

SUZHOU RIVER

Year: 2000

Country: China

Certificate: 12

Length: 80 minutes

Director and screenplay: Lou Ye

Producers : Nai An and Philippe Bober

Screenplay: Lou Ye

Director of Photography: Wang Yu

Editor: Karl Riedl

Production Designer: Li Zhuoyi

Music: Jörg Lemberg

Cast:

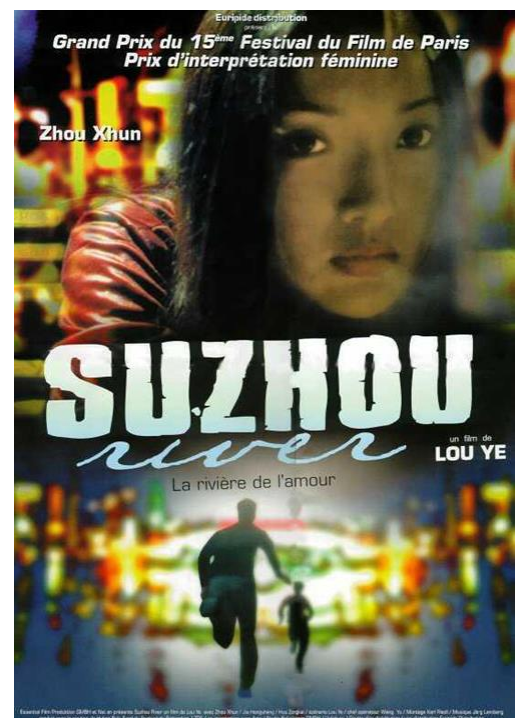
Zhou Xun ... Meimei / Moudan

Jia Hongsheng ... Mardar

Yao Anlian ... Boss

Nai An ... Mada

Zhongkai Hua ... Lao B



Whatever you think when you think about films from China "Suzhou River" will come as a bracing surprise.

A haunting and ambiguous film about an obsessive love affair, "Suzhou River" shares a number of obvious similarities with Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo." Despite these resemblances, it remains an original picture, with a plot that revolves around a murky river in Shanghai and the web of diverse characters that it attracts.

Lou Ye is one of what are known as the 6th Generation Chinese directors. Ye describes them as the "386Mhz generation, 3 for over thirty, 8 for educated in the eighties, 6 because we were born in the '60s." This group of filmmakers, who were mostly educated at the Beijing Film Academy, eschew the traditional Chinese approach to cinema and instead focus on current social issues such as urban crime and the complexities of modern relationships.

The Sixth Generation also borrows heavily from American and European directors, and "Suzhou River" has drawn comparisons with Hitchcock's "Vertigo", especially since the music occasionally cheekily borrows from Bernard Hermann's score for that classic film.

Daring and edgy, it's a German co-production (which was critical for avoiding censorship) that's filled with the intoxicating excitement of creating images for the screen.

With its jump cuts, jazzy camera work and an intricate storytelling style that never stops to catch its breath, "Suzhou River" exults in visual razzle-dazzle.

Writer-director Lou Ye is himself a native of Shanghai. He uses night life locations and a frenzied zoom lens with the enthusiasm of an adventurous student. It was filmed with a hand-held camera, which makes the picture wobbly and at the beginning sometimes difficult to watch, but also adds an immediacy and subjectivity that Ye thought would drag the viewer in some sense into the film.

His tale of *amour fou* set in modern-day Shanghai, opens with shots of the swirling Suzhou river from which it takes its name. As we float past the cluttered banks of the city, the unnamed - and unseen - videographer who narrates the film ponders the many secrets the river holds.

In only his second film Ye has crafted a haunting tale of betrayal, love and death told in a jerky, documentary style of photography with a compelling performance by the young actress Xun. It opens and closes with the same snatch of conversation but, by the time we hear it for the second time, we understand a lot more about the characters and the words themselves have become so much more meaningful and melancholic.

The film is unlikely to boost tourism to Shanghai, apart from visitors intrigued by sci-fi horizons where jagged skyscrapers mingle with bizarrely bulbous industrial plants. According to this film, it's a huge, rough, mean, crime-ridden dump with little or no sign of police - ideal for the film's elements of character study, romantic drama, teasing puzzle, noirish thriller. In cinematic terms (if none other), it's a perfect environment.

Zhou Xun completely captivates playing her dual roles and watch out for the one of the film's producers, Nai An, as Mada. A strong, startling denouement concludes the journey through Shanghai.

Lou Ye's picture is more of an exercise in style than in plot plausibility and visually the film is a resounding success. The cinematography is frequently breathtaking and there is some exquisite footage of the river that runs through the tale. As a love story, "Suzhou River" is unusual and on the whole unconvincing, but it does strikingly and tragically depict the search for and loss of affection. Its enigmatic twists and turns mean that it perhaps demands a second viewing to be fully comprehended, but the lyrical shots stay in the mind far longer than the plot.

"Suzhou River" is a strange film, rather like a Chinese ghost story. This is an oddity, but a rewarding one.

Iain McGlashan