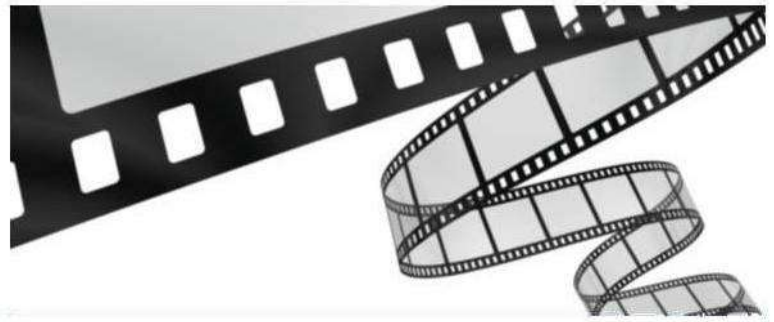


CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

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Spring in a Small Town

Dir. Fei Mu

China 1948

98 minutes

Cast: Chaoming Cui (Lao Huang); Wei Li (Zhang Zhichen); Yu Shi (Dai Liyan); Wei Wei (Zhou Yuwen); Hongmei Zhang (Meimei)

Tian Zhuangzhuang's 2002 *Springtime in a Small Town* [which members may remember we screened a few years ago as part of a short season of Chinese films] set its petrified adulterous triangle in the historically ambiguous zone between the end of Japanese occupation and the victory of Communist revolution. Indeed, it was a movie of multiple historical ambiguities, having remade a 1948 Chinese classic. Ever since Tian broke a near decade of silence with the tale of a sickly young landowner, his unhappy wife, and their robustly progressive childhood friend, cinephiles have been rattling cages and writing congressmen in hopes of seeing its source.

Now they can. The original, directed by Fei Mu and titled *Spring in a Small Town*, shows twice this week as part of the Walter Reade's "Centenary of Chinese Cinema" series. A chamber piece with a rubble-strewn location as aggressively "placeless" as the set for a Beckett play, *Spring* is revelatory in a number of ways—not least in demonstrating how Tian exquisitely refracted a stark contemporary drama through the prism of a double nostalgia. Increasingly claustrophobic and shadowy, Fei's film is stranger, starker, and less subtle than Tian's remake—closer in mood to Strindberg than Chekhov. Where the remake is deliberately distancing, the original uses a voiceover to cut in and out of the frustrated heroine's bleak consciousness. "I simply don't know how to live in the future," she muses at one point. Trapped in an unsatisfying feudal marriage (to the dying past), she is drawn to the ruined city wall, in part because it crystallizes her feelings of hopelessness.

Communist commentators criticized Fei's ideological "backwardness" and "narcotic effect"—not realizing, as Tian evidently would, the painful irony of Fei's title and how perfectly his movie embodied the moment of its making.

J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*, 18 October 2005

I first became aware of Fei Mu's masterly Chinese drama just over a decade ago, via a very intelligent and heartfelt modern remake/homage: Tian Zhuangzhuang's film *Springtime in a Small Town*. At that stage, I could only get hold of the original on a fuzzy VHS copy. So it is such a pleasure to see this big-screen re-release, written by Li Fianji and taken from his own short story, part of the BFI season celebrating a century of Chinese cinema [June-October 2014].

It is a powerful, yet exquisitely subtle emotional drama, something to be compared with Ophüls, or Mizoguchi, or with a Hollywood studio picture by Douglas Sirk or an early David Lean. The resemblance to Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* or *The Wings of the Dove* is also notable. The depressed and hypochondriac Liyan (Shi Yu) lives in a provincial town in 1948, in a house still damaged by Japanese bombing in the war, and which he cannot afford to repair. He is depressed by these ruins and by the stagnancy of his marriage to the beautiful Yuwen (Wei Wei) from whom he has emotionally retreated. He is delighted when his old childhood friend Zhang (Li Wei), shows up to visit, a dynamic and personable doctor in a western-style suit.

Yet Liyan does not realise that he was a former lover of Yuwen's, and her demure manner turns into suppressed coquetry and passion; something like a clandestine *affaire de coeur* begins to flower between them, but oppressed by fear and guilt, they entertain the notion of a future wedding between Zhang and Yuwen's kid sister Xiu (Zhang Hongmei). For reasons no one can explain, everyone is drawn to taking walks by the ruined city wall. Perhaps there is something about damaged limits or vulnerable barriers. There is a captivating subtlety in the glances, smiles, brief hand-holdings; it has an inspired emotional fluency and candour. This is a film to fall in love with.

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 19 June 2014

A note on the sound

Our screening is from the British Film Institute's 2015 DVD release of the film. In his *DVD Beaver* review of this release Gary Tooze notes the following:

The mono audio has a bit of echo - more noticeable at some times more than others - but, again, it is nothing that deterred my viewing. The clarity confirmed it too [along with the visual elements] had some thorough restoration.

He also includes the following in his review:

Received in email: "*Fei Mu SPRING IN A SMALL TOWN from the BFI arrived and I'm a bit aghast that after all the restoration work they've released the version lacking most of the music track. I was never quite clear about what happened between these two versions but thought it had to do with the China Film Archive and China Film Export people having different copies and the latter being more accessible. But this could be wrong.*

I guess we shouldn't announce too broadly that the complete score is on the YouTube version.

It simply looks very weird in those opening scenes with the heroine wandering around the ruined mansion, turning, pausing and continuing her stroll when this should be accompanied by an orchestral counterpoint."

http://www.dvdbeaver.com/film5/dvd_reviews_61/spring_in_a_small_town.htm

Our next film: Tuesday 17th May: *Leviathan*