

菊豆

Ju Dou (PRC 1990) directed by Zhang Yimou, starring Gong Li and Li Baotian.

Set for the most part in a die factory in 1920s China, this film tells the story of the factory's owner, an impotent old man, surnamed Yang, who takes a young wife, called Judou, at great expense (having tormented his first two wives to death). He mistreats her, tying her up nightly on the bed and beating her instead of having sex. The wife eventually instigates an affair with the owner's nephew (and also his adopted son), Tianqing, who makes her pregnant. The child is then mistaken for that of her legal husband, Old Mr. Yang, and named Tianbai, since he is thought by the clan elders to be of the same generation as Tianqing, in actuality his natural father. The names Qing and Bai fit together, as one elder notes, in the compound qingbai, or in qingqing baibai -- of "sterling reputation" (irony here?). When the old man goes off on business, she and Tianqing rejoice in secret, only to be interrupted by the return of his donkey, sans rider. Tianqing finds the old man collapsed along a wooden path. Tianqing carries him home, where a doctor pronounces him paralyzed below the waist.

Tianqing and his beautiful "aunt" (this was the first major role for Gong Li -- he addresses her from the outset as Sher, or "Auntie") carry on more openly, provoking the wrath of the invalid old man, who tries repeatedly to kill them or burn the die factory down, while pushing himself about in a wheel-chair like wooden bucket ("Your pants are full of nothing but shit," mocks Judou after he fails to strangle her). At one point, when they happen to inadvertently leave their toddler son unattended (he makes his way back home to the die factory while they frolic in the fields), the old man attempts to kill him by pushing him into a vat of die, but the filial "grandson's" timely shout of "Daddy!" wins over the old man's affections, especially when it dawns on him that there is a chance he can use the child's new-found realization of the familial hierarchy, to humiliate his natural father and undercut the couple's short-lived security.

One day the old man is killed in an accident when left unsupervised with Qingbai, who inadvertently nudges his wheel-chair into a die vat. The child, not fully comprehending the process of drowning, laughs at the sight of the old man floundering in the vat of die. After his death, Judou and Qingtian are required to wear white mourning attire and ritualistically attempt to block his coffin 49 times, while the child rides triumphantly atop the coffin. Finally they are alone, but the clan elders decide that Qingtian must sleep at the home of the neighboring Wang family, so as to avoid gossip. As their son grows older, he seems to relish locking Qingtian out at night. One day, when he overhears gossip about his mother and Qingtian in the street, he pursues the principal gossip-monger with a meat cleaver and eventually kicks Qingtian, when he gets home. "You've just struck your own father," Judou cries, at the end of her tether, but the simian-featured boy seems to grow even more incensed, rather than being cowed by her remark.

Finally, in an attempt to be alone one last time "as man and wife," as Qingtian puts it, they enter what appears to be a dried-up well, where they begin to suffocate to death in each other's arms, after making love (we assume). Tianbai enters the well and carries his mother out, saving her. When she regains consciousness and calls for Tianqing, though, the boy hauls his father out, only to dump him in a die vat, where he drowns amid Judou's helpless screams (she is still too weak from the asphyxiation to come to his aid. Judou later sets fire to the cloth and the entire die factory is consumed in a gigantic conflagration.

Questions for discussion:

1. What might the die factory be a metaphor for?
2. Could the whole film symbolize the abortive democracy movement of 1989?
3. Who might Judou symbolize? (The Chinese people or the intellectuals asking Zhao Ziyang to do something, to move against the dictatorship, as did Gorbachev and Yeltsin?).
4. In her book Primitive Passions Rey Chow challenges the idea that Zhang Yimou's films simply play on orientalist exoticism. In a review of her book, Australian film critic Chris Berry observes:

Here, suffering women are not only objects of sympathy but also of identification by virtue of their admittedly problematic discursive deployment as symbols of China itself.

The particular still on the cover of Primitive Passions is taken from a scene in Judou, discussed at length in Chow's chapter on the trilogy of Zhang Yimou films (142-172). Here Judou is not only spied upon by Tianqing, her lover-to-be, when she is bathing the wounds inflicted by her sadistic husband. Perceiving Tianqing's presence, she also turns to face him, defiantly displaying herself and her wounds to him.

Just as the character Judou perceives her own objectification and turns it back on her viewer, so Chow argues Zhang's film seizes all the sexist, patriarchal, orientalist baggage of China as a locally and globally circulating set of signifiers and displays it as an act of defiance... Voyeurism becomes exhibitionism, and objectification is answered with defiance. Yes, the image seems to say, I am that thing! And just as this act initiates Judou's agency within the world of the film, so Zhang's move has enabled his films and Chinese cinema to engage with and actively participate in the international cinema. (UTS Review 2:2, Nov. 1996, 181-2).

Do you agree with this analysis? If so, why. If not, why not?