

Preserving Taiwan's collective memory

By Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop
Friday, February 13, 2009

<http://www.iht.com/slideshows/2009/02/13/arts/14jessop.php?index=0>
<http://www.iht.com/articles/2009/02/13/arts/jessop.php>

Articles follow the photos/captions



The Esplanade

"The Village," a new play in Mandarin and Hokkien by the Taiwanese playwright and director Stan Lai, (left, with the producer Wang Wei Zhong) spans 50 years in the lives of three families living in one of these dependents' villages.



The three-hour epic, featuring Lai's Taipei-based troupe Performance Workshop, had its premiere in Taipei in December and has proved to be a popular and critical success, with a sold-out second run until Feb. 24. The play has contributed to the recent debate in Taiwan about the need to preserve collective memories, while giving a human face to the impact of strained cross-Straits relations. (Pictured, a scene from "The Village.")



From the villagers' allegiance to the Republic of China flag to their sorrow when Chiang Kai-shek died in 1975, their tearful return and reunion with loved ones on the mainland in the 1980s, and their children's aspirations to travel around the world, "The Village" is really the story of Taiwan. (A scene from "The Village.")



Lai, 55, said the ideas for the many personal stories told in "The Village" came from discussions about village life with the Taiwanese television producer Wang Wei Zhong, who has been active in efforts to preserve and record the vanishing culture, having filmed documentaries and also written a drama series. (A scene from "The Village.")

Involuntary separation, displacement, and the search for identity have been long-running themes in Lai's works. "Who are you? In Taiwan, that question has been a searing one for years," he said. (A scene from "The Village.")

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

**Preserving Taiwan's
 collective memory**

By Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop
 Friday, February 13, 2009

SINGAPORE: The makeshift homes of the "military dependents' villages" in Taiwan were never meant to last. Built to house the thousands of Kuomintang soldiers and their families who had retreated to the island in 1949 following their defeat on the mainland by Communist forces, the villages were seen by their inhabitants as



temporary dwellings, where they would stay only until Chiang Kai-shek's forces regained control of the mainland. But Mao's Communist army was not to be beaten, and as the years passed, the dependents' villages developed a distinctive mixed culture with people from different Chinese provinces, speaking different dialects and cooking different cuisines, living side-by-side.

The impact that these melting-pot communities, which once numbered more than 800, have had on Taiwan is significant. But in recent years, the communities have been broken up and skyscrapers have replaced the old homes. Today, less than 200 of the original villages are left standing.

"The Village," a new play in Mandarin and Hokkien by the Taiwanese playwright and director Stan Lai, spans 50 years in the lives of three families living in one of these dependents' villages. The three-hour epic, featuring Lai's Taipei-based troupe Performance Workshop, had its premiere in Taipei in December and has proved to be a popular and critical success, with a sold-out second run until Feb. 24. The play has contributed to the recent debate in Taiwan about the need to preserve collective memories, while giving a human face to the impact of strained cross-Straits relations.

"These villages are an important part of our history that no one has really written much about," said Lai. "But I think there is a real nostalgia and an urgency to protect the memory of these villages." He added: "Once the physical buildings are demolished and the people who lived in these communities pass away, it'll be all gone."

From the villagers' allegiance to the Republic of China flag to their sorrow when Chiang Kai-shek died in 1975, their tearful return and reunion with loved ones on the mainland in the 1980s, and their children's aspirations to travel around the world, "The Village" is really the story of Taiwan.

Lai, 55, said the ideas for the many personal stories told in "The Village" came from discussions about village life with the Taiwanese television producer Wang Wei Zhong, who has been active in efforts to preserve and record the vanishing culture, having filmed documentaries and also written a drama series. Wang, 52, grew up in the close knit-community of a dependents' village, which he describes as "a refugee camp for adults and a playground for kids."

Both men were in Singapore earlier this month, when "The Village" played for two nights at the Esplanade Theatre to standing ovations as part of a Chinese-themed cultural festival.

Involuntary separation, displacement, and the search for identity have been long-running themes in Lai's works. "'Who are you?' In Taiwan, that question has been a searing one for years," he said. He added that although he was born in Washington D.C. and raised there and in Seattle until his teens and never lived

in a village himself, his family was "part of the whole story of 1949." His father, a diplomat, first moved to Taiwan from mainland China in 1949 before migrating to the United States. In a diplomat's family, "you're always searching for who you are, since you're always moving around," he said.

Lai said he believed that one of the play's achievements had been "to get a lot of young people to understand the hardships of the mainlanders after they came to Taiwan."

"Many think they had an easy time, but this wasn't the case," he said, adding that he believed the play would also resonate with audiences on the mainland, where there are plans to stage it later this year.

"I think in China it will definitely be a connector to let people see what happened to all these people that left in 1949 and what their lives were like and what they felt when they came back," he said.

Because they thought they were moving away for only a brief period of time, many Kuomintang soldiers left behind parents, wives and loved ones, and both sides had to rebuild their lives and create new ones when it became clear the separation would be permanent.

While the director anticipates the Chinese censors' ire might be raised by one scene with the nationalistic flag, as well as a few lines referring to mainland spies in derogative terms, Lai said he thought there should not be any problems with the overall script.

Lai has written 29 original plays, including his classic, "Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land" (1986), about two theater companies booked into the same rehearsal space. "Stan is probably the best Chinese language playwright and director right now," said Benson Puah, CEO of the Esplanade, Singapore's main venue for performing arts. "His work is never one dimensional or linear, there are always layers to it."

The playwright said that the last nine months had been some of his busiest. In addition to writing "The Village," he also wrote two more new plays. One of them, "Light Years," is about the "life" of a black and white TV, from its youth as a cutting-edge household appliance through old age as a sought-after antique. As the TV set finds different homes in different cities throughout China, "living" with different families, Lai explores the country's changing values over the last 30 years, and "how the country has grown so rich and how the values have become so poor."

Although the play has already been touring China, it was due to officially open at the new theater of the CCTV Tower in Beijing on March 17. However, a fire

at the CCTV Tower complex earlier this week has suspended those plans, and the producer is considering other venues.

For now, Lai is busy with the rehearsals of his newest play, "Writing in Water," which will have its premiere at the Hong Kong Arts Centre on March 7. He described the play, about a woman who works as a happiness coach but doesn't have much happiness in her own life, as a "screwball Zen comedy" that again looks at issues of identity. "The story is about family connection and the search for personal happiness in a post-Lehman world," Lai said. "The boyfriend of the main character is an ex-broker who is out of a job. So it's quite topical."

Copyright © 2009 The International Herald Tribune | www.ihf.com

