



Xiao cheng zhi chun (Spring In a Small Town) is a greatly admired 1948 Chinese drama directed by Fei Mu. It is often cited as the finest live action feature drama yet made in China. Below is Kino Ken's review of the Rare Films For You subtitled dvd release of that film.

11 of a possible 20 points = **1/2 = above-average film

China 1948 black-and-white 98 minutes subtitled live action feature drama
Wenhua Film Company Producer: Wu Xingzai

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 2 Direction: Fei Mu*
 - 1 Editing: Wei Chunbao and Xu Ming
 - 1 Cinematography: Li Shengwei
 - 1 Lighting
 - 1 Screenplay: Li Tianji
 - 0 Music: Huang Yijun
 - 1 Production Design: Che Ning and Zhu Dexiong
 - 0 Sound: Miao Zhenyu
 - 2 Acting
 - 2 Creativity
- 11 total points

Cast: Cui Chaoming (Huang Lao, the servant), Li Wei* (Zhichen Zhang, doctor),
Shi Yu* (Liyan Dai, the husband), Wei Wei* (Yuwen Zhou, the wife),
Zhang Hongmei (Meimei, Liyan's teenage sister)

Perhaps due to severe financial limitations, Fei Mu's *Xiao cheng zhi chun* (*Spring In a Small Town*) was shot in only a handful of locations with a tiny cast composed of a mere five speaking parts. Released in 1948, it was the final significant Chinese film distributed before the seizure of power by the Chinese Communist Party.

Not until Xie Jin's *Wutai jiemei* (*Two Stage Sisters*) appeared in 1964 would Chinese cinema spawn a major new production. That would be followed by an eleven year void before a piece of pure Maoist propaganda surfaced, winning praise from some admirers in the West. *Jue lie* (*Breaking with Old Ideas*) sang the praises of turning colleges and universities into labor camps headed by party hacks. This ultra-patriotic snow job, released in 1975, was directed by Li Wenhua and can be viewed on YouTube by the curious.

1980 marked the advent of China's Fourth Generation of Filmmakers, with *Bashan yeyu* (*Evening Rain*), co-directed by Wu Yonggang and Wu Yigong, serving as flagship. From that point on, a small stream of worthwhile films emerged with some degree of regularity, occasionally reaching international audience. Thus paving the way for masterpieces by Fifth Generation directors such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang.

As the swan song of capitalist filmmaking in China, *Spring In a Small Town* is notable for its superb ensemble acting and depiction of a destroyed aristocracy mired in past glory. This is epitomized in the lethargic character of Liyan, who holds himself responsible for the overgrown garden and dilapidated manor house which resulted from eight years of wartime destruction. Melancholy, aloof, embittered, Liyan is an archaic survivor of mandarin China, unwilling to adapt to the changing circumstances of his environment. Though he believes himself to be physically ill, his real problem is soul sickness.

Liyan's wife, Yuwen, lives entirely in the moment. For only that philosophy enables her to endure an existence devoid of marital companionship. Hers is a loveless marriage to a selfishly introspective misanthrope. Only occasional shopping trips to the nearest village in order to obtain essential foodstuffs allow her a bit of freedom and change of scenery.

Also stuck in this chilly household is Liyan's adolescent younger sister, a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl keen on creating bonsai miniatures for which neither Big Sister Yuwen nor Big Brother show any admiration. Though her elder sibling

assumes dutiful guardianship over the girl, he treats her as simply an acquired obligation rather than a beloved member of the family.

Financial distress and wartime exigencies have reduced familial domestics to a solitary assistant, Huang Lao. In the past he served, it seems, as supervisor of the children. His two charges, now grown beyond the age of constant monitoring, have maintained respect for their now aged former overseer. Huang himself has become the chief dependent in their household, in an inevitable role reversal.

Life drags wearily on for these four until one fine spring day Zhichen Zhang, formerly a medical student companion of Liyan's, comes to their home on a surprise visit. He has simply planned on a long-delayed reunion with a college buddy. That becomes quite a bit more complicated upon his discovery that Liyan has married Zhichen's childhood sweetheart. Because both Yuwen and Zhichen are still in love with each other.

What was intended as a brief residency of a few days turns into an agonized extension as lovers attempt to maintain a social friendship within accepted ethical limits. Yuwen is married. Zhichen is not. Liyan's sister Meimei cannot realistically be turned into a substitute fiancée for the nostalgic visitor. She's too young for marriage and Zhichen is more avuncular than spousal material. Though such a wedding plan does occur to Liyan as one possible solution to the awkward triangle which has developed.

Having strong similarities to David Lean's doomed central pair in *Brief Encounter*, these Chinese counterparts agonize over whether to betray bonds of friendship and marriage. Will love conquer all? Or shall duty prevail?

Technically, the film has little to recommend it. Editing is choppy and spasmodic, lighting only adequate, cinematography more robotic than flowing. There are no inspired insights provided by Li Tianji's screenplay. Sound is problematic, with one of two power plant whistles mentioned notably missing from the soundtrack. Aside from pleasant singing of folk songs by young Zhang Hongmei, aged twenty-one, the only other assets here are the performances, which comprise a true symphony of telling gestures, poignantly pregnant silences, and consistently low-key dialogue exchanges. No one ever wanders out of character for even a second. So Mu Fei's direction must be considered exemplary.

Production design by Che Ning and Zhu Dexiong is certainly evocative of the period, making the best of available resources to portray a country estate fallen into disrepair thanks to cumulative effects of bombings and later neglect by apathetic owner.

In this original dramatization of *Xiao cheng zhi chun*, events are narrated by the wife, expressing her point of view. When remade in color by director Tian Zhuangzhuang in 2002, the husband's point of view was substituted, creating quite a different atmosphere in the process.

Because of its very mature contents, *Spring In a Small Town* is suitable viewing only for adults, though it contains only one brief incident of self-injurious violence, no eroticism, and zero vulgarities of language. It makes excellent double feature viewing alongside the 2002 remake cited above.

This Rare Films for You dvd release contains no bonus materials.