

## Document Citation

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**JU DOU**

(MIRAMAX)

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(NR)

93 Mins.

Cast: Gong Li, Li Baotian, Li Wei, Zhang Yi, Zheng Jian.

Credits: Directed by Zhang Yimou. Produced by Zhang Wenzhe, Yasuyoshi Tokuma, Hu Jian. Screenplay by Liu Heng. Director of photography: Gu Changwei. Edited by Du Yuan. Art directors: Cao Jiuping, Xia Rujin. Music by Zhao Jipin.

**Zhang Yimou's spare, visually sumptuous tale of passion and retribution fully justifies its numerous festival awards (Cannes, Chicago) and recent Oscar nomination. 91-74**

Think of the most gorgeously photographed film you've ever seen—*Sunrise, The Wind, The Devil is a Woman, The Red Shoes, Touch of Evil, Lola Montes, Jules and Jim, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, The Makioka Sisters*, etc. Think, in black-and-white or color, of the cumulative variation of shade and hue, angle and motion, and now add *Ju Dou* to the list.

Amid a flurry of controversy from the People's Republic of China, *Ju Dou* was nominated for a Best Foreign-language Film Academy Award, the first Chinese film to be thus recognized. Its graphic (for China) depiction of adultery, illegitimacy and murder is evidently not the approved cinematic agenda, and the Chinese Government has banned it and tried to withdraw it from consideration. All this aside, it happens to be one of the most beautiful films ever made. The story is nothing new—some have seen strong resemblances to *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, but the basic tale of a young bride, bought in marriage by a sadistic old man, who turns to his nephew for solace and rescue, is as old as drama itself. Films as diverse as *They Knew What They Wanted*, *Manpower* and *Desire Under the Elms* all operated from a similar premise. It's bare-bones stuff at best, but Zhang

Yimou's pure, visceral direction, filled with imagery that is at once both lush and economical, makes this a uniquely striking achievement.

Certain images in *Ju Dou* implant themselves on the memory with an empathic immediacy that goes far beyond the clichéd "picturesquely Oriental" effects of scrolls, screens or, for that matter, many films. The main setting is a dyer's plant of an indefinable period; yards and yards of cascading ochre, scarlet and orange cotton are the film's unforgettable leitmotif. Their quick, billowing movement seems to inspire the protagonists' passion-driven motives and embraces. The actual location was a mansion built during the Ming Dynasty—it is every bit as resonating a presence as any of the characters, and with it Zhang pulls off magisterial effects that equal and often surpass any in Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*. The film moves at a measured pace—not the excruciating retard of many Asian films—but dilatory enough to suggest the passage of time and the characters' passive complicity in their fates. Visual rewards, like a shot of a river welling blackly over ancient stone, crop up at judicious intervals. The funeral scene, in which the lovers abase themselves over and over again before the procession, is both powerful and mysterious. The viewer is drawn into the story and experiences it fully and at first hand, no small achievement with a plot so predictable.

Gong Li has an indignant, carved beauty in the title role, and makes a memorable, surprising femme fatale (in a very literal sense). No mere victim, in her hands, *Ju Dou* has a startling, intermittently nasty sense of humor, as well as an elemental quality that gains in force and strength, making her final act of catharsis immensely liberating. Li Baotian is too dupe-ish, an impressive-looking, old-ivory-hewn figure, but, regrettably, just as stiff. If one accedes the point that a hero in these circumstances must be one degree above basic village idiocy stipulations, then a purely sensual presence is all the more needed—a John Lone or Russell Wong. It's an unimaginative performance, all open-mouthed expressions of dumbfoundedness and frantic scramblings in the hay for a peek through a knothole at *Ju Dou* bathing. It's hard to accept the ravaging, self-destructive physical need for him that she feels over a lifetime. When he suddenly breaks down and cries over his lot at a party and the guests scoff at him, one is rather inclined to side with the revelers. On the plus side, Zhang has somehow elicited what has to be one of the very finest performances from a child in that of Zhang Yi as Tianbai, the infant son of the lovers. The scenes he has with Li Wei, who plays the old, malevolent, Lon Chaney-ish Uncle, have a primal horror. Li frankly revels in his Old Testament villainy; his unmitigated nastiness effectively ruptures the contemplative *mise-en-scene*. Zheng Jian, the actor who takes over when Tianbai grows to adolescence, is an uncanny physical match-up and impressively dour. He's a likely result of a lifetime of shameful secrecy, alienation and dark intuition.

—D.N.