THREE'S A CROWD
Zhou Yuwen (Wei Wei) is a housewife who has grown bored of her tubercular husband Dai Lyan (Shi Yu) and whose domestic life is turned upside down when her childhood sweetheart arrives from Shanghai

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

A nationalist who sought to promote Confucian values, director Fei Mu emerged with China's Second Generation in the 1930s but rejected their leftist political agendas. Pursuing his own poetic, experimental trajectory, his cinematic voice found full flower in 1948's 'Spring in a Small Town', the tale of a love triangle set amid the post-war devastation of the Yangtze Delta

By Noah Cowan

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* (*Xin Nüxing*, 1935), and Wu Yonggang, the director of *The Goddess* (*Shennü*, 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.

He began his career working for Hou Yao, a legend of the silent era responsible for *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xi Xiang Ji*, 1927) – of which only a tantalising fragment remains – and the rather more stolid

BRIEF ENCOUNTER
Director Fei Mu (far right) toned down the melodrama inherent in the illicit love affair between the married Zhou Yuwen and her one-time childhood sweetheart, played by Li Wei (above, right), in *Spring in a Small Town* (above left), opting for psychological nuance and poetic undertone instead

Mulan Joins the Army (*Hua Mulan cong jun*, 1928). (Yes, that *Mulan* – Disney's version is considerably more fun!) Hou Yao wrote an influential book, *Techniques of Writing Shadowplay Scripts*, which emphasised cinema's theatrical elements, such as dramatic conflict and emotional intensity. Fei Mu struggled against this philosophy while making his first feature, *Night in the City* (*Chengshi zhi ye*), in 1933. Now lost, the film adheres to the Lianhua progressive cinema textbook from a plot perspective, yet was noted by critics at the time for its more subtle emotional register and its attention to realism.

Around this time, Fei Mu published his own essay on filmmaking, 'A Brief Discussion of Air', valiantly exegeted by the Chinese literature scholar David Der Wei Wang, who explains the idea at its centre: "Fei Mu proposes that a director should be good at creating air – the invisible yet crucial element that enlivens cinema – so as to [in Fei Mu's words] 'capture his audience's attention and make them assimilated with the circumstances of the characters'." This rather heady idea is apparently achieved through a careful linkage between camera and the object filmed, providing a sense of wonder to the audience beyond the experience of theatre. While it appears Fei Mu is attempting to create a dodgy fusion of Aristotelian physics and practical phenomenology, it is more likely related to the writings of scroll painters and calligraphers, especially in how they speak of emptiness and space on the canvas to account for the power of their work.

This traditionalist approach is also felt in the second major idea in his essay, a theory of 'new drama', inspired by both traditional Chinese and imported Western theatre that emphasises art as a moral teaching tool. Wang explains: "As Fei Mu would have it, new drama brings forth the 'moral occult' – elucidating virtues and vices of humanity otherwise eclipsed in actual life." Circumstances suggest Fei Mu is reacting to the tiresome, metaphor-free leftist cinema around him by suggesting a return to more traditional storytelling practices, but inspired by the confidence of Western morality tales.

The first instance of Fei Mu putting these principles to work (that can actually be seen today) is the respectable if rather leaden *Song of China* (*Tian lun*, 1935), an early sound epic co-directed with his studio boss in an attempt to rescue Lianhua from financial disaster. The film features an all-star cast and slavishly reproduces the tenets of then-dictator Chiang Kaishek's prudish, fascist New Life Movement. A hoary tale of a young man torn between piety to his parents and the temptations of the city is undercut by impressive sequences of rich camera movement and a poised eye when choreographing crowd scenes. It is a well-made but conventional addition to the age's cinematic heritage.

How shocking then is *Blood on Wolf Mountain* (*Lang shan die xue ji*, 1936), Fei Mu's follow-up feature. A highly sophisticated atmospheric thriller with (impossible) shades of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), it is a blunt allegory, recounting the story of Japan's gradual hegemony over China by other means. Released just months before the full-scale invasion by the Japanese, it features a town suddenly entrapped by a band of once-docile wolves. Bold black-and-white landscapes and striking nighttime compositions give the film a classy *noir* flavour while Fei Mu's use of menacing, howling sound effects are uncanny and something very new for Chinese film. Sadly, the film cannot be seen officially, though a print exists; the presence of actress Lan Ping – later to be known as Jiang Qing, Mao's last wife and ringleader of the Gang of Four – has made its circulation difficult.

Soon after, Fei Mu directed a major Peking opera film, *Murder in the Oratory* (*Zhan jing tang*, 1937). Some critics suggest that his interest in opera, and especially its continuity with Confucian values, came from a desire to balance out the Western aesthetics creeping in to his more modern films. His next film, another Japanese invasion allegory called *Nightmares in Spring Chamber* (*Chungui Duanmeng*, 1937), a ten-minute segment in the omnibus "inspired by music" film *Lianhua Symphony* (*Lianhua jiao xiangqu*), strongly suggests this interpretation is correct. A kind of demonic stalker fantasia, it helped introduce German expressionism into Chinese cinema.

In 1940 he completed his recently restored epic, *Confucius* (*Kong Fuzi*). Again an allegory – though this time a dispirited look at the failure of Confucius, and so China, to keep the peace through his teachings – it often feels stilted, overly noble and obsessively formal. Bordwell compares it to Mizoguchi's *The 47 Ronin* (1941) and Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) but, despite some disarmingly modern flourishes, it lacks the former's grace and the latter's urgency. Its most important feature is Fei Mu's increasing attraction to ancient visual arts compositions for establishing shots, during cutaways and even vistas seen outside windows.

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* (*Xiao Cheng zhi Chun*), 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* (*Yijiang Chunshui Xiang Dong Liu*, 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.

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* (*Hua Yang Nian Hua*, 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. ⓢ

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i ***Spring in a Small Town* is rereleased by the BFI on 19 June as part of its 'A Century of Chinese Cinema' season, which runs until 7 October at BFI Southbank, London. Noah Cowan will present an illustrated lecture to accompany the season on 17 June**