

A Spring That Brought Eternal Regret: Fei Mu, Mei Lanfang, and the Poetics of Screening China

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Cinema and Peking opera were two of the most popular performing arts in early modern China. Despite sharing little common ground in terms of historical origin, aesthetic appeal, or visual technology, the two forms appeared to influence each other as early as the incipient moment of Chinese moviemaking. In 1905, Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847-1917), the leading actor of Peking opera at the turn of the century, performed before the camera an episode of *Dingjungshan* 定軍山 (Dingjun Mountain), the first film made in China.¹ The following decades saw dozens of movies of Peking opera and many more inspired by or adapted from the venerable stage art.² At a time when cinema was rising to become the modern form of public entertainment, it is not surprising that Peking opera performers were attracted to it—both as viewers, to experience the sensation of technological novelty, and as performers, to preserve their art at its most vivid.³ Meanwhile, moviemakers

¹ For the rise of Chinese cinema in connection with Peking opera, see, for example, Cheng Jihua 程季華, ed., *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* 中國電影發展史 (A History of Chinese Cinema) (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1963), vol. 1, chapter 1. Also see Zhong Danian 鍾大年, “Zhongguo dianying de lishi jiqi genyuan: zailun yingxi” 中國電影的歷史及其根源：再論影戲 (“The History and Origin of Chinese Film: On Shadow Theater Again”), *Dianying yishu* 電影藝術 (Cinematic Art) 2.3 (1994): 29-35, 9-14.

² Gao Xiaojian 高小健, *Zhongguo xiqu dianyingshi* 中國戲曲電影史 (A History of Chinese Movies of Performing Arts) (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2005).

³ For a discussion of the sensation and excitement that movies and moviemaking brought to early Republican Chinese theater audiences, see Zhen Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), chapters 1-3.

acquired from Peking opera a whole range of resources, from stagecraft to acting method, thematics to theatrics.

By the mid-1930s, select movie makers and critics such as Tian Han 田漢 (1898-1968) and Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-1981) had examined the conceptual frameworks behind the two forms as well as the psychological responses and the technological effects they produce. More importantly, in view of the recent campaign to make Peking opera the quintessential genre of “national theater,”⁴ these critics extended their observations to issues such as how cinema could help modernize Peking opera, and how this newly anointed national theater could illuminate the making of “national cinema.”⁵

Among these critics, none could surpass Fei Mu 費穆 (1906-1951) in either theory or practice. Fei Mu developed a passion for movies and moviemaking in his teenage years, and he became a director in 1933. Thanks to family influence, Fei Mu entertained an equal enthusiasm for traditional Chinese theater, especially Peking opera. In 1937, having made six movies on various subjects, Fei Mu directed *Zhan jingtang* 斬經堂 (Murder in the Oratory), based on a Peking opera of the same title, and he went on to direct four more Peking opera movies over the next decade.⁶

⁴ Li Suyuan 鄺蘇元, *Zhongguo xiandai dianying lilunshi* 中國現代電影理論史 (A History of Modern Chinese Cinema Theories) (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2005), pp. 162-178. Among the trumpeters of Peking opera as “national opera,” Qi Rushan 齊如山 is the most prominent figure. See *Qi Rushan huiyilu* 齊如山回憶錄 (A Memoir of Qi Rushan) (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005), chapters 7-8. Also see Joshua Goldstein’s succinct analysis in *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). For a critique of Qi Rushan’s notion of “national theater,” see chapter 4.

⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of the leftists’ effort to promote national cinema in the 1930s, see Ma Junrang 馬軍讓, “Minzu zhuyi suo suzao de xiandai Zhongguo dianying” 民族主義所塑造的現代中國電影 (“Modern Chinese Cinema as Fashioned by Nationalism”), *Ershiyi shiji shuangyuekan* 二十一世紀雙月刊 (Twenty-First Century Bimonthly) 15 (1993): 112-119.

⁶ These four Peking opera movies are *Qiantai yu houtai* 前臺與後臺 (On Stage and Backstage, 1939), *Gu Zhongguo zhi ge* 古中國之歌 (Songs of Ancient China, 1941), *Xiao fangniu* 小放牛 (The Little Cowherd, 1948), and *Shengsi hen* 生死恨 (Eternal Regret, 1948). See Chen Mo 陳墨, *Liuying chunmeng: Fei Mu dianying lungao* 流鶯春夢：費穆電影論稿 (Flying Oriole, Spring Dream: A Study of Fei Mu’s Movies) (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2000),

Keenly aware that cinema is a distinctive form of visual art, Fei Mu did not want to merely duplicate theater performance on the screen. Rather, he tried to find in Peking opera elements that could both enrich the “national character” of Chinese cinema and express his own aesthetic taste.

Such an undertaking was no easy feat, and the extent of Fei Mu’s accomplishment is subject to debate. What concerns me here is the fact that Fei Mu’s endeavor led to his collaboration with Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1896-1961), master of female impersonation and arguably the most innovative and popular Peking opera singer in twentieth-century China. Together they made *Shengsi hen* 生死恨 (Eternal Regret)—the first Chinese color picture—in 1948. But *Eternal Regret* was not the only film that Fei Mu directed that year. While preparing to shoot the Peking opera movie, he directed *Xiaocheng zhi chun* 小城之春 (Spring in a Small Town), a piece that would be hailed by many critics as “the best Chinese movie ever made.”⁷

Eternal Regret and *Spring in a Small Town* are very different projects, but the fact that they were shot back to back points to something more than a mere coincidence. As will be discussed below, when juxtaposed with each other, they render a compelling story of how Fei Mu, with the inspiration of Mei Lanfang, negotiated a new way of screening China, and more intriguingly, how he produced a radical manifestation of cinematic “Chineseness” where it was least expected. Fei Mu was able to do so because of his unique vision of cinema, which, he claimed, functions not only as an art of optical illusion but also as a vehicle of poetic

chapters 15-18.

⁷ *Spring in a Small Town* was rediscovered and featured in Hong Kong in 1983. It was celebrated as the first of the ten greatest Chinese movies in the special issue of *Dianying shuangzhoukan* 電影雙週刊 (Movie Biweekly). It again was voted by movie critics and scholars as the best of the first century of Chinese movies (1905-2005) in Hong Kong. See Chen Huiyang 陳輝揚, *Mengying ji: Zhongguo dianying yinxiang* 夢影集：中國電影印象 (Dream Images: Impressions of Chinese Cinema) (Taipei: Yunchen chubanshe, 1990), p. 126. Also see http://movie.kingnet.com.tw/media_news/index.html?act=movie_news&r=1110868977; Li Zhuotao 李焯桃, “Yihu Zhongguo, chaohu chuantong” 宜乎中國，超乎傳統 (“Befitting China, Surpassing Tradition”), in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu* 詩人導演——費穆 (Poet Director Fei Mu), ed. Wong Ain-ling 黃愛玲 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong dianying pinlun xuehui, 1998), p. 294.



Posters for *Eternal Regret* and *Spring in a Small Town* (1948)

rendition. He certainly found a kindred spirit in Mei Lanfang, who regarded Peking opera as less a theatrical spectacle than a lyrical illumination.

Finally, the timing of Fei Mu's moviemaking tells us more about the aesthetics and politics embedded in his adventure. When Fei Mu was shooting *Spring in a Small Town* in the spring of 1948, China was already engulfed in the civil war. Amid the deepening national crisis, neither *Eternal Regret* nor *Spring in a Small Town* seemed relevant to the political or emotional needs of the time. Both movies were released to lukewarm reviews that fall; *Spring in a Small Town* was even sneered at for catering to a decadent taste.⁸ But was Fei Mu really so insensitive to his time? He never had a chance to defend himself; he died of a heart attack in 1951, and his movies were quickly thrown into oblivion. It would take more than thirty years for his visual poetics to be recognized as capturing a historical time at its most poignant.

⁸ See Cheng Jihua's criticism in his *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi*, vol. 2, pp. 270-271.

In Search of the “Air” of Chinese Cinema

Fei Mu has been nicknamed “poet director” for his experimentation with form, penchant for symbolism, and philosophical contemplation of film as a modern visual medium of subjectivity.⁹ In his debut, *Chengshi zhi ye* 城市之夜 (Night in the City, 1933), an exposé of Shanghai, Fei Mu let “slices of life” crisscross each other so as to project a panoramic view of the city jungle. As reviewers noted, his use of montage effects not so much a contestation of themes or characters as an impressionist *tableau vivant*. “Drama” is toned down in deference to the director’s evocation of mood. This tendency became clearer in Fei Mu’s next two pictures. *Rensheng* 人生 (Life, 1934) presents a woman’s life at its most unfortunate. Instead of dwelling on her misery, Fei Mu ponders the meaning of life at large as well as cinema’s function in presenting it. He “gave little information about the characters’ backgrounds and cut down intertitles to a minimum.”¹⁰ *Xiangxuehai* 香雪海 (Sea of Fragrant Snow, 1934), deals with a woman’s twice becoming a nun and twice renouncing her vows as a result of historical turmoil and family interference. Fei Mu adopted two new methods, narratage, which features one character’s voice as the guiding thread of the performance, and flashback, which foretells the ending of the plot. His intention was to downplay the film’s suspenseful plot in favor of a cinematic and phantasmal recapitulation of religious mysticism and fate. But this movie managed only to confuse its audience, so much that it had to be re-edited for a second release.¹¹

Before he became a director, Fei Mu had served as assistant to Hou Yao 侯曜 (1903-1942), film director and author of *Yingxi juben zuofa* 影戲劇本作法 (Techniques of Writing Shadow Play Scripts, 1925), the first theory book about making Chinese cinema. Hou shared with his peers the view of cinema as a kind of theater, calling it *yingxi* 影戲 (literally, “shadow play”); he also noted that cinema

⁹ Wong Ain-ling, *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*.

¹⁰ Quoted from Chen Mo, *Liuying chunmeng*, p. 27. Hence his careful design of mise-en-scène and camera angle.

¹¹ Chen Mo, *Liuying chunmeng*, pp. 25-31.

conveys a far more powerful sense of realism thanks to the mediation of modern technology.¹² Hou identified two factors in a successful movie script: conflict and composition. Echoing Ferdinand Brunetière's notion, Hou contended that "if there is no struggle, there is no drama," and argued for a structure with which to incorporate the elements of conflict, such as crisis, confrontation, and obstacle, into a meaningful matrix.¹³ Above all, Hou considered that like drama, film is supposed to inculcate the meaning of life. Conflict and structure, accordingly, point to not only a technical undertaking but also a deeper level of semantic configuration.

Fei Mu's first three movies reveal his tension with his mentor and the majority of the other directors of his time. Where Hou Yao stresses conflict, Fei Mu relieves it; where Hou Yao upholds structure, Fei Mu subverts it. Fei Mu's intent is best manifested in "Daoxu fa yu xuanxiang zuoyong" 倒敘法與懸想作用 ("On the Function of Narratage and Flashback," 1934):

Just as theater can be separated from literature . . . becoming an independent art in its own right, so cinema should be separated from theater as soon as possible. As in the case of *Sea of Fragrant Snow*, I have tried my best to avoid the formation of "dramatic climax," in favor instead of understatement. This may well be a loss from the perspective of theater, but we can afford to ignore this loss from the new perspective of film.¹⁴

Thus while Hou Yao and his peers approached cinema in terms of the familiar genre of theater, Fei Mu was already trying to locate in film a new set of visual and cognitive schemes. His stance is best represented by "Lüetan 'kongqi'" 略談"空氣" ("A Brief Discussion of 'Air,'" 1934), in which, with his three movies as examples, he proposes that a director should be good at creating "air"—the invisible yet crucial element that enlivens cinema—so as to "capture his audience's attention and make them assimilate with the circumstances of the characters."¹⁵ He argues that this "air"

¹² Also see Zhen Zhang's discussion in *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, chapter 3.

¹³ Li Suyuan, *Zhongguo xiandai dianying lilunshi*, p. 105.

¹⁴ Fei Mu, "Daoxu fa yu xuanxiang zuoyong" 倒敘法與懸想作用 ("On the Function of Narratage and Suspense"), in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*, p. 25.

¹⁵ Fei Mu, "Lüetan 'kongqi'" 略談"空氣" ("A Brief Discussion of 'Air'"), in *Shiren daoyan Fei*

can be generated in four ways: “First, from the function of the camera on its own terms; second, from the object of the camera; third, from a suggestive *mise-en-scène*; fourth, from sound effects.”¹⁶

Note that Fei Mu takes issue with cinematic reflectionism, a notion endorsed by most of his fellow directors. For him, the camera eye, thanks to its technological virtuosity, is far more agile than human vision, so it brings about a visual wonder beyond the verisimilar effect of live theater. In other words, though committed to the reflective power of cinema, Fei Mu contends that the camera is capable of creating reality on a different plane. He notices that various types of “air” arise when “cinematography is linked with the objects,”¹⁷ and that the “objects” can be either drawn from the world of nature or constituted by artifice.

As in real life, “air” is the indispensable element that enlivens cinema yet remains invisible. “Air” can only be hinted at rather than presented; it nevertheless presupposes a careful design of camera work. Thus there is a paradox in Fei Mu’s essay, in that he seeks to utilize the new, powerful specular apparatus of cinema to approximate an invisible atmosphere. Optical set-up and visual spontaneity are seen as mutually implicating each other, thus generating the fantastic effect of film. Fei Mu is aware of this paradox in not only visual but also other sensory terms, claiming that he “tried to express in silent movies the [air of sonic] effect of sound films.”¹⁸

But there were values shared by Fei Mu and Hou Yao and other forerunners of Chinese cinema. Like Hou, Fei Mu believed that film, because of its optical accuracy and evocative power in representing reality, carries an ethical mission. Moreover, for all his proclamations that this new genre deserved a position of its own, Fei Mu acknowledged that film cannot do away with the impact of theater. He wrote in “Zaxie” 雜寫 (“Miscellaneous Writing,” 1935) that

Mu, p. 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* See also Chen Shan 陳山, “Disanzhong dianying: Fei Mu dianying siwei de shuli luoji” 第三種電影：費穆電影思維的疏離邏輯 (“The Third Kind of Movie: The Logic of Alienation in Fei Mu’s Movies”), *Dangdai dianying* 當代電影 (Contemporary Cinema) 5 (1997): 43.

Kunju 崑劇 and *pihuang* 皮黃 operas are the mature forms of classical Chinese theater. At the burgeoning moment of Chinese cinema, it is the rising vernacular new drama (*xinju* 新劇), still naïve in form, that comes closest to cinema and more realistically represents life as it is. . . . It was based on the “art” of new drama that Chinese cinema took shape. . . . Instead of being poisoned by new drama, Chinese cinema is in effect nurtured by new drama. . . . [The English word] “moviegoers” is derived from “theatergoers”; Chinese cinema and its audience come from the theater of new drama.¹⁹

This statement sounds like a contradiction to the one cited above, where Fei Mu holds that cinema should have an autonomous position. Reconciling this contradiction reveals a most fascinating dimension of Fei Mu’s cinematic poetics.

New drama arose at the turn of the modern century and has traditionally been looked down upon; its melodramatic plotting, exaggerated performance style, and eclectic adoption of dramaturgy from both Chinese and Western theater all reflect a period of Chinese theater in drastic transformation. By all accounts, its boisterous, sensational effect is anything but the “air” Fei Mu hopes to achieve in his movies. Interestingly, Fei Mu found in new drama a realistic appeal, presumably thanks to its topical subjects and “panoramic” spectacles—from life-size props to lifelike special effects—that greatly “shocked” theater audiences into a new visual and auditory experience.²⁰ Moreover, Fei Mu was impressed by the ethical contestations and emotional ambiguities in new drama, such that he deplored the recent proliferation of movies with nonsensical, fantastic elements.²¹ Beyond surface tears and exclamations, as he would have it, new drama presented the terms of the “moral occult” at the burgeoning moment of Chinese modernity, renegotiating the boundaries of senses and sensibilities blurred by the drastic changes of the time.²²

¹⁹ Fei Mu, “Zaxie” 雜寫 (“Miscellaneous Writing,” 1935), in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*, p. 29.

²⁰ See, for example, Li Hsiao-t’i, *Opera, Society, and Politics: Chinese Intellectual and Popular Culture*, Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1996, chapter 3.

²¹ Fei Mu, “Zaxie,” p. 29.

²² I am referring to Peter Brooks’ terminology, in his *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), chapter 1.

Vacillating between the appeal of the ethereal “air” of cinema and the call for the “moral occult” of new drama, Fei Mu had yet to find a way to smooth over the inconsistencies of his claims. But precisely because they are glaringly contradictory, we are prompted to rethink the magnitude of his stake in re-forming Chinese visual aesthetics and ethics.

Fei Mu’s efforts at negotiating theater and cinema are illustrated by his next few pictures. *Tianlun* 天倫 (Song of China, 1934), for instance, tells of the story of a prodigal son turned benevolent Confucian patriarch over a span of three generations. Made as part of the national campaign for the New Life Movement, the movie nonetheless shows Fei Mu’s intent to reassess Confucian values in the post-May Fourth era—for which he earned the nickname “Modern Saint” (*modeng shengren* 摩登聖人).²³ Still, his effort takes an unexpected turn when rendered through the movie’s sprawling and slow narrative, interspersed with pastoral vignettes. Gone is the urgent didacticism; instead there is a natural, or even “naturalist,” look at the cycle of human frailties and virtues, all dissolved in the end into the continuum of time.

As if responding to the criticism that he was indifferent to the impending national crisis, Fei Mu’s next project, *Langshan diexue ji* 狼山喋血記 (Blood on Wolf Mountain, 1936), his first sound movie, focuses on the theme of anti-Japanese aggression. The movie, set in a mountain village beset by wolf attacks, contains a clear patriotic allegory and won critical acclaim upon release. But Fei Mu invested no less “air” in it, by deriving a mood from the wolves’ howling and the villagers’ silent wrath, from wolf hunters’ gratuitous attempts to capture the animals and the ominous apathy of the surrounding mountains. His alternation of panoramic landscape shots, in which human figures are almost invisible, and close-ups of characters, in which human expressions are exaggerated to the point of grotesquerie, projects a psychological drama about humankind’s confrontation with the invincible forces of nature and fate. Fei Mu’s synopsis (*benshi* 本事) best describes the poetic predisposition of his movie:

The edge of the mountains, the edge of water, dark woods, pale moon, faint

²³ Chen Mo, *Liuying chunmeng*, chapter 9.

wind,
In total silence comes a few wolves' howling.
A kind of horror, a kind of threat, shrouds the quiet village.
Sheep tremble, all house windows and doors are shut tight.
Far away, the silhouette of a tall person stands, with a gun and a dog, atop
ahill.²⁴

Fei Mu's experimentation during this time culminated in a short feature, *Chungui mengduan* 春閨夢斷 (An Interrupted Dream in the Spring Chamber, 1937), one of the eight episodes in the omnibus work *Lianhua jiaoxiang qu* 聯華交響曲 (Symphony of Lianhua Studio).²⁵ In its run of eighteen minutes, there are three scenes: in scene one, two girls are sleeping restlessly in a bed, as opposed to two soldiers on the battlefield, one blowing a bugle and the other gazing at a begonia leaf, the botanical symbol of China; in scene two, a devilish figure is seen rolling a globe, looking at a begonia leaf, and throwing it into the fire amid sinister laughter; in scene three, the two girls are trapped in a haunted hall, about to be ravished by the devilish figure, when they stand up to fight back and kill the villain. Meanwhile, the soldiers have won their battle.

Its contentious patriotic theme notwithstanding, the movie shows how close Fei Mu was to the avant-garde cinematic aesthetics of his time. Fei Mu is said to have been much struck by Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920);²⁶ indeed, the attention that *Nightmare* lavishes on distorted set design, active camera movements, chiaroscuro lighting, and stylized acting carries clear imprints of German expressionist cinema. Nevertheless, the Chinese title of Fei Mu's film suggests his indebtedness to classical Chinese poetic imagery, as it evokes the Tang poet Chen Tao's 陳陶 (812?-885?) famous line, "Pitiable are those bones on the bank of Wuding River,/ still being dreamed of by their beloved in the spring chamber" (可憐無定河邊骨，猶是春閨夢裏人). Fei Mu thus frames his modernist

²⁴ Fei Mu, "Langshan diexueji benshi" 《狼山喋血記》本事 ("Synopsis of *Blood on Wolf Mountain*"), in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*, p. 43.

²⁵ Chen Mo, *Liuying chunmeng*, chapter 11.

²⁶ Chen Mo, *Liuying chunmeng*, p. 149.

projection of war with a gendered reflection on historical pathos and romantic delusion.

Whereas 1937 marked the peak of Fei Mu's cinematic experimentation with Western models, that year he undertook a very different kind of movie, the Peking opera film *Murder in the Oratory*. The movie starred Zhou Xinfang 周信芳 (1895-1975, also known as Qiling tong 麒麟童), one of the most popular actors in the male role (*laosheng* 老生) in 1930s China. It tells the story of the fatal dilemma of Wu Han 吳漢, a general in the service of Wang Mang 王莽 (45 B.C.-23 A.D.), who usurped the Western Han dynasty. Wu Han was married to Wang Mang's daughter, not knowing that Wang was the murderer of his father. As insurrections arose against Wang, Wu's mother revealed the truth to her son, urging him to take revenge by killing his beloved wife, a pious Buddhist, and to defect from his master and father-in-law. At the climax, Wu's wife commits suicide to help solve her husband's dilemma.

Murder in the Oratory gives rise to two questions about Fei Mu's cinematic aesthetics. First, for all his fondness of Peking opera since childhood, Fei Mu had resisted making films based on traditional theater. Cinema, he maintained, should enjoy a position independent of drama. One can easily discern the tension in *Murder in the Oratory*—loyalty versus betrayal, filial piety versus marital bonding, individual free will versus family obligations—and its power on the stage, not to mention that Zhou Xinfang was known for his “Shanghai style” of overacting (*haipai* 海派). By shooting a movie with such violent action within the domestic space, was Fei Mu trading his modernist pursuit for traditional dramaturgy and contradicting his belief that film should avoid rather than indulge in melodrama?

Second, a more immediate reason for Fei Mu to take up Peking opera at this time was his desire to respond to the call for nationalism in the film industry.²⁷ While both *Blood on Wolf Mountain* and *An Interrupted Dream in the Spring Chamber* carry a patriotic theme, the impressionist or expressionist style in which they are made still suggests Fei Mu's attachment to Western inspirations. Fei Mu may have

²⁷ Chen Mo, *Liuying chunmeng*, chapter 10, especially pp. 129-132.

asked himself: if he meant to promote a genuinely “Chinese” culture, wouldn’t it be a new challenge, or mission, to make a movie of Peking opera, the “national theater”? Here his task lay not merely in reconciling his personal taste for the “air” and the inherent sensationalism of traditional theater, as discussed above, but also in dealing with the more slippery issue of what constitutes the Chineseness of Chinese cinema.

Take *Murder in the Oratory*. The movie could easily be identified as “Chinese” for its story, which presents Confucian values in conflict, or merely for its costume, music, and setting. But what intrigued Fei Mu is the fact that Peking opera, despite its melodramatic plots and high-strung emotional charge, is predicated on a theatrics through which actions are aestheticized and emotions codified. If there is an affective motive to speak of, it has less to do with empathy than with a “distanced” sympathy. Hence the opera produces a unique effect of catharsis, in the sense that the audience undergoes not so much a “purification” from pity and fear as an acquiescence to the stylized representation of human conditions.

One recalls Fei Mu’s early dilemma between his endorsement of the realistic elements as showcased by new drama and his pursuit of the amorphous “air” of cinema. Through Peking opera, he came to a better grasp of the kind of “realism” that concerned him. In “Zhongguo jiuju de dianyinghua wenti” 中國舊劇的電影化問題 (“Issues in Making Cinema of Traditional Chinese Theater,” 1941), Fei Mu points out that the performing skills of Chinese drama “are all incorporated into a programmed repertoire of singing and dancing. Actors are not human in the ‘realist’ sense. In order to appreciate its realism and fun, the audience must come to terms with its effect of sublimation in a state of liminality.”²⁸

The action and costuming of the roles in Chinese drama indicate that they are not figures of reality. Objectively speaking, they can be likened to puppets, to ghosts; subjectively, they can be likened to people of ancient times or in paintings. But the ultimate purpose of Chinese drama is to make the audience

²⁸ Fei Mu, “Zhongguo jiuju de dianyinghua wenti” 中國舊劇的電影化問題 (“Issues on Making Cinema of Traditional Chinese Theater”), in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*, p. 82.

recognize them as live human beings, beings in reality; to make them feel “this is real” through the unrealistic characters and performances. This is a subtle state, requiring the fusion of psychology of both the actors and the audience.²⁹

We now can view Fei Mu’s engagement with cinema and Peking opera in a better light. As discussed above, Fei Mu sees film as a medium occupying the contact zone of optical technology and visual fantasy, illusionism and realism. Beyond projecting on the screen a vision in its utmost intimacy and immediacy, film is supposed to convey an “air” that is as much evocative as it is reflective of reality. After a series of experiments with Western styles, Fei Mu found in Peking opera a semiotic system comparable to his theory of “air.” An unlikely discovery, but he was nevertheless able to extract from it an aesthetics of his own. Thus when he set out to make a Peking opera movie, he did not intend merely to recycle a conventional theater form on the screen; rather, he was aiming at a double goal. On the one hand, he hoped that cinema could bring out the unique performative style of traditional Chinese theater, something beyond mimetic realism. On the other hand, he hoped that Peking opera could provide cinema with a repertoire of cultural and affective indexes so as to warrant its “national character.”

Despite his theoretical engagement, Fei Mu faced unexpected hurdles when shooting *Murder in the Oratory*. To overcome the gap between the formalism of Peking opera and the realist demands of cinema, Fei Mu and Zhou Xinfang are said to have negotiated numerous times to the point where, ironically, their stances shifted. Whereas Zhou Xinfang proposed to adopt as much realist technique as possible, Fei Mu opted for the abstractionism underlying Peking opera.

The outcome was a compromise. To suggest a theater ambiance, Fei Mu took mostly medium or long shots throughout the film, and was restrained in presenting action and mood. Still, for those not familiar with Peking opera, the movie may look like no more than a screen recording of traditional performance. The cuts from exterior to interior scenes and from stylized to natural gestures and props are often so abrupt as to exaggerate the gap between the two genres. Fei Mu sounded sincere

²⁹ Ibid.

when he later claimed that he had yet to grasp the method of making a “Chinese” movie of Peking opera and that its fundamental challenge was “not so [much] a problem of technique but rather one of artistry.”³⁰ Fei Mu’s search for this “artistry” was rewarded only after his encounter with Mei Lanfang, the most illustrious figure of Peking opera.

Eternal Regret

In the winter of 1947, Fei Mu paid a visit to Mei Lanfang and proposed to collaborate on a Peking opera movie in color, which would be the first color film ever made in China. The two had first met in Hong Kong in the late 1930s, when their careers were undergoing a difficult moment of transition. After the war broke out, Fei Mu followed the trend to work on costume movies, but he ended up with a project that reflected again his nonconformist bent. He directed *Kong fuzi* 孔夫子 (Confucius, 1940), which chronicles the sage’s life,³¹ and *Gu Zhongguo zhi ge* 古中國之歌 (Songs of Ancient China, 1941), which features three interludes from Peking opera.³² Both could not appear more anachronistic given the ethos of the time. They nevertheless brought forth Fei Mu’s agenda in seeking a vision of cultural restoration despite historical adversities. In the following four years, for various reasons, Fei Mu stopped making movies and became a spoken drama director.

Mei Lanfang brought his troupe and family to Hong Kong in 1938 for a performance and took refuge there afterward. In the following three years, he continuously turned down Japanese invitations to perform. Mei was forced to return to Shanghai after Pearl Harbor and found himself under mounting pressure to collaborate with the Japanese. In early 1942, he appeared with a new look that

³⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

³¹ Wong Ain-ling, ed., *Fei Mu dianying Kong fuzi* 費穆電影孔夫子 (Fei Mu’s Confucius) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong dianying ziliaoguan, 2010).

³² The aforementioned essay (note 28), “Zhongguo jiuju de dianyinghua wenti,” was written in conjunction with the release of *Gu Zhongguo zhi ge* 古中國之歌 (Songs of Ancient China, 1941).

shocked both his fans and enemies—he had grown a mustache.³³ With this conspicuous male biological trait, Mei Lanfang gestured a farewell to his past as female impersonator, a drastic way to “perform” his patriotism indeed. Mei again made national news right after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, when he shaved his mustache and return to the stage. The artistic director of Mei’s comeback performance was none other than Fei Mu.

For their color movie project, Mei and Fei settled on the opera *Eternal Regret*. Premiering in 1936, the opera was derived from an early Ming story by Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (1329-1412?), about the adventures of a woman named Han Yuniang 韓玉娘 after the 1129 fall of the Northern Song dynasty to the Nüzhen Tartars. Yuniang falls into the hands of a Tartar lord and is forced to marry a fellow Han slave, Cheng Pengju 程鵬舉. She persuades Cheng to flee south on their wedding night, only to be turned in by him out of fear. Upon seeing Yuniang being brutally punished, Cheng becomes convinced of her loyalty and fidelity. He acts on her wish to flee and join the Southern Song army, and eventually becomes a governor. For years Cheng misses his wife, but when he finally finds her, it is too late. Already wasted from hardship and longing, Yuniang dies the moment she is reunited with her husband.

Mei Lanfang produced *Eternal Regret* on the eve of the Second Sino-Japanese War, with a clear goal of critiquing Japanese expansionism and propagating patriotism. In the aftermath of the war, both Mei and Fei Mu felt that the nationalist theme remained as powerful as it had been when the opera was first performed, its political poignancy only accentuated as a result of the emerging civil war. The play’s tragic ending, a rarity in the repertoire of Peking opera, appealed to them, as it foregrounded the contingency of history that befalls common men and women.

Mei Lanfang was no newcomer to filmmaking. He shot his first movie as early as 1920, and by 1947 he had starred in eight features.³⁴ When visiting the United

³³ Xu Jichuan 許姬傳, et al., *Zhongguo sida mingdan* 中國四大名旦 (The Four Great Female Impersonators of China) (Hebei: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1990), p. 105. Also see Mei Shaowu 梅紹武, ed., *Yidai zongshi Mei Lanfang* 一代宗師梅蘭芳 (The Grand Master Mei Lanfang) (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1997), p. 216.

³⁴ Throughout his career Mei starred in fourteen movies based on Peking opera. See Li Lingling

States in 1930, Mei made his first sound film and befriended stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford.³⁵ On his tour of the Soviet Union in 1935, Mei not only met with Sergei Eisenstein but also shot an episode of his performance at the latter's invitation.³⁶ As evinced by his written recollection, Mei was attuned to the unique technological as well as aesthetic demands of filmmaking, particularly the "fragmentation" of camera work, which results in a reorientation of time, mood, and bodily movement, as opposed to live performance onstage. When making silent films in the early years, Mei tried to time his gestural rhythm and expressions in such a way as to evoke a "visual" effect of singing on the screen.³⁷ Upon the advent of soundtrack technology, he took it as a great advantage to have his image and voice disseminated to audiences far and wide. Constantly pursuing ways to enhance his performance, Mei was naturally attracted to the prospect of producing "the first color picture in China." There were other reasons for him to engage in a movie in 1947. Time—war, age, and other historical factors—had made him keenly aware of his physical vulnerability, and he wanted to preserve his vocal and visual expertise at its peak before it faded away.

Mei Lanfang had been hailed as a pivotal figure in shifting Peking opera from an art of auditory entertainment to a visual marvel. Though a superb singer, Mei owed his success nevertheless to a bold reform of visual effects both on and off the stage. His endeavor began with make-up and costume and included bodily movement and acting skill, and sets, lighting, stage direction, and even theater architecture. At the center of the Mei Lanfang craze was his art of impersonation. Despite its popularity, female impersonation had been regarded before the early Republican days as a performing skill that blurred gender boundaries and incited sexual deviance, and female impersonators were more often than not associated with

李伶伶, *Mei Lanfang de yishu yu qinggang* 梅蘭芳的藝術與情感 (The Art and Romance of Mei Lanfang) (Taipei: Zhibingtang chubanshe, 2008), pp. 198-212.

³⁵ Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳, *Yibu bu huanxing* 移步不換形 (Moving Forward without Altering Fundamental Forms) (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2008), pp. 226-252. For Mei Lanfang's tour to the United States, see Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, particularly chapter 8.

³⁶ Mei Lanfang, *Yibu bu huanxing*, pp. 191-215.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

male prostitution.³⁸ Mei's accomplishment was that he not only perfected his art of cross-dressing but also elevated its status from sexual and moral ambiguity to artistic refinement: "No movement that is not dance, no sound that is not music," as proposed by Mei Lanfang's leading consultant, Qi Rushan 齊如山.³⁹ At his best, Mei is said to have transformed the seductive power of his acting into a lyrical charm that embodied the Chinese virtue of feeling (*qing* 情).⁴⁰

The phenomenon of Mei Lanfang coincided with the ethos of his time, when spectatorship and spectacle emerged to become a sensory novelty.⁴¹ This novelty has a technological implication. Lu Xun, for one, was startled by the fact that the presumably dated art of female impersonation should coexist with, even blend into, technologized modernity. To his chagrin, images of celebrated impersonators such as Mei Lanfang were on display as often "in the hearts of the Chinese people" as in "the windows of photo studios."⁴² They had left their everlasting imprints in both psychological reflection and its mechanical reproductions. Moreover, the modern image of Mei Lanfang ignited a new dynamics of viewership as a result of his changing roles in the public and private spheres. As Joshua Goldstein points out, his enchanting feminine stage roles aside, Mei became all the more popular because he

³⁸ See my discussion in *Fin-de-siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), chapter 2. For the ambiguous gender identity of female impersonators, see also Isabelle Duchesne, "The Chinese Opera Star: Roles and Identity," in *Boundaries in China*, ed. Jonathan Hay (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp. 217-240; Min Tian, "Male Dan: The Paradox of Sex, Acting, and Perception of Female Impersonation in Traditional Chinese Theater," *Asian Theater Journal* 17.1 (2000): 78-97.

³⁹ Qi Rushan, *Qi Rushan huiyilu*, p. 101; Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, chapter 4.

⁴⁰ Wang Anqi 王安祈, "Jingju Meipai yishuzhong Mei Lanfang zhuti yishi zhi tixian" 京劇梅派藝術中梅蘭芳主體意識之體現 ("The Embodiment of Subjective Consciousness in the Mei Lanfang School of Peking opera"), in *Ming Qing wenxue sixiang zhong zhi zhuti yishi yu shehui* 明清文學與思想中之主體意識與社會 (Subjective Consciousness and Society in Ming and Qing Literature and Thought), ed. Wang Ailing 王瓊玲 (Taipei: Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, 2004), pp. 750-762.

⁴¹ Laikwan Pang, *The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), chapters 1, 4.

⁴² Lu Xun 魯迅, "Lun zhaoxiang zhilei" 論照相之類 ("On Photography and the Sorts"), in *Fen qin* 墳 (Graves), *Lu Xun Quanjì* 魯迅全集 (Complete Works of Lu Xun) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), vol. 1, p. 187.

was an equally competent “performer” when appearing in everyday media as a handsome man, a public-spirited male citizen, and a heterosexual lover, among other images. That Mei was able to shift smoothly between different gender and social roles bespeaks a sea change from the old art of impersonation, and he became an unlikely agent who aroused among fellow Chinese a “community of feeling.”⁴³

Mei’s popularity was followed by the developing politics of national representation. As discussed above, Peking opera had been elevated to “national theater” by the thirties, and Mei naturally became its best spokesperson. He had visited Japan twice in the twenties, but it was his visits to America and the Soviet Union in 1930 and 1935 respectively that made him an international celebrity. Again, Lu Xun’s comment testifies to the controversy over Mei’s image as a cultural ambassador of China. In “Lüelun Mei Lanfang ji qita” 略論梅蘭芳及其他 (“On Mei Lanfang and Other Issues,” 1934), Lu Xun ridiculed Mei’s recent overseas tour as a sign not of the actor’s rising stardom worldwide but of his decreasing popularity in China.⁴⁴ But Lu Xun directed his most vehement attack at Mei’s planned performance in the Soviet Union. He was exasperated that an aging female impersonator should entertain revolutionary cadres on behalf of China and that the star should bill his art as the “purest presentation of symbolism.”⁴⁵

For someone like Lu Xun who had been converted to socialist realism long before 1934, symbolism meant the worst kind of art form, which employs a game of metaphors to camouflage real problems and avoid real solutions. But Mei’s “purest presentation of symbolism” enchanted many progressive viewers in the Soviet Union. Besides Sergei Eisenstein, Mei met in Moscow with Nicolai Stanislavski and Bertolt Brecht, two pillars of modern Western theater. While Stanislavski’s system highlights actors’ empathetic understanding of the motivations of a play and full “control” of their parts with an analytical precision, Brecht takes issue with

⁴³ Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, pp. 139-140, 160-161.

⁴⁴ Lu Xun, “Lüelun Mei Lanfang ji qita” 略論梅蘭芳及其他 (“On Mei Lanfang and Other Issues”), in *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 5, pp. 579-584.

⁴⁵ Mei Lanfang made the statement on September 8, 1934; quoted by Lu Xun in “Lüelun Mei Lanfang ji qita,” p. 583.

representationism, calling instead for the “alienation effect” that prods both the actor and the audience to a politics of theatrical experience.⁴⁶ Despite their different approaches, both found something to learn from the Chinese opera singer. Mei’s performance, so lifelike yet so stylized, inspired Stanislavski to streamline his realist claim and Brecht to develop his aesthetics of “epic theater.”⁴⁷

“Symbolism” after all may not be the best term to describe Mei’s performing system. Critics have defined his art as “lyrical” for its evocative intricacy and poetic refinement. Some even suggest that whereas Stanislavski’s and Brecht’s concepts constitute the opposing ends of the dialectic of mimesis, naturalization versus alienation, Mei’s represents a third option. For Mei, theater is not an artificial duplication of life or its disavowal; rather, it is an artistic participation in life. Accordingly, his performance aims to engage the characters, actors, and audience interactively, maintaining a mercurial relationship between lived experience and role playing, realism and stylization, reasoning and feeling.⁴⁸ At his best, Mei is said to be able to abstract from his performance an exquisite form of sound and movement, something that illuminates the poetic core of life.

To conclude, the phenomenon of Mei Lanfang is not how visible he was worldwide but how his visibility—the conditions of becoming visible—pertains to

⁴⁶ Mei Lanfang, “Huiyi Sitannisilafusiji he Niemiluoweiqi·danqinke” 回憶斯坦尼斯拉夫斯基和聶米洛維奇·丹欽科 (“Remembering Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko”), in *Mei Lanfang quanji* 梅蘭芳全集 (Complete Works of Mei Lanfang) (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, vol. 3, pp. 374-375; Chen Shixiong 陳世雄, *Sanjiao duihua: Sitanni, Bulaixite, yu Zhongguo xiju* 三角對話：斯坦尼，布莱希特，與中國戲劇 (Triologue: Stanislavski, Brecht, and Chinese Drama) (Xiamen: Xiamen daxue chubanshe, 2003), chapter 2. Also see Cai Dengshan 蔡登山, *Mei Lanfang yu Meng Xiaodong* 梅蘭芳與孟小冬 (Mei Lanfang and Meng Xiaodong) (Taipei: INK chubanshe, 2008), pp. 237-252.

⁴⁷ There has been a long debate regarding Brecht’s reception of Chinese theater. For a recent study of Brecht’s “epic theater” and Chinese theater, see Min Tian, “Alienation Effect for Whom? Brecht’s (Mis)interpretation of the Classical Chinese Theater,” *Asian Theater Journal* 14.2 (Fall 1997): 200-222; Carol Martin, “Brecht, Feminism, and Chinese Theater,” *The Drama Review* 43.4 (1999): 77-85.

⁴⁸ See Ye Xiushan 葉秀山, *Gu Zhongguo de ge: Ye Xiushan lun jingju* 古中國的歌：葉秀山論京劇 (Melodies of Ancient China: Ye Xiushan on Peking opera) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2007), pp. 389-400, 261-342.

the image of China on the stage of global representation. As Deleuze puts it, “visibilities are neither acts of seeing a subject nor the data of a visual meaning,” “but rather forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer.”⁴⁹ It is therefore no coincidence that Mei Lanfang’s trips to Japan, America, and the Soviet Union each culminated in a stint of movie-making. Among the modes of artistic representation of the 1920s and 1930s, film offered not only an advanced visual technology, capable of preserving an artist’s skill with accuracy, but also a powerful form of “luminosity” that casts a spotlight on the symbolic valence the artist stood for—in Mei’s case, Chinese “national theater.” If Mei Lanfang first captured modern audiences’ hearts with his photographs, as Lu Xun grudgingly noticed, moviemaking further enhanced his stature through live action and its celluloid projection, nation and impersonation.

When implementing Mei Lanfang’s art in cinematic production, Fei Mu met no fewer hurdles than before. He still had to deal with the fundamental discrepancies between the abstraction of Peking opera and the verisimilar appeal of cinema. He was determined not to make a documentary like movie of *Eternal Regret* and hoped to draw inspiration from the vocal and choreographic configuration of musicals. Meanwhile, he looked to the style of classical Chinese painting to generate a suggestive ambience. One major attraction of the new movie was the adoption of color, which presumably would enhance the power of visual spectacle on the screen. Fei Mu, however, contended that “if color is toned down, it could become more beautiful,” and “if a certain color is toned up, feeling could become more beautiful.”⁵⁰ Accordingly, the actors were asked to wear lighter makeup and the set and costumes were designed to downplay their color scheme, while Fei Mu paid special attention to lighting so as to foreground the “color” of the mood of select scenes.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 52.

⁵⁰ Fei Mu, “*Shengsi hen tekan xuyan*” 《生死恨》特刊序言 (“Foreword to the Brochure of *Eternal Regret*”), in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*, p. 104.

⁵¹ The famous “Nocturnal Soliloquy” (*yesu* 夜訴) scene, for instance, is cast in blue, as opposed

Above all, Fei Mu had to work closely with Mei Lanfang in turning the master's acting into a form suitable for the camera. As Mei recalled, before formal work started, Fei Mu test-shot a segment of his performance in a conventional, stage format, with no realistic props or background except for a customary set consisting of a table and two chairs. Much to Mei's dismay, the footage looked tedious and banal, a sharp contrast to his onstage performances. Fei Mu concluded that the camera projection had "flattened" the three-dimensional stage performance into a "shadow play" devoid of sculptural perception. Enlivening Mei's on-screen performance necessitated rethinking not only acting skill but also how to use cinematic technology.

A prime example is the climax of the play, "Night Soliloquy" (*yeshu* 夜訴) and "Fantastic Dream" (*menghuan* 夢幻). In "Night Soliloquy," Yuniang, now in exile, is seen weaving alone at night while recollecting the trials she has gone through. She longs for her husband and parents while bearing an even stronger sentiment against the Tartar rule. The scene features little action beyond Yuniang's absorption in her mood, from longing to self-pitying, from melancholy to aspiration:

My years resound with the night watchman's first drum,
I reminisce about my calamity.
Kidnapped to the realm of Jin,
I met Cheng and married him.
A star-crossed couple indeed.
I urged him to fly away,
But all my devotion came to naught.
Now I wander alone in a foreign land,
Solitary, under a lonely light.
Though a woman, I have sense and judgment,
Romantic love is not my concern.
I only wish for the arrival of our troops,
Who with sharp knives will uproot the barbarians.

to the dream reunion scene which is dominated by red.

Only then could I be content.
My sole regret is that Cheng has forgotten me,
Our love, strengthened by misfortune, he has forsaken.
Full of disillusionment and melancholy,
All I have left is my chaste body.⁵²

耳邊廂又聽得初更鼓響，
思想起當年事好不悲涼。
想當初擄金邦身爲廝養，
與程郎成婚配苦命的鴛鴦。
我也曾勸郎君高飛遠揚，
有誰知一旦間改變心腸。
到如今害得我異鄉飄蕩，
只落得對孤燈獨守空房。
我雖是女兒家頗有才量，
全不把兒女情掛在心旁。
但願得我邦家兵臨邊障，
要把那眾番奴，一刀一個，斬盡殺絕，
到此時方稱了心腸。
恨只恨負心郎把我遺忘，
全不念我夫妻患難情長。
到如今看破了紅塵萬丈，
留下這清白體還我爹娘。

Yuniang sings in a sequence of meters for as long as twenty minutes and is seated throughout, her physical movement reduced to a few gestures of weaving. This is a moment of lyrical caesura, so to speak, when motion gives way to emotion, and it requires acting of the most subtle kind to bring out the psychological turmoil underneath the bodily composure. Yuniang sings about herself, and yet the way she sings objectifies her story as if she were singing to herself. Her reminiscences are

⁵² Translation from a DVD album, *Wei Haimin gudian juchang: Dashi jingdian—jizhi zhanfang* 魏海敏古典劇場—大師經典·極致綻放 DVD (Wei Haimin Classical Theatre Chinese Opera Variation DVD) (Taipei: Taigu guoji, 2011).

directed to a momentary revelation of not only her own fate but also that of all women trapped in historical calamities.

Fei Mu did not think the night scene would work well on screen: it would appear too long and tedious for a “motion” picture. To redesign the scene, he ordered a real, oversized loom to replace the original prop and asked Mei Lanfang to figure out a way to interact with it. This was a huge challenge for Mei because, for one thing, the size of the loom was such that it threatened to overshadow him were he to sing sitting next to or behind it. A more serious concern, however, was that the loom appeared to be an intrusion into a performance system premised on stylization and symbolism. It reminded Mei as well as his audience of the fact that a clumsy “reality” had set in, demanding its place in a style of acting that otherwise programs a given experience into conventions.

Although scholars have expressed reservations about this scene,⁵³ I take it as a crucial moment of Fei Mu’s intervention in the representational paradigm of Peking opera. I argue that the loom is both a realistic object and a tool with which Fei Mu shocked his cast and audience into a cinematic re-vision of traditional theater. To begin with, Fei Mu had Mei Lanfang perform with not one but two “machines”: Mei was confronted by a life-size loom and was also watched by a camera. Both machines, however different in function, were set up in the name of recapitulating reality more accurately. Mei therefore had to significantly modify his movements to accommodate both the loom and the camera.

But Fei Mu was not a simple-minded believer in the stark realism of moviemaking. He must have pondered: if Peking opera was already an art heavily mediated by conventions, what kind of “effect of the real” could a Peking opera movie bring about through a camera lens? By disturbing the aesthetic equilibrium of

⁵³ See Zheng Peikai 鄭培凱, “Xiqu yu dianying de jiu ge: Mei Lanfang yu Fei Mu de *Shengsi hen*” 戲曲與電影的糾葛：梅蘭芳與費穆的《生死恨》 (“The Entangled Relationship between Traditional Theater and Movie: Mei Lanfang and Fei Mu’s *Eternal Regret*”), in *Wenyi lilun yu tongsu wenhua* 文藝理論與通俗文化 (Literary Theory and Popular Culture), ed. Peng Hsiao-yen 彭小妍 (Taipei: Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, 1999), vol. 2, p. 570, note 30.



Mei Lanfang performs behind the large loom in *Eternal Regret*



Mei Lanfang performs in front of the small loom in *Eternal Regret*

Mei Lanfang's acting with the conventional prop loom, Fei Mu introduced an "air" into his film. This "air" points not so much to a verisimilar illusion as to the contrasting effects of theater versus screen, bodily semblance versus mechanical reproduction.

Mei Lanfang's contribution to the movie was equally significant. A conscientious artist, Mei spent many sleepless nights trying to devise a way to incorporate the loom into his acting before the camera, and the result was inspiring. As seen in the movie, Mei does not sit through the "Night Soliloquy" scene as in his onstage performance; rather, he moves around the loom, demonstrating a variety of gestures such as leaning on it, dusting its parts, weaving with a shuttle, and occasionally pausing and pondering—all while singing his arias. Instead of acting with the loom, Mei acts on it in the sense that he treats it as that which motivates his feeling and movement. The loom, a quintessential token of female productivity in ancient China,⁵⁴ appears first to be a reminder of Yuniang's gratuitous labor; it then takes on a new dimension along with her weaving and singing. Stranded in a foreign place, Yuniang is wasting away year after year. But she has to weave to make a living and sustain her waiting, to the point where the mechanical rhythm of the loom seems resonant with the Sisyphian soundings from her heart.

The loom ends up becoming a testimony to the Chinese Penelope's romantic and loyalist feelings. Moviemaking thus prompted Mei to play out a fundamental Chinese lyrical motif—from *ganwu* 感物 (feeling the object) to *ganwu* 感悟 (epiphany). Etymologically, the Chinese character *shu* 抒 (unravel, release) of *shuqing* 抒情, or "lyricism," is interchangeable with the character 杼, which is pronounced *zhu* and literally means "loom." In other words, Mei's interaction with the loom brings back to mind the bifurcated faculty inherent in Chinese lyricism: to unravel, and at the same time to weave, the tapestry of feeling.

While Mei Lanfang lends his magical touch to the loom, Fei Mu works with his camera to capture the lyrical "air" of the scene as a whole. He first pans across the

⁵⁴ See Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), chapters 4-5.

domestic space, then focuses on Yuniang's interaction with the loom. With a few shots from a slightly elevated angle, his camera tracks Mei's movement horizontally, at a pace in response to the tempo of his singing. The camera rarely gets too close to Mei, but it follows his movement around the loom, providing the audience with an almost 360-degree view of Mei at work. In this way, Fei Mu renders a visual access to Mei Lanfang that the theater audience could never have had.

But Fei Mu's camera work is not merely a display of optical agility; it acts as a conduit through which a new configuration of perceptions comes into sight. We thus experience a most intriguing moment. When panning across the set following Mei, Fei Mu's camera at least twice captures a glimpse of another, smaller loom—in the shape of the miniature prop one would have expected to see on the conventional stage. The coexistence of the two looms could hardly have been mere coincidence, given Fei Mu's meticulous attention to *mise-en-scène*. For viewers familiar with Mei Lanfang's onstage performances, the miniature prop loom is not a redundant entity of the otherwise minimalist set but rather a token of the residual memory of Mei's onstage performance, a trace that lingers after any effort at “undoing” the past. The two looms, therefore, offset each other's claim to realism as much as they contextualize each other's function in bridging life and artistic representation.

The “Night Soliloquy” scene culminates with Yuniang falling asleep during a break from her work. She has a dream in which she finds her humble residence turned into a splendid edifice and her shabby clothes transformed into a set of luxurious garments, while a jubilant procession has arrived to welcome her to a reunion with her husband. Fei Mu uses a series of dissolves to effect an instantaneous, mutual diffusion of the real and the fantastic, something not easily achievable by stage production. He also uses a reddish hue of lighting to suggest a festive mood, as opposed to the bluish color scheme that dominates the weaving scene. More importantly, Fei Mu lets his camera pan back and forth to expose the fact that Yuniang's house is actually part of a larger, empty studio set. The opening up of the optical scope, together with the use of dissolves, vividly reminds us that all happenings in the play, life or death, reality or dream, are forming a contiguous relationship under the spell of the camera. Thus, Fei Mu uses camera work to

advance his poetics of life as illusion versus realism.

Spring in a Small Town

Although preparation work started in the winter of 1947, the shooting of *Eternal Regret* was put off until the following summer for financial and technical reasons. In the spring of 1948, when waiting for those logistics to be resolved, Fei Mu found himself in a window period. At this time he was given a script titled *Spring in a Small Town*, by a young writer named Li Tianji 李天濟, and took an interest in it. While his studio favored the script with an eye on its modest budgetary proposal, Fei Mu was thinking of another kind of “economy”: the story has a neat structure and a symbolic theme highly suggestive of classical theater. What followed is by now a familiar story. Fei Mu took on the project and finished it in three months, with a cast of five actors mostly unknown to audiences at the time. *Spring in a Small Town* nevertheless became a landmark picture, even ranked the best in the first century of Chinese cinematic history.⁵⁵

Much has been said about *Spring in a Small Town* as a poetic movie. But there has been little inquiry into how Fei Mu’s movie *works* to bring out his poetics. In his essay “Guochanpian de chulu wenti” 國產片的出路問題 (“On the Future of Chinese-Made Cinema”)—written right before the shooting of *Spring in a Small Town*—Fei Mu points out three challenges faced by Chinese moviemakers: first, the lack of facilities and well-trained actors; second, a stress on “content,” often motivated by propaganda and didacticism, at the expense of “form”; and third, a conflict between realism and romanticism. Fei Mu is particularly concerned about the third challenge. He acknowledges that conscientious Chinese directors never follow the Hollywood trend by making only crowd pleasers but rather strive to “face up to reality,” with the result that their works are “closer to the European trend,

⁵⁵ But the recognition of *Spring in a Small Town* came as late as the 1980s. The eclipse of the movie from the late forties to the early eighties and its belated “rehabilitation” bespeak no better the dynamics of Chinese cinema on both aesthetic and political fronts.

showing more subjectivity in skill.”⁵⁶ Fei Mu welcomes this European quality, but he deplors that in displaying their “subjective” sensibility vis-à-vis reality, most of his fellow directors merely let sentimentalism take over and descend to a crude presentation of romanticism plus realism, “totally incongruous with the coherent style required of a film.”⁵⁷ His concern boils down to the question of how, given its limited resources, a “Chinese-made” movie could demonstrate a “subjective” reflection of reality while succumbing neither to emotional excess nor to artistic formalism. *Spring in a Small Town* showcases Fei Mu’s concern as well as his answer to it.

Spring in a Small Town takes place one year after the end of the Sino-Japanese War (1946), and the movie itself was made one year before the Chinese Communist takeover of the mainland (1949). The historical implications of his project would not have been clearer: to what extent could a movie, a most accurate vehicle of visual representation, register the sentiment of his time? Just the year before (1947), three films had won huge box office success: *Yaoyuan de ai* 遙遠的愛 (Far-Away Love), *Baqianli lu yun he yue* 八千里路雲和月 (Eight Thousand Miles of Clouds and Moon), and *Yijiang chunshui xiangdongliu* 一江春水向東流 (A Spring River Flows East). All deal with the consequences of the war, and all are packaged in a melodramatic form, or what Fei Mu would have called “romanticism plus realism.” They address a cluster of political or ethical concerns—such as ideological allegiance, family responsibility, and marital fidelity—that challenge Chinese humanity when all values are turned upside down. Through a full-fledged dramatization of pain and sorrow, amid “tears and sniveling,”⁵⁸ the audience was supposed to learn the terms of living in a postwar world and to construe the “moral occult” underneath the confused reality.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Fei Mu, “Guochanpian de chulu wenti” 國產片的出路問題 (“On the Future of Chinese-Made Cinema”), in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*, p. 94.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ I am referring to Joseph Lau’s popular terminology in describing the sentimental inclination of modern Chinese literature.

⁵⁹ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, chapter 1.

Fei Mu made his movie an intriguing dialogue with this trend. Roaming atop a ruined city wall every day, his heroine, Zhou Yuwen 周玉紋, is trapped in a lifeless marriage with Dai Liyan 戴禮言, the bedridden master of a decayed household. Yuwen's romantic passion is rekindled when her first love, Zhang Zhichen 張志忱, who happens to be Liyan's close friend, pays them a surprise visit. The triangle quickly becomes too much to bear for all three parties. With such a plot, Fei Mu could have easily made a tearjerker of *Spring in a Small Town*, thereby aligning himself with the directors of the aforementioned movies.⁶⁰ According to two earlier versions of the script, his film could have ended either with both Yuwen and Liyan dying a patent mandarin-ducks-and-butterflies-style death, or with Zhichen leaving the small town determinedly (for revolution).⁶¹

However, Fei Mu “reprogrammed” the emotional input of the story at both public and personal levels, and produced a movie full of psychological nuances and poetic undertones. *Spring in a Small Town* ends with “nothing” really happening. After much inner struggle, Yuwen decides to stay with her husband; we last see her and Liyan standing together on top of the city wall, watching Zhichen leave.

Leftist critics have criticized the decadent, ambiguous mood of the movie;⁶² that Yuwen, Zhichen, and Liyan could have indulged in a love triangle, regardless of the political status quo, was deemed symptomatic of bourgeois intellectuals' malaise. On the other hand, sympathetic reviewers have argued that Fei Mu deserves praise precisely because he conveys the pervasive melancholy at a time when nothing seemed to hold firm anymore. Neither side, however, was able to offer more insight into how sentiment could be modulated to represent the impending historical crisis, let alone how an “air” could be conjured up to characterize a “national movie” about

⁶⁰ As a matter of fact, the story of *Spring in a Small Town* has been likened to that of *Yuli hun* 玉梨魂 (The Death of Yuli), the ultimate example of the mandarin ducks and butterflies romance.

⁶¹ See Chen Mo, *Liuying chunmeng*, pp. 366-367. For the movie's relationship with mandarin ducks and butterflies fiction tradition, see Chen Hongshi 陳弘石, ed., *Zhongguo dianying: miaoshu yu chanshi* 中國電影：描述與闡釋 (Chinese Cinema: Description and Interpretation) (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2002), p. 38.

⁶² See, for instance, Cheng Jihua, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi*, vol. 2, pp. 268-272.

such a crisis.⁶³

Fei Mu claimed that he resorted to little craft in shooting his movie. Closer examination indicates otherwise. Fei Mu famously wrote about his motive and methodology of shooting *Spring in a Small Town*:

In order to transmit the gloomy mood of old China, I have undertaken a presumptuous and daring experimentation with my work, relying on the “long take” and “slow motion” (without seeking any further craft). As a result, the movie comes across being too dull. . . . The playwright hoped to make a movie that neither cries out nor points a way out. For me, however, to make such a movie is far less easy or powerful than a production based on either sentimentalism or didacticism. . . . The only thing I can offer to console myself, however ironically, is that I did not play with any craft.⁶⁴

Here Fei Mu spells out two factors in his production method: long takes and slow motion. As repeatedly observed by critics, *Spring in a Small Town* is dominated by long takes, which efficiently slow down the sense of temporality, as opposed to the more popular device of montage often adopted by mainstream films. Famous examples include the first evening gathering after Zhichen’s arrival, in which the relationships among the three main characters plus Dai Xiu 戴秀, Liyan’s younger sister, are laid out; the boating excursion; Yuwen and Zhichen’s meeting on the city

⁶³ For discussions of *Spring in a Small Town*, see Li Shaobai 李少白, “Zhongguo xiandai dianying de qianqu: Lun Fei Mu he Xiaocheng zhi chun de lishi yiyi” 中國現代電影的前驅：論費穆和小城之春的歷史意義 (“The Forerunner of Modern Chinese Cinema: On Fei Mu and the Historical Significance of *Spring in a Small Town*”), *Dianying yishu* 5 (1996): 34-78; Ying Xiong 應雄, “Xiaocheng zhi chun yu dongfang dianying” 小城之春與東方電影 (“*Spring in a Small Town* and Oriental Cinema”), *Dianying yishu* 1, 2 (1993): 11-18, 46-52; Luo Yijun 羅藝軍, “Fei Mu xinlun” 費穆新論 (“New Study of Fei Mu”) *Dangdai dianying* 5 (1997): 4-15; Chen Mo 陳墨, “Fei Mu dianying lun” 費穆電影論 (“On Fei Mu’s Movies”), *Dangdai dianying* 5 (1997): 26-40; Chen Shan, “Disanzhong dianying,” pp. 41-47; Chen Shan, “Yongyuan de Xiaocheng zhi chun” 永遠的小城之春 (“*Spring in a Small Town* Forever”), *Beijing dianying xueyuan xuebao* 北京電影學院學報 (Journal of Beijing Academy of Cinema) 44.1 (2002): 50-58. Also see Susan Daruvala, “The Aesthetics and Moral Politics of Fei Mu’s *Spring in a Small Town*,” *Journal of Chinese Cinema* 1.3 (2007): 169-185.

⁶⁴ Fei Mu, “Daoyan, juzuoze—xiegei Yang Ji” 導演，劇作者——寫給楊紀 (“Director, Playwright—to Yang Ji”), in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*, p. 99.

wall; and particularly the birthday party for Dai Xiu, in which Yuwen and Zhichen's intimacy became clear to Liyan.

Fei Mu's long takes, however, are never monotonous, extended shots over a length of time but rather use nuanced devices aimed at multiple associations with feeling. Props (the contrast between the potted orchid and small bonsai, offered by Yuwen and Dai Xiu respectively, in Zhichen's studio), paraphernalia (Yuwen's embroidery work, Zhichen's stethoscope, and even Liyan's medicine), lighting (moonlight, candle, light bulb, and studio lighting), and setting (the ruined wall, the convoluted interior, the barren garden) are all carefully arranged. Stage direction plays an equally important role; in the evening gathering scene, for instance, the way the four characters are positioned, followed by their visual interactions and bodily movements, neatly summarizes the muted tension among them.

Related to Fei Mu's long takes is his preference for dissolves. Compared with cuts, dissolves facilitate a smoother and more rhythmic transition within individual scenes and between scenes. Within a single scene, dissolves function to suggest



The evening gathering scene, *Spring in a Small Town*

changing perspectives of the mind's eye of either characters or implied viewers. In Li Cheuk-to's words, "dissolves bring in a sense of continuity. . . . The film's long takes linked together by dissolves are so constructed that conflicts and contradictions develop within the same space."⁶⁵ Take the scene of Yuwen and Zhichen's meeting on the city wall, which presents Liyan's plan to have Zhichen marry Dai Xiu. Fei Mu uses three dissolves, each showing Yuwen and Zhichen taking different positions against the same background, to intimate the passage of time and the pressure of prolonged uncertainty of the conversation. When Yuwen finally tells Zhichen her decision to stay, the scene cuts to her running away from the wall, an action that offsets the preceding, almost dreamlike sequence composed of dissolves.

Fei Mu's frequent use of long takes has been cited as a Chinese response to the theory of his contemporary André Bazin (1918-1958).⁶⁶ Bazin critiques the artificial collage of montage and its implied ideology about time and space, promoting instead a stark cinematic realism that could bring out the ontological state of the real in flux through the camera lens. Not unlike Bazin, Fei Mu stresses cinema's capacity for screening the world as it really is. But on the issue of what constitutes the real, Fei Mu has a rather different take. If Bazin brings realism to showcase a Bergsonian obsession with the flux of time and subjectivity's vital position along with time,⁶⁷ Fei Mu emphasizes not the existential potential embedded in film but its continuous interplay with fullness and emptiness, truthfulness and fictionality, on and off screen. He is more concerned with how cinema can capture the layered emotional implications of humanity vis-à-vis external stimuli, and how cinema can lend an aesthetic and ethical perspective through which fragments of life can be sutured and floating moods can be anchored, however tentatively.

This leads us to rethink the way Fei Mu brings the long take to bear on the

⁶⁵ Li Zhuotao, "Yihu Zhongguo, chaohu chuantong," in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*, pp. 282-292.

⁶⁶ Ding Yaping 丁亞平, *Yingxiang zhongguo 影像中國：1945-1949* (Imaging China: 1945-1949) (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1998), pp. 374-376. For a general introduction to Bazin's cinematic aesthetics, see Ian Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), chapter 7, particularly pp. 179-93.

⁶⁷ Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema*, pp. 179, 182, 187.

aesthetics of visuality in the Chinese tradition. Lin Niantong has pointed out that Chinese film is a form “basing itself on montage while employing the long take as an expressive vehicle.”⁶⁸ For Lin, while montage was welcomed by moviemakers as a way to ignite visual and visceral responses, the long take best represents the matrix of Chinese cinematic conception. This is because the long take not only reproduces the ambiance of theater, from which Chinese cinema derives its inspiration, but also informs the visual system in Chinese aesthetic traditions such as painting. Here Fei Mu expresses his appreciation of Chinese painting:

Chinese painting is a kind of painting of the intent: it is a kind of “unlikely associations and fantastic epiphany, its meaning to be found only outside language and image.” Chinese painting is never mimetic art, but the impression it conveys is realistic. It fuses a subjective view into objective entities, creating a multitude of changes as if under a divine power. Sometimes permeated with clouds and fog, sometimes showing only a few slight touches, Chinese painting can convey the landscape and flowers and birds at their most fantastic, but it never worries about mimetic accuracy. That is Chinese painting.⁶⁹

No surprise that, with *Spring in a Small Town* as an example, critics have discussed early Chinese cinema’s preference for horizontal camera movement in light of traditional hand-scroll painting. That is, the viewer is guided to move his or her perspective from one point to the next, incessantly incorporating perceived images into a continuum of visions that change as if unrolling a scroll painting.⁷⁰ Instead of a panoramic view, the scroll-like horizontal camera work renders scenes in a series of seemingly inexhaustible segments, thereby giving rise to proliferating perspectives. This encourages viewers to make associations with scenes continually coming into and falling out of sight; thus it gives rise to a configuration of time and

⁶⁸ Lin Niantong 林年同, “Zhongguo dianying de yishuxingshi yu meixue sixiang” 中國電影的藝術形式與美學思想 (“The Artistic Form and Aesthetic Thought of Chinese Cinema”), in *Zhongguo dianying meixue* 中國電影美學 (The Aesthetics of Chinese Cinema) (Taipei: Yunchen chuban gongsi, 1991), p. 27.

⁶⁹ Fei Mu, “Zhongguo jiuju de dianyinghua wenti,” p. 82.

⁷⁰ See Lin Niantong, “Zhongguo dianying de kongjian yishi” 中國電影的空間意識 (“The Sense of Spatiality of Chinese Cinema”), in *Zhongguo dianying meixue*, pp. 86-87.

space in sharp contrast with that of pictures based on perspectivism.⁷¹

For example, in the birthday party scene, the camera pans to introduce a series of interactions between wife and husband, wife and lover, wife and her sister-in-law, and servant and master. When everyone appears increasingly overcome by inebriation, the ethical, romantic, and class orders they otherwise would have observed start to dissolve. The scene was originally shot in a single take,⁷² and if it had not been well rehearsed, Fei Mu would not have been able to control so precisely the multiple actions along with the same time sequence. Fei Mu's camera moves continually throughout the long take, as if driven by curiosity of its own about the goings-on both between and within the characters.⁷³ Moreover, to build up the tension, Fei Mu cuts the footage so as to flaunt key moments of changing perspectives. The result is a series of montages—within the drinking take—of skewed relations of the characters that unfold amid the noises of the wine game, under glimmering lamplight, in the cramped space of a traditional Chinese house.

Equally suggestive is Fei Mu's use of slow motion as a companion technique of the long take. By slow motion, however, Fei Mu does not mean a technique of overcranking the film; nowhere in *Spring in a Small Town* does the speed of images actually slow down. Rather, he points to a special acting and directing style that creates the impression that action is protracted and mood prolonged. Fei Mu explains that he adopted this sort of slow motion so as to foreground a group of figures lagging behind their time and incapable of real action—and in this respect is

⁷¹ In Lin Niantong's words again, the movie relies heavily on the perspective of "horizontal distance" (*pingyuan* 平遠), a key notion of spatial composition in classical Chinese painting, to show a broad, embracing approach to reality. But this "horizontal distance" does not promise a placid, detached view any more than calling forth an internal dynamics composed by montage, dissolves and other techniques.

⁷² Chen Mo, *Liuying chunmeng*, p. 395.

⁷³ The still camera-long take-long shot style is fairly standard in today's European art films (as well as Taiwan New Wave and Jia Zhangke), but important German expressionist directors Murnau and von Sternberg both used a lot of long takes combined with tracking shots. Mizoguchi also used intricate camera movements in conjunction with his long takes, so perhaps it wasn't altogether out of the ordinary from the 1930s to the 1950s to use extensive camera movements in combination with long takes.

reminiscent of Anton Chekhov's plays.

But perhaps Fei Mu was playing with a more polemic thought. Just as he invests in the long take a spatial view of Chinese reality, he uses slow motion as a way to intervene in time. Slow motion offers a different pace in the viewer's conceptualization of time and history, in contrast to the contemporary call for a quick fix through war and revolution. Slow motion also means a stylized motion, informed by aesthetic imaginaries and movements with an aim to reconfigure the relationships between the subject and the world, distance and proximity. Finally, when it holds the diegesis of a movie at such a dawdling pace, almost to the point of pause, slow motion tends to "spatialize" time, calling attention to the multiple layers of reality in a synchronized zone.

Fei Mu may have derived his method of slow motion from his experience of directing spoken drama (*huaju* 話劇).⁷⁴ He directed at least thirteen plays between 1941 and 1945 and is said to have favored classical subjects, stylized acting, and poetic ambiance.⁷⁵ As Stanislavski's brand of realism had been increasingly accepted by Chinese directors, Fei Mu's dramaturgy was deemed artificial and behind the times.⁷⁶ Above all, Fei Mu's major source of inspiration had to be Mei Lanfang. In the early forties, Fei Mu became increasingly familiar with Mei and Mei's art; as he saw it, the charm of Mei Lanfang's performance resides in its smooth oscillation between mimetic identification and self-alienation, which gives rise to a rhythmic alternation between life and acting. For him, Mei best embodies the abstractionism underlying Peking opera: "On the stage, a thing happens this way if you think it should; a thing happens that way if you think it should. Concrete things do not

⁷⁴ Chen Mo, *Liuying chunmeng*, chapters 19-20.

⁷⁵ Fei Mu is said to have offered no script to his actors; instead he explained to them the dramatic situation he intended, asking them to flesh out their parts accordingly. He paid special attention to music, set, and lighting; he did away with the "fourth wall" of realist theater in recourse to pantomime and stylized movements; and he had actors take voice and acting lessons from Chinese opera performers. See Chen Mo, *Liuying chunmeng*, pp. 340-342.

⁷⁶ Sun Qiyang 孫企英, "Fei Mu de wutai yishu" 費穆的舞臺藝術 ("Fei Mu's Art of Stage Play"), in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*, p. 185.

always exist, and imaginary things transform when imagination transforms.”⁷⁷ Mei neither lets himself be completely overtaken by his role nor deliberately calls forth an “alienation effect.” Performance is therefore treated like an event in its own right, like any other that sets in motion the fiduciary relationships between self and other, existential temporality and historical flow.

Wei Wei 韋偉, the actress playing Yuwen, recalled that in preparation for her role, she was asked by Fei Mu to underact her emotions, and her model was none other than Mei Lanfang.⁷⁸ Not only was she expected to perform a singular role, she was also supposed to render—and even critique, in an intersubjective sense—the mentality and demeanor that characterize many women like Yuwen. In other words, Wei Wei was supposed to not just act but act out and act on her part, so that her performance would not merely embody her image but also enact a “dialogue” between the performance and the character. The result is a negotiation between lifelike acting and sculptural gestures and movements. Wei Wei’s subsequent performance, particularly in moments such as her gazing atop the city wall, her night walk to Zhichen’s studio, and her eyeing her beloved and playing with her silk scarf, carries a clear imprint of the manners of the *dan* 旦 (female role category) perfected by Mei. Through Mei’s codified and spontaneous acting, Fei Mu discovered a new way to engage, and disengage, with realistic theater and, by extension, realistic time.

Finally, because *Spring in a Small Town* was made during the pause of the production of *Eternal Regret*, its aesthetic premise, performative style, and even ideological underpinning can be appreciated in relation to those informing the Peking opera movie. In the opera, Han Yuniang and Cheng Pengju are Han slaves forced by their barbarian lord to marry each other. Although they have little romantic attachment, they share a loyalism that becomes the catalyst of their eventual emotional bonding. Years of separation and hardship cannot diminish their mutual trust; but when their reunion turns out to be a time for eternal farewell, it illustrates the harsh outcome of individual fate versus historical contingency—hence “eternal

⁷⁷ Quoted in Sun Qiyang, “Fei Mu de wutai yishu,” p. 188.

⁷⁸ See Chen Huiyang’s interview with Wei Wei, in *Mengying ji*, p. 124.

regret.”

When turning this play into a movie, Fei Mu had to consider whether, first staged as a patriotic play on the eve of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the story of *Eternal Regret* could still mean anything to Chinese audiences after the war. At this juncture, *Spring in a Small Town* offers an ironic counterexample. In the movie, Yuwen and Zhichen were in love before the war broke out. Despite Zhichen’s request that they leave for the hinterland together, Yuwen chose to stay and ended up marrying Liyan. The lovers’ reunion eight years later brings them “regret” too, about broken promise, thwarted passion, and wasted time.

Both cases show the conflicts between morality and passion underlying the changing ethos of the time, and both feature a young woman made to test, and being tested by, the new boundaries of beliefs and values. Where Yuniang embodies unwavering loyalty and endurance, Yuwen appears torn between romantic love and marital duty; where Yuniang dies tragically to consummate her dedication, Yuwen decides to reconcile herself to the status quo. The keyword here is *hen* 恨, or regret. The Chinese character *hen* bears a double meaning: it can mean incisive hatred or a prolonged melancholy resulting from an unfulfilled desire. Both Mei Lanfang and Fei Mu play with the double meaning of *hen*. Whereas Mei Lanfang foregrounds its cataclysmic cause and irredeemable consequences, Fei Mu ponders its aftereffects, which prove to be annoyingly ambiguous.

To be sure, *Eternal Regret* and *Spring in a Small Town* are different projects. I suggest nevertheless that they are related like the print of a film and its negative, the contradictory and complementary sides of a Fei Mu take on Chinese reality. Seeing these two movies side by side, one comes to realize that the Sino-Japanese War is but the latest in a long succession of calamities in Chinese history, and that individual will, social imperative, and fatal aberrations are as intertwined with each other as ever. Yuwen may seem too conformist to assert her passion; Fei Mu hints that her emotional turbulence becomes intelligible only when Han Yuniang’s loyal sentiment and eternal regret are brought into sight.

One can easily consider Yuniang a paragon of feminine virtue and frown on Yuwen’s indecisiveness and compromising decision. But the circuitous way Yuwen

reaches her (non-)decision is no less symptomatic of the consequences of war than Yuniang's unconditional commitment eight hundred years ago. Precisely due to the gap that exists between Yuwen's and Yuniang's ways of performing their social and emotional roles, it is clear in *Spring in a Small Town* that "time" changes, and as a result there arises a new sensibility called the "modern."

A Poetics of Screening China: The "Air" Versus the "Wall"

The above discussion prepares us to ask how, as a "poet director," Fei Mu brings traditional Chinese poetry to bear on his cinematic vision; and how, in so doing, he calls forth the "cinematic" potential of Chinese poetic imagination. Critics have noted that the motifs of *Spring in a Small Town*, from the ruined city wall to the cyclical return of the spring and transient human relationships, all correspond to the vision of Du Fu's 杜甫 (712-770) "Chunwang" 春望 ("Spring Prospect"), written in the aftermath of the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763):

The nation shattered, mountains and river remain
City in spring, grass and trees burgeoning
Feeling the times, blossoms draw tears;
Hating separation, birds alarm the heart.
Beacon fires three months in succession,
A letter from home worth ten thousand in gold.
White hairs, fewer from the scratching
Soon too few to hold a hairpin up.⁷⁹

國破山河在，
城春草木深。
感時花濺淚，
恨別鳥驚心。
烽火連三月，

⁷⁹ Du Fu, *The Selected Poems of Du Fu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 78. The poems have been translated multiple times. For various versions, see <http://www.chinapage.com/poem/dufu/chunwang.html>.

家書抵萬金。
白頭搔更短，
渾欲不勝簪。

Nevertheless, it was not Du Fu but Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) who occupied Fei Mu when conceiving his movie. According to Li Tianji, during their first meeting to discuss the script, Fei Mu brought up Su Shi's song lyric—*ci* 詞—"Dielianhua" 蝶戀花 ("Butterfly That Loves Flowers"):

A scattering of faded red bares apricots, small and green,
Time young swallows learned to fly
Spring flood surrounds the house
Catkins from the willows' upper branches blow and dwindle
From here to heaven fragrant grasses grow

Inside the wall, a wing; outside, a road
Outside, a man walking
Inside, a girl laughing
The laughter dies away, and all is still
All but desire, fired by indifference.⁸⁰

花褪殘紅青杏小。
燕子飛時，
綠水人家繞。
枝上柳綿吹又少，
天涯何處無芳草！

牆裏秋千牆外道。
牆外行人，
牆裏佳人笑。
笑漸不聞聲漸悄，

⁸⁰ I am using Julie Landau's translation, in *Beyond Spring: Tz'u Poems of the Sung Dynasty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 123-124.

多情卻被無情惱。

The song lyric starts with a natural scene of faded blossoms and newly ripe apricots, signs of late spring. This relatively melancholy outlook on seasonal transition is animated by the flight of young swallows and an idyllic abode next to a brook. The lyric then directs attention to the dwindling catkins from the willow trees, another sign of fading spring, and finds relief in the last line, an overarching prospect of immense greenery in infinite time and space. The second stanza zeroes in on a dramatic scene, where a romance between the poet persona and a lady seems to be taking place, except that they are obstructed by a wall between them. Amid the ambiguous fading laughter of the lady behind the wall, there comes the final, ironic comment on the poet persona outside the wall: “all but desire, fired by indifference.”

Fei Mu and Li Tianji concurred that Su Shi’s song lyric best summarizes the tenor of *Spring in a Small Town*. The spring in the film suggests both hope and its dismissal, both the recurrence of the seasonal cycle and the return of a memory that may as well have been buried in the past. The two lovers, kept apart by the invisible wall of time and war, want to resume their romance, but they only prove that their pursuit is much ado about nothing.

One must take into account the fact that, before Su Shi came along, the song lyric had been a genre associated with either ornate feminine mannerisms or contrived sentimentality, and therefore was secondary to *shi* 詩 (poetry), the quintessential form of Chinese poetry. The song lyric is predominantly theatrical, in the sense that it is a device of words set to musical tunes, and that it deals with stock themes (boudoir lament, for example) and situations that have universal appeal. In Su Shi’s hands, however, the genre underwent a metamorphosis and was invested with a highly personal form of poetic expression traditionally reserved for *shi*.

Su Shi’s engagement with the song lyric did not happen until the 1070s, after he had been exiled as a result of his political downfall. Critics have pointed out that Su Shi’s turn to the song lyric at this time was out of his caution under perilous circumstances.⁸¹ Be that as it may, Su Shi managed to reform the genre to his own

⁸¹ See Ronald Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard-

needs, finding in it a freer, and sometimes darker, channel to express himself. “Butterfly That Loves Flowers” is an example. Su Shi imbues his song lyric with the sincerity and exuberance of *shi* while never losing a theatrical undertone.⁸² It not only describes unrequited love but also prompts an inquiry into the contingencies of human life.

What Fei Mu meant to do with *Spring in a Small Town* was not unlike the way Su Shi re-formed the song lyric with regard to *shi*. By the standards of mainstream cinema, Fei Mu’s new movie dealt only with a petty romance in a confined space, a far cry from the sentiment and theme occupying the nation. Although the film may lack a grandiose claim, the way Fei Mu deals with his subject compels one to rethink his ambivalent attitude toward Chinese cinematic discourse amid historical turmoil. With a subject as light as the “catkin,” *Spring in a Small Town* nevertheless intends to gauge the latitude of individual feeling vis-à-vis national and nationalist sentimentalism. It seeks to bring forward the lyrical with regard to the epic.

Where Su Shi uses poetic imagery to rise above historical limitations, Fei Mu resorts to camera work. Here I call attention only to the opening scene of *Spring in a Small Town*. With sweeping pans of a ruined city wall in springtime and a woman looking out aimlessly, the scene may recall Du Fu’s “Spring Prospect,” in which the poet “zooms in from the nation to the town to the family to one’s own hair—a series of metonymic gestures takes place until the self comes to embody the ruins of the nation.”⁸³ But it is Su Shi’s song lyric that lends the scene the matrix of visual dynamics: the panning across spring landscape, the tracking of a lonely woman lost in her romantic dream, the montage of the natural and human scenes, and the cross-cut of the personae inside and outside the wall, among others.

The wall in the opening scene quickly becomes a leitmotif of Fei Mu’s movie, as evinced by the dilapidated wall of the Dai family that Zhichen crossed over to make his entrance and other forms of divider within the Dai compound. The wall is

Yenching Institute Monograph Series, Asia Center, 1994), p. 326.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 280-294.

⁸³ Jie Li, “Home and Nation Amid the Rubbles: Fei Mu’s *Spring in a Small Town* and Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life*,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21.2 (2009): 88.

not only a physical landmark that defines political and familiar closures but also a symbolic barrier that differentiates intimacy from estrangement, the known from the unknown, the past from the present.

As opposed to the mineral gravity projected by the wall, the opening scene is supplemented by a voiceover, arguably the most famous part of *Spring in a Small Town*. In an oneiric, reflective tone, this voice reverberates between the heroine as narrator and the heroine as character, now recollecting, now projecting, now commenting, now fantasizing, now murmuring to herself, now conversing. It is haunting because it comes across as both intimate and remote, like an uncanny sound from another time, another world—a poetic sound that pierces through the “wall” of time and mind.

Thanks to the interplay between the dreamlike opening sequence and the voiceover on and off the screen, time becomes a question at the outset of *Spring in a Small Town*. The diegesis does not unfold smoothly but seems to have stopped, or skewed, so to speak, and it creates a temporal effect not unlike poetic apostrophe. The movie starts with the scene of Yuwen looking out from the top of the city wall,



The opening scene, *Spring in a Small Town*

intercut with Zhichen leaving the small city, which should have taken place at the end. The voiceover, nevertheless, sounds prescient about the action and thus interrupts the diegetic flow of narrative. As a result, the ending of the movie is already embedded in the beginning, and what happens in between may as well be an extrapolation of the reflexive, even fantastic, consciousness of Yuwen. Fei Mu had experimented with narratage and flashback as early as his second movie, *Sea of Fragrant Snow*, but failed. Fifteen years later, he achieved a poeticized movie by making a more radical attempt.

This mysterious interplay between image and voiceover can be understood in terms of notions such as Pier Paolo Pasolini's "cinema of poetry,"⁸⁴ which projects subjective consciousness at its primitive and amorphous level, or Gilles Deleuze's "crystal image," which points to a reoriented scheme of time and subjectivity.⁸⁵ Pasolini opposes the cinema of prose and the "cinema of poetry," proposing that film's realist appeal comes from its "hypnotic nostrum" that is pregrammatical or directly premorphological. Beneath its surface representation, film is about the subjective consciousness in its primordial and libidinous projection. It is this metalinguistic/visual level that Pasolini finds most enchanting: a dreamlike, self-

⁸⁴ For Pasolini's concepts such as "cinema and poetry," see *Heretical Empiricism*, ed. Louise K. Barnett, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Chen Shan has pointed out the resemblance between Fei Mu's cinematic language and Pasolini's notion of "cinema of poetry." He particularly calls attention to Fei Mu's use of voiceover, which is highly suggestive of a free indirect style favored by Pasolini; see Chen Shan, "Disanzhong dianying," p. 45. See also Deleuze's discussion of free indirect discourse in cinema in his *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbra Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 72-76.

⁸⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 2-9. The crystal image fashions time as a two-way mirror that splits the present into two directions, "one which is launched toward the future while the other falls into the past. Time consists of this split, and it is . . . time, that we see in the crystal" (p. 81). David Rodowick describes the time-image as one that shuttles between actual and virtual, that records or deals with memory, confuses mental and physical time, and is sometimes highlighted by incommensurable spatial and temporal links between shots. See David Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 79-117.

expressive level reminiscent of the ecstasy of poetry.⁸⁶ For Deleuze, though, Western cinema after the war underwent a paradigmatic transformation of the spatiotemporal relations in form, from the movement-image to the crystal image. Whereas the movement-image mandates a coherence based on action, the crystal image is the indivisible fusion of the virtual and the actual image. The crystal image shapes time as a constant two-way traffic of present and past, and it brings up a memory in a compressed and distorted form.⁸⁷

While the theories of Pasolini or Deleuze (or Bazin, as previously discussed) no doubt help us appreciate Fei Mu's films, the master might have appreciated more a critical dialogue in reference to Chinese resources. What Fei Mu and his peers wanted to accomplish, after all, amounts to no less than transposing the visual dynamics of traditional Chinese poetry to the new medial form of cinema. To that end, his cinematic concepts, from "air" to "long take" and "slow motion," bear a clear imprint of Chinese poetics. I have introduced above Lin Niantong's study of Fei Mu's cinematography in relation to Chinese painting theory. Here I call attention to Wang Guowei's 王國維 (1877-1927) poetics, not only because of Wang's pioneering attempt at conjoining modern Western aesthetics with its Chinese counterpart but also because of his keen awareness of lyricism and visuality—by invoking the "mental vista" or *jingjie* 境界—at a modern juncture.

In his observation of the poetic vision of feeling/*qing* versus scene/*jing* 景, Wang Guowei introduces the notions of *ge* 隔 (obstruction) versus *buge* 不隔 (non-

⁸⁶ See Sam Rohdie, *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 51-55; also see Deleuze's discussion, *Cinema 1*, pp. 72-76.

⁸⁷ See Deleuze, *Cinema 2*. With the cinema of neorealism as his case in point, Deleuze argues that "what defines neo-realism is this build-up of purely optical situations (and sound ones, although there was no synchronized sound at the start of new-realism. It is perhaps as important as the conquering of a purely optical space in painting, with impressionism"; "this is a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent" (p. 2). "As for the distinction between subjective and objective, it also tends to lose its importance, to the extent that the optical situation or visual description replaces the motor action. We run in fact into a principle of indeterminability: we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental, in the situation, not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask" (p. 7).

obstruction). With the genre of the song lyric in his mind, Wang relates the two terms to the emotional effect of artificiality versus spontaneity.⁸⁸ Whereas “obstruction” can be caused by the poet’s indulgence in personal feeling and rhetorical ornamentation, “non-obstruction” happens when the poet is moved to express himself in terms of transcending immediate personal and spatial-temporal concerns.⁸⁹ Wang’s notion of “obstruction” versus “nonobstruction” occupies the core of his theory of mental vista, which has been regarded as the modern summation of the discourse on the fusion of visual, spatial, and poetic horizons, a discourse ranging from Liu Xie’s 劉勰 (465?-532) *yinxiu* 隱秀 (implicit immanence) to Liu Yuxi’s 劉禹錫 (772-842) *jing shengyu xiangwai* 境生於象外 (visionary space borne beyond image), Sikong Tu’s 司空圖 (837-908) *xiangwai zhi xiang, jingwai zhi jing* 象外之象，景外之景 (image beyond image, scene beyond scene), and Wang Fuzhi’s 王夫之 (1619-1692) *qingjing jiaorong* 情景交融 (fusion of feeling and scene).⁹⁰

To be sure, Wang Guowei’s theory predated the advent of Chinese cinematic discourse. I argue nevertheless that it inaugurates the modern re-vision of premodern poetics, and to that effect anticipated further visual paradigmatic changes in the modern century. Let us take another look at Su Shi’s “Butterfly That Loves Flowers,” and by extension, Du Fu’s “Spring Prospect,” in light of the terms *buge* and *jingjie*. Both poems are predicated on a literal reference to the wall, the material mark of obstruction. At the imagistic level, whereas the wall in “Butterfly That Loves Flower” suggests the demarcation line between passion and propriety, the wall in “Spring Prospect” is taken to symbolize the political and cultural fortification now ruined by both man-made and natural causes. However, what makes both poems intriguing is that, despite invoking wall imagery as the intransitive circumstances of

⁸⁸ Ye Jiaying 葉嘉瑩, *Wang Guowei jiqi wenxue piping* 王國維及其文學批評 (Wang Guowei and His Literary Criticism) (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), p. 255. Wang Keping, “Wang Guowei’s Aesthetic Thought in Perspective,” in *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Chung-ying Cheng and Nicholas Bunnin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 37-56.

⁸⁹ Wang Guowei 王國維, *Renjian cihua* 人間詞話 (Remarks on the Song Lyric and the Human Condition), ed. Chen Hongxiang 陳鴻翔 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2002), p. 115.

⁹⁰ See Zhang Shaokang 張少康, *Gudian wenyi meixue lungao* 古典文藝美學論稿 (A Theoretical Draft of Classical Literary Aesthetics) (Taipei: Shuxin chubanshe, 1989), pp. 21-44, 485-502.

life, both poets hint at a spatial perspective above or beyond it; they are seeking a vision that transcends the obstructions of life—from personal to historical, material to psychological—with the hope of communicating the incommunicable.⁹¹ Thus in “Butterfly That Loves Flowers,” a fleeting moment of romantic infatuation leads to a pondering of human frailty and its redemption through nature; in “Spring Prospect,” national pathos and individual nostalgia are brought to bear on a more profound understanding of personal fate, historical vicissitude, and natural cyclicity.

Wang Guowei regarded Su Shi’s song lyric poetry as exemplifying the state of non-obstruction.⁹² Insofar as Fei Mu was inspired by Su Shi’s song lyric, one can surmise that he in his own turn aimed to explore the dialectic of “non-obstruction” regardless of the circumstance of obstruction, and that he tried to do so by reliance on the new medium: cinema. Fei Mu demonstrates his attempt at overcoming obstruction in at least three aspects. At the thematic level, he teases out the emotional nuances of a cliché-ridden genre; at the discursive level, he challenges the directorial trends of realism or romanticism in an effort to rethink the elements of national cinema; at the technical level, he crosses the lines of media sphere and temporality in evoking a resonance between the poetic and the cinematic, the classical and the modern. Wang Guowei could not have foreseen his theory being used to discuss the aesthetics of moviemaking. But precisely because Wang’s provocation of “non-obstruction” necessitates crossing over that which blocks the fluidity of artistic and affective imagination and production, I argue that the way Fei Mu freely traverses the “wall” between poetry and cinema, mindscape and landscape, illuminates the lasting power of Wang’s poetics in a new medium.

⁹¹ In Wang Guowei’s terminology, the poetic vision enables them to cross the state of *ge* 隔 or obstruction to the state of *buge* 不隔 or nonobstruction. With the genre of the song lyric as his case in point, Wang Guowei originally referred the two terms to the emotional effect of artificiality versus spontaneity. Whereas obstruction can be caused by indulgence in personal feeling and rhetorical ornamentation, nonobstruction happens when the poets are moved to express themselves in the truest terms and intersubjectivity. In Wang’s affective schemata, it is pathos—feeling resulting from various forms of obstruction in life—that best drives sensitive poets to conjure up works of nonobstruction: “of all that is written, I love only what a man has written with his blood.”

⁹² Wang Guowei, *Renjian cihua*, entry 40.

Su Shi's and Du Fu's poetry aside, Mei Lanfang's vocal performance is a source for Fei Mu's handling of cinematic poetics. It is a commonplace that Peking opera characters introduce themselves as well as the meaning of their action on stage from a seemingly third-person perspective. This convention can be lyrical if delivered exquisitely by an experienced actor such as Mei Lanfang. In the "Night Soliloquy" scene of *Eternal Regret*, for instance, Yuniang is supposed to be immersed in her own thoughts all by herself, but the way she speaks and sings suggests that she is either reviewing her plight in a detached manner or simply addressing her audience. Moreover, thanks to the stylized form of performance, she even gives the impression that she is expressing not herself so much as the "self" in the given circumstance. Accordingly, just as Yuniang's soliloquy projects in effect multiple temporal zones and affective responses, so Yuwen's voiceover is supposed to invite her audience—and herself, as both character and actor—to appreciate the meaning of her situation.

This brings us to rethink Fei Mu's lifelong pursuit of "air" in his movies. I suggest that if the "wall" in *Spring in a Small Town* marks the obstructions on the landscape and mindscape of Chinese humanity, it is the "air" that finds a way to penetrate the cracks of the wall—even the ruined walls in the movie—and brings forth a breeze of relief or "non-obstruction." To repeat, "air" means for Fei Mu both a specific kind of *mise-en-scène* with a spontaneous undertone and the mercurial affect that abounds therefrom. Moreover, the two Chinese characters that constitute "air," *kong* 空 and *qi* 氣, point to some of the essential ideals of Chinese poetics: *kong* refers to the Buddhist vision of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and *qi* to the dynamic force enlivening humanity and cosmos. Thus, when he claims that he wants to endow his movie with an "air," Fei Mu is suggesting something both intangible and enlivening.

We can now understand better why Fei Mu claims that *Spring in a Small Town* displays "no artificial device" (*wu jiqiao* 無技巧) despite the fact that he experiments with techniques ranging from the long take to slow motion, dissolve, and voiceover. As if echoing Wang Guowei's terms, Fei holds that all artistic devices are supposed to be used in such a way as to facilitate the flow of "air"—the quintessential element underlying the state of non-obstruction. Therefore, the voiceover, so abrupt and mysterious at first hearing, not only captures the inner reverberations of the female

character in postwar emotional ruins but also triggers a series of echoes across time, including Su Shi's song lyric, Du Fu's poem, and Mei Lanfang's aria. In other words, Fei Mu's movie demonstrates a yearning, at both thematic and technical levels, for what Lin Niantong calls the effect *ge er bujue* 隔而不絕 or "continuum in spite of obstruction."⁹³ Obstruction, in that human will and artifice are always already subject to hindrances and insufficiency. Continuum, in that the existential blockade can hopefully be appreciated, if not removed, through the mediation of multiple perspectives drawn from artistic inventions.

Fei Mu has indicated that as a media form, film captures modern sensibilities not just because it features visual spectacle or represents reality (even truth) in an unprecedented way. Film actualizes at a historical juncture and in a special form human consciousness's encounter with the world. And for Fei Mu, film becomes "Chinese" only when it joins the long array of artistic endeavors, such as Du Fu's and Su Shi's poetry, Wang Guowei's poetics, and Mei Lanfang's theatrics, as the latest manifestation of the evolving entelechy of the poetic mind. Like poetry, film renders the "unique, factual account of an experience in historical time, a human consciousness encountering, interpreting, and responding to the world."⁹⁴ Insofar as *wen* means pattern, sign, and artistic inscription, *wenxue* or literature is an art of registering the proliferating forms that overcome the obstructions of humanity and the world. Or in Stephen Owen's words,

If literature (*wen*) is the entelechy of a previously unrealized pattern, and if the written word (*wen*) is not a sign but a schematization, then there can be no competition for dominance. Each level of *wen*, that of the world and that of the poem, is valid only in its own correlative realm; and the poem, the final outward form, is a stage of fullness.⁹⁵

⁹³ Lin Niantong, *Zhongguo dianying meixui*, p. 46. Based on the notion of "continuum within obstruction," Lin calls attention to the element of continued movement, *you* 游 or roaming, that characterizes Chinese cinematic aesthetics.

⁹⁴ Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 21.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

It is in this sense that Fei Mu deserves to be called a poet director and his cinematic career a quest for the continuum of *wen* or Chinese literary manifestations.

Coda

I have discussed *Eternal Regret* and *Spring in a Small Town* in terms of Fei Mu's engagement with Chinese lyricism, pointing out three directions: first, Fei Mu considers Chinese cinema not an isolated modern medium but part of the continued manifestation of the poetic mind across time; second, to envision the modern subjectivity in cinematic terms, he calls on a repertoire of lyrical arts from Mei Lanfang's theatrics to classical Chinese painting theory and poetry, thereby generating a unique aesthetics of mutual illumination; third, such a pursuit enables Fei Mu to proffer a theory that cuts against the dominant trend of representationism; for various reasons, its impact was not appreciated until the last decades of the modern century. These factors, I argue, constitute Fei Mu's contribution to the polemics of Chinese "national cinema."

My discussion of Fei Mu, however, cannot conclude without a look at the ending of *Spring in a Small Town*, arguably the most controversial point regarding Fei Mu's lyrical vision. In the final scene, Yuwen appears to have been reconciled with her husband. She is seen standing with Liyan on top of the city wall, watching Zhichen depart—an anticlimax after the preceding turbulence all three parties underwent. Critics have offered different interpretations, of which the most popular one resonates with the Confucian dictum "starting with feeling and closing with propriety" (*fahuqing, zhihuli*, 發乎情，止乎禮). Yuwen is thus seen as a paragon acting out the female virtues of decorum and self-edification.

In her study of Chinese cinema, Rey Chow notices "an inclination or a disposition toward making compromises and toward making-do with even—and especially—that which is oppressional and vulnerable."⁹⁶ Chow calls such "a mood

⁹⁶ Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations: Contemporary Chinese Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 18.

of endurance” “sentimental.” She considers that the modes of Chinese human relationships are affectively rooted in the imagined inside of “domesticity and household,” “an inside whose depths of feeling tend to become intensified with the perceived aggressive challenges posed by modernity.” In this regard, Chow considers Fei Mu’s *Spring in a Small Town* a “masterpiece *sans pareil*.”⁹⁷

I nevertheless would like to offer a different reading: that if *Spring in a Small Town* moves us, it is because the movie refuses to settle for “a mood of endurance.” I suggest that Fei Mu might have started to produce his movie with a sentimental intent, but he managed to work out something else, that is, a call for the lyrical over the sentimental. Fei Mu was not naïve about the obstructions—the wall—besetting his time and the Chinese movie industry. However, in contrast with his fellow directors who were seeking a sentimental resolution, as demonstrated in either the progressive manner of calling for revolution or the regressive manner of dwelling on “tears and sniveling,” he believed that a lyrical approach could still serve as an alternative.

In *Spring in a Small Town*, Yuwen makes a conciliatory decision toward her marriage and love, thereby appearing ready to “endure” the foreseeable unhappiness of life. But wouldn’t the movie’s finale have been even more melodramatic if Yuwen ended up running away with Zhichen, or terminating her life (as Li Tianji’s original script goes)? At stake here is not whether Yuwen’s decision is compromising or not but rather the way she manages to rise above its implied closure—the wall—of sentimentalism and even lend it a poetic magnanimity. In other words, Yuwen is distinguished from most cinematic heroines of her time in that she reaches the height where she stands above the closure, and is able to make a decision via a complex of passageways that generate a constellation of situations, thoughts, moods, and imaginations.

Instead of personifying endurance or Confucian propriety, therefore, Yuwen acts out the lyrical dialectic of the most paradoxical kind: “feeling so deeply as to become unfeeling” (*qing buqing* 情不情), whose subtle logic is best expounded by

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*.⁹⁸ This dialectic arises from Yuwen's obsessive attachment, which nevertheless manifests itself in self-negation. It has little to do with either religious resignation or sentimental self-sacrifice; rather, it points to Yuwen's vision of striking a balance between emotional effusiveness and reflective certitude. The final impression, therefore, is not unlike the lyrical suspension of images and figures, when the complexity and tension between irreconcilable opposites balances itself by accepting that all answers are merely provisional. If there is a feeling of "endurance" to speak of, it strikes one as an existential perseverance aimed at the fulfillment of selfhood.

Fei Mu regards cinema as a vehicle not merely "bearing" realism or sentimentality but instantiating, and even creating, a lyrical awakening otherwise associated with poetry. And as discussed above, this final impression is uncannily embedded in the elliptic sequence at the beginning of the movie. Fei Mu might have appeared out of tune with his peers, but he understood he was not alone. With inspiration drawn from Du Fu and Su Shi, he sought to capture in cinematic terms the epiphanic reflections of human attachments; through Mei Lanfang's theatrics, he learned to render his filmic take on reality in a style of engaged disengagement. For him, this is what a "Chinese" cinema—and poetic mind—was all about in the given historical moment.

Thus the spring of 1948 saw a most fascinating engagement of Chinese cinema with Peking opera, and filmic vision with poetic illumination. But the story behind the screen was anything but lyrical. Fei Mu had a relatively smooth shooting of *Spring in a Small Town*; meanwhile, he worked hard to prepare for *Eternal Regret*. Problems arose right after shooting started in late June. For instance, since color film called for much brighter lighting, additional electricity generators were brought in to produce enough power, but they also produced such noise as to affect on-site recording. Even Mei Lanfang's costume had to be replaced, as it caused unexpected

⁹⁸ This is, of course, derived from the famous dictum in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. See Wai-ye Li's succinct interpretation of the three possible connotations of *qing buqing*, in her *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 207-208.

reflections under the strong spotlight.

When the first footage was test-screened, however, both Fei and Mei were disappointed by its unstable color. It turned out that the film had been developed in the bathtub of the cinematographer's apartment and that its color varied along with the change of water temperature—which was kept down by ice and therefore went up when the ice melted.

These travails during shooting were nothing compared with what happened during the postproduction work. As Mei Lanfang recalled, the screening was disastrous because the color appeared extremely pale, due to the use of Ansco color film instead of regular Kodak color film for budgetary reasons. Ansco color was generally used for shooting 16 mm film, and its color fades when it is blown up to 35 mm format for commercial screening. Worse, the soundtrack and the image were not synchronized, a result of unstable voltage during shooting. While the color problem could not be remedied, Fei Mu re-edited the film inch by inch in order to make the soundtrack match the image.⁹⁹

Eternal Regret was finally released, but due to the undesirable color quality and the civil war that had engulfed most of China, the first color picture in China did not receive much attention. By then *Spring in a Small Town* had already been shown in select cities, and reviews were mostly unfavorable. So what Fei Mu and Mei Lanfang had tried so hard to make turned out disappointing. Both movies were quickly moved out of sight when the new era of Communism came. It would take decades for audiences to rediscover what the two artists had accomplished for Chinese cinema in the spring of 1948.

⁹⁹ Mei Lanfang, "Diyibu caise xiqupian *Shengsi hen de paishe*" 第一部彩色戲曲片生死恨的拍攝 ("The Making of the First Color Picture in China, *Eternal Regret*"), in *Shiren daoyan Fei Mu*, pp. 213-236.

A Spring That Brought Eternal Regret: Fei Mu, Mei Lanfang, and the Poetics of Screening China

David Der-wei WANG

This article discusses the mutual illumination between Chinese opera, cinema and poetry on the eve of the Chinese Communist Revolution. I focus on two films made by the “poet-director” Fei Mu in 1948, *Eternal Regret* and *Spring in a Small Town*. The former is an adaptation of the Peking opera of the same title, starring Mei Lanfang, the most popular female impersonator of traditional theater; the latter is a contemporary melodrama allegedly inspired by the song lyric of Su Shi (1037-1101). The two movies cannot be more different in style and background. But the fact that they both deal with wartime romance and were produced back to back points to something more than a coincidence. It tells a compelling story of how Fei Mu, with the inspiration of Mei Lanfang and traditional poetics, negotiated a new way of screening China.

Keywords: National Cinema Chinese lyricism Poet-director “Air” “Wall”
Wang Guowei

《小城之春》《生死恨》

——費穆、梅蘭芳與中國電影詩學

王德威

本文探討一九四九年前夕，中國電影與戲劇的相互借鑑與影響。全文以一九四八年「詩人導演」費穆的兩部電影《生死恨》與《小城之春》為焦點，指出前者脫胎於京劇大師梅蘭芳同名戲劇，後者的靈感得自於蘇軾詩詞。兩部電影背景與風格極為不同，但兩作同時製作，並皆探討戰爭與情義的主題，則似非巧合。並讀兩作，提供費穆、梅蘭芳、中國詩學之間的奇妙對話，以及一代影人思考呈現「民族電影」的意義。

關鍵詞：民族電影 抒情傳統 詩人導演 空氣 牆 王國維

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