



Berlinale  
 72<sup>nd</sup> Internationale  
Filmfestspiele  
Berlin  
Berlinale Classics

# Suzhou River

A FILM BY LOU Ye



## Cast & Crew

Starring: Zhou Xun, Jia Hongsheng, Nai An, Yao Anlian,  
Hua Zhongkai

Cinematography: Wang Yu

Script: Lou Ye

Editing: Karl Riedl

Production design: Li Zhuoyi

Sound: Xu Peijun

Music: Jörg Lemberg

## Production

Producer: Nai An, Philippe Bober

Production Company: Essential Films, Dream Factory

With the support of: Hubert Bals Fund of the International  
Film Festival Rotterdam ZDF in Zusammenarbeit mit  
ARTE, Studio Babelsberg GmbH, Uplink Co., Goutte d'Or  
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Göteborg Film Festival Filmfund



# SUZHOU RIVER

by *LOU YE*

China / Germany, 2000, 83 min, 4K



New 4K restoration supervised by Lou Ye himself from  
the original 16mm A-B negative of the image



*“No one dares to look the Suzhou River directly in the face because, while it is the mother river of the city, it is also an amalgamation of pollution, chaos, poverty and the vestiges of Shanghai’s colonial past. Though, it is also a hiding spot for beautiful memories. Personally, it reminds me of my own life, of friends from the past and of Shanghai, where I grew up.*

*I was born in Shanghai and spent my childhood on the banks of this river. Many of my old friends still live there. I often stood at my window and looked at the people outside. I made up many stories about these passersby.*

*That’s where the idea for the film originated. It came out of stories that I experienced and told to friends a long time ago.*

*I wanted to make this film on the Suzhou River for a long time, with a view of Shanghai from it.”*

LOU YE

## SYNOPSIS

**A motorcycle courier in his mid-twenties is asked to drive the 16-year-old daughter of a smuggler. They fall in love, but when she figures out that he is kidnapping her for a ransom, she jumps into the river, and he is jailed for murder.**

**After his release he meets a dancer: her alter ego.**





## BACK TO SUZHOU RIVER

An introduction by Dennis Lim

“Cameras don’t lie,” claims the narrator of SUZHOU RIVER, who makes a living as a videographer, a professional voyeur, and whose gaze we inhabit for much of the film. The first thing that grabs your attention in Lou Ye’s 2000 movie is indeed the camera. Handheld, restless, and alert, it is an embodied camera, both the wandering eye and the mysterious “I” of this richly atmospheric neo-noir. As SUZHOU RIVER opens, the narrator is drifting down the polluted Shanghai waterway that gives the movie its title, observing the bustle of activity on the boats and barges and along the riverbanks and bridges. “If you watch it long

enough,” he tells us in voiceover, “the river will show you everything.” Each person who catches his gaze has a story. The narrator says that he could tell you these tales — some of them we will see playing out in the film — but in some cases, he warns, “I would be lying.”

The question of what to believe, of when the camera or the narrator might be lying, remains tantalizingly unresolved throughout SUZHOU RIVER. Never named and never seen except when his hands enter the frame, the narrator is himself a participant in the first of the movie’s love stories.

At the Happy Tavern, he meets Meimei (Zhou Xun), a young woman who has been hired to perform as a blond-wigged mermaid in the bar's prominent aquarium. They become involved, and Meimei tells the narrator of another romance, this one involving a motorcycle courier named Mardar (Jia Hongsheng), who has spent years searching for a lost love. Assigned to watch over his boss's daughter, Moudan, Mardar falls for her while also getting involved in a mob scheme to kidnap her. This story has the ring of an urban myth, and as it unfolds, doubt and déjà vu set in: Moudan looks exactly like Meimei (and is also played by Zhou Xun) and the narrator's second-hand recounting is full of hesitations and guesses ("Maybe he rode past my window" . . . "What else? Let me think.")

The Moudan-Mardar story ends with Moudan throwing

herself off a bridge into the Suzhou, mermaid doll in hand, never to be seen again . . . unless of course she has been reincarnated as Meimei. The final act heightens the identity confusion, teasing out the mystery of whether Meimei and Moudan are the same person, but also blurring the male roles, as the narrator seems to hand off his responsibilities to Mardar.

The trope of the doubled femme fatale meant that almost all early reviews of SUZHOU RIVER invoked Hitchcock's VERTIGO. But doppelgangers were rife in 1990s and millennial cinema (from Kieslowski's THE DOUBLE LIFE OF VERONIQUE to Lynch's MULHOLLAND DRIVE) and Lou Ye's film, with its narrative playfulness and its embrace of reflexivity and indeterminacy, belongs unmistakably to its postmodernist moment.



Premiering at the Rotterdam Film Festival, where it won the Tiger Award, and going on to extensive festival play and widespread international distribution, the film was also greeted as a welcome surprise in the context of the so-called Sixth Generation (whose pioneering figures included Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Jia Zhangke). Mainland Chinese cinema made its way to global festivals and art houses in the late 1980s with the historical epics of the Fifth Generation, children of the Cultural Revolution led by Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Chen Kaige. The generation that followed marked the beginnings of an independent film scene. Especially considered in hindsight, it is too diverse a group to fit comfortably under a single umbrella, but broadly speaking, the filmmakers who emerged in the '90s worked with lower budgets, gravitated to urban settings, referred to global popular

culture, and concerned themselves with marginal subjects and the here-and-now of a society undergoing rapid and dramatic change. This was a generation that came of age in the transitional years of the '80s, defined equally by the formative trauma of Tiananmen Square and a process of economic liberalization that brought with it an influx of overseas cultural product.

Within a cohort whose dominant style was a grungy realism, SUZHOU RIVER registered as something of an anomaly. Even today, the festival circuit is a largely realist landscape, and Western audiences tend to expect independent Chinese cinema (and much of non-Western cinema) to take the form of state-of-the-nation communiqués or sociopolitical critiques. As has become clear in the years since, Lou is a filmmaker deeply invested in the lived

realities of China present and past. But his movies do not restrict themselves to a realist language; they stretch the forms of the melodrama and the thriller, upending and renewing genre conventions. Lou's movies have ranged widely — they include the tumultuous SUMMER PALACE (2006) and SPRING FEVER (2009), both films in which sexual and political freedom go hand in hand, and the historical dramas PURPLE BUTTERFLY and SATURDAY FICTION (2019), both set in Japanese-occupied Shanghai — but many of them share the thrilling kineticism and expressive romanticism of SUZHOU RIVER.

The most powerful force in Chinese cinema of the past few decades is arguably the attraction to the real. It has been all but impossible for anyone making a film in China not to take stock of the convulsive changes that

have transformed the country beyond recognition. The compulsion to capture this process of transformation — and its profound impact on all aspects of life — explains the fertility of Chinese independent documentary in the 21st century, as evidenced by the likes of Wang Bing, Zhao Liang, and Shengze Zhu. But SUZHOU RIVER is, in the apt words of the critic J. Hoberman, “a documentary that feels like a dream.” Viewed today, its documentary quality, as a record of a vanished world, is hard to miss: the post-industrial waterfront was long ago cleaned up, the dilapidated riverside buildings replaced by new high-rises. In Lou's hands, cinema has always been not just an instrument of documentation but also a medium of re-enchantment.

One can detect a kinship with his work in one of today's most interesting young Chinese directors, Bi Gan, whose films remain rooted in the geographic and cultural particulars of his native province of Guizhou even as they float off into realms of dream and memory. "My camera doesn't lie," the assertion at the heart of Lou's breakthrough film, would become a catchphrase of sorts for the Sixth Generation (it provided the title for a documentary about the movement). Key to its enduring appeal, SUZHOU RIVER — and Lou's cinema as a whole — takes that statement as equally true and false.

DENNIS LIM, MAY 2022





# BACK TO SUZHOU RIVER

A conversation with Lou Ye

## What was the origin of SUZHOU RIVER?

Lou Ye: It started with my desire to shoot Suzhou River and then the idea of using it as a setting with some characters came up. I did write some character breakdowns and the connections between the characters, but there wasn't a finished script. During the preparation, I read a news report, and I still remember the headline: "Mermaid Show", and there were photos, so I put it into my story. And then of course there was the "I", and all these made up the beginning of the film.

**With "I" participating in the film as a "director", a strong desire for expression appeared almost certain at the time. There must be some self-projection in "I". How many days did the first shooting take around the Suzhou River?**

Over 30 days, on Super 16 film. And we followed a comparatively traditional way, as it was not possible to make one take particularly long due to the limited length of the reel. Those technical limitations also brought about a big trouble to the handheld and impromptu photography.

We were editing the film while looking for other investment. It was quite lucky that we met Philippe Bober and finally accomplished the film together. The whole film was edited in Berlin.

**There was a “film” born from the footages of the 30-day shooting, which was totally different from the one we know about now.**

This one-hour version is extremely different from the final version. The original one basically followed the characters and their intertwined storylines. The elements of two versions were similar, but we dealt with the whole editing and structures later for the final one on the editing table.

**During the editing in Berlin, you completed the script for the reshooting and even revised the “script” of the whole film?**

Yes. I put aside the so-called “script” while editing and only focused on the footages we had to see what we could do. The outline for the reshooting was also based on what had already been done.

**How come you got the idea of reshooting?**

We were short of materials at the moment. Or how should I put it... there was a big technical error in the shooting, so the materials were not enough. But we tried very hard to integrate the materials with technical mistakes into the film later. Thus, I regarded this experience as a “baptism” for me: one can work on a film even like this, which in fact showed many more possibilities than I expected at that time.



### **So what was the main part of the reshooting?**

It was mainly about how different characters were connected to each other, as I remember it. It was originally shot in line with the characters, but during the editing, it became clear that some interactions of them should be refined, especially the ones with “I”, which was probably the key point for the reshooting.

### **What about the voiceover?**

Originally it was there, but always in a state of being tweaked with the editing. In fact, this situation continued even after the reshooting.

### **So when the idea that Meimei and Moudan are actually two persons was settled?**

It was never settled until the end. I hadn’t made up my mind even during the first editing. But we had two perfectly viable options: they can actually be one person, or two persons; either could work. However, it still took us long to make a decision.

### **What was it like working with the actors in SUZHOU RIVER? It seemed to be a mixture of acting under the direction and improvisation.**

In fact, Zhou Xun was a non-professional actress at that time, which was particularly wonderful; Jia Hongsheng had studied acting, so he had more difficulties and preferred to perform under the direction. Zhou, of course, was more innocent, more nature, which was her innate gift. This was terrific and it, on the other hand, helped Jia and other professional actors. The juxtaposition of professionals and non-professionals in this film was also a start for me.

### **I had heard that most of the dialogues and lines were re-recorded, is that true ?**

There was a very large amount of re-recording, but not all of them were re-recorded. It was actually the rewriting of the lines. And it was probably my first time to do so and I couldn’t stop after that.

### **You mean you find the fun in it? The fun you got from breaking something set-to-be-shot while shooting and breaking it again while editing?**

It’s just constantly working again and again. This workflow kept developing to the point that during editing THE SHADOW PLAY, my editor and I would both wonder immediately whether a line was re-recorded or was an actual sound when we heard it, simultaneously asking each other: “Is it real or not?” And then we’d go and

listen to what was really said and we were shocked. It was also during the editing, we finally found the shifting of subjective and objective perspectives and the shifting of the narrators. As a result, I recognized the magic of editing and how it changed the materials for the very first time. There would always be an extraordinary amount of work on the editing table since SUZHOU RIVER.

### **It is not exaggerating to say that SUZHOU RIVER was the foundation of your filmmaking, if we look back now. But did you realize this at the time?**

Looking back now, it was more like an adventure, a feeling of not knowing what would happen at last. So, it was likely that I’ve been very obsessed with this kind of feeling since then...



Without knowing the result, I could only figure out the direction and have a rough idea of what I want, and things would be slowly clarified during the working procedure. This made me more daring for the following films. From then on, I've discovered that the situations on set lead to the texture of shooting, which is in reverse to the process from paperwork to scenes. As the script would completely lose its function after the shooting is done. And the script only provides a reference to make a set of material which we can turn into a film. This was the methodology I've always followed since SUZHOU RIVER.

**Likewise, let's take this a step further, a script is to shooting what shooting is to editing.**

Yes, once the shooting is done, all the content would be in a very unimportant position and we could put aside how hard it was for the shooting and a scene that might take

20 days to get would be deleted without any regret during the editing. This would never be a problem for me as its role has been totally changed.

**I obviously noticed the political metaphor in the film after watching this restored version. Both Moudan and Meimei have constantly asked the question, "Will you keep looking for me till you die?" I was very impressed by that, especially by the simple line "You lied!" It is very political, and almost can be seen as a symbol of the disillusion of the post-89 Democracy Movement.**

To me, not until PURPLE BUTTERFLY did I clearly realize that "love" was used as a metaphor for politics, which turned to be even more obvious in SUMMER PALACE. These two things are compatible and inseparable. What you just mentioned, is a fair interpretation. You simply can't avoid political discussions when you talk about the 90s.

It was in our blood. For SUZHOU RIVER, the “politics” should be named as “camera politics” because I showcased politics through my camera. There are four characters in SUZHOU RIVER, Moudan – Meimei, Mardar – “I”. But in fact, there is one more “character” – the camera, almost as the fifth person of this film.

**The politics of camera is to use the moving camera to intertwine with those four characters and constantly break old relationships and build new ones. With the camera’s intervention, the whole structure of the story unfolds.**

Yes. And this is probably what filmmaking is: you use camera to intervene the characters and document what happens after they’re being intervened. This basically defines what cinema is.

**SUZHOU RIVER won the TIGER AWARD in International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2000. But you were officially banned from filmmaking as screening it internationally without the permission from the authorities.**

If I remember it correctly, this penalty has existed for many years and it is still there. I was banned from filmmaking for two years with a 20,000 RMB fine (laugh). I requested the screening permission of this film several years ago but never heard back. But anyone who wants to watch it will find the film very easily.

**It’s been 22 years since its first release. Looking back, what makes SUZHOU RIVER special to you?**

It undoubtedly changed my life. When I made SUZHOU RIVER, I had probably experienced all types of difficulties

in filmmaking, from technical problems, censorship issues to creative challenges such as editing the footage... Looking back, this experience got me well-prepared for my later works. All the later challenges weren’t unfamiliar. I do not feel easily anxious as SUZHOU RIVER has just previewed all the possible obstacles.

Aesthetically speaking, SUZHOU RIVER is a career milestone for me. It has set me free, creatively and technically, since then. The freedom of filmmaking is everything and purely precious.

**Regarding the restoration, what do you say?**

I’ve watched the footage sent by the post production studio and what had concerned me before was that the images could be restored to be overly clear; but it didn’t happen. So, it is good.

**The roughness is still there, which also plays a part in your following works as a style. Even the traces left by the conversion from Super 16mm to 35mm are still visible. The sound is well restored too.**

It is indeed a beautiful restoration.

INTERVIEW BY WANG MUYAN, APRIL 2022





# BACK TO SUZHOU RIVER

A conversation with producer Philippe Bober

**How did you come into contact with the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers in the first place ?**

Philippe Bober: I came into contact with the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers through a Chinese friend who studied film in Germany and regularly sent me the VHS tapes of these filmmakers. Lou Ye appeared immediately as one of the most promising directorial talents of the group.

**What was your impression of the films made by this new generation ?**

Filmmakers from the Sixth Generation express their sense of loss, anxiety, and frustration in the face of China's quickly changing cityscape of the 90s. Their films explore in depth individual identities, penetrating the inner psychology of their characters. They do not allegorize their narratives. In a sense, they bring Chinese cinema into the present, by showing the real China, by confronting the social reality of the present.

**When did you first meet with Lou Ye ?**

In September 1998, he was preparing the feature film project PURPLE BUTTERFLY, which was to be presented at the Busan Film Festival in October for the pitching and I wanted to participate in this project as co-producer. I travelled to Beijing for the first time, in the editing room, I discovered the first footage of his another, most recent project, shot secretly in Shanghai, which was not yet finished and short of post-production financing: SUZHOU RIVER was in the making.

I saw the beginning of the film where there were the handheld shots of the river and I immediately stepped in as a producer to complete the rest of the film. Together with Lou Ye, we edited a 15-minute trailer which was presented at the Busan Film Festival in lieu of PURPLE BUTTERFLY. Hubert Bals Fund of Rotterdam Film Festival

and the Göteborg Film Festival picked up SUZHOU RIVER soon after.

**What immediately attracted your attention to this project ?**

Some of the material was filmed as a quasi-documentary, that gave everything a sense of immediacy. Today that's not unusual, but a film under such a context was very rare. It gave us a glimpse of certain aspects of his country that we didn't know about before. And it was combined with a story that clearly borrows from Western cinema. Also, Lou Ye has a unique insight, he is not afraid of casting unknown actors as leads and he has always succeeded in pushing them into the list of superstars in one fell swoop. Jia Hongsheng, born in theatre, is not a typical traditional movie actor.





However, Lou Ye was deeply moved by his spiritual and natural charm and insisted on making this friend from his art circle the chosen actor before his lens. However, Zhou Xun, who was not unheard of after debuting, met Lou Ye at a Shanghai bar party. Her beauty and innocence and clever personality impressed him. Lou Ye saw her potential and boldly approached her. Acting as the leading actress, Zhou Xun after SUZHOU RIVER, led to real fame and even jumped onto the international stage.

**How did you work together on the film, between Germany and China?**

In December 1998, the editing of the first part was moved to Berlin. Using the material already available, Lou Ye, me and Han Jianwei worked on the script for the second part of the shooting. The narrator, the distorted chronology and the establishment of Moudan and

Meimei as two female characters emerged during this phase. Additionally, a 40-minute trailer was cut, which I presented at the CineMart in Rotterdam in January 1999. The financing was officially secured thanks to pre-sales and the shoot was eventually resumed.

**The toing and froing between China and Germany was secret?**

Yes. The material was then sent from China to Berlin – as it was the first time. The editing was completed after 6 months of polishing (with the support of script consultants Franz Rodenkirchen and Brock Norman Brock). Jörg Lemberg, a graduate of the Ludwigsburg Film Academy, composed the music for SUZHOU RIVER after being contacted by associate producer Susanne Marian. The producers were also able to secure a collaboration with a music publisher for financial contribution.

The film was mixed in Beijing in autumn 1999 and then smuggled back to Berlin through clandestine routes, where the first print was completed in January 2000. Shortly afterwards, SUZHOU RIVER celebrated its world premiere in Rotterdam and was awarded the prestigious TIGER AWARD.

**In your opinion, what makes Lou Ye different from others directors of his generation ?**

He insists on participating throughout the whole process of his experimental creations. He is always thinking, revising, and looking for inspiration. His subjective narration creates a poignant story about extraordinary yet common people in the middle and lower classes in this charming metropolis — Shanghai. His creative and experimental film language tries to find the best way to

present a story in the most unconventional way. Lou Ye was not lost, notwithstanding the unrest of the great age. He was quite determined to be able to take a different path. Expression of freedom and originality have become his consistent philosophy since he began filming, and SUZHOU RIVER was born in this spirit. The line in the film “My camera doesn’t lie,” spoken from the first person’s point of view, by the narrator, exemplifies the pursuit of a realistic aesthetic on the part of the whole new generation of directors.

**Despite its worldwide success, SUZHOU RIVER was not screened in its native country.**

And Lou Ye received a two-year ban for letting his film screen in Rotterdam without the authorization from Chinese film censors.





Meantime, SUZHOU RIVER is probably the most sold movie in the Chinese pirated DVD underground, Lou Ye himself had 8 different pirated editions.

**Which role does SUZHOU RIVER play in Lou Ye's filmography today?**

SUZHOU RIVER is not only one of the most iconic of Lou Ye's films, but also a masterpiece of modernity in Chinese independent cinema. The movie marks a critical milestone for Lou Ye personally, and for the sixth generation of directors he represents, with his critical exploration of individual values and spiritual worlds of modern urban life.

**And which role does SUZHOU RIVER play in your career as a producer ?**

This is the first film I was creatively involved, in the script and in the editing of the film and also in the writing of the voiceover, which is crucial to this particular case. Before, I did have conversations with directors, of course, for instance, with Lars von Trier and Roy Andersson, but I never had the proof to show that whether my opinion had been finally taken into consideration or not except for the case of THE KINGDOM maybe.

INTERVIEW BY WANG MUYAN, FEBRUARY 2022



## ON THE RESTORATION...

Every restoration project is a prototype. There is no rule book, especially when working on films from other cultural backgrounds. I often compare restoration work to that of an archeologist – you find the broken pieces, stick them back together, and then, seeing the shape of it, you fill in the missing gaps. Restoring a film is trying to understand not only the cultural background but the time that it was produced in and the situation surrounding the production. It is quite intimate. You really have the director's work under a microscope.

Working on SUZHOU RIVER was special, as I was able to communicate with Lou Ye and his assistant director Ying Li throughout the whole process. An opportunity like

this sets a clear framework for the restoration. During these sessions, we generally discuss the director's approach, things they would have liked to do at the time of production but were not allowed or technically able to achieve. In terms of sound, spreading the mono signal from the original material into a 5.1 experience - which we did on SUZHOU RIVER - is nearly a pioneer's work. This calibre of sound restoration came up in the last ten years. In Germany, there might only be a dozen sound engineers working with that technique. Although Lou Ye was eager to create a 5.1 sound experience, he also insisted on keeping the roughness of the audio, and even some of the original sound mistakes for authenticity.

We made a point to not add any new sound or atmospheres to the film. Everything was extracted directly from the original material. It was a balance between repairing and reshaping.

Ying Li was here in the Berlin studio and in close contact with Lou Ye at all times. We would tweak the scenes and the sound together following the director's feedback before sending a playout for him to screen in China. He would then send us his feedback with a list of timecodes and suggested treatments. At the end of the process, he confirmed the restoration's sound stayed faithful to the original soundtrack.

ANSGAR FRERICH, RERECORDING MIXER AT BASIS  
BERLIN POSTPRODUKTION



### *Technical information*

The 4k digital restoration of the original version of SUZHOU RIVER was realised starting from the original 16mm a-b negative of the image from the laboratory Kopierwerk Babelsberg.

The image was scanned by screenshot AG Berlin, dust-busted at The Post Republic and colour-graded by Moritz Peters.

Titles were rebuilt by Mieke Ulfig.

The soundtrack was restored at Basis Berlin Postproduktion gmbh. New foleys were recored by Fabian Weigmann and Jonathan Ritzel, the sound design was recreated and additional sound effect added by Sebastian Tesch. The dolby 5.1 mix was mastered by Ansgar Frerich and Sebastian Tesch.



## LOU YE

Lou ye was born to a theatrical family in Shanghai in 1965. He spent his childhood in theaters and studied at Shanghai School of Fine Arts before working as an animator at Shanghai Animation Studio.

He graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1989, majoring in directing. His films have been selected by all the major international festivals (Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Taipei Golden Horse Awards, Chinese Independent Film Festival, Asian Film Awards) and awarded numerous prizes, including the Silver Bear at the 64th Berlin Film Festival for BLIND MESSAGE and the Best Screenplay Prize at the 62nd Cannes Film Festival for SPRING FEVER.

### *Filmography*

2019 **Saturday Fiction**  
2017 **The Shadow Play**  
2014 **Blind Massage**  
2012 **Mystery**  
2011 **Love and Bruises**  
2009 **Spring Fever**  
2006 **Summer Palace**  
2003 **Purple Butterfly**  
2000 **Suzhou River**  
1993 **Weekend Lover**



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