

LIFE



Left: A scene from *River/Cloud*, featuring Taiwan actor Chang Chen. Center and right: Scenes from Lai's classic play, *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



A global stage rises in rural Jiangxi

The Huichang Theatre Season transforms a quiet county into a vibrant cultural hub, blending international works with Chinese traditions, **Chen Nan** reports.

In the tranquil county of Huichang, Ganzhou, nestled in the lush landscapes of Jiangxi province, a cultural phenomenon is taking shape.

From May 29 to June 7, the Huichang Theatre Season will transform the quiet streets and ancient homes of this picturesque town into a global stage for theater, blending the East with the West, and tradition with innovation.

With nearly 400 shows and more than 100 productions, the 10-day festival promises to be a landmark event in China's cultural calendar.

The event will feature works from some of the world's most renowned directors, cutting-edge experimental theater and performances that celebrate both Chinese traditions and global perspectives. The festival's lineup speaks to the ambitious vision of the event's founders: to create a theatrical utopia where diverse cultural traditions meet and engage.

The festival is the brainchild of theater director Stan Lai, 71, and its roots can be traced to his own connection to the county, where his father was born.

In 1997, his father went to Taiwan and was assigned to work as a diplomat in the United States the next year. Lai was born in Washington, and his father never returned to his hometown. Lai returned to Taiwan in 1966. It was only in the early 1980s, when Lai was studying for a PhD in dramatic art at the University of California, Berkeley, that he received a letter from relatives in Huichang. From that moment on, a long-lost connection began to rebuild, which sparked a personal quest to reconnect with his cultural heritage — a journey that ultimately led to the establishment of the festival. Lai visited Huichang for the first time in 1999.

Lai, who has long believed in the transformative power of theater, has made the county his artistic home.

The festival is more than just a

cultural event; it is a means of bridging the gap between different generations and cultural backgrounds," he says. "Huichang has become a place where we can remember the past and create the future. By bringing global theater here, we're not just showcasing art; we're creating connections that span time and borders."

The festival's diverse lineup includes a range of international works, from bold reinterpretations of classic plays to avant-garde performances that challenge traditional boundaries. One of the most anticipated productions is a Chinese-language adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, directed by Travis Preston, a prominent American theater and opera director. This production will engage with the Chinese audience in a new way by presenting Ibsen's exploration of social constraints and personal freedom in the context of modern society.

"In this production, we're not just telling a story; we're creating a conversation between the play and the audience. It's an opportunity for Chinese audiences to see this classic work in a new light, one that speaks directly to their lives," says Preston.

Another major highlight will be Lai's *Promenade*, an environmental theater piece set in one of Huichang's ancient mansions. Drawing inspiration from Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) playwright Tang Xianzu's classic *The Peony Pavilion*, one of China's most treasured works, Lai's production will explore the intersection of history, literature and the modern world. Through this work, Lai hopes to spark a dialogue between ancient Chinese literary traditions and contemporary theater practices.

"In this performance, the past isn't just a backdrop. It's a living, breathing entity that engages with the present," Lai says. "It's a way of showing how theater can speak



Directors Stan Lai (left) and Travis Preston in Beijing on April 13, announcing the Huichang Theatre Season, which will take place from May 29 to June 7 in Huichang county, Jiangxi province.

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Stan Lai, theater director

across centuries, connecting us to our cultural roots while moving us forward.”

The festival will also celebrate nostalgia and cultural memory, particularly through the 40th anniversary of Lai's play, the classic *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*. First performed in 1986 and still touring worldwide, this iconic work centers around themes of love, homesickness and the emotional and cultural connections that tie people to their homeland.

The play is a tragicomedy following the poignant love story between Yun Zifan and Jiang Binliu, who are separated and lose contact during the War of Liberation (1946-49). Then, unbeknownst to each other, both move from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan.

"I've always said that *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* is a love letter to my hometown," Lai says. "By bringing it back to Huichang, I feel like we're completing a circle, honoring the past, and acknowledging how much this place has shaped me as an artist."

This year's festival will feature multiple versions of the play, including *River/Cloud*, featuring Taiwan actor Chang Chen playing the role of Jiang.

According to Chang, the decision to take on this role felt almost like a coincidence. He mentions that his grandfather passed away in 2004, and he didn't really have many memories of their conversations. "But it's strange — after he passed, I kept dreaming about him. Even though he never spoke to me

in the dreams, I often saw his face. So, playing Jiang Binliu feels like a gift. I get to portray a character from the same place as my grandfather," says Chang, 49, whose grandfather was born in Changchun, Jilin province, like Jiang, and later moved to Taiwan.

"When I first visited Changchun in '20s, I didn't think too much about the significance. But I remember the old architecture around a beautiful roundabout. It was cold, but I felt so happy to be there, and I could sense the importance of the place. Coming back to act as Jiang Binliu, it feels like destiny has brought me here," he adds.

He also mentions that he talked with King Shih-chieh, the veteran actor who portrayed Jiang when the play was first staged.

"He told me that he also related the role to his own family members, like his father and his uncle, who moved to Taiwan from the Chinese mainland, which made the role more meaningful to him," says Chang.

While the Huichang Theatre Season is rooted in tradition, it is also an incubator for cutting-edge experimental work. One such performance is *Sissy*, directed by actress Hao Lei. Using minimalist staging and intense physical performance, the production delves into the psychological and spiritual crises of its characters.

Since its inception in January 2024, the festival has undergone a dramatic transformation. Once a quiet, rural county, Huichang is now a vibrant cultural hub. In addition to the festival, the place is home to a theater academy, which trains the next generation of theater technicians and offers acting workshops for amateur theater lovers, as well as resident troupes that performs Lai's classic works year-round.

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UK students find wonder in Chaoyang's fusion of art, nature and technology

By YANG FEIYUE

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On a warm mid-April afternoon, the pastel-colored castle of Pop Mart's Pop Land rose like a "magic kingdom" in Beijing's Chaoyang Park. Inside, a group of young British visitors laughed, took photos, and discovered the stories behind the vinyl figures they had long collected back home.

They are all student union representatives from multiple UK universities, including the Universities of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, Imperial College London, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the University of Leeds, who came to Chaoyang district to experience China's innovation, explore cutting-edge technology and build bridges between the two nations.

"I had no idea that all these different characters were under Pop Mart," says Maximilian Camara from the University of Leeds. He was on his way to visit the British Embassy in London, only to discover later that the quirky figurine had taken British social media by storm. "The process of opening the box is full of fun and surprises."

For Otchukwusi Molokwu, a graduate student at the University of Leeds, the experience was a mix of excitement and discovery. "I didn't know what to expect, but the nature here is



Left: UK college students visit the Zhongguancun (Chaoyang) Internet 3.0 Park in Chaoyang district, Beijing, in mid-April. Right: Performances in Pop Land, Chaoyang Park, are a big draw for visitors from home and abroad. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Science, the view brought an unexpected delight.

"I loved the Powerpuff Girls growing up. I didn't even know Molly was one of them — and she's in Pop Land!" She proudly showed off a limited-edition headphone case. "The process of opening the box was more like the brand's IP protection."

Leaving Pop Mart, Molokwu remained immersed in the beauty of Chaoyang's trendy side, the Zhongguancun (Chaoyang) Internet 3.0 Park

stunning," she says. "The trees, the water — it really feels like being in a magical kingdom."

She also walked the Great Wall, watched a robot do a backflip, and ate some of the best food she had ever had during her first five days in Beijing. But she says it is the blend of nature and culture in Chaoyang Park that left the deepest impression. "The people have been so welcoming. I will definitely come again," she says.

If Pop Mart represents Chaoyang's trendy side, the Zhongguancun (Chaoyang) Internet 3.0 Park

blew the UK students' minds with its innovation. There, the delegation experienced domestically developed eye-tracking technology — an innovation that can assist people with movement problems such as ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), or be used in driving environments.

Esbinder Singh, vice-president of the student union at Queen Mary University of London, had a long conversation with Yao Chunliang, a project director at the park, and they immediately exchanged WeChat contact details.

"We discussed how to create a

new employment and entrepreneurship model for our students," Singh says. "This trip has filled me with ideas, such as how Chinese universities collaborate with companies and encourage students to become entrepreneurs."

He also offered a nuanced view of China-UK complementarity: "China is focusing on technology and R&D, while the UK is good at building a policy framework around safeguarding — to avoid misuse. They can go hand in hand."

Singh had visited the park's representatives to London. "We can con-

nect more companies and universities and build a platform together," he says.

Yao, the park's project and incubation director, welcomes the students' interest. "They asked: 'What are Chaoyang's key industries? Does the Chinese market accept cutting-edge tech?' And would we be open to collaborating with British universities?" Yao notes. "I told them the answer is yes."

The park already has partnerships with Singapore and Hong Kong, running annual talent internship programs and facilitating two-way exchanges.

"We would very much welcome collaboration with British universities and incubators through joint competitions, cooperative models or co-launched projects," he says.

According to the trip's organizers, the student delegation showed interest in Chaoyang as it is home to nearly all of the foreign embassies in Beijing, 80 percent of international organizations, more than 60 percent of Fortune 500 companies, and half of the capital city's international talent. In 2025, the district's GDP reached 969.9 billion yuan (\$15 billion).

Singh left Beijing with a WeChat contact and a plan: when the park hosts its next event in London, he will host him at Queen Mary University.

