



The Cave of the Spider Woman

Dir. Darwin Dan | China | 1927 | N/C PG | tinted, b&w | Chinese and Norwegian
intertitles with English surtitles | 1h (incomplete)

Performing live: Günter Buchwald (piano, violin), Frank Bockius (percussion)

2:30pm on Sunday 23 March 2025

Screening material courtesy of The National Library of Norway. English translation of
intertitles courtesy of San Francisco Silent Film Festival

The Cave of the Spider Woman (盘丝洞), released in 1927, is a landmark silent film in the history of Chinese cinema. Produced by the Shanghai Shadowplay Film Company, one of the first Chinese film studios, the film was directed by Dan Duyu (Darwin Dan), a pioneering figure in Chinese filmmaking. Dan rose to fame initially as a commercial artist, specialising in painting calendar posters—a popular form of advertising in China at the time. Driven by his passion for motion pictures, screened in Westernised Chinese cities such as Shanghai, he founded the family-run film studio in 1920 to experiment with storytelling with this new visual technology.

Darwin Dan's decision to make *The Cave of the Spider Woman* was influenced by a broader trend in the late 1920s Chinese film world, that is, the popularity of costume dramas and martial arts films featuring fantastical elements, monsters, and demons. These films often drew from China's vast literary and folkloric traditions, offering audiences an escape into worlds of magic and adventure. *The Cave of the Spider Woman* was part of this wave, showcasing Dan's ability to blend traditional storytelling with modern film techniques.

The film is based on an episode from *Journey to the West* (西游记), one of the most beloved classical novels in China. The novel recounts the adventure of the monk Tripitaka and his three disciples (Monkey, Pigsy and Sandy), as they journey to India to obtain Buddhist scriptures. This episode focuses on one of the many trials they face: an encounter with a group of spider spirits in a mystical cave. While the film draws upon Chinese literary tradition, it also incorporates elements of fantasy, special effects, and early attempts at colour tinting, making it a visually innovative work for its time.

It was an immediate success at the box office. It was warmly received by Chinese audiences, prompting Dan to produce a sequel two years later. The film also found an audience abroad, particularly in Southeast Asia, where a large Chinese diaspora community

