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ZHOU YU'S TRAIN (Film)

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Section: FILM REVIEWS

(ZHOU YU DE HUOCHE) (CHINA-HONG KONG)

A China Film Group Corp., Sanjiu Film (China)/Glory Top Properties, Media Asia Films (Hong Kong) production, in association with China Film Co-production Corp. (International sales: Glory Top, Hong Kong.) Produced by Yang Buting, Zhao Xinxian. Executive producers, Huang Jianxin, Sun **Zhou**. Co-producers, Tai Zuhui, Tang Yat-ming, Bill Kong.

Directed by Sun **Zhou**. Screenplay, Sun, Bei Cun, Zhang Mci, from Bei's novella "**Zhou Yu's Cry**" (**Zhou** Yu de hanjiao). Camera (color), Wang Yu; editor, William Chang; music, Shigeru Umebayashi; art director, Sun Li; costumes, Ma Defan; sound (Dolby Digital), Chen Fei; special effects, Su Xiongfei; assistant directors, **Zhou** Hua, Yang Qianbin. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (non-competing), Feb. 13, 2003. Running time: 92 MIN.

Zhou Yu/Xiu	Gong Li
Chen Ching	Tony Leung Kar-fai
Zhang	Sun Honglei
Train conductor	Li Zhixiong
Xiang	Shi Chunling
Liu	Liu Wei
Tao	Gao Jingwen
Librarian	Dai Ke
Uncle Guai	Pan Weiyan
Zhou Yu, as a young girl	Huang Mo

With: Zhang Heng, Wang Yanhui, He Jie.

(Mandarin dialogue)

Chinese thesp Gong Li goes for a striking career makeover in "**Zhou Yu's Train**," a sensual, slickly packaged slice of Euro-style metaphysical cinema centered on a free-thinking woman and the two men in her life. Though often borderline pretentious, recalling a style of filmmaking more akin to the Gallic tone-poems of Alain Robbe-Grillet than anything in mainland cinema, pic is an important step forward, like Zhang Yimou's "Hero," in expanding the aesthetic boundaries of Chinese cinema. However, the long-in-the-works picture reps a major marketing challenge, especially in the West,

given the film's impressionistic structure, Gong's customary profile and occidental perceptions of mainland moviemaking in general, signaling limited passengers at small stations on arthouse networks.

Shot in fall 2001, and originally set to be released in September 2002, pic finally opened in China in February, amid a blaze of publicity for its "daring" (by mainland standards) sex scenes. Critical reception there has been mixed, largely due to its unconventional, non-narrative structure; at its Berlin fest showings, reactions were mostly bemused. In Hong Kong, film opened in mid-February on a couple of arthouse screens.

Helmer Sun **Zhou's** previous collaboration with Gong, "Breaking the Silence" (2000), was largely flawed by the actress's unconvincing perf as a plucky mother from the countryside struggling to gain a proper education for her deaf son. In "**Train**," Gong goes for broke in reshaping her career away from both regal beauties or repressed rural women: From the very first slo-mo images, her character is defined as an utterly modern, willful spirit whose sexuality is part of her personality.

Basic story is simple. A teacher, Chen Ching (Hong Kong's Tony Leung Kar-fai), falls for a porcelain painter, **Zhou** Yu (Gong), who lives and works in the town of Sanming. After giving her a present of one of his poems, in which he compares her to a mystical lake, he returns by **train** to his home in distant Chongyang. Soon afterwards, **Zhou** takes the same **train** to his doorstep and the pair start an intense relationship, with her commuting twice a week for sex.

Zhou becomes an avid disciple of Chen's writings and even tries to arrange a poetry reading and the publication of a book. Unsure whether **Zhou** has fallen for him or his work, Chen begins to feel crowded, and asks to be transferred to a faraway school in Tianshui.

Zhou, meanwhile, has started a friendship with a local vet, Zhang (Sun Honglei), whom she met on the **train** one day. When he learns about her relationship with Chen, he follows her on one of her trips; but after she discovers what he's done, she breaks it off with him. Bookending the pic is the scarcely developed stow of another woman, Xiu (also played by Gong, with short hair), who's had a relationship with Chen and is trying to find out more about his time with **Zhou**. When, at the end, she tracks him down in his new posting, Chen has a surprising piece of news for her.

Such is the bare plot, but in the way helmer Sun has chopped up the carcass, rearranged the organs and gently stewed the whole thing, it's almost impossible to follow events in any kind of linear way. For starters, it's easy to assume Xiu is an older version of **Zhou**, recalling her previous relationship with Chen; in fact, the character is only clarified (scarcely) near the end.

Doubts are also raised halfway through as to whether **Zhou's train** affair with Chen is a figment of her imagination, inspired by the poem addressed to her: When Zhang goes with her to find the lake, it's covered in mist, and hardly the thing of beauty described in the poem. Another reading of the movie -- supported by shots of Xiu reading a book titled "**Zhou Yu's Train**" -could be that **Zhou** never existed, and was a figment of Chen's poetic imagination.

Any reader of the original novella by Bei Cun will also end up confused. Helmer Sun, working with the author and Guangdong writer Zhang Mei (hired, apparently, to deepen the female perspective), has retained Bei's free, metaphysical style but changed locations, characters' occupations and even the crux of the novella, in which Chen was more the fulcrum and made the **train** journeys to meet **Zhou**.

Underlying theme of the pic, expressed near the end, is simply that "a lover is like a mirror, in which you can see yourself more clearly." Underlying irony of the characters is that they're actually ordinary: **Zhou** is a flighty femme, out to impress her dull, small-town work mates; Chen is a

jobbing teacher who's had only one poem published in a local newspaper; and Zhang is a bottom-line country vet whom **Zhou** likes stringing along for as long as she can.

Though the pic makes little sense at a concrete level, Sun and his script collabs manage to keep the wispy craft afloat for 90 minutes through sheer cinematic sleight-of-hand, recalling the more magical, music-driven moments of Sun's "Heartstrings" (1992). Present cut is, in fact, the third; Sun is reported as saying he still prefers the original one.

Wang **Yu's** lensing, which makes considerable use of zoom compression, is sumptuous, contrasting the soft, pastel hues of rural Sanming (actually Kunming, in Yunnan province) with the wet, overcast cityscapes of Chongyang (actually Chongqing, in Sichuan province). And Shigeru Umebayashi's orchestral score, melancholic but always rhythmic, gives the movie a sense of forward motion -- paralleled onscreen by omnipresent images of **trains**, tracks and traveling.

With the evident realization that they're playing archetypes, the three lead thespians give it their all, with Gong holding the screen as the lovelorn, changeable, cigarette-smoking **Zhou**. Leung, speaking accented but OK Mandarin, has been here before in Jean-Jacques Annaud's "The Lover," but is fine as the conflicted poet. Sun, as the vet, is agreeably laid back.

PHOTO (COLOR): POETRY IN MOTION: Tony Leung Kar-fai and Gong Li star in Sun **Zhou's** "**Zhou Yu's Train**," about a woman who falls in love with a man who writes a poem for her.

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By **Derek Elley**

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