



## An Exploration of the Changing Reputation of *Spring In A Small Town* at Different Times

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### Abstract

This article argues that while the power of political factors should not be underestimated, the change in the reputation of Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* was a complex process that involved a combination of factors, such as the cultural construction of a symbolic system of the nation-state and the awakening of ontological consciousness brought about by economic development. More importantly, the study of audience reception of *Spring in a Small Town* has not been introduced in previous studies, and the lack of this perspective makes it impossible to grasp the complete journey of Chinese film conceptions and film viewing contexts. As Adorno argues, art is a product of social forces - economic, political, technological, etc. - and the proper study of art is the study of these forces. The fame of *Spring in a Small Town* has evolved from a controversial release in '48 to a classic of Chinese cinema today, providing a path to grasp the political, economic and cultural roles behind the film's critique and to understand the deep psychology of the audience at the time.

**Keywords:** Fei Mu; Chinese cinema; Douglas Sirk; melodrama; gender



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# An Exploration of the Changing Reputation of *Spring In A Small Town* at Different Times<sup>1</sup>

Kaihui Bi

## Introduction

While this has so far only demonstrated the influence of politics and economics on film evaluation in a specific context, it is impossible to ignore how film as history has evoked different and even opposing evaluations at different times. A valid example of this is the evaluation of Sirk's films, which Camper describes in his article as 'progressive', as well as the melodramas in which he specializes. As he emphasizes in his article, "the meaning of a text is fundamentally dependent on the positions and needs of those involved in its evaluation, rather than on the text itself, as is commonly claimed." The study of the critique of Sirk's films provides an excellent case study for this essay, The critical study of Sirk's film provides a good case study for this paper, where the changing reputation of Sirk's film demonstrates the role of factors other than the film text in the process of the film becoming a classic, in the same way that the reputation of *Spring in a Small Town* changed. Hence, Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* will be chosen as a case study in this essay. The difference is that in previous studies of this movie, most scholars have regarded politics as a decisive factor in the classic status of the film, for example,

in Luo Yijun's article 'A New Theory of Fei Mu', which argues that the changes in political thought since the New Age have rediscovered Fei Mu.

This article argues that while the power of political factors should not be underestimated, the change in the reputation of *Spring in a Small Town* was a complex process that involved a combination of factors, such as the cultural construction of a symbolic system of the nation-state and the awakening of ontological consciousness brought about by economic development. More importantly, the study of audience reception of *Spring in a Small Town* has not been introduced in previous studies, and the lack of this perspective makes it impossible to grasp the complete journey of Chinese film conceptions and film viewing contexts. As Adorno argues, art is a product of social forces - economic, political, technological, etc. - and the proper study of art is the study of these forces. The fame of *Spring in a Small Town* has evolved from a controversial release in '48 to a classic of Chinese cinema today, providing a path to grasp the political, economic and cultural roles behind the film's critique and to understand the deep psychology of the audience at the time.

In the process of forming film classics, both popular and academic film critics have a preference for selecting films for wider discussion, and in the process ignoring some films they consider unimportant. The political stance and interests of the critics who are the authors of the reviews are the reasons for these preferences. As Staiger claims in "The Politics of Film Canons"

the academic is out to prove that his or her critical approach, history, and theory are not only worthy of financial support in an era of economic austerity, more so than others (Steiger 1985). This not only proves that the tendency of critics stems from a need for economic necessity but also provides an opportunity to view film criticism in the context of wider social reality. Just as in the original argument about whether cinema was art, the critics elevated cinema to the status of art to ensure that the medium was valuable in the consumption of cultural products, for the purpose of attracting the attention of middle-class audiences (Steiger 1985). In addition to economic influences, on the other hand, the formation of the cinematic canon was also tied to politics. Altieri argued that society should preserve works that could produce social or public interest (Altieri 1983), and so those films that met the criteria of social interest were put on the pantheon by generations of film critics and official institutions, and in the education that served as a case study to produce those who adhered to social norms. These economic and political influences prove that the evaluation of a film is complex and is a combination of political and economic factors. The change of reputation of *Spring in a Small Town* provides evidence for this argument. During the long process of it becoming a classic, its poor reputation at the beginning has formed a great contrast with its later status as a classic. The evaluation of it by academics and audiences has been changing with the change of times, and political, economic, cultural and

other factors have been playing a role. By studying this change, we can grasp the role of politics, economy and culture behind the criticism of *Spring in a Small Town*, and understand the profound psychology of the audience at that time.

While this has so far only demonstrated the influence of politics and economics on film evaluation in a specific context, it is impossible to ignore how film as history has evoked different and even opposing evaluations at different times. A valid example of this is the evaluation of Sirk's films, which Camper describes in his article as 'progressive' (Klinger 1994), as well as the melodramas in which he specializes. As he emphasizes in his article, "the meaning of a text is fundamentally dependent on the positions and needs of those involved in its evaluation, rather than on the text itself, as is commonly claimed." (Klinger 1994). The study of the critique of Sirk's films provides an excellent case study for this essay, The critical study of Sirk's film provides a good case study for this paper, where the changing reputation of Sirk's film demonstrates the role of factors other than the film text in the process of the film becoming a classic, in the same way that the reputation of *Spring in a Small Town* changed. Hence, Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* will be chosen as a case study in this essay. The difference is that in previous studies of this movie, most scholars have regarded politics as a decisive factor in the classic status of the film, for example, in Luo Yijun's article 'A New Theory of Fei Mu', which argues that the changes in political thought since the New Age have rediscovered Fei Mu. This

article, however, argues that while the power of political factors should not be underestimated, the change in the reputation of *Spring in a Small Town* was a complex process that involved a combination of factors, such as the cultural construction of a symbolic system of the nation-state and the awakening of ontological consciousness brought about by economic development. More importantly, the study of audience reception of *Spring in a Small Town* has not been introduced in previous studies, and the lack of this perspective makes it impossible to grasp the complete journey of Chinese film conceptions and film viewing contexts. As Adorno argues, art is a product of social forces - economic, political, technological, etc. - and the proper study of art is the study of these forces (Adorno 1997). The fame of *Spring in a Small Town* has evolved from a controversial release in '48 to a classic of Chinese cinema today, providing a path to grasp the political, economic and cultural roles behind the film's critique and to understand the deep psychology of the audience at the time.

### The initially unacceptable *Spring in a Small Town*

Reviews of *Spring in a Small Town* have been mixed since its release. From the thirty essays found in this period, it is found that the reviews of this movie fall into two tendencies. Some critics argue that this movie has brought Chinese cinema to an unprecedented peak (Ma 1948),

while opponents focus on attacking the meaning of the film, arguing that it shows "the fragile intellectual side of a depressed life (Mu 1948). The two opposing voices illustrate the complexity of assessing *Spring in a Small Town* during this period. It has been suggested that while political concerns contributed to the polarisation of *Spring in a Small Town*, concerns about artistic standards and the response to the spatial imagination of urban citizens also had a significant impact on this film's reputation.

One political fact that cannot be lost in this debate over the reputation of *Spring in a Small Town* is that the victory in the Civil War was about to go to the side of the Communists. The upshot of this impending victory was that the ideas of the Left gradually gained the upper hand in the struggle against Kuomintang's 'New Life Movement' of the period. The Left Wing's admiration for cinema focused on works that preached socialism, reflected the lives of the people, and spread social justice. Thus, the deliberate concealment of the period and setting of *Spring in a Small Town* made the story take place in a "purgatory isolated from outsiders", so that the story and the characters became the product of the director's and screenwriter's fantasies, and the grey mood in the characters' hearts was the director's personal decadence. Thus some left-leaning critics, such as Xie Xin, have pointed out that Fei Mu was always inextricably linked to the so-called degenerate petty-bourgeois sentiment (Xin 1948). After confirming the argument that the idea was pale, left-wing critics further linked the fantasy story to the times, arguing that

the film both failed to respond to the needs of the people and promoted false values. The latter, more notably, refers to the "New Life Movement" propagated by the Kuomintang government, which is the opposite of the left's aims. In fact, Fei Mu had been advocating a return to Confucianism, which coincided with the Kuomintang government's cultural policies. When Fei Mu's films did not incorporate this dominant ideology directly and effectively, they faced criticism and even rejection from their audiences.

However, while the context of the Civil War brought with it a critique of the political perspective of *Spring in a Small Town*, the diversity of opinions in the film proves that political critique was not the defining factor of the era; it was the evaluation of the film's level of artistry and its response to the spatial imagination of the city's citizens that determined the reputation of *Spring in a Small Town*. For this paper, an effective clue to sketching the initial contours of *Spring in a Small Town* in the history of its reception is to comb through the reviews associated with it. These reviews consisted of reviews by professional critics, non-professional journalists, and a small number of fans, and were published in the *CD news*(*中央日报*), *Drama and Film Spring and Autumn*(*剧影春秋*), *Ta Kung Pao*(*大公报*), and the *Xinmin Evening News*(*新民晚报*). Since it has been more than seventy years since the release of *Spring in a Small Town*, a larger portion of the comments are no longer verifiable, and the oral history method cannot be included



in this case study of the audience, while these official comments will be an important reference material representing the audience's opinions. From these sources, the opinions expressed around *Spring in a Small Town* focused on three important areas of discussion: women's repressed sexuality and female emancipation; the class consciousness imposed on the audience while watching the film; and director Fei Mu's personal style.

In discussing women's repressed sexuality and female emancipation, although some critics and viewers, such as An E, expressed affirmation of the fire of female emancipation latent in this movie, which would ignite women's gender consciousness (An 1948). From the twelve articles that dealt with the topic of women, there were five articles that agreed with this viewpoint, and four of them were written by women, which means that most of the critics and viewers who agreed with this viewpoint were women. If the authors of these published articles are considered representative of the opinions of female audiences at the time, then it can be inferred that women at the time would have similarly agreed that *Spring in a Small Town* ignited women's gender consciousness. However, if we continue to analyze the content of these six articles, we can find that half of the articles praised the female consciousness in the movie, but still expressed dissatisfaction with Zhou Yuwen's choice to be loyal to her husband at the end of the movie due to moral constraints, for example, Shen Lu wrote in an article published in *Ta Kung Pao*: "Precisely because it is still in the transitional era, the awakening of women's consciousness

seems to have nothing else to do but to imagine their own. It is also because it is still a transitional era, the awakening of women's consciousness, it seems that there is no other way but to fantasize about the death of their husbands, which can only become "the heartfelt sorrow of contemporary intellectual men and women." (Shen 1948) Like Shen Lu, An E, also believes that "movies, novels, plays, and dances, up to the present day, still inevitably sell women on their capitalist and feudal stances, which is a mistake in the era of democratic demands." (An 1948)

As for the other three articles, they mainly praised the actor who played the role of Zhou Yulin in the movie, without commenting on the movie itself. Thus, these articles conveyed the simple fact that *Spring in a Small Town's* discussion of women's issues catered to the needs of the times and was accepted by the predominantly female group of viewers, but its depressing ending still put a great damper on its acceptance. According to the data in Shen Xiling's article *How to Watch Movies* published in *Popular Life* (大众生活) (Shanghai) in 1935, there were two potential audience groups for *Spring in a Small Town*: the first-class audience who were used to European and American films, and a part of the audience of the second-class cinema. Another article, "Cinema's Shapes and Colors," mentions the identities of these viewers, the former being wives and ladies who had seen too many Peking Operas and went to the movies to relieve their boredom, while the latter were modern young people who went with the opposite sex. It can be

seen that female audiences made up the majority of the audience of *Spring in a Small Town*, and their disappointment with the movie formed a huge public opinion impact on the movie's reputation.

On the other hand, male viewers and critics were extremely united in their opinions, with six other reviews written by men unanimously criticizing the film's neutral repression. A commentator in the then "left-leaning" *Xinmin Evening News*(*新民晚报*) stated a few months after the film's release that when he saw *Spring in a Small Town*, he "felt very disgusted" and "could not sit still because of the sensuality! " (Zi 1949). In addition to the social background of the Civil War, a direct cause of this public attitude was the huge mistake made in publicizing *Spring in a Small Town*. The *Shanghai News* placed in The Declaration proclaimed that the film was "The behavior is almost hussy, but not lascivious, good-naturedly licentious, but not so much as goatish(近于冶荡, 一切无邪, 难得放浪, 不及于乱).",("Advertisement " 1948) and then Fei Mu himself responded to the content of the film by proclaiming that the female protagonist's determination to pursue pleasure was at times close to hussy, and that the relationship between the two men developed to a delicate stage that was just less than goatish (Fei 1948). These advertised claims led audiences to view *Spring in a Small Town* as a "sexually" stimulating erotic movie. As one viewer commented, the movie was described as "no

different from *Widow's Shop*<sup>2</sup> (Guangjue 1948). The result of such claims was that, as mentioned above, both major potential audience groups lost interest in the movie.

The unacceptability of *Spring in a Small Town* was definitely something Fei Mu did not anticipate. According to Fei Mu's conception, this movie, which expresses his bitterness, would resonate with the intellectuals who were carried along by the times, and in the atmosphere of broken mountains and rivers that he portrayed, it would evoke the national identity of the intellectuals as well as their desire to rebuild a new society constrained by traditional humanistic values. When Fei Mu began to make films in the 1930s, the intellectual temperament displayed in his films is an important clue to study the value of Fei Mu's films. As a member of the literati deeply influenced by Confucian culture, Fei Mu's films express nostalgia for traditional humanistic values by creating a unique atmosphere. The purpose of this nostalgia is not to lead the public back to feudal society, but to establish the ideal of caring for the lower class and saving the country in the midst of the shattered mountains of the country. As Eileen Wong declared, "His films express a deep feeling for home and country through their distinct way." (Wong 2014). Beginning with *Song of China* in 1935, Fei Mu's films show a growing interest in the lower classes and a sympathy for the common people. As the invasion of Japan intensified, the glorification of traditional values took an increasingly important place in Fei Mu's films. An

analysis of *The Wolf Hill* (1936) reveals that Fei Mu's nostalgia for traditional values in this film is the inheritance of the patriotic sentiment of the literati since the feudal society, which is to "the literati remonstrance the king even if the king tried to behead them, the generals fought the enemy to death" against the invasion of Japan. Subsequently, during the period when Shanghai was an isolated island, Fei Mu's *Confucius* (1940) portrayed a man who ran around for the unification of the country and used all his energy and knowledge to create a peaceful country of unification, which is exactly the projection of Fei Mu's image. All this evidence testify to the values of Fei Mu's films and his literati ethos, that is, a literati artist who is passionate about his country and uses his talent to awaken the spirit of the people, except that the path Fei Mu chose was based on traditional humanistic values. This value was carried over to his 1948 film *Spring in a Small Town*.

But the difference is that before making *Spring in a Small Town*, Fei Mu, with the support of the Kuomintang, had planned a movie to celebrate the victory of the war and to express his desire for peace, *The Magnificent Country*, which was also motivated by the family and nationalistic feelings that Chinese intellectuals have always had. However, the subsequent breakdown of the KMT negotiations dragged Fei Mu's vision of China back into the war, and the ideals in Fei Mu's mind broke down with it. As a result, *Spring in a Small Town*, which was made in just three months, fully reflected Fei Mu's "bitter" mood at that time. This is confirmed

by the recollection of the screenwriter Li Tianji, who emphasized that the story wanted to express "bitterness", and at the same time, this bitterness would not be forced to put on a bright tail at the end, but rather, "don't say it explicitly, but only the emotion". (Lie 2014, p. 192) The post-war mentality of the people is attached to the broken walls of a small town in the south of the Yangtze River, and the broken tiles and walls of the Dai family's house are abstracted as the broken mountains and rivers. The repeated presentation of the dilapidated city wall is based on the history that the city wall has the practical function of defending against foreign invasion and is the important support for the resilience of the Chinese nation. Its geographic location, "inside" and "outside" the city, is burdened with worries at the practical level and bitterness at the spiritual level, echoing the common state of mind of many intellectuals at that time. According to Shen Yun, these works are the psychological manifestation of the social contradictions of intellectuals of different dynasties and generations, and a way of expressing their metaphors of the existing life in which they have no choice (Shen 1992).

In other words, Fei Mu hoped to awaken more people (mainly intellectuals) to the hope of rebuilding the country after its collapse through the expression of his bitterness. But the grey mood of old China is unacceptable to a population that has endured 14 years of resistance and the Chinese Civil War war. Judging from the advertised screenings, it appears that *Spring in a*

*Small Town* ran for only a month and a half, with a break of more than ten days for various reasons. It broke all box office records since the company's inception (Li 2006). What was surprising about the post-war film industry was that both producers and audiences clearly wanted films that directly confronted the issue of war. A key issue is that despite the victory in the war against Japan, little has changed in the lives of the people, and the question that haunts them is why the victory in the war against Japan felt like a defeat after the war. The public believed that the cause of this problem must have arisen during the war, so they reflected on it based on facing this war head-on and, by feeling the hardships of the fallen martyrs in this genre, compared it to their own miserable lives, rediscovering their place in that life and establishing a better imagination of their new life. In *Spring in a Small Town*, on the other hand, Qian Xiang argues that the characters in *Spring in a Small Town* who are afraid to face up to reality and wallow in clichéd emotions are a piece of scrap in the world (Xiang 1948). In the grip of this sentiment, audiences naturally develop a sense of anticipation for more realistic films, through which they relate to their own experiences and thus express their emotions. A clear example of this is that among the films released around the same time as *Spring in a Small Town*, the films that created a sensation such as *Spy Number One* (1946) and *The Spring River Flows East* (1947), *Spy Number One* grosses 200 million yuan in 20 days at the Queen's Cinema in Shanghai (Huang 2021), and the latter was shown in its first run in Shanghai for two hundred and nine days until

15 January 1948 and was seen by 14.39% of the city's population (“After the song..” 1948). The both films ultimately responded to the hardships of the war and the suffering of the people during the war against Japan, such as the struggle against the agents in *The First of Heaven* and the tragic strategy of using family separation to suggest the war in the country in *The Spring River Flows East*.

Although some intellectuals of the time expressed approval of the artistic quality of the film, such as Xin Xie, who argued that the author of this movie used an oriental color stroke - a wash-out stroke - to portray a beautiful orientalist story. But the expression of *Spring in a Small Town* was too pioneering for the audience and most critics of the time, and this determined that this production *Town* could not be recognized as a work of art. *Spring in a Small Town* cannot be accepted as a classic of unassailable status. Firstly, it is overwhelming for the average viewer immersed in Hollywood melodrama. According to James Udden, *Spring in a Small Town* had an average shot length of 24.5 seconds, much longer than his contemporary's *Eight Thousand Miles and the Moon's* 16.5 seconds and *A River Runs East's* 11.2 seconds (Udden 2012). the excessive length of the shots was an obstacle to audience reception, and AN E emphasizes that director Fei Mu's focus on naturalistic techniques and his excessive use of sketches ,it led to the fact that it was slightly less effective (An 1948). Even Fei Mu himself later admitted in an interview that the



use of long shots and slow motion to construct scenes for the film resulted in it being overly dull (Fei 1948). It is thus clear that the excessive use of long shots made the effect unacceptable to the people of the time.

On the other hand, Fei Mu's creative use of narration, even though nowadays it is considered a highly modern innovation, was, for the viewers of the time, a narration that complemented the narrative, and Fei Mu's use of narration that was equal to the content of the image. For example, when Leiyan, who then appeared, shouted to Zhou, "Yuwen! Yuwen!" when the silent Zhou narrates "Now he's calling me", it is not only a redundant repetition of information for the audience, but also fails to hold their attention. It is for these reasons that most audiences have been unable to accept this emotionally pallid, purely formalist production. Thus, the reputation of *Spring in a Small Town* was initially controversial for its overly avant-garde artistic expression and its inability to respond to the civic imagination. Although the role of politics in this process cannot be ignored, it is not a decisive factor.

### The Politically Excluded *Spring in a Small Town*

Controversy over the film did not die down until after the country's creation. At this stage, the topicality of the times overwhelms all other voices, i.e. the ideological voices overwhelm the debate over the film ontology and personal style of the film. With the establishment of the new

China, the Chinese Communist Party gradually modelled its artistic and aesthetic agenda on Soviet literary theory to suit its own political interests, and as a result, political exclusion led to *Spring in a Small Town*, which expressed the gloomy sentiments of the bourgeoisie, going unmentioned and being forgotten by mainstream film critics and scholars. Of these seventeen years of Chinese cinema, only Cheng Jihua's History of the Development of Chinese Cinema documents it in a way of fragmentary manner. This History of the Development of Chinese Cinema, edited by Cheng Jihua, is also one of the achievements of literature and art in the service of politics. The book argues that the negative impact of *Spring in a Small Town*, which was released in September 1948 at a time when the liberation war was rapidly developing and the people's movement was on the rise, cannot be ignored, and that it actually served to paralyse the will to struggle at the time (Cheng 1963). The book is not only a work of individual scholarship, but also represents the official ideology of New China, presenting a distinct class-historical outline, a commentary suggesting that *Spring in a Small Town* was ideologically rejected by critics and the ruling class alike.

However, while there were political reasons for the neglect of *Spring in a Small Town* during this period, popular expectations for a particular genre also made it difficult to gain support for the film. With the launch of the Great Leap Forward in 1953, the powerful call to

"work hard, strive for success, and build a socialist country more quickly and with less effort" dominated people's minds, and audiences were looking for films that would call on working people to build a new China, introduce the country's scientific message and raise political awareness. After watching a film, the workers of the Xijing Automobile Repair Factory thought, "What we need today is a film that reflects the way in which our fellow workers have taken ownership of their technical innovations and improved their efficiency as the master of society." ("Special Issue.." 1958)" For the audience of the time, the story of the the film was itself different from their needs. The audience, in the heat of construction, could not understand why a young landowner was so melancholy when he did not need to work, nor could they understand the chaotic relationship between Zhou Yuyin, Dai Liyan and Zhang Zhichen. The expression of the three men's feelings, which Fei Mu takes great pains to create, is ultimately reduced to the pejorative term "petty bourgeoisie", which in the eyes of the audience represents wavering, weakness, decline, decadence, greyness, negativity and illusion, and they represented the darker side of the "proletarian" discourse that was being portrayed at the time, and no one bothered to pay attention to them. On the other hand, as mentioned above, Fei mu's overly avant-garde means of artistic expression did not improve the public's understanding of the film itself at this stage, as they were still concerned with the content of the story itself, and the alienated narrative

method used in *Spring in a Small Town* remained incomprehensible and incomprehensible to them.

Thus, in addition to the vital need for literature to serve politics, popular expectations of specific genres led to the disappearance of this film from public view in this period.

### *The Rediscovery of Spring in a Small Town*

Since the reform and opening-up, political factors have only indirectly contributed to the re-evaluation of *Spring in a Small Town* within China as a general context. This wave of re-evaluation was spearheaded by Hong Kong filmmakers (Hong Kong had not yet returned to China), so it is important to analyse how Hong Kong rediscovered and re-evaluated *Spring in a Small Town*. As mainland China issued a declaration on the resumption of Hong Kong in the early 1980s and took a series of measures to ensure the reunification of Hong Kong in 1997, and Britain's influence on Hong Kong gradually faded during this period of time, Hong Kong became a relatively independent region in terms of politics, economy and culture. This relatively independent status has had both positive and negative consequences for Hong Kong. First, due to Hong Kong's independence during this period, Hong Kong constructed the mainland as a traditional socialist state. By re-creating the mainland imaginary in its films, Hong Kong has shaped an imaginary other and compared the mainland's political, economic and existential

environment with Hong Kong's, constructing Hong Kong as a modern capitalist state. As Yingchi Chu emphasises, China is represented by a series of symbols that signify the Communist geopolitical state: the Red Guards, Communist security officials, Third World peasants and illegal immigrants. All these symbols emphasise that Hong Kong's political and economic system and legal rights are different from those of Third World China. Similar to the image of China, the image of the British colonial government was also shown in films and used to emphasize Hong Kong's independent identity. In the police films that became popular in the 1970s, corrupt dealings by the British colonial government were detected and eventually sanctioned by Hong Kong-born police officers with a sense of Hong Kong identity. Ultimately, these elements helped create and emphasize Hong Kong's own independent identity.

However, as the Sino-British Joint Declaration continued, the sense of crisis in the minds of the people of Hong Kong over the reunification grew stronger and stronger, and Hong Kong finally realized that it was a "nation" that lacked independent political power. The crisis has forced Hong Kong to look for traceable sources to confirm its position. It was against this backdrop that *Spring in a Small Town* came to the attention of Hong Kong critics. This paper argues that at this point *Spring in a Small Town* became a myth that helped to resolve Hong Kong's identity crisis and confusion, a myth that told the story of Hong Kong's "national" origins, the basis of its present existence, and an ambitious goal for the future, that connected

Hong Kong to its common past with the mainland, and that helped to distance modern-day Hong Kong from socialist China, which has a different political and economic system. In his study, Anthony Smith identifies eight "themes and characteristics" of national myths, arguing that they provide community members with a sense of self and belonging, authenticity and security:

- 1 a myth of origins in time; i.e. when the community was 'born';
- 2 a myth of origins in space; i.e. where the community was 'born';
- 3 a myth of ancestry; i.e. who bore us, and how we descend from him/her;
- 4 a myth of migration; i.e. whither we wandered;
- 5 a myth of liberation; i.e. how we were freed;
- 6 a myth of the golden age; i.e. how we became great and heroic;
- 7 a myth of decline; i.e. how we decayed and were conquered/exiled; and
- 8 a myth of rebirth; i.e. how we shall be restored to our former glory (Smith 1989).

That's exactly what Hong Kong critics are trying to do by praising *Spring in a Small Town* at this point in time. First of all, the Chinese elements and atmosphere that pervade everywhere in *Spring in a Small Town* are indicative of the time and space in which the movie is set (although the director deliberately conceals the specific period setting, the costumes on the characters are indicative of the era in which they are set, which is modern China), which addresses the first two of the eight themes and characteristics of the national myth pointed out by Smith. And the film's ubiquitous war debris and effects shape the war brought on by the invaders into a major issue shared by both China and Hong Kong. A large group of Hong Kong critics interpreted the film's allusions as the usual techniques of boudoir poetry, and portrayed the entire film as a symbol of

the invasion of the country (Zhuo-tao 2014). Hong Kong was precisely ceded to Britain by the Qing government under the pressure of the war of aggression. In other words, the people of Hong Kong have come to Hong Kong from the country that gave them birth because of the war, but they have inherited Chinese civilization. This interpretation of *Spring in a Small Town* from the point of view of state aggression explains the third and fourth of the eight themes and features of national mythology identified by Smith. Similarly, this interpretation from the perspective of war reminds one of the inclusion of Hong Kong in the framework of the most difficult war of resistance against Japan fought by the Chinese nation, and reminds one that the people of Hong Kong underwent the same painful and glorious war before they were liberated and became great and heroic. Thus, the rediscovery and re-evaluation of *Spring in a Small Town* has prompted Hong Kong film critics to emphasize the identification of the Chinese nation by placing Hong Kong in the face of war as part of a war of resistance against aggression. So far, the review of *Spring in a Small Town* has helped Hong Kong, in the face of an identity crisis, to address its own origins. However, due to the differences in the current political and economic systems in Hong Kong, they also need to establish their own independent status in order to resolve the crisis of being completely controlled by the Communist Party of China (CPC). This is due to another strategy of Hong Kong movie critics. This awakening of ontological consciousness prompted Hong Kong filmmakers to seek ways to critique Hong Kong cinema as

a "national" cinema. One important way of doing so is to articulate the differences in artistic style and mode of production between Cantonese and Mandarin films, the very differences that have created Hong Kong cinema (a specific local cultural community) (Chu 2003). The analysis of *Spring in a Small Town* by Li Zhuo-tao and others identifies the traditional aesthetic characteristics it possesses, and in this way distinguishes it from Hong Kong cinema, thus confirming the cultural uniqueness of Hong Kong cinema. Li Zhuo-tao, for example, argues that the film's low camera elevation suggests Day's inferior perspective (Zhuo-tao 2014). This is an important feature of Chinese cinema that allows the audience to understand the characters from different perspectives and on different levels; Whereas Cantonese cinema cinematography usually starts from a fixed angle on the front and head of the characters in the drama, retaining a fixed audience position and viewer perspective. By distinguishing between the aesthetic norms of Chinese and Cantonese cinema, the ontological awareness prompted Lee to separate Hong Kong cinema from the national category of Chinese cinema and affirm the uniqueness of its films.

Unlike Hong Kong, the 1980s were the beginning of China's economic take-off. The difference is that the mainland claims the film as the forerunner of modern Chinese cinema. The reason for this is that despite China's rising economic status, the development of cultural theory



was almost cut short by the Cultural Revolution. The situation has led to a monopoly of interpretation of Chinese cinema by Western film theorists, which in turn has created cultural and academic anxiety among Chinese scholars about themselves. Especially after the reform and opening-up, a flood of Western literary theories poured into China, and the introduction of these theories led Chinese film theorists to realize that Chinese cinema needed to be combined with theories of modernity in order to have a broader academic space. The traditional mainstream cinema, due to its subservience to ideology, was not likely to be given more room for academic interpretation, and *Spring in a Small Town*, which strayed from the main theme, replenished the academic gap at this time and drew on Western theories to supplement the imagination of Chinese cinema as it stepped into modernity. Among these, Li Shaobai's interpretation of the modernity of *Spring in a Small Town* is highly representative. In Li Shaobai's essay 'Precursors of Modern Chinese Cinema' he emphasises that *Spring in a Small Town* is seen as a pioneer of modern Chinese cinema because it first conveys a narrative view of modern cinema (Li 1996). Fei Mu's use of narration in *Spring in a Small Town* has been interpreted as a modern use of narrative in Chinese cinema, shifting the focus of the film from 'what to say' to 'how to say it'. The interplay of past and present tense creates confusion in the narrative perspective, thus exploring humanity by emphasizing the inner emotions of the characters. Another counter-example to this view is the subsequent criticism of *Spring in a Small Town* by overseas scholars

Hu, he arguing that this movie still has a strong dramatic conflict, (Udden 2016). The commentary exposes the lie that Chinese scholars are talking to themselves, but demonstrate China's desire for an interpretive discourse on cinema and its desire to engage in a 'dialogue with the world' as a result of its economic takeoff. Hence in both Hong Kong and the mainland, the awakening of local cultural consciousness brought about by economic take-off has contributed to the classic status of the film.

### *Spring in a Small Town* and poetic tradition

The classic status of *Spring in a Small Town* is further confirmed as we enter the 21st century. As China's economic development contributed to the growing international status of Chinese cinema, *Spring in a Small Town* was constructed as a representative of Chinese film theory, as claimed by the Chinese film school, and as a link to China's poetic tradition. Liu Chenghan, for example, argues that this film demonstrates what a Chinese film aesthetic is, and proves that Chinese film schools can indeed be justified. This view is widely shared by Chinese film scholars of the period (Liu 2019). but before explaining how the classic status of the film was established in this period is what needs to be explained, namely: why a school of Chinese cinema was constructed and why this film is considered to have a typical Chinese film aesthetic. Firstly,

as China entered the twenty-first century, Chinese cinema rapidly integrated into the world film market, becoming a world leader in terms of marketability, industry scale, number of productions and box office revenues, while politically, China's strategy of moving from being a manufacturing power to a manufacturing power prompted a conscious shift towards a cinematic powerhouse. In the process, Chinese film criticism has come to realize that China's own problems cannot be solved within the framework of Western theories, leading to a sense of 'aphasia'. This cultural self-reflection has prompted Chinese film scholars to consider the unique spiritual syndrome behind Chinese cinema. As Rao Shuguang says, the most sophisticated, vivid and dynamic film practices in China today are sufficient to support Chinese film theoretical thinking, to support us in building new concepts and systems that integrate Chinese and foreign cinema, and to support us in building a Chinese school of film theoretical criticism (Rao 2015). In this context, the need to construct a Chinese school of film came into being. Secondly, the traditional Chinese aesthetic presented in *Spring in a Small Town* was proposed by Hong Kong scholars in the 1980s, and Zhuotao Lee described the characteristics of the traditional aesthetic in *Spring in a Small Town* (Lee 2014). Subsequently, in his 1998 essay 'The Third Kind of Film', Chen Shan analyses how Fei Mu staged atmosphere to demonstrate the poetic mood (Chen 1997). In this atmosphere this film came to the attention of Chinese film scholars. A study of Fei Mu reveals that he was very much a traditional Confucianist himself, which often led to a focus

on traditional Chinese aesthetics in his films. In his essay "The Way Out for Chinese Films", as well as expressing his concern for traditional Chinese aesthetics, Fei argued that Chinese theater, like Chinese painting, should capture the national style of Chinese cinema (Fei 2014). The combination of this self-conscious expression of Chinese culture by Fei Mu and the self-conscious construction of a theory of national cinema in China at the present time has led to a renewed focus on *Spring in a Small Town*. On the other hand, Fei Mu is also a film theorist, for example, he talks about the "air theory" as a different framework from Western theory for national film theory, which is not only well used in *Spring in a Small Town*, but also highlights the charm of Chinese indigenous film theory. The establishment of *Spring in a Small Town* as a period classic thus stems from the need to construct a theory of Chinese cinema in the wake of China's economic rise, that is, when economic factors played a large role.

Unlike in China, where the attention paid to *Spring in a Small Town* in the West is politically motivated, this attention is essentially an Orientalist gaze. The entry of Chinese cinema into the Western perspective is actually due to the efforts of the fifth generation of directors, who created a series of images of China that were recognized in the West, such as the repressed woman, the iron cage without hope, etc. Their award is a testament to the success of their chosen strategy. While these Chinese directors have been criticized for their stereotypical

and scandalous portrayals of characters and Chinese culture, whether intentionally or not, the films of these directors reveal a powerful dichotomy between the individual and the tradition, and these stories are considered to be exemplary of Chinese cinema worldwide. As Bill Nichols highlights, this representation of Chinese tradition and politics fits the mould of what he describes as a typical international film festival (Nichols 1994). The review of *Spring in a Small Town* perpetuates this bias. In Chris Berry's essay, he uses realism as a clue to the ideological relevance of realism to the debates about Chinese modernity and national survival in the first half of the 20th century, and analyses the symbolism of the family's response to the national catastrophe in *Spring in a Small Town*. (Berry and Farquhar 2006) Indeed, half of Chris Berry's analysis is correct, in that the film does use the family to symbolise China's fate as a victim of Western modernity. But it is worth discussing the question of the relationship between modernity and realism, for which one of Chris Berry's essential points is that realism is constructed as an aesthetic counterpart to the quest to make China a modern nation-state. However, the tradition of realism in Chinese cinema represents the literati ethos inherited from ancient China, a deep concern and sympathy for the state, society and people's livelihoods, expressed in the words and deeds of intellectuals who were actively engaged in the world and concerned with reality after the turmoil and changes of rites and music, lords and lords and wars. Similarly, the realism of Chinese cinema since modern times has shown this tendency. In this movie, however, Li Zhuo

Tao relates it to the boudoir poetry tradition, arguing that Fei Mu expresses a sense of sorrow for the country and its people (Le 2014, p.250). Thus, the romantic realism of *Spring in a Small Town* has nothing to do with modernity, and the fantasy of modernity to which Western scholars aspire, as *Spring in a Small Town* argues, is essentially a recapitulation of the image of the Chinese underdog, an Orientalist gaze.

### Conclusion

As mentioned above, the status of *Spring in a Small Town* as a now classic Chinese film has been an extremely long process of change. Political, cultural and economic factors have all played a part in this process, and rather than political factors always playing a decisive role, this status is actually the result of a constant compromise and eventual balancing of various causes. The fundamental reason for the initial failure of *Spring in a Small Town* in terms of fame and box office was its overly pioneering form of expression and its inability to respond to the expectations of audiences at the time, while the criticism of politically left-wing critics merely served to guide public opinion. With the establishment of the new China, *Spring in a Small Town* was both unrecognisable to audiences and unable to fit into the socialist mode of expression; with the development of the Chinese economy and the integration of Hong Kong with the mainland, the political enlightenment and cultural self-awareness brought about by economic

development led scholars to take note of the film's use of China's unique traditional aesthetics, while the adoption of Western literary theory crowned it as a pioneer of modern Chinese cinema, a result of various factors. This was the result of a balance between various factors. This balance has been maintained from the turn of the century until now, when economic development has pushed Chinese cinema into world cinema, Chinese and Western scholars have begun to focus on the poetic character of the film and its connection to traditional Chinese aesthetics, Chinese film scholars have reawakened to the need to construct a school of Chinese cinema centred on China's unique cultural and aesthetic qualities, while Western scholars have associated *Spring in a Small Town* with China's desire to enter modernity at the expense of the Chinese literary tradition, is essentially an Orientalist gaze. The reception and interpretation of *Spring in a Small Town* is thus determined by the political, economic and cultural context.

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## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> [Editor's note]: Other interesting perspectives on Fei Mu's cinema can be found in books and articles by Daruvala (2007), Udden (2016) and Ng (2020).

<sup>2</sup> A Chinese proverb here means that the film flaunts pornography like a widow.