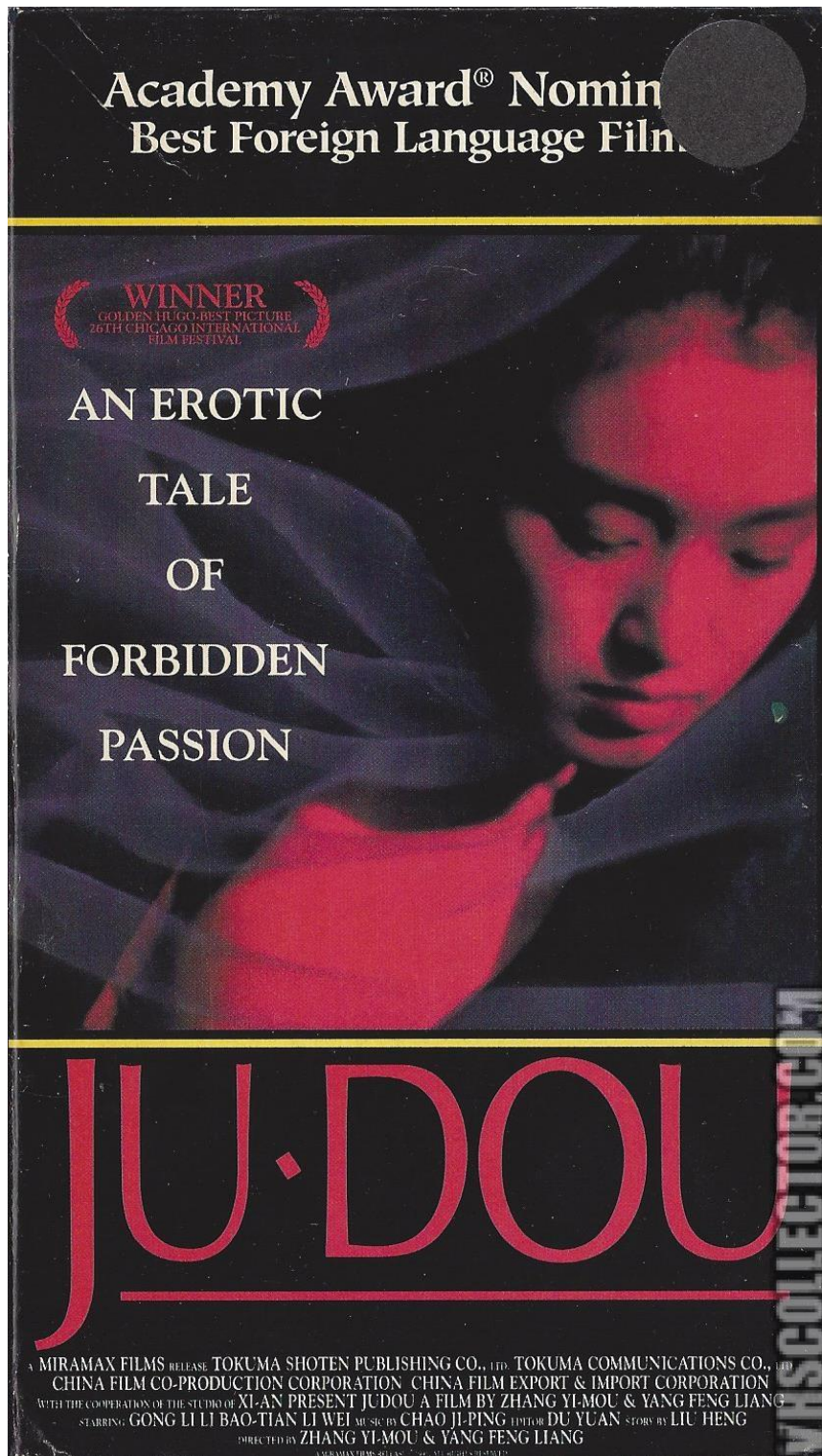


Ju Dou, China, 1990, Zhang Yimou

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From *The 100 Most Important Asian Films: Canons of Asian Cinema*



All significant films by Fifth Generation directors were widely distributed across Eastern Europe around the end of the Cold War, even if relations with China had been in stagnation for decades. Thus, for someone like me, living behind the Iron Curtain up until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the discovery of new Chinese cinema was even easier than for those in the West, who only had the chance to see it at special programmes at festivals. For, as far as I can remember, the names of Zhang Yimou and Gong Li were well publicized and known by the time *Ju Dou* was released in 1990.

Their previous film, *Red Sorghum* (1987), had been acclaimed widely, and yet had failed to touch me. The new one, however, impressed me tremendously. It still remains my favourite film from among the long list of Fifth Generation achievements, ranking next to Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Horse Thief* (1986) and Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984).

Ju Dou tells a simple story that evolves around family, a domineering husband, a victimised young bride, secret love, and punishment. It shows a kind of domestic violence that thrives amidst the patriarchal setting and reaches shocking proportions. In that, the film has the dramatic density and the streamlined plotline of a Greek tragedy, transposed here to the beautiful setting of a deceptively tranquil traditional Chinese village.

Most of all, however, this film leaves an unforgettable colour imprint on one's mind. The silk strips of fabric that the family dyes and that hang all over the place supply added dramatic tension and colour-code the emotions of the protagonists. *Ju Dou* makes use of Technicolor at a time when it was believed that this technology had

already become obsolete. In that, it ranks as one of the most important Technicolor achievements, alongside exuberantly colourful classics like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). It is a colour cornucopia of highest order, where Zhang Yimou, who trained as a cinematographer, reveals his extraordinary painter's sensibility.

Ju Dou is among several remarkable films that the couple made in the early period of their careers. The director has since established himself as a larger than life character, known for his image-making abilities all over the world. Gong Li has gone her own way and has mainly been cast in large commercial productions that foreground her extraordinary appearance (rather than using her acting ability, best revealed in her feisty performance in *The Story of Qiu Ju*, 1992). In recent years, since lending her face to L'Oreal for their Asian expansion, she became a globally known socialite and is routinely seen on the pages of glossy magazines, setting the standards for Asian beauty. Yet her most authentic and memorable roles remain those early ones from the days that she worked with Zhang Yimou.