red Lotus Society*). As a play, "Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Land" debuted in 1986, but the filmic version was not released until 1992. The difference may be significant in that the play was a product of the very end of the martial law era, whereas the film was made after the lifting of martial law. Both the play and the film were written and directed by Lai. Most scholars think of it first and foremost as a play, but the film version was

important internationally, in part because it was subtitled in English by the director himself and played to a much wider audience, winning 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 Lai to finance his second film, *The Red Lotus Society*). *Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Land* 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 *Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Land* is so avant-garde and innovative, particularly when compared with the work of mainland filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, which were also winning prizes at the time.

Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Land actually involves two separate plays brought together by their need to (rather reluctantly) share the same stage. In *The Peach Blossom Land*, historical and temporal frames are constantly switched on the audience to an almost dizzying 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 in *Secret Love*, a pseudo real-life drama unfolds starting in late 1940s Shanghai, but with much of it taking place in a hospital room 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 the first 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 雲之凡 (played by Lin Chin-hsia[1]) has family in Guilin 桂林

1 This is the prominent actress Lin Ch'ing-hsia 林青霞 (pinyin: Lin Qingxia; West. Brigitte Lin, 1954–), born in Taiwan in 1954, the descendant of a Shandong family. In the text, I am citing the original spelling of the names of the cast of the film, as it appeared in the publicity documents.

and needs to return home just once more to see them, while the man, Jiang Binliu 江濱柳 (played by Chin Shih-chieh 金士傑) is from Dongbei 東北 (Manchuria) and longs to see his own family but cannot easily effect a visit there.[2] The world for Chinese people has been radically uprooted by the war 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 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 still goes 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,"[3] another dose of reality for both the audience and the members of the first group of actors. In a sense, this is national allegory.[4]

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

3 The "Taiwan accent" in Mandarin was frequently typified by some as lacking the *juan-sheyin* 卷舌音 or retroflex in pronouncing zh-, ch-, sh-, r- initials; hence *shi-bu-shi* 是不是 (meaning: "is it [thus] or not?") would be pronounced in the Taiwan accent as *si-bu-si* 四不四 (sounding something like: "is it *four* or four?"). This challenging of northern-style stage Mandarin with southern Mandarin was a notable feature in Lai's play and the film. Much critical acclaim focused on similar linguistic features in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) which were considered innovative in representing the linguistic realities of the diaspora, although the film appeared later.

4 Taiwan is often conceived of as made up of these two ethnic groups: the Taiwanese and the mainlanders. The national allegory would be the arrival of these groups at markedly different historical periods and their rivalry now to tell their story, "take the stage" and pilot the craft (Taiwan has been compared with the image of *A boat in a stormy sea* 汪洋中一條船. Of course, this is a simplification of the populace,

We are then introduced to the recurring reenactment (by the second troupe) of Jin 晉 era author and literatus Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 (Tao Qian 陶潛 365–427) fourth-century story *Tao Hua Yuan Ji* 桃花源記 (Tale of the Peach Blossom Spring), in which the classical Chinese language intrudes amid a predominately farcical *baihua* 白話 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."[5] Questions like: "Do you know where Wuling[6] is?" are met only with bemused incredulity. To make matters worse, the protagonist, an impotent fisherman called Old Tao (Lee Li-chun 李立群) feels that his disloyal young wife Spring Flower 春花 (Ismene Ting 丁乃竺) and her lover Master Yuan (Ku Pao-ming 顧寶明) 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 transmogrified into a kind of self-made (and yet not self-controllable) Hell,

leaving out the aboriginal peoples (*yuanzhumin* 原住民), the Hakkas (*Kejiaren* 客家人) and others who are nowadays are lumped in as honorary Taiwanese. For the famous debate on Third World literature as national allegory, see Jameson 1986, the response by Aijaz Ahmad and Jameson's rejoinder.

5 In the original classical-language tale, dated sometime during the Taiyuan 太元 reign period during Jin 晉 (376–396 AD), they are said to have "fled the chaos of Qin times" 避秦時亂. See Tao 1922, 1b6. The authoritarian Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇 (First Emperor of the Qin) is sometimes used as a stand-in for Mao Tse-tung 毛澤東 and/or the Communist Revolution. Certainly "chaos" can be a reference to the civil war of the 1940s between the Kuomintang and the Communists.

6 Wuling 武陵, now called Changde 常德 and located in the present-day province of Hunan, was the alleged place of origin for the protagonist of Tao Yuanming's *Taohuayuan ji* 桃花源記(lit. "Record/Tale of [a trip to] Peach Blossom [Stream's] Source").

much like what Taiwan became during the forty-year martial law period for a number of the refugees from the mainland,[7] as well as the "native" Taiwanese, over whom they ruled. 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'? and "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 景美,[8] 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.[9]

Even the name of Taohuayuan 桃花源 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* 臺灣省 ("Taiwan Province," the official mainland designation for the island, skewed) and the perceived spiritual, if not

7 This is reflected in the 2009 film *Prince of Tears* 淚王子 by Hong Kong based director Yang Fan 楊凡 (West. Yonfan, 1947–), a "mainlander" who grew up in Taiwan during the 1950s and 1960s. The plot is based on a true story of two little girls whose gallant, loving father, a loyal pilot in the Kuomintang air force, falls victim to the White Terror and is executed.

8 Jingmei is a district in Taipei adjoining another district where one of the two separated lovers from the mainland resided for many years, unaware that the other was living nearby. This underscores the irony that the great metropolis of Shanghai, which they were both in temporarily, was where they met by chance initially, but they never would run into each other again over the many years they lived out their lives in the diaspora in Taipei.

9 One example is 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 ago. Taiwan was not China, a decoy China, a facsimile." See Kingston 1980, 294.

intellectual, need for the "rectification of names" (*zheng ming* 正名)—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), the film asks the existential question: 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. And what of the native Taiwanese who may have "forgotten where" they came from, or even feel they did not "come from" anywhere. 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 20s, identifying herself only by the English name "Michelle," wanders onto the set, ostensibly from off the street, continually calling the name of her disappeared boyfriend ("Liu2 Zi3ji4") in Taiwan-accented Mandarin, a name which is not recognized by the actors of either troupe, although each assumes him to belong to the other. In Tao Yuanming's original story the name of a real historic traveler (to other places) Liu Ziji 劉子驥 was mentioned for purposes of authentication of the fable—supposedly the only person from our world of mortals ever to attempt to re-trace the steps of the fisherman and re-discover the Peach Blossom Spring, Liu failed (his surname is a homonym for liu 留 "to remain"). The viewer of the film gradually begins to suspect that Michelle and her elusive friend may represent Taiwan's Generation

10 Lai, "Synopsis", op. cit.

X (and those who came after), attempting to lead their own lives outside of the reality created by their parents and grandparents, but nevertheless having to do so with the risk of either being engulfed by that reality or marginalized by it.

Meanwhile, as *Secret Love* continues, now in the Taipei of the mid-to-late 1980s, the aging Jiang Binliu who was so deeply in love with the young woman in Shanghai and, despairing of ever finding her, has married a Taiwanese woman in 1963, now languishes in a hospital. His impetuous Taiwanese nurse discovers that he has run a front-page personal ad in *The China Times* 中國時報[11] asking for information on the whereabouts of Yun Zhifan, the woman he met in Shanghai. Concealing the paper from his Taiwanese wife with some comic effort, the nurse presses him for personal details of the romantic attachment and prods him about the failure of the Shanghai woman, 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 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 begins to wonder if the metaphor of the Peach Blossom Land might not extend to America, as well, the "new mainland"[12] to which many mainlanders wandered from Taiwan in the later 1950s and 1960s and continue to end up in now, along with growing numbers of Taiwanese.

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

11 Then a popular centrist newspaper.

12 "*Na shi yige xin dalu*" 那是一個新大陸 (that is a new mainland), I recall reading of America in the Chinese literature produced by exiled mainlanders on Taiwan in the 1970s, many of whom aspired to go to the US, or to have their children study there, get "green cards" and re-establish the family there.

the Taiwan tea she prepared for him and how he would lapse into long, unexplained silences and pensive moods, finally the woman from Shanghai appears at the hospital room door, asking for "Mr. Jiang" 江 from the mainland (a homonym for another character Jiang 僵 Mr. "Deadlocked" or perhaps Mr. Jiang as in 僵屍 "Rigor-mortis" / Zombie / Walking Dead? Or by a further stretch, Mr. Jiang as in Jiang3 Jie4-shi2 蔣介石—Chiang Kai-shek?—we are not sure what the surname implies, if anything, but the informed audience member probably has suspicions at this point, for the seasoned reader of Chinese literature often looks for *double-entendre*).[13] The protagonist's full name, Jiang Binliu 江濱柳 could be translated literally as "a willow [tree/branch] on the side of a river," signifying a lover's regret at parting. It is also a homonym for 將賓留 "to retain guests" (longer than the intended stay), or even "someone who will remain a guest," just as the protagonist remains by his own choice an outsider in Taiwan.

At that point the nurse suggests that she accompany the wife downstairs to "pay the bill" (although the hospital stay is not over—the implication is that although the drama may be between mainlanders, it is the Taiwanese who get stuck with the bill).[14] 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

13 When I read this portion of the paper before an audience in Taiwan, Lai Shengchuan, who was sitting in the back row, began smiling and nodding.

14 Here I am referring to the Chinese Civil War and its aftermath, which tragically brought forty year of martial law to Taiwan (1947–87).

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.

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 from that era by Zhou Xuan 周璇 (1918–57), 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 lies on a table. We get the impression he might be dead, but then 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 Michelle (the woman calling "Liu Ziji!") faces a mirror in the same room, doing her makeup. Then she is 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.[15] 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

15 According to Tao Yuanming's ancient story, the stream which led the fisherman to the spring was lined with trees, from which peach blossoms were falling. Nanyang Street 南洋街, in the "cram school 補習班" area of Taipei, is frequented by students and

stage worker, as if he were Liu Ziji. Then she cries out "As for me? / What about me?" (*er wo* 而我?) while spinning around rapidly and looking up towards the sky. The actress who plays Jiang's Taiwanese wife then 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 "Peach Blossom Land" is dragged past 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 young Taiwanese 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 ... 我 (me) ..." A younger Taiwanese actress wearing a long coat pauses in the hallway to look back. Michelle continues to spin herself in circles with her arms outstretched as the credits begin to roll.

Although Liu Ziji is a proper name of a real historic traveler tacked on at the end of the original fourth-century story, who supposedly tried to retrace the journey back to the mythic Peach Blossom Land but failed, this may not at first glance be apparent to members of the audience—here it may in fact function as a homonym: *liu zi ji* 留自己/記 (keep/preserve

young couples in search of late night snacks. It leads directly from Taipei Station to the former New Park 新公園, a place where lovers met during the martial law era. It also appears in *Crystal Boys* 孽子, a 1983 novel by Pai Hsien-yung 白先勇 (pinyin: Bai Xianyong; West. Kenneth Pai, 1937–) as a place where gay people met during the martial law period. Pai is a prominent gay author in Taiwan. The son of a Muslim warlord from Guangxi, Bai Chongxi 白崇禧 (1893–1966), who rose to Minister of Defense in the Kuomintang government (1946-48), Pai taught Chinese at the University of California, Santa Barbara before he retired to promote the *kunju* 崑劇 opera *Mudan Ting* 牡丹亭 (Peony Pavilion) to Taiwan and overseas diasporic youth and lecture on his father's role in Republican history. He has recently published a three-volume commentary on *Honglou Meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber).

yourself/the self or your own memories). In that sense "Michelle's" urgent cry may be meant as a call to the younger generation to hold onto their connection to their own pasts, not one which is created for them or dictated to them by other people—something which can only be fully achieved by bringing about an authentic balance between the present and the past of Taiwan.

Here I see a thematic continuity between Lai's first and second films. *The Red Lotus Society* was finished in 1994, eight years after the debut of the stage version of *Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Land*. These were years that saw tremendous changes in Taiwan society with the lifting of martial law and the introduction of a pluralistic political system. They also witnessed significant changes in culture and the beginning of a ferocious wave of identity politics. In many ways, *The Red Lotus Society* addresses these while at the same time suggesting directions for the future.

From the outset, it may be noted that there is a discrepancy between the English and Chinese titles of the film. The Chinese title *Fei Xia Ah Da* 飛俠阿達 indicates literally that this is the story of a martial arts devotee, "Flying Gongfu Master Ah Da." Although "Ah" as an informal and familiarizing prefix for given names is quite common in Taiwan, particularly in the south and among working-class people, for those acquainted with modern Chinese literature, the name of the would-be flying martial arts adept Ah Da is of course reminiscent of Ah Q, the hapless coolie created by Lu Xun in his 1921 satiric novella *The True Story of Ah Q* 阿Q正傳 in part as a stand-in for China[16]. Ah Da in the Taiwanese language suggests either a person with loose marbles or someone who is dull-witted. In that sense, both Ah Q and Ah Da are characters who operate on the margins

16 Chinese text in Lu Xun 1991, 1:487–532. English translation by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang in Lu 1980, 1:102-54. There are, of course, different interpretations of *The True Story of Ah Q*. Some take him to represent China; others the shortcomings in the Chinese "national character"; still others take him as a modern Everyman, present in all nations and societies.

of their respective societies. Ah Q is illiterate and Ah Da fails to take the all-important *liankao* 聯考 (nation-wide examination) for admission to university, in part because of his slacker attitude and in part because his girlfriend Ah Dan 阿丹 (the Chinese name used in Taiwan for Dennis the Menace)[17] gets involved in what may be a bogus Miss Greater China contest (大中國小姐Da Zhongguo Xiaojie), supposedly operated out of Shenzhen. He then does odd jobs, as an assistant to a traditional bone-setter, posing as a blind masseur and later working as a gopher for the ostensibly rich and powerful but rather erratic Miss Song 宋小姐, owner of a short-term lending company, whom he met as his massage client. Like Ah Q, Ah Da and his friends all have a strong desire to escape reality and a penchant for self-delusion. They also have a similar hairstyle, Ah Q sporting a queue and Ah Da exceptionally long hair for the Taiwan of his era,[18] which he usually keeps tied back in a pony-tail that is reminiscent of a queue (the Chinese word for both is *bianzi* 辮子).

As in *Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Land*, in *The Red Lotus Society* there is a constant tension between fantasy and reality. One striking feature of *Red Lotus Society* is its sophisticated use of time-frame and flashbacks and the way the film moves gracefully between Taiwan's past and present. In this aspect, it is technically superior to films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* 臥虎藏龍 (2000) and *City of Sadness* 悲情城市 (1989), the former of which resorts to magical realism and the latter of which makes constant but oblique recourse to Taiwan's unspoken history.[19]

The Red Lotus Society begins by projecting a statement written in

17 The comic strip featuring Dennis was translated "Naughty Ah Dan" 淘氣的阿丹 in Taiwan. Like Dennis, Ah Dan in the film is continually getting into fixes that fall on Ah Da, himself not much of a fixer, to sort out. They are good-natured, but clearly a "slacker" couple.

18 At one point we are told the events in the film took place in the 1980s.

19 I.e. that of Er Er Ba 二・二八 (The February 28 Incident) in 1947 and the massacre and purge of society that followed in its aftermath as the White Terror took

traditional Chinese characters about *qinggong* 輕功, reflecting on the idea that:

> [...] in today's society we can only see this spectacular form of "Chinese martial arts" in *wuxia* 武俠 novels and movies. But numerous materials left from ancient times convince some people that there is a possibility this form of *gongfu* 功夫 actually existed. According to the materials we are left with, those who were devoted to this form of martial arts tied bags of iron filings to their ankles and practiced jumping with various equipment, day after day, year after year. According to secret documents from the late Ming/early Qing era, practitioners who used this method could jump one *zhang* 丈 (ten *chi* 尺 or Chinese "feet"). If they combined this with internal training (*peihe neigong* 配合內功) then they could jump 20 feet. It is said that the true practices of *qinggong* are secret and were never revealed and in fact the distances they could vault were far greater than twenty feet. Aside from written accounts, it has also been asserted that in contemporary society there have been adepts who claim to have received oral instruction in this form of martial arts practice.[20]

The movie then expands on this premise with the narrative device of Ah Da's self-imposed quest to locate any surviving members of a shadowy group known as the Red Lotus Society 紅蓮會, win their confidence, and learn the secret technique of vaulting from them, questioning the line between reality and fiction and, by extension, the veracity of different,

hold.

20 The above is my own translation. Although an English-subtitled version was screened at the film's premier in Lincoln Center, this has been lost or misplaced at Lai Shengchuan's Biaoyan Gongzuofang 表演工作坊 (Performance Workshop) in Taipei. I have worked from a Mandarin version with Chinese subtitles only, kindly supplied to me on DVD by the Performance Workshop.

competing versions of history. The implications of this for Taiwan are far-reaching in that the film asserts the existence of multiple versions of history, which might be equally valid. This is certainly one of its defining postmodern moments, but it is also one of its most insightful contributions to the current debates over identity in Taiwan.

Central to the "veracity" of the story is, of course, the question of to what extent *minjian* 民間 organizations (i.e. civil society, to use Habermas' term) such as the Red Lotus Society were tolerated by the Kuomintang among the people and what, if anything, they could have accomplished in terms of social and political agency, given the constraints of the martial law dictatorship. Although we are told by an old man from the mainland speaking in a northern accent to Ah Da and his friends in a park, who purportedly served at one time as their cook, that the members of the Red Lotus Society at times went off on missions "behind enemy lines" (*di hou fang* 敵後方), we are unclear on the nature of these missions and at whose command (if anyone's) they were run. What we do see are some vignettes of their activities in Taiwan, including a member who is at one point in a flashback depicted as seated behind Chiang Kai-shek's desk in the Presidential Palace in 1954, after (we assume) having vaulted there. He nonchalantly peruses a scroll of the President's calligraphy on which is written a maxim derived from the philosophy of Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–77), a Song neo-Confucian thinker, exhorting us all as individuals to live for the greater good of humanity,[21] subsequently disappearing (off screen) just before a sentry enters.

In another scene we see a member of the Society taken prisoner during the White Terror, under interrogation in the dungeons of the Kuomintang Ministry of Defense, on provocation suddenly break the chains that bind him to the wall and confront his accusers, who then ineffectively try to

21 The maxim, generally ascribed to Chiang Kai-shek, reads: "The purpose of life lies in advancing the life of the entirety of humankind; the significance of life is in creating life which sustains the universe" 生活的目的在增進人類全體之生活；

use chemical weapons to subdue him, only gassing themselves in the end. The conclusion we are left to draw is that both the Kuomintang and the Communists viewed the Red Lotus Society with suspicion and, although the loyalty of the Society lay with the cause of justice, such independent, non-governmental organizations were as unwelcome in "Free China" as they were in the mainland because in some way they might pose an implied challenge to the dictatorship's monopoly on power. In fact, throughout Chinese history the *xia* 俠 (knight-errant figures) have always played a subversive role in the eyes of governmental authorities: the Legalist philosopher Han Fei recommended their ruthless suppression—adding yet another level of implicit criticism, were the Chiang Kai-shek regime being compared to the tyrannical "First Emperor," Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇, who favored Legalism over Confucianism, allegedly burning books and burying scholars.[22] What is different about this film from much of the rest of the *wuxia* 武俠 genre is its sparing deployment of magical realism in a way that deftly questions the bounds between fantasy and reality. Could it have happened?—Probably not, but then again, within the context of reality defined by the perimeters of the film, we are never one hundred percent certain it did not. Vaulting, in and of itself, is symbolic of man's attempt to overcome time and space, but also in *this* film of the necessity to cross natural barriers like the Taiwan Straits and to transcend political boundaries to again become whole, not necessarily by reuniting with the mainland, but by reuniting with one's own past: the Red Lotus Society was *here* in Taiwan.

The film treats us to evocative flashbacks of Sun-Moon Lake 日月潭 in the 1950s, where an exclusive dinner and dance club are reconstructed with the deftness of a Pai Hsien-yung 白先勇 or a Chang Ai-ling 張愛玲

生命的意義在創造宇宙繼起之生命.

22 *Records of the Historian: Biographies of the Scholars* 史記：儒林列传. Normally the more frequent comparison would be of Qin Shi Huang to Mao Zedong, who in his later years, came to admire the "First Emperor."

(1920–95) narrative.[23] There are so many subtle details that I half expected Cao Juren 曹聚仁 (1900–72) to walk out beside the lake or into the banquet scene.[24] The reproduction of a dumpling 餃子 stand in the Ximen Ding 西門町 of the 1950s and the consequences of a political purge on its sadly beautiful proprietress, another refugee from the mainland (and probable member of the Society), are alluded to with the eerie contrast of scenes of the stand at the height of its popularity with the night after its shutdown. Ultimately the history of the Red Lotus Society and that of the young people in the film, Ah Da, Ah Dan and their friend Ah Kui 阿魁 begin to parallel each other, as misfortune clouds the lives of the young people. Due to Ah Da's own alienation from his life in the real world and his quest for fulfillment through mastering the secret technique of vaulting, his relationship with his girlfriend, Ah Dan, remains unconsummated, despite overtures by the young lady. She is then injured in a traffic accident not long after an argument with Ah Da over her irrational acceptance of a prediction made by a random taxi driver that she is being followed by the ghost of a man she jilted in a previous life. She recovers from her injuries only after a long period of convalescence in Japan, where she has

23 Pai Hsien-yung (see the note above) pays particular attention to detail, especially in the description of female characters. Chang Ai-ling (pinyin: Zhang Ailing, West. Eileen Chang, 1920-1995) was a prominent diasporic woman author, writing both in Chinese and English. Although she grew up in a decaying gentry family in Shanghai, attended Hong Kong University (1937–41) and relocated to the US in 1955, she is frequently identified with Taiwan, where she lived briefly (c. 1962), achieving critical acclaim and also publishing contracts, which revitalized her career.

24 Cao Juren, a writer, journalist and historian who knew both Lu Xun and his brother Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967) from early on, was active in the literary scene from the May Fourth era in Beijing on. During WWII he was a battlefield correspondent for a newspaper under the sponsorship of Chiang Ching-kuo. After 1950 Cao lived in Hong Kong as a centrist writer with leftist sympathies, from where he travelled to Taiwan to make representations on behalf of the PRC government to the Chiangs, these included negotiations to end the civil war, which were broken off by the Cultural Revolution.

been sent by her father at the cost of his fortune. Finally, when they are trapped together in a building which has caught fire, she urges Ah Da to save himself by abandoning her and leaping out the window, which he does, partially it seems, as a result of a shove from her. She says she knows he can do it (i.e. fly) and he does manage to vault an extraordinary distance onto the roof of a distant building, which collapses. He survives, only to return to the wreckage of the burnt-out building, where his girlfriend has already perished.

But a snapshot had been taken of a shadowy figure in flight through the night air by a bystander at the fire, although Ah Da is unidentified. This is suddenly big news in Taiwan. We are then shown a simulated newscast using an actual female television newscaster Ye Sushan 葉蘇珊, who would have been familiar to the Taiwan audience at the time, interviewing another young man (not Ah Da) who is claimed to be a martial arts adept capable of such a jump. Once again, a play takes place on the boundary between reality and fantasy. A final scene takes us back to the park where, after the old story-teller cook has had a stroke, a new retired narrator, bilingual both in northern-style Mandarin and in Taiwanese, continues the story of the Red Lotus Society to a new group of young people.

In the *wuxia* genre, adepts normally use martial arts to right wrongs or to save people. Ah Da does neither. He even fails to save his girlfriend from the conflagration. In that sense, he is an anti-hero, like Ah Q. But he rises above his father, a believer in traditional *gongfu* 功夫, who merely uses it to deceive people. In that sense, the quest for the Red Lotus Society embodies not only a quest for Taiwan's own roots, like the Chen Kaige 陳凱歌 and Zhang Yimou 張藝謀 films from the mainland in the 1980s, and buried history, like Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝賢's *City of Sadness*, but also a search for ideals in a postmodern world where, we are often reminded, absolute truths can no longer exist.

With his newest production, *Dreamers* 夢想家 (2011), a gala-musical (he calls it a "rock opera") written for the centennial celebration of

the Republic of China, Lai seeks to reaffirm the historical link between the Taiwanese populace and events on the mainland prior to the Communist revolution of 1949 by means of a two-fold tale: one story set in present-day Taiwan and another that brings the audience back to the Huanghuagang Uprising 黃花崗起義 (April 27, 1911) in Guangzhou 廣州, which directly preceded the Xinhai Revolution 辛亥革命 that broke out in Wuchang 武昌 on October 10, 1911 and toppled the Qing dynasty, establishing the Republic of China.[25] The play was controversial at least in part because of this specific choice of subject matter. The faction that favors Taiwan independence wants Taiwanese public art centered in and on Taiwan—an art that downplays or ignores historical connections with the mainland, unless these depict victimization. But media spokespersons for the Minjindang 民進黨 (Democratic Progressive Party) chose not to harp on the plot per se, rather pointing to the large sum of money spent on the production (approximately US $ 7,000,000), most of which came from the public coffers.

Part of what Lai Shengchuan as playwright, director and librettist seeks to do in this production is to portray the life of the struggling middle classes in Taiwan, as well as the young actors who come from less than privileged backgrounds (the young woman protagonist works in a Seven Eleven store, and the young man in the story has a father who is a noodle hawker). In his defense against accusations of too high a budget for a production which did not employ prominent movie stars (as is often the case with New Years and important anniversary productions in contemporary Chinese and Taiwan culture), it might be argued that Lai used one-third of the amount of money spent on a similar, although less significant historically, extravaganza in Singapore. Moreover, he sought to give a "break" to the same sort of unknown and unsung players who have

25 For which the political regime on Taiwan holds itself forth as the successor (a "reestablished" state)—Taiwan still uses the official name of the Republic of China, whereas Communist China after October 1, 1949 called itself the People's Republic of China.

been associated with his troupe, the Performance Workshop. The noodle seller's family are supposed to be descendants of two of the unidentified martyrs of the Huanghuagang Uprising, which took place on the mainland in Guangzhou. There were originally 72—but the grandfather and grandmother of the noodle seller (the Lin family from Fujian) were the 73rd and 74th, according to the story. Historically there were indeed unidentified revolutionists who were killed there, and their having hailed from Fujian makes them more ethnically akin to the Taiwanese, whose ancestors came mostly from Fujian in the 17th to 19th centuries. The narrative of the play in fact draws specific attention to the fact that there were Fujianese at Huanghuagang.

In a way, the dreams the grandparents gave their lives for have been realized—the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan is now a democratic, pluralistic society (the song lyrics stress "we are from everywhere"—i.e. all over China and from out of the Chinese diaspora as well), but ordinary people have come under increasing economic pressure, so the noodle seller's aspirations sound far less lofty than those of his grandparents when he sings: I only want to be able to sell a good bowl of noodles in order to keep my family alive 我只要賣一碗好面，養活我的家眷. It is also in part for this reason that he cannot fathom his son's desire to remain in Taiwan to pursue his acting career (and his love for the actress who works in the Seven Eleven store), rather than to go off to America to pursue a graduate degree in Management at the Wharton School of Business.

In that sense, the opera is not so shallow after all—it reflects on the post-modern plight of the majority of the people in a country where, indeed as in most of the other nations with advanced economies, the gulf between rich and poor in fact grows increasingly wide,[26] thus questioning the present system in terms of delivering what their founding father Dr Sun Yat-sen termed the "People's Livelihood" (*Min-sheng* 民生), the social-

26 According to a report from the think-tank OECD (December 5, 2011).

democratic element in his Sanminzhuyi 三民主義 (Three Principles of the People). Still, all in all, when the Taiwanese audience have finished the show and look off toward the mainland, they should realize that while they have actualized many of the ideals, their cousins in the mainland still await them. In that sense, they can truly remind their mainland counterparts of the famous injunction with which Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 (1866–1925) appealed to his followers: "The revolution has not yet succeeded—Comrades, [you] must continue to strive!" 革命尚未成功，同志仍需努力.[27]

My first conclusion on viewing "Dreamers" was that Lai deftly sidestepped the opportunity to underscore the fact that the principal unresolved goal of the 1911 Revolution and the establishment of the Republic, which was to bring democracy to China, has in fact already been achieved by the ROC on Taiwan, but this dream remains to be realized on the mainland. There was too much repetition in the production, eg., singing the same song ("We are Dreamers") over and again. From the angle of a "philologist," I would also question the use of the modern term *Mengxiang Jia* for the title, arguing that it is a neologism translated from the English term "dreamers," which sometimes has a less than positive connotation. Lai does not intend it to be interpreted that way, but his critics may focus on this detail. If a dream is achievable and in the public good, is it not cynical to suggest it may still amount to nothing more than pie in the sky? Taiwan has national healthcare—the mainland does not. Was this so unattainable? Is Taiwan not a model for mainland China in this, as well as for its erstwhile mentor, the United States? In the case of something so essential and necessary for nation (and economy) building, who faces reality and who prefers to live in a state of delusion?

In terms of the American connection, this is something Lai seldom speaks about, but it seems to me that he was influenced here by the

27 This originates in a calligraphic inscription dated 1923, but was paraphrased in his will of 1926.

choreography of American musicals he may have seen in his youth, such as "West Side Story." Lai was born in 1954 in Washington, DC, where his father, who had come to Taiwan from the mainland with the Kuomintang regime, served in the ROC embassy. Lai returned to Taiwan only in his early teens. This gives him a "mainlander" or *waishengren* 外省人 (person from another province) *shenfen* 身分 (status) in Taiwan, which resulted in his fall from official grace during the first period of DPP rule under Chen Shuibian 陳水扁 (2000 to 2008). In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, Stan Lai (his "foreign" name) is something of an American Asian, if we can accept that as a counterpoint to the designation of Asian American, and in that sense is only a "mainlander" by ancestry. Where are any of us *from*, actually? I am struck by the profundity of Andy Warhol's utterance: "I'm not from anywhere..." which sheds more light on the modern condition than most other observers since Oscar Wilde.

What can we conclude? Lai's three productions can be seen to fit together as a trilogy. The first play-cum-film tells the story of the human cost for the mainlanders of their relocation to Taiwan and hints at the disruption this caused to the indigenous Chinese society of the Taiwanese (*sans* aborigines). It also dramatizes the contest for the stage, i.e. a struggle for a place to tell one's "own" story, as well as for a platform from which to speak and be heard in society. The second film engages the then-buried history of the martial law period in a very different way from Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness*, underscoring the necessity to remember other forgotten aspects of the White Terror and its aftermath of selective historical amnesia.[28] The third, a musical production, begins earlier (in 1911) but carries the story (and the social criticism) up to the

28 One cinematic example appears in the film *Prince of Tears* by Hong Kong based director Yang Fan, who was born in Wuhan, grew up in Taiwan in the 1950s and '60s, studied in America, and his career then took him to Hong Kong. It is based on the true story of two young daughters of a dashing Kuomintang air force officer on Taiwan, whose charmed lives are shattered when it is discovered that their father flew an

present day. If the results of the Taiwan election in 2012 which restored the Kuomintang to power with a second term for Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 (1950–) as President give any indication, Lai's view of cultural Taiwan as more the product of the Chinese diaspora than that of the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945) may be increasingly legitimized, despite the (arguable) shortcomings of "Dreamers" as a production. But as an artist and an intellectual of conscience operating in transnational China, Lai will have to face, as one day we all must, the late Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo's 劉曉波 (1955–2017) empty chair and then perhaps reflect on Sun Yat-sen's final injunction. Now that another election has come to pass in Taiwan and the DPP returned to power in 2016, the new woman President Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文 (1956–) has retracted her view that the ROC was a "government in exile"[29] and publicly stated that "Taiwan is the ROC, the ROC is Taiwan."[30] Not long afterward, she stated that Taiwan would be willing to help China democratize.[31] This, of course, kicks the ball back into mainland China's court, implying that talks on reunification might be possible if mainland China were first to democratize. With its

unauthorized personal mission back to the mainland (to retrieve one of girls). The film gives a hint of the extent of the persecution of mainlanders (as well as Taiwanese) under the White Terror. It premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2009, also opening at the Sydney Film Festival, where this writer witnessed its director receive a standing ovation from an Australian audience immediately after the film was screened and before he made any remarks.

29 In May of 2010 she stated that the ROC regime was "a government in exile non-native to Taiwan" see the article "KMT Blasts Tsai Ing-wen for Flip-Flop on ROC" in *Taiwan News*, October 10, 2011.

30 On October 8, 2011, two days prior to the 100th anniversary celebration of the 1911 Revolution, Tsai stated: "The ROC is Taiwan, Taiwan is the ROC, and the current ROC government is no longer ruled by a non-native political power." See "DPP Chair Attends Flag-raising Ceremony in Southern Taiwan," in *Focus Taiwan News*, October 10, 2011.

31 *Taiwan Today*, June 4, 2016.

own successful transition from forty years of one-party rule under martial law and its linguistic and cultural ties to the mainland, Taiwan is in a unique position to do so, just as Stan Lai has shown himself able to establish and maintain, across changing political climes, a career that is taken seriously on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Ultimately, it may be not be impossible to find one's way back to Wuling, not just to get one's loved ones out, but rather to use what one has learned by living in the diaspora to transform "the old planet," as did Dr Sun in his day.[32]

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