

Springtime in a Chinese ruin: Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* (1948)

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Xiao Cheng Zhi Chun/小城之春/*Spring in a Small Town* (1948), a black-and-white feature film directed by Fei Mu/費穆 (aka Fey Mou, 1906–51), is now widely considered one of the greatest in Chinese film history and indeed in all world cinema. The film's storyline is simple: the Dai household – the wife Yuwen, the husband Liyan, the little sister Dai Xiu, and an old servant Lao Huang – finds itself receiving an unexpected visitor on a spring day. The visitor, Zhichen, turns out to be an old friend of the husband and a former lover of the wife. In the ensuing week, the marriage between Yuwen and Liyan, which has long been on the rocks, is tested further. It seems, however, that neither of the two long-dead relationships can bloom again within this triangle, and none of the emotional turmoil resolves into dramatic action. The two lovers cannot run away together, and the depressed husband, who comes close to killing himself, continues his marriage with Yuwen, who almost contemplates killing both him and herself. In the end, the married couple stay in the dilapidated small town as the visitor leaves. An understated story with a bare ensemble and an unassuming budget made in Shanghai's Wenhua Studio, this film appeared on Chinese post-war screens at a time when the nation's audiences were gripped by melodramatic epics, such as the popular *Spring River Flows East*/一江春水向東流 (Cai Chusheng/蔡楚生 and Zheng Junli/鄭君里, 1947). Fei's stylistic choices, the anti-climactic narrative, extensive long takes and slow-paced editing were considered an anomaly. The film received little in the way of box-office success or critical attention at the time, offering

no hint of its later recognition as a masterpiece and a milestone in the history of Chinese cinema.

Among the many unusual experiments Fei exercised in this film, it is the excessive representation of ruins that stands out as the most striking and original. *Spring in a Small Town* is essentially a ruins film – ruins are everywhere. Even if these are only narrowly defined as the sites of architectural remains, they are given an astonishing amount of screen time as a prominent feature within the frame, about 30 minutes by my count. They are, furthermore, implicitly present throughout the film's diegesis; there is no scene that is not set among ruins. They are represented in a wide variety of forms, architecturally, bodily, psychologically and ideologically: city walls crumbling in weeds; a house and garden collapsing into their own remains; a man living among them is like a piece of rubble, broken beyond repair. Moreover, ruins are formally also the backbone of the film's narrative and affective visual power, at the core of its spatial and temporal structure: they give architectural shape to Fei's experiments in film form; they are an art-historically informed exercise deeply mining the traditions of ruins in Chinese art, language and poetry; and they provoke ideological resistance to prevalent historical views and utopian visions for the future. In short, this film is an outstanding treatise on ruins, whose scope and depth are unprecedented and unparalleled in any medium of image-making in the history of Chinese art.

The director Fei Mu is singly responsible for this astonishing treatise. Fei made an important change to the film's setting, from the generic Chinese house in the original story by Li Tianji to the bomb-ravaged estate in a small town.¹ For the location shooting, he chose Songjiang/松江, a town in Jiangnan, the southern region around the lower Yangtze River. Songjiang is historically significant, known as the origin of the textile industry in China and a symbol of southern Chinese civilisation, classic intellectual culture, and the history of art. It is the hometown of the artist and art historian Dong Qichang/董其昌 (1555–1636), who famously established the critical discourse of 'literati painting'. Songjiang's city wall was first constructed in 751 CE in the Tang dynasty, but the brick wall structure shown in the film was originally built in the Ming era in 1397. Following the norms of Chinese urban planning in the early modern period, Songjiang's enclosing wall has four gates, upon which Dong Qichang inscribed signs in his celebrated calligraphy in 1630. (The film shows Zhichen entering through one of these gates.) The city and its walls were devastated in 1937 by Japanese bombing raids. By the time Fei shot the film there, Songjiang was a city in ruins, its walls broken and the houses within it an utter shambles. Yet Fei did not highlight the location of Songjiang in the film, in fact he seems to carefully avoid any specification that would identify a particular place. It was not, after all, the only devastated city in China in 1948, following the long war of resistance against Japanese invasion. The ruins in this film must have been recognised by the audience as a

1 See the memoir by the film's playwright Li Tianji, 'Gan dianying wei le chifan' (Make film to earn rice), in Tang Zhenchang (ed.), *Li Tianji ju zuo xuan* (Anthology of Li Tianji's Film Scripts) (Shanghai: Xue lin chu ban she, 1996), p. 192. For a discussion on some of the changes Fei Mu made to Li's script in this film, see Carolyn Fitzgerald, 'Spring in a Small Town: gazing at ruins', in Chris Berry (ed.), *Chinese Films in Focus II* (London: British Film Institute, 2008), pp. 205–11.

realistic representation of many parts of the country and a document of the present, as well as the battered traces of an artistic and cultural past.

While scholarship on this iconic film abounds, this essay will take an art-historical approach, analysing its ruins at the intersection of art history, film history and Chinese history. Discussion on Chinese film's aesthetic debt to China's long and diverse art history has thus far centred mainly around a few generalist understandings of traditional Chinese painting (more specifically, literati ink landscape painting). However, as a thoughtful and (self-)critical director, Fei was well aware of the vast and rich resources in Chinese art and was not content with defining a Chinese film aesthetics by simply emulating a few recognisable styles of painting on screen. Rather, he aspired to a filmic approach that engages deeply and fully with philosophical concepts within art tradition, yet is by no means insular or essentialist (I return to this later). His treatise on ruins in *Spring in a Small Town* is a feat exemplifying that approach. This essay, therefore, will first examine how Fei explores the unique iconography of a Chinese ruin and transposes it into an experimental film form. While ruins in Chinese art history are not as easily recognisable as ink landscape painting, certainly not as stereotypical, they are in fact among the core concepts in Chinese art. In Fei's thorough exploration of their potential as a film form, ruins also become a site where divergences among different film-theoretical interpretations can find a possible space to converge. Indeed, much of the critical discussion about this film so far – whether its aesthetic indebtedness to Chinese traditional culture, its assertion as a theoretical model alternative to Euro-American hegemony on film realism, or its intervention as a modernist film form experiment – can find support, be paraphrased and contested in the imagery of this Chinese ruin. Secondly, this essay also discusses how, with its distinctive temporal-spatial structure, ruins in this film function as an ideologically charged site. Enclosed yet open, they accommodate a complex criticality, connecting to a historical mode that is persistently and perennially dissuasive, undermining all erected structures, while also extending an invitation to multiple discursive potentials and generating seminal energy for alternative visions.

Fei's exploration of a Chinese ruin begins with a cinematic interpretation of some of the most recognisable lyrical verses in classical Chinese literature. The film's opening credit sequence, a 30-second sequence of just two shots, unfolds with a sweeping pan from right to left that provides the audience with a view of the ruined state of a city wall, followed by a still view of the wall surrounded by an old moat; the camera then tilts down and lingers on lush trees in spring sunshine, especially on two young saplings in the foreground (figures 1–2). As Li notes, this sequence is instantly recognisable as an illustration of the poem *Spring Prospect*/春望 by the great Tang poet Du Fu/杜甫

Figs 1 and 2. Shots from the opening credit sequence of *Spring in a Small Town* (Fei Mu, 1948). All images are from Fei's film.



- ² See Jie Li, 'Home and nation amid the rubble: Fei Mu's "Spring in a Small Town" and Jia Zhangke's "Still Life"', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2009), pp. 86–125.
- ³ In David Hawkes, *A Little Primer of Tu Fu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

(712–70 CE).² Du's verses offer a foundational representation of ruins in China; the first stanza translates literally as: 'State ruined, mountains and rivers survive. City Spring, grass-trees thick.'³ (國破山河在 城春草木深). The first word *guo*/國, meaning nation, is a character that has roots in, and bears pictographic resemblance to, a walled city (an encircled wall surrounding a kingdom). It is followed by the word *po*/破, which means broken or ruined, a character containing a radical indicating rocky rubble. Fei begins his film with the metonymic image of *guo*, the wall of the city and the nation, followed by a focus on its rubble, surrounded by the river that has survived, outgrown by spring trees and grass.

Chinese literary history is replete with such verses alluding to ruins that result from war, devastation and dynastic change. Du's imagery of a ruined city in spring, however, compact as it is, offers the most detailed description of the sight. In general there is little ekphrastic description of what ruins actually look like; instead, their physical appearance as ruins is noted only cursorily, while the poems focus on the effect they have on

4 Stephen Owen, *Remembrance: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

5 Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 23.

6 Ibid., p. 24.

the beholder. The emotional pang that ruins trigger is usually referred to as *huaigu*/懷古 – a lament for the past – which Stephen Owen explains eloquently and more precisely as a ‘lament of absence’.⁴ In pre-modern Chinese painting, in a similar fashion, direct representations of architectural ruins *in images* are few and far between. The concept of ruins is affectively focused on the concept of absence, doubly reinforced by the absence of ruins imagery itself. While ruins are among the key tropes in European art and cinema, they are also fundamental to Chinese art history, although being represented in different forms means they often go unnoticed by those who expect the same European formula. As art historian Wu Hung points out, Chinese ruins ‘depended on the notion of erasure: frequently it was the “void” left by a destroyed timber structure that simulated a lament for the past’.⁵ Wu argues that it is the image of a remaining city wall encircling a void that forms the epicentre of the Chinese art history of ruins. This image is reflected in the pictographic form of the ancient Chinese character for ruins, *qiu*/丘, which delineates an emptied-out and roofless square space marked by walls. *Shuo Wen*/說文, an etymological dictionary from around 200 AD, explains that *qiu*, in the shape of a walled void, signifies a fallen city and a land that once was built but now is forsaken. As Wu succinctly puts it: ‘two significations of *qiu* – architectural remains and emptiness – together construct an indigenous concept of ruins in China’.⁶

This topographic structure of a Chinese ruin is the watermark in Fei’s cinematographic composition in *Spring in a Small Town*. Fei often composed his shots from an extremely low angle, such that each frame contains the rubble as a border, enclosing an isolated human figure who is set against an empty sky (figure 3). The film’s spatial design also mimics the same structure. It is configured as a series of enclosed (and ruined) walls – consecutively, the walled city, the walled house, and the enclosed bedchambers in the house that allow for no intimate traffic – all encircling an empty space of desolation (at the film’s 36th minute, Yuwen states as much in her voiceover). Circular in shape – although we



Fig. 3. One of Fei’s signature low-angle shots.

see no aerial shot of them in their entirety – the ruined walls mark out not only the boundary of the film’s diegetic space but also its sovereign vision. Even as we see Yuwen constantly looking into the distance from the wall, there is no eyeline match shot of that distance, nor do we have any point-of-view shots from outside the city walls (the only exceptions being the opening credits panorama and Zhichen’s arrival).

The wall is an important marker of time in the film’s storyline, which has clearly stated time tags from day one to day 12, and a ‘stopwatch’ that starts with Zhichen’s arrival. The city wall appears eight times in the film, on each occasion marking an important shift in the dynamic of the relationships and serving as a stage to reveal hidden feelings. It is on the wall that the two lovers have their rendezvous, showing intimacy and talking about their past relationship and their vague plans for the future. As the dynamic heightens, a brief sequence on the wall shows Yuwen preparing to jump off and end her life, while the end of film shows the married couple standing on the wall as they gaze into the beyond. The ruined city wall functions as sequential bookends to each narrative stop, like a space cell in the tradition of Chinese narrative painting. Space cells are pictorial spaces enclosed by landscape elements such as mountains or trees, functioning as temporal-spatial units in the narrative progression in a single continuous scroll or a mural painting in pre-modern Chinese art – what art historian Chen Pao-chen calls 圓圈狀空間, a circular enclosed space.⁷ They are bracketed spatial marks as much as they are temporal signals, breaking down the progression of scroll-time into narrative episodes. The varying dimensions and footage of these cells often correspond to the elastic time of the narrative. By using the wall as space cells, in his film *Fei* similarly structures the 12 days of diegetic time into episodes, each with varying screen time (or film-roll footage). Each of these episodes, as narrative cells bracketed by the city wall, can also be seen as a ruin, following the visual logic of Chinese ruins as a bracketed space of void. The film’s temporal form takes on the shape of a cadenced series of ‘mini-ruins’.

The overall temporal structure in the film also mirrors in a grand form the same encircled topography. It starts with the female protagonist standing on the wall looking out, and ends with her standing on the wall, but joined in the last frame by her husband, hand in hand, looking at the visitor leaving for the outside world. But this ending as an event has confusing chronology: in linking the visitor’s departure with Yuwen’s looking, the film implies that the shot is presumably from her point of view. But a perceptive audience might realise that these shots at the film’s close are in fact identical to those at its start. Yuwen is in the same clothing and the same pose, shot in the same camera angle and frame, looking out from the wall in the same manner (figure 4). Of course it is not until the film’s end that the audience is finally privy to the object of Yuwen’s gaze at the beginning, and is only then able to comprehend fully her desolate mood; she is bidding farewell to the departing party, who stride out of town full of hope and vitality, leaving her behind

7 Chen Pao-chen, ‘Time and space in Chinese narrative paintings of Han and the Six Dynasties’, in Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (eds), *Time and Space in Chinese Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 239–85.

Fig. 4. Yuwen gazes out from the wall, basket in hand.



among the ruins. The ‘recycling’ of the identical shots thereby suggests the departure was also her point of view *then*, and that the film’s start is made ambivalent by its end. If the exit of Zhichen has already been ‘seen’ by Yuwen, it may be possible that what we see as the beginning of the film’s narrative time is in fact the ‘aftermath’ of the filmic events, and the film’s duration is how Yuwen has experienced the event as a memory and reflection. Just as the end harkens back to the start to form an enclosed circle (instead of an arc), the wall forms a grand bracket, and we leave the cinema with the image of Yuwen wandering alone on the city wall, in looping eternity with no way out.

As well as exploring a film form that is based on the iconography of ruins, Fei also taps into its significance in philosophy and cosmology. In many aspects, Chinese ruins share similarities to those in the West. In European art, where the subject of ruins has enjoyed a prolific representation – whether Piranesi’s rambling labyrinths, Poussin’s decaying monuments of the Roman empire, or Constable’s dilapidated abbeys – ruins from before the 20th century have come to be associated with the representation of antiquity, romanticism or fantastic reverie. Deriving from the Latin *ruere*, the English word ‘ruin’ is both a noun and a verb, encompassing a thing that has fallen to the ground as well as the action of falling or collapsing.⁸ Ruins are rendered as a theatrical space in which a peculiar confrontation with history is staged. Seen as the legible and visible record of an otherwise invisible and no longer legible past, they are the reminder of that past as an absence. They are also a fragmented and fantastic reminder, neither feigning a replica of the whole nor standing in for the real. In that sense the meaning of ruins, whether *ruere* or *qiu*, is universal.

Yet there is also a significant difference between the two. The Chinese ruins’ focus on the enclosing wall and voided centre offers a distinctive spatiality that has profound repercussions. Certainly the empty centre can be partly explained in the material sense: the fact that the timber

⁸ See Susan Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson: Meaning and Material in Western Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

structures of ancient Chinese palaces were easily burned and quickly erased once war, calamity, or other ravages of time and history occurred. After abandonment or destruction, usually no standing masonry arches remained, only the walls, made of earth. But the overall absence of direct pictorial depiction of dilapidated buildings or derelict monuments in Chinese paintings is not just the result of the general lack of physical structures, but also a philosophical predilection for the concept of ‘emptiness’, 虛/*xu*. *Xu*, as emptiness, is often paired with *shi*/實, as substance or the physical world. Together they form a dialectic pair, as Jason Kuo has explained, that is one of the fundamental aesthetic ideals and formal principles in Chinese art.⁹

While the concept of *xu* is enormous and far-reaching, certainly far surpassing the scope of this essay, it is important to examine its spatial connotation, as it is relevant to the core concept of ruins in China and in this film. (In Yuwen’s voiceover she refers to the ruins as a space of *kong xu*/空虛, literally, empty void.) Firstly, *xu* as emptiness does not simply mean non-existence, it is a rather an all-encompassing concept that simultaneously denotes a substance that once was present but is now no more, and a great omnipresence that is nevertheless beyond representation. It also indicates a space that is open, ready to be filled. ‘The great void’ – *taixu*/太虛 – originally mentioned in the *Zhuangzi* (5th to 4th centuries BCE), was believed to be the formless state that pre-exists, and is only phenomenally manifest in, the physical world (*shi*). *Xu* and *shi* are often connected with the equally complex concept of *qi*/氣, meaning the atmosphere and the energy. The 11th-century philosopher Zhang Zai in his *Zheng meng*/正蒙 (Correcting Youthful Ignorance) expounds the dialectics with a natural metaphor: the great void is the space where *qi* is replete and dispersed, but it can coalesce into physical shape and matter in the mundane world as water can coalesce into ice.¹⁰ In this tradition of thought, the *xu/shi* dialectic concept also explains the ultimate significance of the act of art-making. While making marks and forms, art aims not to mimetically represent the physical world but to show the process of that coalescence of energy and the physical manifestation of *taixu*, the unrepresented and unrepresentable. This concept finds its most eloquent demonstration in monochromatic ink landscape paintings, where misty mountains appear to be in the process of emerging from the void, as painted marks emerging out of unpainted piece of paper or silk. The 11th-century artist Guo Xi/郭熙, in his important treatise on Chinese landscape painting, *Lofty Record of Forests and Streams*/林泉高致, urges all painters to remember to ‘reserve room for heaven and earth’ before setting down their brushes on the silk.¹¹ As a tradition, Chinese ink paintings often leave many areas unpainted, respectfully recalling the supreme void, the source of all things physical and natural.

Xu, the great void, is also where everything in this world eventually returns, according to Chinese classics. In *Liezi*, the ancient author (5th and 4th centuries BCE) describes a geographical place for this return, a

9 See Jason Kuo, ‘Emptiness-substance: *xushi*’, in Martin Powers and Katherine Tsang (eds), *A Companion to Chinese Art* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2015), pp. 329–48.

10 For a discussion of *taixu*, see Kaibara Ekken, *The Philosophy of Qi: The Record of Great Doubts*, trans. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Robin Wang and Ding Weixiang, ‘Zhang Zai’s theory of vital energy’, in John Makeham (ed.), *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (New York: Springer, 2010); Chang Woei Ong, ‘The principles are many: Wang Tingxiang and intellectual transition in mid-Ming China’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 66, no. 2 (2006), pp. 461–93.

11 Guo Xi, in Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih (eds), *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 188–90.

- 12 A. C. Graham, *The Book of Lieh-tzu: A Classic of Tao*, trans. A. C. Graham (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 97.

fathomless void called *guixu* (歸, or return to *xu*) in the Eastern Sea, into which all water flows.¹² Remarkably this place shares the same character with ruins, *xu*/墟, another word for ruins in Chinese language, interchangeable with *xu* as ‘void’ but containing an additional radical that indicates ‘earthen walls’. Therefore *qiu*, the ancient origin for the concept of ruins, and *xu*, the more common word for ruins in modern Chinese, both refer to the same pictographic construction: a void paired with the presence of remaining walls, connecting to the mythic descriptions of the world’s formation and disintegration. In the void there lies an equation between the genesis, the ruination and the ultimate return, all manifest and connected in *xu*. It also suggests that the void, in the cyclical cosmic order, portends a central vortex with liminal infinity and indeterminable potential. If the picturesque crumbling steeples and dilapidated edifices in western paintings can be seen as indexes of absence, the Chinese ruin is marked with a specific topography of an enclosed, concave space of void, a vortex that pulls towards the original and the ultimate state of being.

The concept of ‘void’ and the *xu/shi* dialect therefore provide a lexicon to help give more contour to some of the major theoretical readings of the film, especially those concerning Fei’s engagement with film realism and long take (the latter discussed in more detail below). It is widely noted that Fei’s approach to reality in *Spring in a Small Town* is never through direct parlance or mimetic depiction but through leaving it unsaid and unrepresented. Victor Fan identifies in this film an alternative approach to film realism, one that manifests as an affective ‘ordinariness’. This realism-cum-ordinariness absorbs the viewers with an aesthetic of absence, absence of either extraordinary drama or of rhetorical preaching. Fan describes a gap between the film’s screen image and the reality understood by the audience – what he calls the ‘potentiality of time, desire, and life’.¹³ Jason McGrath also notes the importance of absence in the film’s poetics but further proposes to see it as an example of what he calls ‘apophatic realism’, one that operates on a paradoxical and self-referential recognition that reality perpetually exceeds the film’s representation of it.¹⁴ Both conceptions of Fei’s film realism can be visualised in an image reminiscent of a Chinese ruin. If reality, as conventionally understood, is associated with the concept *shi*, Fei’s approach is one that understands that presence can be reached through absence, as *xu* and *shi* are mutually generative. In this sense, if one must look for an iteration of realism in *Spring in a Small Town*, one will discover that both reality and the representation of such are redefined in the concepts of *xu*, ruins, and the great void.

In a humble ‘self-critique’ of his film, Fei explained that he deliberately avoided direct depictions and didactic address in order to achieve the air of ‘a gray mood of the old China’.¹⁵ This experiment is a result of long and thoughtful process in his filmmaking career. As early as in 1934 Fei explained the same concept in an article, ‘A brief discussion of “air” (or atmosphere)’ (略談空氣/*lüe tan kong qi*), about

- 13 Victor Fan, ‘Fey Mou: the presence of an absence’, in *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (Twin Cities: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. 109–52.
- 14 Jason McGrath, ‘Realism and event in post-war Chinese cinema’, in *Chinese Film: Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital Age* (Twin Cities: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), p. 241.
- 15 Fei Mu, ‘Self-critique as a response to a critique written by Yang Ji on *Da gong bao*’, *Da Gong Bao* (*L’Impartial*), 15 February 1948; reprinted in Wong Ain-Ling (ed.), *Shi ren dao yan Fei Mu* (Fei Mu: The Poet Director) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society, 1998), p. 99. I cite the English translation by David Der-Wei Wang, in ‘Fei Mu, Mei Lanfang, and the polemics of screening China’, in Carlos Rojas and Eileen Chow (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 70.

16 Fei Wu, 'Lü tan kong qí', *Shi dai dian ying*, no. 6, 1934; reprinted in Wong (ed.), *Shi ren dao yan Fei Mu*, pp. 27–28.

17 Élie Faure, *The Art of Cineplastics*, trans. Walter Pach (Boston: Four Seas Press, 1923), p. 24. See also Anthony Vidler, 'The explosion of space: architecture and the filmic imaginary', *Assemblage*, no. 21 (1993), pp. 44–59.

18 Fei, 'Self-critique'.

19 Ma Boliang, 'Ping Xiao cheng zhi chun' (A review of *Spring in a Small Town*), *Zheng Yan Bao*, 24 September 1948.

20 Tianwen, 'Pi ping de pi ping – guan yu Xiao cheng zhi chun' (A critique of the critiques – about *Spring in a Small Town*), *Ta Kung Pao*, 20 October 1948. Tianwen was the pen name of the later famous critic Zhang Tianwen. Reprinted in Wong (ed.), *Shi ren dao yan Fei Mu*, pp. 278–81.

the poetic ideal he aspired to achieve, a poetics he called *kongqi*, literally 'empty air'. Among the methods he used to achieve it, he emphasised a technique of 'insinuation' (旁敲側擊/*pang qiao ce ji*).¹⁶ It means a technique that avoids direct engagement with the subject but renders onscreen only those things adjacent to the subject. In other words, the unrepresented subject is in fact represented as a void, its shape given by its surroundings. It is precisely a demonstration of the Chinese concept of ruins, where the centre, as a void and as absence, takes on the shape given by its surrounding wall of remains.

When Élie Faure wrote in the early 20th century about the 'cinéplastics', he believed that film 'represents a sort of moving architecture', an architecture that is not a still edifice, nor an embalmed space that is definite, but 'in constant accord, in a state of equilibrium dynamically pursued – with the surroundings and landscapes where it is erected and falls to the earth again'.¹⁷ Faure's vision for film's plastic potential in temporal-spatial creation is utopian, with no clear prescription of exactly what shape it might take, but Fei here provides one: an articulation in the form of Chinese ruins. Using ruins as a cadence marker and as a grand form, Fei created in this film a cinéplastic structure, one in which time and space rise and fall into a repeated spatial form. The perpetual and dynamic movement in cinéplastic vision, when presented as ruins, creates an overall sense of hopelessness; but the ideological outlook here is not exactly dystopian either. Rather, it suggests a non-linear historical view that cannot be reduced to either pessimism or optimism, a historical view in the shapes of ruins with the liminal and connective temporality that ruins embody. This ambiguous historical view was not received kindly at the time of the film's release, nor in the following decades.

Upon its release, *Spring in a Small Town* did not engender much box-office activity for Wenhua Studio, and was quietly taken out of theatres only six days into its first run. As Fei himself conceded, the film 'failed' to appeal to the audience and rally the public when compared with its more financially successful peers.¹⁸ These films often recounted the recent experience of war using moral judgement in service of a particular vision of future reconstruction. *Spring in a Small Town* reviews were sparse. While any praise appeared vague and polite,¹⁹ the criticisms, mostly from left-wing critics, were in general more insightful, sensitive and fierce in tone, picking up the unsettling complexity in Fei's seemingly formal experiments, especially the historical and political problems posed by his representation of ruins. Tianwen/天聞, for example, argued passionately:

Really, no message, no passion. Purely formalistic stuff! This formalistic stuff seems harmless, but in fact it has significant consequences [...] it will freeze everything, deprive everything of its vitality, it will lead to disillusionment, nihilistic disillusionment! – It is unforgivable evil!²⁰

- 21 Shi Man, 'Kan Xiao cheng zhi chun hou gari' (Some thoughts after seeing *Spring in a Small Town*), *Ta Kung Pao*, 20 October 1948.

- 22 Cheng Jihua, *History of Chinese Cinema* (Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi) (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1963), p. 271.

Tianwen's palpable frustration reveals not just an indignation that the film was missing in action in the post-war zeal for nation-building, but also a fear for its perceived anti-revolutionary effect. Echoing this sentiment, critic Shi Man/石曼 accused Fei of 'leading the audience towards a tiny trap of [*tuifei*/頹廢] sentimentality [...] which should be opposed'.²¹

Tuifei, a phrase in modern Chinese often used in describing a person who has given up on life, suggests a fallen, decadent and indolent state of being, mostly associated with the upper classes or privileged intelligentsia. Remarkably, it also contains two characters indicative of ruins. *Tui*/頹 evokes the image of fallen walls, as the character often appears in the compound *duan jing tui yuan*/斷井頹垣 (broken wells and fallen walls), a descriptive phrase for something resembling a former living environment now in a derelict state; meanwhile *fei*/廢 is part of the phrase *feixu*/廢墟, the most recognisable modern Chinese equivalent for ruins. *Tuifei*, identified as the troubling sentiment and problematic aesthetic in *Spring in a Small Town*, became the official verdict on the film in the ensuing Mao era. The authoritative film historian of the People's Republic, Cheng Jihua/程季華, in his account of Chinese film history, wrote the following entry for the film:

Fei Mu's artistic treatment of the story contributed absolutely nothing but a heightening of the *tuifei* sentiment of the fallen class and a propagation of its negative effects. The film was made at a time when the war of Liberation was developing rapidly, and the people's movement was reaching its acme. The negative effects of the film should not be ignored. As a matter of fact, it did function to paralyse people's will to fight.²²

To these critics, *tuifei*, the ruins-sentiment, is identified as a problematic ideological metaphor and a particularly inappropriate historical view that has direct and devastating social consequences. It is interesting to see how such a view is constructed in this film in the imagery of ruins. Firstly, the film establishes the overall point of view as one *from* the ruins, and *of* the ruins. More than a backdrop to the action of the film or a complement to the figures, ruins in this film are enlivened by the camera framing and movement, activated as additional characters in the film, which Fei adeptly accomplished through giving the ruins their own point of view. Ruins are the first image we see in the film's opening credits and the first 'character' introduced in the film proper: the opening image is a stretch of ruined wall framed in a static medium-long shot as if in a portrait (figure 5). The camera silently fixes on this 'portrait of ruins' for a few seconds, before panning slightly to the left (instead of cutting), revealing Yuwen slowly strolling next to the wall. It then becomes clear that the previous 'portrait' of the ruined wall is not a point-of-view shot of any human characters in the film, certainly not a view seen by Yuwen, but filmed from a low angle, as if from the perspective of the rubble strewn on the ground.

Fig. 5. The portrait of the ruined wall, the film's first character.



23 Cheuk-to Li, 'Spring in a Small Town: mastery and restraint', *Cinemaya*, no. 49 (2000), p. 61.

Fei habitually places the camera at this low angle in the film, an act Cheuk-to Li interprets as the camera's identification with the invalid husband Liyan, who is often reclining.²³ While this is true in many scenes, I would further propose that overall, with the many shots that take this point of view, Fei establishes a camera angle that identifies not with his human characters but with this rubble. It is the ruins, scattered and ever-present, that construct the scope of the film, anticipating the characters' arrivals and departures with quiet omniscience. The 'ruins-first' sequential order is repeated throughout the film, such that almost no character appears on screen without the camera first constructing a ruined space to frame their entrance. Ruins act as the opening narrator for a play, or the set on the stage, waiting for the human actors to enter their world. Sometimes, the ruins' vision is animated, for instance travelling ahead of the wandering woman, anticipating her at each stop. At other times their role is admonitory, witnessing the human characters going 'off-track' and cautioning them to come back with a sharp tug. In the brief sequence of Yuwen's suicide attempt on the wall, the camera is stationed in its usual place, as in the opening scene, but now a little more elevated and a little closer to her, as if it were a faithful and caring companion. The closer frame on the broken wall also permits us a rare glimpse *beyond* the wall, a warning against Yuwen's attempt to jump from the precipice. The rubble, meanwhile, is portrayed as a ground-level visual link back to the inside world of the wall, beckoning and drawing Yuwen back as she stands on the edge, wavering in the billowing spring wind (figure 6).

But this ruins-scope is a circumvented vision. The film's 'outlook', as reflected in the last frame of the film, where the invalid husband joins the wife on the ruined walls, is not so much of a look outwards but one directed towards the inside of the ruins. The camera stays low on the ground inside the wall, therefore positioned inside the circle of time and space. As the last frame of the film, it reaffirms the pictographic image of Chinese ruins as a void encircled by walls. The view *of* the ruins and

Fig. 6. Yuwen on the wall is seen from a closer and higher angle than before.



from the ruins therefore constitutes a surrounding and sutured space of insular enclosure, delineating the limits of space for the human actors and conditioning the audience's complicity and solidarity with the ruins' subjective scope. It also determines that ruins are the inescapable condition of life and history, the permanent paradigm where temporary human actors find their place. It is among the ruins that the old servant asks Liyan, 'Why so sad, young master, don't we now have peace?'. Liyan scoffs, 'What peace?'. His disbelief comes from the reality, in 1948, that there truly was another war raging. In the film's night sequences, a siren would suddenly go off during dinner, announcing the wartime curfew. The audiences in 1948 would well understand this as a realistic portrayal of their present reality, but would equally perceive these clues as indicative of the cyclicity of history. They are reminded, vexingly, that they are not out of the war, not then, and perhaps not ever. Just as entire civilisations fall, neither war nor peace can reign permanently.

It is no surprise that such was also Fei's personal view on history. As early as 1936, in an interview with the Communist film critic Linghe/凌鶴, Fei revealed his doubts about the Left's vision of a future China. Linghe could not conceal his disappointment with Fei's political views:

Naturally, there are many places where our opinions differ; for example, he [Fei Mu] thought that when the future just society comes, it is unavoidable that there will be revolutions again, which of course provoked my suspicions, and I could not by any means agree.²⁴

Three years before the making of *Spring in a Small Town*, Fei was assigned by the Nationalist government in 1945 to take over all the Shanghai film companies formerly run under Japanese influence, and to establish a new Shanghai Experimental Film Studio – *Shiyan dianying gongzuo shi*/實驗電影工作室.²⁵ As the chief coordinator of the studio, Fei launched a project titled *Jinxiu Jiangshan*/錦繡江山 – *Splendid Rivers and Mountains* – a film that would envision co-operation between

24 Ling He's real name was Shi Linghe (1906–95). An important member of the leftist film critic team, in 1932 he became the chief film critic of the Communist party. Linghe, 'Fei Mu lun' (On Fei Mu), *Wen Hui Bao* (1948); cited in Wong (ed.), *Shi ren dao yan Fei Mu*, p. 349.

25 Wong (ed.), *Shi ren dao yan Fei Mu*, p. 184.

the Nationalists and the Communists in the building of a new China of beauty and peace. The film would never see the light of the projector. One year after starting the project Fei was forced to abort it, despite the considerable work he had already invested.²⁶ The rapid changes to the situation and the ever-closer war between these two forces would have mandated constant revisions to the optimism in the script, and out of frustration Fei moved to the Wenhua Film Company to make *Spring in a Small Town*, a film of much smaller budget and scale. It is clear that he could place blind faith in neither political camp at the time, and had doubts about the irreversibility of linear societal progression, with revolution leading towards the inevitable Communist future that shall preserve its perfect form for eternity, or the possibility of a paradise on earth where all struggles shall henceforth cease. He was also incredulous about the concept of there being one war so great and just that it ends all others, or of a return to a paradise lost. What irked Linghe and other leftist critics was precisely that Fei's filmic ruins are presented not just as a metaphor of the perilous past, but as a configuration for the *future*: that the present debris is all dispersed, sublimated not into a uniform revolutionary zeal but into the cyclical nature of history.

Fei's ruins were by no means a conservative ideological fortress against progress or innovation (the city and the house are evidently broken from inside out). He was equally suspicious of the viability of pure Confucian mores, as is apparent in his portrayal of Liyan as an impotent, pathetic and irascible Confucian patriarch (Liyan's name literally means Confucian propriety), a figure who ought not to be hated yet equally cannot be loved. Much has been written on the metaphoric use of ruins in this film as a commentary on the crumbled Confucian social order.²⁷ The Confucian patriarch Liyan, clearly identified with the ruined house and garden, not only fails in his duties but is damaged and utterly incapacitated by them: he cannot leave and fight in the war like Zhichen because he is supposed to take care of the family estate. His tragedy – the tragedy of the nation – has its very roots in these Confucian obligations, which not only shackle a nation from fighting for its own survival but also continue to kill: the couple both attempt suicide as the only way out. The traditional rules of propriety and bondage are represented in the film as rings of collapsed walls and as the entrapments of the desolate void, which precedes and extends beyond the rubble left by the recent enemy conflict. Deftly deploying the double significance of a wall as both a defence and an entrapment, Fei's ruins suggest that the ravaging force comes both from the outside (the Japanese, or other invaders) *and* the inside, in the form of a deep malaise in China's own cultural history.

Artistically, Fei was not a traditionalist either. Among the modernist experiments he exercised in *Spring in a Small Town*, including long shots and deep focus, it is the long takes that have attracted the most scholarly attention. Consisting of 235 shots, the film's average shot length is 40 seconds (by comparison, in Wu Yonggang's

27 See Li, 'Home and nation amid the rubble', pp. 86–125.

28 James Udden counts the average shot length of this film as 24.5 seconds, but either number still makes this by far the longest among Chinese films of the 1930s and 1940s. See Udden, 'In search of Chinese film style(s) and technique(s)', in Yingjin Zhang (ed.), *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 266.

29 Fei Mu, 'Issues in cinematizing Chinese traditional operas', in Wong (ed.), *Shi ren dao yan Fei Mu*, p. 82; originally published in *Yihua Huabao* Special Issue, Shanghai (1940).

30 Fei Mu, 'Random notes on film style', in Wong (ed.), *Shi ren dao yan Fei Mu*, p. 112; originally published in *Ta Kung Pao* (Hong Kong), 6 May 1950.

Goddess/神女/*Shennü* [1934] it is 8.3 seconds).²⁸ Fei's extraordinary long takes seem to invite divergent interpretations between traditionalism and modernism. Hong Kong film critic Lam Nien-tung claims Fei's long takes as traditional, such that the film embodies an inherently Chinese aesthetic. Lam compares the duration of Fei's long takes and the continuous camera's movement within a single take to a Chinese landscape painting that seems to unfurl without breaking into individual frames. Chinese landscape painting, especially in the horizontal handscroll format, is acknowledged as containing unfixed perspectival points, allowing a viewer to experience the flux of a continuously moving position. However, it is important to note that such a roaming perspective is not unique to Chinese painting but can be found in many traditions of visual art, including European art before and even after the Renaissance, and certainly in continuous narrative paintings in global art history. Moreover, as I have discussed above, handscrolls, murals and other formats that seem to present a continuous and expansive scene are in fact also organised into bracketed cells, modules and episodes. In the traditional viewing protocols of Chinese handscrolls, no matter how far the scroll is *able to* unfurl, one is only supposed to unroll and look at it frame by frame, to the width of one's shoulders, instead of all at once (so often the method of display in modern museums). After viewing the scroll, it is also common practice to review the painting as it rolls back to its beginning. In this sense, the experience of a Chinese handscroll landscape painting is also rather cellular, or even circular.

While the comparison between Fei's long takes and Chinese painting is interesting and has some validity, a more cautious and nuanced approach is needed in arguing for its general application. Fei's own words decry any easy comparison or emulative practice between film and Chinese artistic heritage. In an article discussing how to cinematise Peking Opera, Fei argues that national opera operates on the same aesthetic and formal axis as that in Chinese traditional painting, and that it is almost impossible to translate either form into cinema. He professes that he has 'made many attempts to achieve the style of Chinese painting in the composition of film image but have all failed'.²⁹ In another article, dated after the making of *Spring in a Small Town*, Fei makes a brief but clear statement on this topic. He emphatically cautions against the folly of making a facile copy of certain features of Chinese painting in cinema to create a so-called national style, which will result in a false and empty look, but urges filmmakers to understand their own modern condition and delve deeper into the philosophical and cosmological roots of Chinese art. Citing Sergei Eisenstein's engagement with Chinese art heritage as a positive example, Fei expresses his wish for an approach to cross-media practices that is based on holistic and cinematic terms rather than simply subjugating the screen image to a mimicry of painting.³⁰ Fei's thoughtful treatise on ruins as a film form is the practice of this preaching. It goes beyond a few compositions that resemble ink

brushstrokes, and engages cinematically with concepts of *xu* and *shi*, fundamental principles of Chinese visual art that connect to the *raison d'être* of image-making and its cosmic legitimacy.

As the few scholars who have also focused on ruins in this film agree, the long takes in this film can be more convincingly explained through this approach. Carolyn Fitzgerald notes that 'rather than simply re-creating the experience of a Chinese scroll, long takes in the film often serve the function of drawing attention to ruins'.³¹ Comparing the long takes in this film to those that have been well conceptualised in post-war European cinema – most famously by André Bazin and Gilles Deleuze – Fitzgerald and Jie Li both see ruins as a subject that demands a protracted gaze. While Fitzgerald identifies the long takes in this film as the duration of the character's traumatised post-war gaze upon ruins, Li emphasises their function as a Deleuzian time image, in which human actors become passive figures in a landscape rather than having any active agency.³² They are the end-point of trauma, a single persistent image experienced in a post-traumatic psyche, and the landscape of an impasse that renders its inhabitants powerless and purposeless. To these salient readings, I propose a couple of revisions. While the Deleuzian reading of the long take as reflecting the retarded passage of time experienced by people in the wake of war can certainly be applied to the ruins in this film, I see Fei's long-take ruins-time as a particular kind of pause, or rather, a time-out. It is less a stoppage or suspension in a linear flow of time, more a transition to a different temporal mode. Time in Fei's ruins is not exactly 'unprogressive', in the sense that it does not have an destination to flow towards, but instead is circular, in that time returns to its primordial form of cyclicity. It is not just an experience of time by a human actor at a specific post-traumatic period, but is presented as the shape of time, as it is and ever shall be, in history and in the cosmos. It is an anti-teleological historiography embodied in a Chinese ruin.

Meanwhile, precisely because of Chinese ruins' connection to cosmic disintegration and integration, the ruins with their central void are more than just anti-monuments of desolation, but an open field of potentials as well. Surely, by their broken nature, they depict rubble and failure, picturing social and cultural structures falling to the ground rather than holographic projection of past edifices or future utopias. It is remarkable that ruins in this film form a resistance, equally, to so many tempting rallying forces. As a photographic document of the contemporaneous reality of rubble, the sights of devastation and displacement are represented in the film as the aftermath of not only the recent Japanese invasion, but also, and more importantly, the many (failed) intellectual and social projects of Chinese tradition and modernity. They render nationalist anger or zeal suspect. Although the film demonstrates what a Chinese ruin might look like on the modern cinema screen, with its

³¹ Fitzgerald, 'Spring in a Small Town: gazing at ruins', p. 208.

³² Li, 'Home and nation amid the rubble', p. 98.

distinctive visuality steeped in Chinese art history, philosophic tradition and literary imaginations, it also refutes an essentialist claim of ‘Chineseness’ in the problematic construction of national cinematic aesthetics. In the process it also becomes a levelled and connective space that allows the possibility for eclectic ideas to enter. Artistically, the ruins already provide a possible point of convergence for the otherwise dichotomous discourses of traditional or modernist. As James Udden rightfully points out, Fei demonstrates in this film that ‘tradition’ and ‘modernism’ are not mutually exclusive but ‘independent variables’.³³ I would add that it is Fei’s adept deployment of the multivalent visuality of ruins in the film – including liminal and elastic temporality, their ambiguous moral attribution, and their dual facing and cyclical historiography – that makes possible the coexistence of tradition and modernism as independent variables.

Fei’s ruins also give a nod to the cosmopolitan and multi-media nature of Chinese modern visual culture. By virtue of presenting ruins so extensively on screen, the film invites consideration of other art traditions. By the time Fei was making *Spring in a Small Town*, Chinese art and visual culture had also undergone significant changes. As Wu Hung describes, ruins, in the form of dilapidated monuments and picturesque structures, had been introduced to China through interactions with the West since the 18th century.³⁴ By the early 20th century, modern Chinese art colleges were modelling their curricula after those in the West, and the students studied different conventions of making art. This cosmopolitan shift in art education introduced students to different visualities of ruins, from classical monuments to the romantic gardens and paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries, and early photography across the globe. While the depiction of rubble is rare in pre-modern Chinese art, it started to appear more in works from the 20th century, on canvases by Chinese artists such as the Paris-educated oil painter Yan Wenliang/顏文樑 (1893–1988), who painted Roman ruins as well as decaying pagodas and towers in his southern China hometown (not far from Songjiang).³⁵ Even in the medium of ink painting, where few ruined structures were previously seen, the reformist Lingnan School in the 1920s experimented with images of ruined buildings, especially those by the Cantonese painter Gao Jianfu/高劍父 (1879–1951).³⁶

This was the context of intercultural and intermedial visual culture in which Chinese cinema was actively immersed, perceived and reviewed. When a reviewer of this film on *Ta Kung Pao* (*L’Impartial*) wrote that ‘Fei Mu uses a brush dappled with oriental hues [*dong fang se cai*/東方色彩], light and elegant, to depict a beautiful story about oriental people [*dong fang ren*/東方人],’³⁷ it was in awareness of their own positionality as a modern audience in their evocation of words such as ‘oriental’, adopting the perspective of the West.

Chinese cinema in the first half of the 20th century is also described as a dialogic and comparative space, in which filmmaking is always an earnest embrace of both Chinese traditions and modern practices from

33 Udden, ‘In search of Chinese film style(s) and technique(s)’, p. 94.

34 Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins*.

35 See Stephanie Wen-Hui Su, ‘Ruins as sites of modernity: Yan Wenliang’s representation of Roman Ruins in 1930’, *Modern Art Asia*, no. 5 (2010), pp. 37–62.

36 Christina Chu, ‘The Lingnan School and its followers: radical innovation in southern China’, in Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1998), pp. 64–79.

37 Shen Jiu, ‘Xiao cheng zhi chun: yi shou qing li de xiao shi’ (Spring in a Small Town: an elegant and beautiful poem), *Ta Kung Pao*, 14 October 1948.

38 See Fan, 'Fey Mou: the presence of an absence', p. 3.

other cinemas around the world. Its existence as an exuberantly dialogic space notwithstanding, Chinese cinema also suffered from the fact that attempts at dialogue were often one-sided and rarely reciprocated, as scholars have noted.³⁸ In addition, the devastating bombings, interruptions and isolation brought about by the long war against the Japanese was a lethal blow to the once dynamic film industry. It remains uncertain how much Fei was connected to the global filmmaking community during these uncertain and transient post-war years in Shanghai. In 1948, the world saw the ruins of German cities in *Trümmerfilme* (rubble films) such as *The Murderers Are Among Us* (Wolfgang Staudte, 1946), and in the likes of Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (1948), Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* (1948) and Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949). The ruined, post-war European cities in their skeletal state provided these filmmakers with a new 'ground zero' for reflecting on the recent catastrophe and a vision for the immediate task of reconstruction. It is highly unlikely that Fei and these western filmmakers saw each other's works. As a Chinese filmmaker equally faced with a devastating post-war reality, Fei offered his own cinematic representation of ruins, whose originality is undeniable, with or without reference to other films. Compared with the troubling use of ruins in *Trümmerfilme*, which tends to emphasise them as a site of shared dire reality, thereby equating the suffering of all parties and their responsibility for the atrocities, Fei's ruins go deeper in their inquisition of, and critical reflection on, all causes, including the wider culture and the viewer's own complicity. The ruins are not a specific and recognisable monument in a specific iconic city (like Berlin), but are presented as a commonplace and household reality, a fundamental and existential structure among humanity. They do not blame a single source as the perpetrator of past destruction, neither do they forewarn of any impending doom. Presented in multifaceted and ambiguous visualities, the unsettling ruins in *Spring in a Small Town* invite us to think rather than to weep or scream. They also beckon us to pause, appearing as stumbling blocks to our unheeding rush to any visions of future.

Walter Benjamin, himself writing from the ruins of war in the 20th century, gives the allegorical power of ruins a modern criticality: instead of standing as an index to the absent Arcadian antiquarian past, ruins, in the form of crumbling monuments, became an uncanny proof of the futility of these past constructions of myth of immortality.³⁹ Fei Mu's ruins, likewise, caution against any grand claims of construction, yet *Spring in a Small Town* also offers a different perspective. At the film's end, as its circular form concludes, the pictographic shape of a Chinese ruin is also complete. The ruins construct an enclosed vortex of desolation and slow violence, but offer us no resolution. It is too easy to interpret the ending as pessimistic; in a way it is, yet the overall theme of circularity and cyclicity refuses the simple interpretation of finality,

39 See Susan Buck-Morss, 'Historical nature: ruin', in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Boston: MIT Press, 1989), p. 164.

40 Wing-Tsi Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 502.

41 Jie Li, 'Home and nation amid the rubble', pp. 119–25.

instead inviting a connection to the philosophical concepts of Change. As Zhang Zai wrote, 'He who apprehends integration and disintegration, appearance and disappearance, form and absence of form, and traces them to their source, penetrates the secret of Changes'.⁴⁰ The 11th-century philosopher decided that ruins, in the form of disintegration and absence, were the necessary condition for knowledge and making of a historical clairvoyance. But as is the way with Changes, disintegration is not only paired with integration, but they are part of each other and give birth to each other.

As all is equally levelled down to the ground, into a void that is ready to be filled, the ruins bear promises for a future construction where alternative possibilities of historiographic imaginations in modern China are accommodated, especially those who are less arrogantly certain of their own infallibility. As a result, Fei's ruin's unsettling critical power continues to re-emerge whenever such a criticality and inclusion is called for at different historical moments. For example, in Jie Li's insightful comparative analysis between *Spring* and *Still Life* (2014) by the contemporary auteur Jia Zhangke, Li considers the treatment of ruins in Jia's masterful film as a continuation of Fei's experiment from decades earlier. In the frenzy of infrastructure building that tears down the old, ruins again serve as an allegory for crisis in value and in human relationships, but also as sites for potential renewal.⁴¹ There is more work to be done to trace this lineage of ruins in Chinese cinema, but I hope this essay serves as a useful and careful study of the sui generis film, *Spring in a Small Town*. As a film form and an ideological site, Fei's ruins present as undermining questions in the face of self-assured and imposing stately or cultural erections. Yet in its perpetual centrifugal motion, there is also endless potential. While the film's call for time-out and its admonishing murmurs about the future were received poorly by critics at the time, its echo, reverberating in the filmic *qiu*, is and shall be occasionally answered by filmmakers of following generations.