



Too Much: Melodrama on Film

Spring in a Small Town

Spring in a Small Town Xiao cheng zhi chun

Director: Fei Mu

Production Company: Wenhua Film Company

Executive Producer: Wang Wanbin

Producer: Bi Jianping

Production Assistant: Wang Yun

Screenplay: Li Tianji

Director of Photography: Li Shengwei

Editors: Xu Ming, Wei Shunbao

Art Director: Zhu De'xiong

Sets: Chi Ning

Props: Zhi Guang

Costumes: Qi Qiuming

Make-up: Da Xu

Photofinishing: Xu Hexiang, Du Zhenkun

Music: Huang Yijun

Sound: Miao Zhenyu

Cast:

Wei Wei (*Yu Wen*)

Li Wei (*Zhang Zhichen*)

Shi Yu (*Dai Liyan*)

Zhang Hongmei (*little sister*)

Cui Chaomei (*Old Huang*)

China 1948

98 mins

Digital

Fei Mu is considered part of the Second Generation of Chinese filmmakers, memorably captured in *Centre Stage* (aka *Ruan Lingyu*, 1991), Stanley Kwan's biopic of actress Ruan Lingyu. The Second Generation flourished in the 1930s, against the backdrop of the intense civil war between Chiang Kaishek's Nationalists and Mao's Communists. Unlike his contemporaries, such as Cai Chusheng, the director of *New Women* (1935), and Wu Yonggang, the director of *The Goddess* (1934), Fei Mu was not especially interested in furthering the leftist agendas of the film cadres who dominated his base at Lianhua Studios. He was instead viewed as a 'poet director', not much of a commendation during an age when political affiliation meant all. His interest in formal experimentation, symbolism, philosophical contemplation and use of subjectivity (a list identified by David Bordwell) set him apart from his contemporaries, who largely deployed Hollywood story structures and technique to convey their progressive messages.

In fact, Fei Mu took a dim view of all non-native philosophies of politics and art, with a particular disdain for the May Fourth Movement, the student movement and literary tendency that began in 1919 and which implored China to modernise through the selective implementation of Western ideas. Instead Fei Mu saw himself as a promoter of Confucian values, pre-Republican morality and steadfast nationalism.

Fei Mu's career was put on hold, like most filmmakers, during the war years. He made two films between 1941-48, but little is known about them and both are presumed lost. In 1948 he agreed to collaborate with Peking opera legend Mei Lanfang on China's first full colour film, *Eternal Regret*. (Also a title and theme riffed on by Stanley Kwan). Technical issues prevented its completion so Fei Mu took on a small project called *Spring in a Small Town*, based on a short story by Li Tianji. Made in three months with little-known actors, it takes place in 1946, one year after the end of the Sino-Japanese War, and was released in 1948, months before the Communist takeover in 1949.

The film allowed Fei Mu to test some new theories from 'On the Future of Chinese Made Cinema', a second major essay he wrote after the war. It deplores the then-prevalent reversion to sentimentality in realist blockbuster epics such as *The Spring River Flows East* (1947) and seeks a way to transmit traditional Confucian values to a nation where history has been obliterated; how, he asks, will one now 'ponder the fate of modern China'?

The plot reads like a conventional love triangle: depressed wife, bedridden husband, the arrival of a hunky doctor. But the film's setting, the Yangtze Delta, the desolate epicentre of Japanese wartime destruction, is no place for love to blossom. Fei Mu also fully rejects the inherent melodrama in the story, opting for psychological nuance and poetic undertone instead. In a facetious moment, Fei Mu was quoted as saying: 'In order to transmit the gloomy mood of old China I have undertaken a presumptuous and daring experimentation with my work, relying on the long take and slow motion, without seeking further craft. As a result the film comes across as being too dull.'

It is precisely these techniques, along with his radical use of dissolves within scenes and a strange hallucinatory voiceover, that have given the film its international reputation and remarkable resonance in modern and contemporary cinema.

Too Much: Melodrama on Film

7th Heaven

Mon 20 Oct 18:15; Wed 12 Nov 20:35

Brief Encounter

Mon 20 Oct 20:50; Sun 16 Nov 14:45 (+ 80th

Anniversary discussion with theatre director Emma

Rice, filmmaker Barnaby Thompson and writer

Oliver Soden)

Enamorada Tue 21 Oct 20:45; Sat 1 Nov 12:20

The Cranes Are Flying Letyat zhuravi

Wed 22 Oct 18:15; Sat 15 Nov 20:45

25 and Under: An Introduction to Melodrama

Wed 22 Oct 19:15 Blue Room

Camila

Wed 22 Oct 20:45 (+ intro by Cinema Mentiré);

Sun 2 Nov 12:15

Leave Her to Heaven

Thu 23 Oct 20:40 (+ intro by Aga Baranowska, BFI

Contextual Events Programmer); Sun 30 Nov 15:10

ÉI Fri 24 Oct 20:45; Mon 3 Nov 18:10

Johnny Guitar

Sat 25 Oct 20:45; Sat 8 Nov 14:45

The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant

Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant

Sun 26 Oct 14:50; Wed 5 Nov 20:20

Splendor in the Grass

Sun 26 Oct 18:20; Mon 24 Nov 18:00

Stella Dallas

Mon 27 Oct 20:40; Sat 1 Nov 17:30; Wed 12 Nov

18:00 (+ intro by Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary

University of London)

Spring in a Small Town Xiǎochéng zhī chūn

Wed 29 Oct 20:50; Sat 29 Nov 12:40

Volver Thu 30 Oct 20:40; Sat 29 Nov 18:10

The Nightingale's Prayer Doaa al-Karawan

Fri 31 Oct 18:00 (+ intro by Imane Lamime, curator

and founder of Fhamtini Film Festival);

Mon 10 Nov 20:40

Breaking the Waves

Sat 1 Nov 20:00; Sat 8 Nov 11:50

Farewell My Concubine

Ba wang bie ji

Sun 2 Nov 14:00 BFI IMAX

Far From Heaven

Sun 2 Nov 18:30; Sat 15 Nov 18:00;

Thu 20 Nov 20:50

Olivia

Tue 4 Nov 18:15; Fri 28 Nov 20:45

Stella

Fri 7 Nov 20:45; Sat 22 Nov 15:00

Mamma Roma

Sat 8 Nov 20:40; Fri 28 Nov 18:15 (+ intro by

Giulia Saccogna, BFI Programme & Research Coordinator)

Devdas

Sun 9 Nov 10:45 BFI IMAX

UK Premiere of 4K Restoration: The Arch

Dong fu ren + pre-recorded intro by T'ang Shushuen

Sun 9 Nov 12:20; Fri 14 Nov 20:50

The Eternal Breasts

Chibusa yo eien nare

Sun 9 Nov 14:50; Fri 21 Nov 20:45

The Life of Oharu

Saikaku ichidai onna

Sun 9 Nov 18:10; Thu 20 Nov 17:50

Now, Voyager

Mon 10 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by film programmer

Caroline Cassin, curator and founder of Women &

Cocaine); Mon 24 Nov 20:40

A Cottage on Dartmoor

Fri 14 Nov 18:20; Sat 22 Nov 12:30

Melo-dramarama

Sat 15 Nov 11:00-17:00

Written on the Wind

Sun 16 Nov 11:00 BFI IMAX

Madame X

Sun 23 Nov 12:20 (+ intro by season curator

Ruby McGuigan); Sat 29 Nov 20:40

The Wicked Lady

+ panel discussion on

Gainsborough melodramas

Sun 23 Nov 14:50

Madonna of the Seven Moons

Sun 23 Nov 18:20

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The slowness of *Spring in a Small Town*, marked by a palpable hesitancy in the performances, emphasises how the characters lag behind their moment in time and are incapable of real action – a trick reactivated by Wong Kar-Wai years later in his own masterpiece *In the Mood for Love* (2000).

The long takes, especially those that linger over ruins, evoke the weight of history and the perils of nostalgia, strikingly like the celebrated cinematography of Manoel de Oliveira's work. And yet those same takes also manage to evoke the exquisite detail of scholarly scroll paintings. Fei Mu has a particular fascination with walls and the vegetation that ekes a life out of their crevices; this metaphor has been deployed in Chinese art to highlight the difficulty of living in a state ruled by a harsh king, a subtle political dig that rhymes with the sombre, dispirited tone of his earlier *Confucius*.

Those astonishing dissolves have been written about with great insight by the Hong Kong International Film Festival programmer Li Cheuk-to: 'Dissolves bring in a sense of continuity... the film's long takes linked together by dissolves are so constructed that conflict and contradictions develop within the same space.' They are, in effect, a technique to further elongate key scenes, to brutally emphasise the film's feeling of entrapment, while allowing a change in perspective for character and viewer alike. Though unique in his hands, one cannot help but think of Orson Welles's highly original use of the dissolve in *Citizen Kane* (1941), though the two men deploy them differently and are after different metaphors and effects.

The film's use of voiceover – eerily presaging the French New Wave and especially several films by Alain Resnais – has an unmistakable ghostly quality. According to scholar Carolyn Fitzgerald, the technique allows the wife, the film's unreliable narrator, to draw our attention to the epistemological and psychological problematics of representing trauma.

These technical features of the film, however, do not fully explain its insistent modernity. For that we must turn to the film's second half, as the protagonists wade into sultry, near-silent eroticism, mostly sublimated but occasionally, shockingly not. Comparisons to Antonioni, made by Bordwell among others, come closest to describing its discomfiting effect, but the gesture is very much Fei Mu's own metaphor, bearing witness to the half-digested violation of China itself and the unbearable shame left in its wake.

Spring in a Small Town was savaged by leftist critics as decadent and ambiguous, and was disliked by many other critics for just being boring. It was a thorough box-office flop. In 1949, Fei Mu fled to Hong Kong and set up a production company, but died in 1951 before completing another film. *Spring in a Small Town* was effectively banned in mainland China for its petit-bourgeois 'decadence', its ideological 'backwardness' and its alleged 'narcotic effect'. Rediscovered at the China Film Archive by the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers in the 1980s, it was shown several years later at the Hong Kong International Film Festival and proclaimed a masterpiece on the spot. It has been cited as a significant influence on their own work by such esteemed Chinese filmmakers as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang (who remade it in 2002), Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, Stanley Kwan and Wong Kar-Wai.

Noah Cowan, *Sight and Sound*, July 2014