

SPOTLIGHT



Lai Sheng-chuan's ancestral home in Huichang, East China's Jiangxi province.

PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

By CHEN NAN

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When the US-born Taiwan-based director and playwright Stan Lai Sheng-chuan brought his comedy *Menage a 13* to Huichang county in East China's Jiangxi province two years ago, there was one thing that took him aback: Not one person in the audience laughed.

"We thought, 'What's going on? Is there really that much difference between folk in the city and folk in smaller places?'" said Lai, whose works have ranged from theater and opera to film and television over the past 30 years.

The failure of *Menage a 13*, a love-triangle comedy, to get a reaction from the Huichang audience was all the more perplexing for Lai given that when it debuted in Taiwan in 1999 it became an instant hit.

He then inquired of one of his friends who worked in the theater.

"We thought we were not allowed to laugh," the friend said. "Someone said the artists are very serious and you don't want to distract them while they are performing. So whether it's funny or not, we just kept everything bottled up inside."

Lai then decided gently to let locals know that if they felt like laughing, they should go ahead and do so, and not force anything. The play was a huge success and extra nights were scheduled.

"People really got into it, and they even talked about the play in very profound terms."

Then last year he took his classic play *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* to Huichang, and tickets sold out fast. The play has been staged hundreds of times since Lai's Performance Workshop in Taipei first performed it in 1986.

On Aug 26 he was in Huichang again to present a play, *A Blurry Kind of Love*, produced by Performance Workshop, a contemporary theater group he founded in 1984.

On the opening night, the 1,000-seat

theater, the only one in the county and which is hidden in an array of narrow, busy streets in the downtown area, was packed.

The play premiered in late 2015, directed by Ismene Ting, Lai's sister-in-law, and is based on the novel *The Game of Love and Chance* by the 18th-century French playwright Pierre de Marivaux. It is a three-act comedy about a young woman who is engaged to a man she has never met. Hoping to learn more about him, she and her servant trade identities. However, her fiancé has the same idea and trades identities with his driver.

Translated by Ting, the play is set in Taiwan in the 1980s. Lai contributed the music to the play, including playing guitar for the theme song.

"Ting hugely rewrote the story and we've made it into a very Chinese story, especially the matchmaking, which is still popular among the young generation today," Lai said.

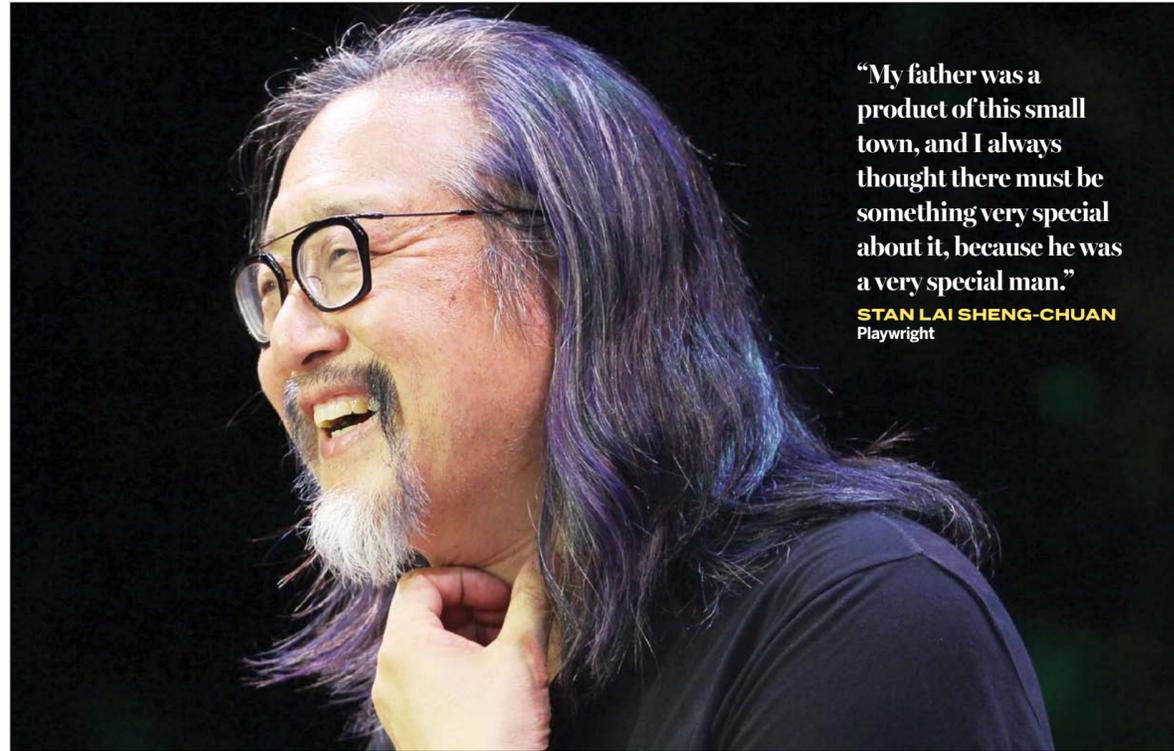
Huichang has a population of about 520,000, most of them members of the Hakka ethnic group.

It is a place that would never stage the level of theater that can be seen in the likes of Beijing or Shanghai, Lai said, and would not tend to attract touring groups.

However, Lai has a very personal stake in Huichang. He has taken plays there for three years in a row because it is his father's hometown. That has always made it attractive to him and he is keen to do something for the community, he said.

Lai's father, Lai Jiaqiu, was born and grew up in Huichang before he went to study at the Central School of Political Affairs in Chongqing, in the country's southwest, and studied foreign affairs at university. In 1947, Lai Jiaqiu went to Taiwan and the next year was assigned to work as a diplomat in the United States. Lai Sheng-chuan was born in Washington, and his father never returned to his hometown.

Lai Sheng-chuan and his brother, Lai Sheng-yu, were asked by their father to return to Taiwan in 1966 to learn Chinese. They spent 10 years there.



"My father was a product of this small town, and I always thought there must be something very special about it, because he was a very special man."

STAN LAI SHENG-CHUAN
Playwright

Playwright gets back to his roots

Director makes repeat visits to his father's hometown in Jiangxi province with shows for the locals



A folk performance during the annual folk art festival in Huichang on Aug 26. The event was launched in 2015.

"My father was a product of this small town, and I always thought there must be something very special about it, because he was a very special man," said Lai Sheng-chuan, who was 14 years old when his father died in 1968.

"He learned English, French and traditional Chinese calligraphy and became a diplomat. Where did all that

come from? Of course it came from this town."

It was only in the early 1980s when Lai Sheng-chuan was studying dramatic art at the University of California, Berkeley, where he received his PhD in 1983, that he received a letter from relatives in Huichang. From that moment on, a long lost connection



Lai Sheng-chuan (center) and his elder brother Lai Sheng-yu (left) at the annual folk art festival in Huichang on Aug 26.

began to be rebuilt.

In 1996, Lai Sheng-chuan went to Huichang for the first time. At the time it was a difficult place to get to, and the trip took him about 30 hours. He had to take an overnight train from Shenzhen to Meizhou, in South China's Guangdong province, then hired a car and drove over very poor roads

through the mountains.

"I really regret not talking to my father much about his hometown and about his relatives. But he didn't talk that much about the town. For him it was a very difficult topic to broach, being away from home and being unable to go home. It was a very sad situation."

A scene from the comedy *A Blurry Kind of Love*.

When Lai Sheng-chuan made his homecoming journey, memories flooded back, he said.

He recalled the day in the 1960s when his father had *jiucai*, or Chinese chive, seeds and planted them in the backyard of their home in Seattle.

"My father went to a great deal of effort to grow this *jiucai*, and being in Huichang holding a dish with *jiucai* in it really connected me with him."

For Lai Sheng-chuan, taking his plays to Huichang is part of fulfilling his father's wish of returning home. However, there is a lot more to it than that; he also wants to promote the theater culture among the locals of Huichang.

The celebrated director had earlier played a role in turning a small town into a theater mecca. He is one of the core members of the Wuzhen Theater Festival, launched in 2013 and which turned Wuzhen, a small town in East China's Zhejiang province, into a theater phenomenon in China.

Lai Sheng-chuan chose comedy to bring to Huichang because he sees that genre as a good introduction for those unskilled in the ways of theater.

"To me it's sort of a social experiment. I am seeing what's going to happen in this small town after 10 years of constant theater coming from me. I am sure there will be change. We want to give the young people in the town a better vision of what the future will bring, so that they don't just feel they have to go to the big cities and do whatever. Perhaps there they have a chance to get into art, to be an artist. Perhaps they could work in the theater. Through theater we want to make a difference."

His stated aims have received warm encouragement from the government of Huichang. A new city center is in the pipeline, one based on the theme of theater and Huichang's local culture, especially the Hakka ethnic culture. Lai Sheng-chuan's name is attached to the theater center.

The new theater will not only put on plays but also function as a training center for young theater talent in the town.

Hua Wenyi, director of the Huichang County Bureau of Culture, Radio, Film and Television, said the new town center project, which covers about 10 hectares where three rivers, the Xiang Shui, Mian Shui and Gong Shui, join, will be completed by 2019.

Architects surveyed every single house and are determined that historically important houses will be safeguarded and renovated. One of those houses is one that Lai's family used to live in.

The ancient city wall, stretching more than 1,000 meters and dating from the Song Dynasty (960-1279), will be preserved as a scenic spot near the new city center.

"There has been no theater culture in Huichang and we want to build this new center into a name card for the town," said Hua, adding that the project is costing 400 million yuan (\$61 million).

The town has held an annual folk culture festival since 2015, celebrating the birth of the god Lai Gong of the local temple, Lai Gong Miao, which is regarded as a blessing for Huichang and its people. A series of cultural events, including a food competition, folk art performances and a parade, are held during the weeklong festival.

"Every small town has its own special character, and we have to find that character," Lai said.

"If we don't find that character, it's possible it will head off in the wrong direction, and that may result in it losing its character. Huichang has beautiful, historic scenic spots, such as the Hanxianyan mountainous area, which has an important place in Taoist history. The place is full of legends and tales."

"Huichang is still considered an impoverished county. But spiritually they don't live in poverty. The master plan for reviving the old town is really exciting to me."

Before he left Huichang, Lai, with his elder brother and cousin visited the house his family once lived in.

"When I stood in that house with my relatives, I said 'Look at us.' Our family's story could be turned into a play."

Out-of-the-way Huichang is well worth a visit

County with scenery praised by Mao Zedong also has folk culture unique to the area, but the sacrificial ducks for worship rituals are now plastic

By CHEN NAN

It is unlikely to be on many people's list of "Ten places in China I must see before I die."

In fact, Huichang county in East China's Jiangxi province is so out of the way that it takes two hours to get there from the nearest big airport, in Ganzhou, and its inhabitants are generally perceived to be poverty-stricken.

However, once you set foot in Huichang you will find yourself surrounded by green mountains and rivers with clear water, breathing pristine air and getting a profound insight into China's Taoist culture.

Huichang county, which neighbors Fujian province, and Guangdong to the south, sits at the confluence of two waterways, which form the Ganjiang River, a major branch of the Yangtze River, in Nanchang, Jiangxi's capital. In ancient times, people from northern China used these rivers to travel and trade.

The town covers about 2,700 square kilometers and has a population of 527,000. It is widely known as one of the old revolutionary bases, one that made a great contribution in the founding of the People's Republic of China.

In 1934, Mao Zedong lived in Huichang for a month and he climbed Huichang Mountain, which inspired him to write a poem in which he proclaimed that "the scenery here is uniquely good."

One of the best-known scenic spots is Hanxianyan, a mountainous region covering 42 sq km, which has about 100 tourist attractions.

It was here that Han Zhongli, a legendary Chinese character and one of the Eight Immortals of Taoism, lived. The region's steep, rocky hills with wooden steps are popular with hikers.

One of the locals, Zhou Wenrong, 83, was in the news recently for offering tourists free cups of tea for 24 years.

Apart from its Taoism, what makes Huichang unique is its folk culture. About 95 percent of its people are members of the Hakka ethnic group, one of the highest concentrations in the country. Hakka is the Cantonese



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pronunciation of the Mandarin word *kejia*.

Since 2015, a big folk culture festival has been held in Huichang to celebrate its folk traditions and this attracts tourists.

On Aug 26, an opening event was held at the Lai Gong Temple and thousands of Huichang residents attended. At the temple they worship the local god, Lai Gong, and pray for health and wealth.

The worship of Lai Gong is a ritual that has been passed down over about 500 years. After the folk performance and worship rituals, a parade takes place in the downtown area of the county.

Cai Weiping, an official of Huichang's publicity department, said one of the big events during the worship ceremony was ducks being sacrificed outside the temple. However, in 2015, local officials decided it was time to end the custom and ordered the manufacture of paper and plastic ducks to replace real ones.

The change was partially triggered by Stan Lai Sheng-chuan, a US-born, Taiwan-based director and playwright, who for the past two years has been staging his plays in Huichang. The plays have enjoyed phenomenal success in the county, his father's hometown.

"To my amazement, they went ahead and made these plastic ducks and gave them to anyone who would vow not to kill their ducks, and so I saved the lives of about 35,000 ducks last year," Lai said.

Local officials have also made an effort to reduce the use of fireworks as a way of minimizing air pollution.