

Zaochun eryue (Early Spring in the Second [Lunar] Month; usually translated "February")

早春二月

date: 1963

director: Xie Tieli

original novella: Rou Shi (1902-1931)

adapted by: Xie Tieli

music: The Central Philharmonic (Zhongyang Yuetuan)

cast (partial): Sun Daolin (as Xiao Jiangiu); Xie Fang (Tao Lan/"Miss Tao"); Shangguan Yunzhu (Wen Sao/"The Widow"); Gao Bo (Tao Mukan); Fang Xuefeng (Mother Tao/Tao "Bomu")

The credits are given in front of a wood-paneled wall which resembles the interior of a river boat. Through a square resembling a window or port-hole we see the countryside pass by outside, as though we were already aboard a boat. The theme music is played by a Western-style symphonic orchestra and sounds a bit like a Riuichi Sakamoto piece in that it combines Eastern and Western motifs, although it clearly predates his popularity.

The film begins aboard a river boat in south China, judging from the scenery it is filmed in the river country of Zhejiang province in southeastern China. An educated traveler, Mr. Xiao, riding with the masses below goes out on deck to observe the passing countryside. There he encounters a little girl of about three or four whose father was a member of the revolutionary army, slain in the fighting near Guangzhou (Canton). We later deduce that the movie takes place sometime in the mid-1920s.

Mr. Xiao is a city-educated intellectual on his way to a job as a teacher at a middle school in a small town, Furong zhen, founded and run by an enlightened former classmate, Tao Mukan. Furong is described as a shiwai taoyuan (a classical allusion to a "Land of Peach Blossoms," i.e. a fictitious haven of peace, away from the turmoil of the world). The town being small and isolated, its inhabitants are naturally somewhat suspicious of strangers. When Xiao shows up with his Western-style leather shoes (indicative of someone who has come from abroad or some large treaty-port type metropolis), he elicits comments from those who see him.

Schoolmaster Tao's educated younger sister, Lan ("Orchid"), lives together with him and his mother on campus, where she is subject to the unwanted attentions of Mr. Qian, her would-be suitor. She has already heard many favorable things about Mr. Xiao from her brother and is obviously excited by his arrival. She immediately tells Mr. Xiao she feels cut off from the outside world in this small town. Knowing he has traveled extensively

throughout China, she asks him to explain recent events to her. He modestly says he understands very little about the world.

In a discussion with other faculty members, Fang Zimou and Mr. Qian (his surname means "money"), Mr. Xiao is told Mr. Fang is an advocate of Dr. Sun Yat-sen's San Min Zhuyi (Sanminism or "The Three Principles of the People," what became the official ideology of the Kuomintang or Nationalist Party.¹ Mr. Qian is a believer in capitalism and opposes the Three Principles of the People because he says they would restrict the free growth of capital and limit the development of industry. They then ask Mr. Xiao what "-ism" he professes; again he modestly declines to state a position. (It is also possible that Xiao is concealing his position because he fears it is too controversial).

Mr. Xiao goes to the home of the revolutionist's widow, Wen Sao, to enquire after the well-being of her two children. He takes the eldest, the daughter, into his school and begins to use his salary to support the destitute widow and her infant son. Tao Lan ("Orchid") finds out and is impressed with his generosity, although rumors begin to circulate throughout the town that he must be having sex on the side with the widow. As the story progresses, Lan expresses her love for Mr. Xiao, who has become preoccupied with the widow's problems, although his feelings for Lan are most probably mutual.

Xiao receives a poison-pen letter in the form of a doggerel verse which speaks of a lecherous stranger come to town, who now desires to possess both a widow and the flower of the school. Soon afterward the widow's infant son dies after a prolonged fever, possibly poisoned or untreated by a bad prescription. Xiao tells Lan he plans to marry the widow, since she has "no other way out" in this society. Lan is stunned and retreats to the inner sanctum of her home. Xiao then learns the widow has just hanged herself. His feelings of shock and resentment are intensified when he hears that some of the townspeople are now proclaiming the Wen Sao a model of widowly "chastity" and saluting him as a sincere benefactor of the widow's family, on the grounds that the her suicide, timed as it was almost immediately after her infant son's death, proves that she and Xiao were not "carrying on" in secret.

Lan takes the one remaining child in. Mr. Xiao then asks for leave to go to a mountain retreat for a few days to recover his thoughts. After his departure a letter is discovered begging Schoolmaster Tao to accept his resignation and saying that he has gone back to the city to take part in the struggles now raging

¹ The three principles are: minzu (nationalism), minquan (people's rights, sometimes called democracy), and minsheng (the people's livelihood, sometimes called socialism). Though enshrined as the official ideology of the Nationalist party, they were virtually abandoned as a practical basis for governance after the Nationalist victory in 1927.

there. One can assume, from references within the film to the leftist journal Xin Qingnian [The New Youth], which arrives in the mail for him from "a friend in Shanghai" and from the news of the successes of the Northern Expedition, that Mr. Xiao is going off to join the fight against the warlords in the north. Whether he will do so on the side of the Nationalists or the Communists we do not know. On reading the letter, Lan runs out of the school, saying she intends to find him.

finis

Questions for discussion:

1. Why do unmarried men, widows, and unmarried women often arouse suspicion in small towns?
2. Why is Wen Sao, in particular, suspicious to the good people of Furong zhen? What about Mr. Xiao?
3. Why do you think Lan has been unwilling to consider marriage to Mr. Qian?
4. What is it about Mr. Xiao that seems so appealing to Lan?
5. Is Headmaster Tao angered by Mr. Xiao's refusal to marry his sister? Why not?
6. Why does Mother Tao think her daughter should consider Mr. Qian's proposal?
7. Who do you think produced the poison-pen letter?
8. Is there a possibility of malpractice in the death of the widow's son? What was the doctor's reaction to Mr. Xiao's presence in the widow's home, along with that of Lan?
9. What themes does the film stress?
10. Rou Shi, the author of the novella on which this film is based, was executed without a trial by the Nationalist government in Shanghai in 1931 as a communist subversive. In 1962, thirteen years after the Communist victory, their own studios produced this film, yet even before the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, Kang Sheng, the head of the Communist government's secret police, had already denounced the film as a "poisonous weed."² What do you think he found so offensive about the film?

²Zhongguo dianying jianshi [A Concise History of Chinese Film] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1990), p. 470.