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Spring and *Time* in Chinese Postwar Cinema, 1945-1949: A New Temporal Approach

ABSTRACT

This paper tentatively proposes a new temporal approach to reexamine Chinese postwar cinema that fills the gap in conventional film categorization. It resituates Chinese postwar films in a historical context of a turbulent postwar society marked by uncertainty and trauma. Using Bergson and Deleuze's theory on temporality, this paper interprets time as a medium of becoming, arguing that the classic progressive film, *Spring River Flows East* (1947), and the prestigious art film, *Spring in a Small Town* (1948), demonstrate more than one mode of cinematic temporality, embodying both linear rationalized time and dynamic duration. By turning the focus of analysis toward cinematic time, Chinese postwar films and their historical context cease to be alienated from contemporary viewers but interpermeate with viewers' perceptions and engagement.

Keywords: Chinese Postwar Cinema, *Spring River Flows East, Spring in a Small Town,* Cinematic Time, Action-image, Time-image

In the history of Chinese film, the postwar period from 1945 to 1949 is far more than a transitional phase in which the Guomindang government reclaimed ownership of the industry from Japanese colonists, and in which the Chinese Communist Party assumed control, both of the country and filmmaking, after winning the Civil War in 1949. The brutal fact is that the Guomindang's victory in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-1945) failed to improve people's impoverished lives. On the contrary, the Guomindang's bureaucratic corruption and its inability to control inflation were exposed directly to the public without the presence of the Japanese invaders as a distraction. "Riots, strikes, demonstrations, protests, and petitions all testify to the public mood of discontent" (Esherick, 8).

At this time, filmmakers such as Cai Chusheng, Zheng Junli, and Zhang Junxiang, like many other ordinary people, returned to Shanghai to restart their prewar careers but only to be overwhelmed by house hijacking, a tightening job market, and enormous disparities between the rich and the poor. They felt an urgent need to resume the Left-Wing Film Movement (1932-37) that was suspended during the War of Resistance to again produce progressive films with the purpose of calling for social revolution and the establishment of a future revolutionary utopia. During the brief four-year period, a great number of progressive films were produced that aimed to instill revolutionary ideology in public awareness. The most notable ones were *Spring River Flows East* (*Yi jiang chun shui xiang dong liu*一江春水向东流, co-directed by Cai Chusheng and Zheng Junli in 1947), *Along the Sungari River* (*Song hua jiang shang,* 松花江上, directed by Jin Shan in 1947), and *Heavenly Spring Dream* (*Tian tang chun meng,* 天堂春梦, directed by Tang Xiaodan in 1947).

Most of these films were family melodramas that, on the one hand, accentuated family members' sufferings (with mainly female

characters) during the War of Resistance. And on the other hand, they painstakingly revealed postwar social tension and the necessity for revolution by prolonging the timespan of these wartime stories to the postwar period. Retelling wartime stories retrospectively and engaging in the social discourse in an active manner was a general tendency driving the production of "mainstream" narrative films released during the postwar period.

In the 1980s, however, the seminal rediscovery of Fei Mu's masterpiece *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiao chengzhichun*, 小城之春, made in 1948) showed another tendency to produce postwar films that restrained the representation of the past history of the Resistance and isolated the story from the postwar revolutionary discourse. A re-examination and canonization of this film has two important implications. First, the rediscovery came hand in hand with the upheaval of the fossilized, ideology-based film evaluation standard that had dominated Chinese film study from the 1950s till the end of the Cultural Revolution, which marks a sharp turn in Chinese film study from the obsession with textual analysis and ideological critique to the aesthetic perception of film, resonating with Western academia's emerging interest in audience sensation and corporeal experience. Second, considering the commonalities shared with European modernist art cinema, *Spring in a Small Town* offers rationales for both Western and Eastern scholars to resituate Chinese art-filmmaking into the classic discussion on postwar film production and its aesthetics as an "oriental supplement." This film's unique emphasis on the voice-over narration of the female protagonist, Zhou Yuwen, and its "lyrical approach to landscape and still life" are reminiscent of Deleuze's concept of 'time-image' (Fan 135–41; Li 94).

Relating the two Chinese postwar production tendencies mentioned above to Deleuze's categories of 'movement-image' and

'time-image' seems reasonable.[1] In the Chinese film's progressive 'movement-images,' revolution and social criticism are the center of the narrative. The "abnormal" behaviors of Yuwen and irrational flow of her consciousness contribute to the audience's perception of 'time-images' (Deleuze 1989, 36). However, the problem is that it is not enough to treat the rediscovery of Fei Mu's unique masterpiece and the revealed confrontation between 'movement-images' and 'time-images' in Chinese postwar cinema as a reassurance of Deleuze's insightful argument because this treatment still fails to offer a comprehensive view of Chinese postwar cinema.[2] Why is gaining a comprehensive view of Chinese postwar cinema so important in this discourse? As mentioned above, the reassessment of Fei Mu's work was a sort of redemptive act that sought to adjust the overemphasis on film ideology and rediscover the art filmmaking vein in Chinese film history. However, such a corrective act, while establishing the legitimacy of postwar art cinema, likewise did not eliminate the splitting of research perspectives caused

[1] From Bergson's movement-image, Deleuze derives three varieties of images: the perception-image, the action-image, and the affection-image. These images relate respectively, to the perception of sight, the interaction between characters and their positions, and to emotional experience. The perception-image is embodied in cinema, an example of subjective perception which frames reality, and separates from the objective image of the thing (which is the thing itself). The action-image is the "material aspect of subjectivity," and relates to the actions of subjects (named verbs through discourse) (65). The affection-image occupies the gap between the first two images, and is the way the subject "experiences itself from the inside." See, Gilles Deleuze, "The Movement Image and its Three Varieties," in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) pp. 91-104. Annotation by Nick Oberly (Theories of Media, Winter 2003), https://csmt.uchicago.edu/annotations/deleuzemovement.html

[2] In Deleuze's taxonomy, Hollywood classic films are the best examples that illustrate the concepts of 'movement-image' and its variants. 'Time-image' can be found in postwar modern cinema (for example, films of Italian Neorealism and French New Wave). See, Gilles Deleuze, "The Crisis of Action-image" in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 197-215.

by previous ideologically dominated criticism. Until now, *Spring River Flows East* and *Spring in a Small Town* are still confined to two separate film study universes that seem impossible to connect. Therefore, it is particularly important to find a theoretical framework that can synthesize and evaluate the two production tendencies in postwar cinema, as a complete rejection of the residual influence of ideological criticism and the beginning of discovering more potentialities in postwar films.

Is there any other possibility in Deleuze's theory that can help researchers re-approach Chinese postwar cinema as a whole, in which the manifestation of the two producing tendencies is merely the becoming of different dimensions? Maybe Deleuze's treatment of temporality can shed an insightful light on this question: that movement-image does not imply the absence of time; it is the indirect representation of time. And time-image, the direct representation of time, should be seen as an actualization of time from its virtual state, different from a fixed state of presence that is short of the possibility of becoming. As Rodowick argues, "Deleuze's principal thesis in *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image* is that cinema has a special relation to duration . . . What is important to these books is the perspective that cinema gives on time. The movement-image is, in fact, a time-image, but an indirect one" (Rodowick, 86). By diving into a series of Chinese postwar films I believe there is a possibility for us to amend the textual, stylistic, and perceptional "rupture" between ideological progressive films and modern art films to discuss them as a whole.

In *Time and Free Will*, reinventing the two kinds of mathematical multiplicities of Riemann (discrete multiplicities and continuous multiplicities) as two different ways of thinking, Bergson proposes that

there are "two forms of multiplicity, two very different ways of regarding duration, two aspects of conscious life": quantitative multiplicity is discrete, numerical, and spatialized; qualitative multiplicity is continuous, interpermeating, and non-spatial (Bergson, 128).[3] Operating within the first multiplicity, we live in a homogeneous and spatialized duration; sixty pendulum oscillations in one minute mean nothing to us but sixty points on a fixed line, in our mind. Under the second multiplicity, duration appears as itself, a continuous succession of qualitative changes; oscillations of the pendulum are not stacked in one line but permeate each other, like the notes of a tune. By this very same operation, there can be two aspects of our conscious life. Using quantitative multiplicity means dividing sensations and feelings into various states, each of which is allocated a specific word to make it clear, impersonal, and unchangeable. For example, happiness, sadness, and anger are three different words that capture our feelings in linguistic

[3] The concept of "Multiplicity," found throughout Deleuze's work, serves as the basis for other important concepts such as rhizome, assemblage, and "concept" itself, and it is also one of his most difficult concepts to grasp because of the many different ways and contexts in which he puts it to work. In a basic sense, a multiplicity is a complex structure that does not reference a prior unity. Multiplicities are not parts of a greater whole that have been fragmented, and they cannot be considered manifold expressions of a single concept or transcendent unity. Deleuze explains that the crucial point is to consider multiplicity in its substantive form—a multiplicity—rather than as an adjective, as multiplicity of something. Everything for Deleuze is a multiplicity in this fashion. Two theorists whom Deleuze associates with the development of the concept of multiplicity are the mathematician Georg Riemann, and the French philosopher Henri Bergson. From Riemann, Deleuze takes the idea that any situation is composed of different multiplicities that form a kind of patchwork or ensemble without becoming a totality or whole. For example, a house is a patchwork of concrete structures and habits. Even though we can list these things, there is finally no way of determining what the essence of a particular house is, because we cannot point to anything outside of the house itself to explain or to sum it up—it is simply a patchwork. This can also be taken as a good description of multiplicities themselves. See, "The Deleuze Dictionary," https://deleuze.en-academic.com/113/multiplicity

terms. Keeping sensations and feelings as they are in the qualitative multiplicity leaves them in the deeper strata of the self, in which pure qualitative changes are constantly happening, intermingling with each other. Such is the experience of listening to music or watching films, which allows us to enter a state in which various emotions are rendered and mixed to indistinguishable effect.

Applying the duration to two different multiplicities will lead to two poles of temporality and conscious states. The discrete quantitative multiplicity produces a rationalized time (the linear time used in modern capitalist society or in scientific research) in which our superficial psychology connects with the external world, "to live in common and to speak." The continuous qualitative multiplicity—where "continuous" refers to duration—produces a dynamic duration (the continuous lived reality in one's mind) where the real self resides (Bergson, 137–39). The most valuable part of Bergson's argument on temporality is that he neither treats the spatialized homogeneous time as a wrong illusion of time remaining to be overturned nor does he propose the heterogeneous duration as the opposite of the homogeneous one. Time is not another homogeneous medium that is analogous to space; instead, time should be regarded as a heterogeneous one, whereby either multiplicity can be actualized by cooperating with different psychic states. As Deleuze explains,

> In this way, for Bergson, duration was not simply the indivisible, nor was it the nonmeasurable . . . Bergson did not confine himself to opposing a philosophical vision of duration to a scientific conception of space but took the problem into the sphere of the two kinds of multiplicity. He thought that the multiplicity proper to duration had, for its

> part, a 'precision' as great as science; moreover, that it should react upon science and open up a path for it that was not necessarily the same as that of Riemann and Einstein (Deleuze, *Bergsonism* 40).

Temporality has always been a problematic term: on the one hand, it is so mundane that its presence is always overlooked, and on the other hand, it never materializes itself; we can only testify to its presence by the traces it leaves behind or construct a metaphysical concept to approach it. However, in film, time seems to obtain its corporeality in our film-viewing experience: repeatedly, we indulge ourselves in the diegesis forgetting the temporal flow, and repeatedly we are stroked by the continuous qualitative changes that time presents to us as a concrete duration which resists any resolute division or interpretation.

Building upon Bergsonian and Deleuzian metaphysics on time, I propose a new viewing and reading of Chinese postwar cinema. Temporality should not be predetermined to the uniqueness of a specific filmic experience of duration or to a textual and social backdrop that serves ideological propagation. By allowing films to interact with different psychic states, temporality appears as a continuous becoming that circulates between the viewer and film. In the discussion on *Spring River Flows East* and *Spring in a Small Town*, this paper will apply a close examination of cinematic temporality to these two films, discussing the two different directors' approaches to postwar storytelling, the construction and destruction of the narrative and temporal structure, as well as the audience's perception of these two films.

A New Reading of *Spring River Flows East*

Cai Chusheng and Zheng Junli's *Spring River Flows East* (1947) was probably the most beloved film of its time in Shanghai. Breaking the box

office record of *Song of Fishermen* (*Yu guangqu,* 渔光曲, 1934), another film directed by Cai Chusheng, *Spring River Flows East* ran in Shanghai theatres for more than three months from October 1947 to January 1948, attracting more than 700,000 viewers (Cheng et al., 222). Besides its popularity among urban filmgoers, this epic film that presents a retelling of wartime history, also gained fulsome praise from progressive intellectuals and film critics. This three-hour film consists of two parts: *Eight Years of Separation and Chaos,* and *Before and After the Dawn*. The first part begins with Sufen (Bai Yang), a worker in a textile factory, and her romantic encounter with Zhongliang (Jin Tao), a patriotic night schoolteacher who hosts the National Day (October 10) celebrations in Sufen's factory and makes an eloquent speech to raise money for the Northeastern Volunteer Army right after the Incident of September 18, 1931 (also known as the Mukden Incident). After a brief yet tight presentation of how Sufen and Zhongliang fall in love with each other, get married, and she gives birth to their little son, Kangsheng, the film swiftly moves to the eight-year War of Resistance and the inevitable separation of Zhongliang and his family. From then, the narrative of the film diverges into two main strands: one is Zhongliang's expedition in the war as a Red Cross rescue member traveling from Shanghai to Nanjing and Hankou, and his exile to Chongqing, the interior city away from the war front, after being captured by the Japanese enemy. The other is the depiction of the relocation of Sufen, the baby, and her mother-in-law (Wu Yin) from Shanghai to the village where Zhongliang's father and brother live, and their suffering under the brutal oppression of the Japanese occupiers. When Zhongliang arrives in Chongqing in 1941, everything finally goes out of control: overcome by frustration and morally eroded by the fancy life that rich people lived in Chongqing, he finally betrays his wife and falls in love with Lizhen, who

manages to get a position for him in her godfather's trading company. However, Sufen, Kangsheng, and her mother-in-law flee back to Shanghai where they are abused inhumanely for another four years until 1945. As its title suggests, the second part only covers a timespan of several months straddling the last months of the war and their early postwar life. After the Republic of China's victory in the War of the Resistance, the separated couple finally end up living in the same city, even under the same roof, but the disparity between their status prevents them from seeing each other—Sufen is a washerwoman in the mansion and Zhongliang is the man to be served. The great contrast in their social status culminates in a dramatic convergence: Sufen eventually recognizes Zhongliang at the National Day banquet which leads to a confrontation between the couple, as well as two other wives entangled with the libertine. Witnessing Zhongliang's impotence to make a choice between her and Lizhen, Sufen becomes disillusioned, and engulfed by great sorrow she finally drowns herself in the Huangpu River.

The two parts that this film splits into correspond to two different genres: one is epic narrative that offers an intensive representation of prewar and wartime life at a fast pace, and the other is melodrama surrounding the unexpected family reunion and break down, both of which happen in the space of twenty-four hours. Even though the timespan of each film varies significantly, temporality in both parts exhibits its power as the ever-forward flow of the river in the opening scene, carrying sailing boats to an (un)known destination. The national victory over the Japanese marks the end of wartime suffering, yet it is not the end of the family's suffering. Their lives take a relentless path, propelling the characters (mainly Sufen) to parts unknown where only more and more mental torture awaits them, accumulating their previous suffering to the very limit of breaking down.

In the first part of the film, history is not a mere backdrop to the story; it is an inexorable flood that forcefully pulls Sufen and Zhongliang apart in different directions. Presented to numerical multiplicity, time becomes a continuous linear flow that makes the epic narrative of war possible. In this part of the film, time is constructed as linear to sustain the epic narrative, incorporating the concept of numerical multiplicity. Numerous historical events go one after another: the September 18 Incident, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the Battle of Shanghai, and the Nanjing Massacre, all of which are set side by side and integrated into the linear narrative, with the viewer's engagement into the filmic diegesis, which was exactly what postwar urban filmgoers wanted. As Pickowicz explains, "Cut off from reliable news during the war, they had many questions about events that had unfolded out of view in the interior. Therefore, they were strongly attracted to epic narratives that re-created the war and thus allowed them to see the disorienting social forces it had unleashed" (142).

It is important to bear in mind that during wartime most directors of postwar films (except Fei Mu, who stayed in Shanghai) fled to the interior (mainly Chongqing) to either produce patriotic films for the government or to direct socially realistic plays for the theater and traveling troupes. Therefore, as Cai and Zheng returned to Shanghai in 1946, their desire to tell the story of the resistance in the interior coincided with the need of the people who stayed behind. With the knowledge of how the war began and ended, like two points on paper, what they needed to do was to draw a succinct narrative line that sutured people's partial wartime experiences into the succession of historical events. The homogeneous temporality embedded in the cinematic apparatus made it possible for filmmakers to sew the battle footage and shots of scenarios together into continuous storytelling in the process of

editing. What is presented to the audience is a series of violent war scenes of gunfire and bombs, and people evacuating right after the first cry of Sufen's newborn son. Juxtaposed with Sufen's reaction shots, even the discrepancy of image quality between newsreels and shots of scenarios is stark: the newsreels of the bombing campaigns of the Japanese Air Force were still stitched into the story to enable coherence in the narrative. In the public context of constructing the history of the war, the director employs a skillfully edited transcendental linear narrative, and invites viewers to construct the war on a rational level, while giving less importance to the distinct image quality inherent in each shot.

The filmmaker employs Zhongliang's separation from his family to the interior to not only create a dramatic effect in the plot, but also to structurally use him as an agent of the director to construct the story of the War of Resistance that was happening in the Chinese interior. Similar expeditions of intellectuals moving from Shanghai to the interior of the country to participate in the war can be found in other postwar films as a common motif of retelling the interior war to the audience, such as the progressive female character Yu Zhen in *Far Away Love* (*Yao yuan de ai,* 遥远的爱; directed by Chen Liting in 1947), and the patriotism-propagating traveling troupe of Linyu and Gao Libin in *Eight Thousand Miles of Clouds and Moon* (*Ba bai li luyun he yue,* 八百里路云和月; directed by Shi Dongshan and Wang Weiyi in 1947). Unlike the guerilla fighters who could stay rooted in the village to fight against the Japanese Army, these intellectuals—burdened with the textual impulse to make an epic narrative—were destined to move constantly until they were exhausted, or the war ended.

If the first part of this film is based on a linear epic narrative that retells the war through the lens of Zhongliang's expedition, the second

part—after Zhongliang and Sufen return to Shanghai—moves to the presentation of family melodrama whose "pathos revolves around the specific figure of Sufen as the suffering innocent" (McGrath, 122–23). Clearly, Cai Chusheng, as one of the progressive directors who had participated in the Left-Wing Film Movement in the 1930s, did resume this film movement's tradition of utilizing melodrama as educational leftist propaganda. By elevating Sufen to the innocent victim who symbolizes the virtues of the "mass," and partnering the husband who betrays his wife by having an affair with a bourgeoisie woman, this film "teaches a morally confused audience how to recognize the difference between goodness and evil" (Pickowicz, 79). However, in the final confrontation between good and evil, without being threatened in any substantial way, Zhongliang deservedly receives emotional punishment and moral denunciation, while Sufen's suicide marks the collapse of traditional Confucian family values, leaving her family and bystanders in extreme pathos. Looking at the camera, the mother-in-law (Wu Yin) makes her most poignant accusation and exalts the pathos to its utmost magnitude like a torrential river: "Living but suffering endless pain. What is the reason? What on earth is the reason?"

The end of this film conveys a clear rejection of two kinds of melodrama structures. First, by departing from the "escapist forms of mass entertainment" offered by classic melodramas, this film explicitly refuses to tackle the family crisis simply on a personalized plane, and boldly relegates it to the social and political level (Elsaesser, 437–38).

Second, haunted by the pervasive postwar passivity—and instead of offering a "brighter tail," a blissful ending with political implications once widely applied to the 1930s left-wing progressive melodramas (Pang, 207–08)—this film relentlessly places the miserable masses into

a situation of extreme desperation on the banks of the Huangpu River, without any future hope or resolution.

Figure 1. Grieving mother-in-law Wu Yin by the Huangpu River after Sufen's suicide. *Spring River Flows East* (1948) accessed from China Central Television (CCTV) website: https://tv.cctv.com/2010/04/06/VIDEjlNhi3w 2LiX3080RgkZA100406.shtml

The film's double denial of audience-pleasing happy endings and revolutionary fantasies deserves our attention, and to better understand how this movie became a huge box office success we must go back to the historical context of postwar society. We should remember that in the face of the eight-year war no Chinese could remain on the sidelines. Even after the victory, inflation, housing shortage, trauma, and many other issues still plagued most Chinese whether they were ordinary people who were oppressed by the Japanese enemy, or patriots who fought for the country, or elite cultural workers who traveled to the interior. These difficulties contributed to a shared inner feeling of great sorrow, which Pickowicz describes as a feeling of "victory as defeat" (Pickowicz, 152–

54). As McGrath argues, although this melodramatic film still inherits left-wing cinema's oversimplification of social issues, its "finality . . . no doubt contributed to the powerful impression of the film's realism for spectators still coping with their own traumas and irreversible losses during the war" (McGrath, 125). Rejecting a narrow reading of this complicated postwar film from either a Communist or Nationalist ideological perspective, both scholars highlight how this leftist film utilizes melodrama to propagate progressive ideology while also speaking to viewers' inner traumatization. Based on this context, I want to direct our attention to how the film's pathos and renunciation of a happy ending wakes up the audience's sensation of cinematic temporality.

Although the pre-existing values such as filial piety and marital fidelity are only gradually overthrown in an ever-changing postwar society, the formation of a new social structure seems far away. In other words, the old order did not exist, and the new one had not come as yet. The character of Sufen—having tried her best to improve the condition of her life—sees that in the prevailing social turmoil most people were deprived of their agency to take action. But she is finally overburdened and exhausted to death. At this moment, Zhongliang's hesitation instinctively suggests his impotence to take the right decision between his fancy upper-class life and his family. Immersed in their own traumas, each person is powerless and unable to change the status quo, inexorably leading the narrative towards an ultimately irretrievable ending and final collapse. This can be interpreted as a crisis of the action-image in classic cinema: "We hardly believe any longer that a global situation can give rise to an action which is capable of modifying it" (Deleuze 1986, 206). The myth that action can make a difference ends in disillusionment. Echoing the crisis of the action-image, *Spring River*

Flows East adopts a most radical approach: quantitative accumulation (ever-increasing narrative pressure) finally leads to a qualitative eruption (character's mental breakdown), any action is suspended, and emotion explodes from the rupture of the narrative. Therefore, the title of this film not only signifies the linear flow of time but is also analogous to an irreducible emotion, sorrow (Chou 愁), just as the poem implies in the ending scene: "How much sorrow could you have, just like spring river flows east." The strong emotions that this film successfully arouses—of sorrow or the feeling of victory as defeat—touches the audience. The overflowing emotion generated by the images enables audiences to stop resorting to using their intellect constructed in spatialized time, and instead by staying with the images of a grieving mother-in-law by the river, they perceive the thickness of traumatic feeling. Departing from the linear narrative structure in the text, temporality finally embodies as a concrete duration that constructs for the viewer a representation of Chinese postwar life on an emotional level.

The Bipolar Dilemma of *Spring in a Small Town*

Unlike most directors who fled to the interior after Shanghai was fully occupied by the Japanese in 1941, Fei Mu chose to stay in that city but became a stage director as his own way of refusing to make films for the invaders. To some extent, his decision to stay behind did influence his postwar filmmaking style. On the one hand, he was incapable of offering an epic narrative that satisfied people's desperate eagerness for a great film that would answer all their questions as he lacked the experience of traveling to the interior and was blocked from any news related to the war. On the other hand, his experience of living in oppression for years with the most vulnerable people, enabled him to craft the subtlest nuances of day-to-day hardship in his postwar filmmaking, wherein the

grand public discourse fades away, to be replaced by the actualization of the characters' deepest psychic state and the immanent time they inhabit.

Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* tells a simple story about a love triangle between a melancholic wife, Zhou Yuwen (Wei Wei), her sick husband, Dai Liyan (Shi Yu), and her former lover, doctor Zhang Zhichen (Li Wei), who is also Liyan's old friend. In a small, war-torn town, everyone leads a repetitive but sorrowful life caused by their stalemated situations: Liyan is troubled by his lung disease and the demise of the Dai family; Yuwen is trapped in a loveless marriage while nurturing a longing for her previous lover Zhichen, which gradually desensitizes her to the surrounding world; Lao Huang (Cui Chaoming), the only remaining old servant in the Dai family, works hard for them but cannot help them out of their emotional turmoil. The only exception to this rule is Dai Xiu (Zhang Hongmei), Liyan's sixteen-year-old sister, a vigorous character in this decaying family, whose subtle and fragile equilibrium is broken by Zhichen's unexpected visit. Like a stone thrown into a dead pool, Zhichen's appearance stirs ripples in everyone's hearts, including his own. However, his arrival also imposes another dilemma upon the former lovers, and the question of whether they should leave the town together or not pulls the whole family into further turmoil. After discovering the unspoken love between Yuwen and Zhichen, Liyan attempts suicide but is saved by Zhichen. In the end, Zhichen leaves town alone without Yuwen.

Scholars have realized that when discussing this unique film, they can unwittingly get caught in a bipolar situation: either stressing its artistic particularity among other Chinese postwar films in order to appropriate this film into Western postwar film production (mainly European cinema) and interpreting it with corresponding theories such

as Bazin's long-take aesthetic and Deleuze's time-image, or elevating it to one of best films that showcases Chinese culture with an emphasis on Confucian values that the film is based on and the aesthetics of other media that this film borrows from such as Chinese painting and Peking Opera (Fan, 111; McGrath, 140). Faced with this situation, scholars have used new approaches to analyze this film from the intersection between Eastern and Western discourses. By formulating "apophatic realism," McGrath interprets this film's off-screen space and editing ellipses to elicit an excessive "real" that, on the one hand, involves the collision between passion (qing, 情) and ritual propriety (li, 礼), and on the other hand, can be related with Bazinian realism and potential self-constituting events in Lacanian psychoanalysis (McGrath, 135–37). The scholar Fan chooses to go back to Fei Mu's writings which share significant commonalities with Western thought on cinematic ontology and cinematic time, yet they still locate cinema's basis to the Confucian concept of *ren* (being human) (Fan, 112). Inspired by Fan's discovery of Fei Mu's film theory and Ying Xiong's discussion of this film, I intend to revisit the temporality of this film: the portrayal of a war-battered landscape and traumatized characters situates the audience's perception of temporality in cinematic duration, yet the director's insistence on moral value prevents this film from becoming a pure time-image.[4]

[4] In Deleuze's film theory, the emergence of the 'time-image' is directly related to postwar society and its irretrievable impact on people. Facing the collapsing society and ruined houses, traumatized characters are deprived of agency to react to the situation and are subjected to prolonged hesitation (Deleuze calls this phenomenon as loosening of sensory-motor schema), thus suspending the linear narrative and giving rise to 'time-image' (Deleuze 1989, xi). Different from the linear homogenous time (in movement-image) that submits to narrative and movement, time-image breaks the linear narrative structure in classic cinema, manifesting its effect in exposing the audience to the direct perception of indeterminacy and emotional intensity in cinematic duration. In 'pure time-image,' the center in 'movement-image' that dictates the flow of

Compared to modern European artistic cinema that directly confronts the rational spatial-temporal order by immersing in personal imagination, fantasy and memory, Ying Xiong points out there is an ambiguous temporality in *Spring in a Small Town*: trapped in the dilemma where normative narrative fails to proceed, *Spring* turns to the sentimental expression of lovers with the perception of irrational time. Yet under the discipline of higher rational and moral regulation in the social order, the outburst of unbridled emotion is always restrained from actualization (Ying, 14–18). On the first evening of Zhichen's arrival, Yuwen, Zhichen, Liyan, and his sister all gather in Zhichen's bedroom to listen to the little sister singing. By securing one corner in the bedroom, the camera records this scene in one continuous long take, accompanied by the little sister Dai Xiu's incessant singing which incites the viewer to perceive the whole scenario as a Bergsonian duration. Beginning with Yuwen preparing Liyan's medicine in the foreground on the left, this scene includes the singing little sister and Zhichen in the middle ground on the right. After a few moments of applause, Zhichen slowly turns his face and looks in Yuwen's direction with a longing gaze. Following Yuwen's trajectory, the camera pans to the left showing Yuwen offering water and medicine to her husband. Between the act of drinking and taking the pills, he keeps looking upward at his wife with feelings of guilt and longing. Refusing any deeper contact with her husband, Yuwen walks to the table to put the cup back and sits in her original position, listening to the performance. However, as the camera pans back to the middle space of the room, it seems to suggest Zhichen's amorous glance is continuously fixed on Yuwen while she is taking care of her husband

images and movements is disrupted,"aberrant movement speaks up for an anteriority of time that it presents to us directly, on the basis of the disproportion of scales, the dissipation of [centers] and the false continuity of the images themselves" (Deleuze 1989, 37).

and soon moves away once he makes eye contact with Yuwen. Dai Xiu's sudden leaning forward to attract Zhichen's attention abruptly interrupts the unspoken sentimentality between the lovers. In response, Zhichen has to turn to the little sister, smiling at her and offering another round of applause. Right after this, Zhichen's eye tentatively moves back in Yuwen's direction, yet afraid to make further eye contact. This time Liyan stands up from his bed and walks to his friend, Zhichen, who finally curbs his longing desire for Yuwen. On this unfolding plane of images, we witness how the smoldering desire of two male characters (mainly Zhichen) is soon extinguished either by their self-regulation or by others' intrusion, but smolders again only to get extinguished once more. Male desire looms larger than life over the room, always in a state between staying virtual and being actualized. "[I]t is a desire that folds back to itself, a desire for desire that lingers in the air in all its immanence" (Fan, 132).

The scholar Fan appears to have noticed there should be a transcendental yet invisible idea that regulates desire from being fully actualized which, in my reading, is quite similar to Ying's argument on how this film keeps the ambiguity of time. Different from the broad connection with other "Oriental Cinema" proposed by Ying, and drawing from Fei Mu's copious writings, Fan thoughtfully embodies this specific Fei Mu-style idea as *ren*, being human, "which has the effect of restraining human desire from becoming excessive and thus damaging or hurtful to the larger human order" (Fan, 151). Therefore, no matter how perfectly Yuwen, as a melancholic character, fits into a Deleuzian definition of "seer" who loosens the linkage of sensory-motor schema in the postwar world, this film actually proceeds from her memory (using the illustration of her voice-over) which symbolizes a rational reflection from the standpoint of Confucian family value.

Figure 2. From left to right: Yuwen (Wei Wei), Dai Xiu (Zhang Hongmei), Zhichen (Li Wei). When Yuwen is preparing her husband's medicine, Zhichen's eyes are fixed on her. *Spring in a Small Town* (1948) accessed from China Movie Official Channel (Channel 6 in CCTV) on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmNlusc7NLk&ab_channel=%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E7%94%B5%E5%BD%B1%E9%A2%91%E9%81%93CHINAMOVIEOFFICIALCHANNEL

In this war-torn town that is removed from a concrete historical context and emancipated from the epic linear narrative and public discourse, we are enabled to engage with the genesis of desire leaning towards the sensation of cinematic duration. However, in a broader sense the director's pursuit of the Confucian idea forms another operating center in this film which ontologically prevents the film from going to the regime of 'pure direct time-image' where no predetermined center dictates the image.

Conclusion

Interpermeating with each other, the temporality of apparatus, diegesis, and spectator all contribute to the description of cinematic temporality. Even though it remains obscure, I believe temporality inscribed in the cinema still can be intellectually discussed and sensibly perceived in our viewing experience. There is no predetermined form of cinematic temporality. Returning to Bergson and Deleuze's theory of temporality, what we should be aware of is not temporality as a duration opposed to science/capital time (the linear time), but rather seeing time as continual, as something that can oscillate with the engagement of our psyche. *Spring River Flows East* juxtaposes the relentless march of linear time with the characters' unhealed wounds but still allows viewers to experience the visceral impact of historical trauma outside of its linear time structure. And, *Spring in a Small Town*, with its ambiguous temporality, on the one hand, invites a meditative contemplation that gradually untangles the emotional knots of characters, and on the other hand, offers pathways to restoration and peace in a transcendental rationalized temporality. Instead of putting them into categories such as art cinema or political progressive films, we can interpret postwar films as a series of "becoming" whereby the viewer's sensation is aroused, historical context appears, and cultural value emerges.

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