



BOUND IN HEAVEN

BASED ON THE NOVEL "BOUND IN HEAVEN" BY LI XIUWEN

DIRECTOR/SCREENPLAY BY HUO XIN

STARRING NI NI ZHOU YOU SPECIAL APPEARANCE BY LIAO FAN

PRODUCER



阿里巴巴 影业集团
Alibaba Pictures



SYNOPSIS

A woman trapped by violence,

A man with a terminal illness,

Two lonely souls tightly intertwine after a chance encounter.

Tragedy will soon devour them.

Yet they find in each other the only light in the darkness of their lives

Bound in Heaven is an adaptation of Li Xiuwen's novel of the same name.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This is a story about “love and death” . Love and loneliness, death and vitality, mellow and rigid - these seemingly contradictory words were mixed into the film and became the focus of our camera. Love is the beginning, and death is the end. The three spacetimes of their entangled destiny each stand as individual chapters yet connect to one another, completing their life journey.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

HUO XIN

(Director)

How did you become a director?

That was just a natural process. In the past, I more often worked on film projects as a screenwriter. In the meantime, I had two or three chances of becoming a director. But I didn't think I was ready. This time, after completing the script, I suddenly had a strong impulse to turn the words I wrote into images and express my ideas as a whole. Whether I'm experienced or not, it is a whole new experience.

Do you have a favorite director or film?

I like a lot of directors and films. It's hard, or rather impossible, for me to choose just one. Some of them are European masters of cinema, while others are emerging young directors.

How would you describe your directing style?

It is still too soon to talk about my directing style. For my first feature film as the director, I wish to show concern for the inner selves while expressing them calmly and with restraint, even though this story is very emotional. Speaking of the formation of a director's style, someone once said a director's style will run through all his/her work. I'm still new, and I'm still exploring how to grasp and control images.

Have you incorporated your understanding of love into the portrayal of love in this film?

Of course. As a creator, whether you are writing a love story, or any other type of story, you will always incorporate your understanding of life and affection into it, provided that it is a fascinating story that is also touching and allows the audience to think. It should also have a distinctive style. Instead of asking me to elaborate on my understanding of love now, it's better to read the original novel *Bound in Heaven*.

Why do you want to create a story like this?

This film was adapted from Mr. Li Xiuwen's novel *Bound in Heaven*. The film tells the story of the love between a man and a woman under the constant threat of death. At the time, we had long discussions about the adaptation. Love and death are basically eternal themes. In this film, love is the core of the story. However, their love for each other does not affect their final destinations at all. Neither of them would interfere with the other. They both calmly accept and choose to "live to the fullest until death." The clash of mellow and rigidness generates an exceptional yet cruel sense of beauty. Moreover, both protagonists are incredibly lonely beings who exhibit their loneliness through passion. This is the most attractive part of the creative process for me. At the same time, I also wish to give a rendition of modern society and people from various social strata in cities and rural areas aside from the main story about love, letting them become the atmosphere in the backdrop of this film.

What is your take on the relationship between the protagonists (Yo and Tai)?

The relationship between the male and female protagonists of the film originates from lust and passion. This is because they belong to entirely different social strata, and there aren't any junction points between them at all. The life of the female protagonist, Yo, in the latter part of the film and her choice to run away from her glamorous life are a result of her choice to experience "passion." The male protagonist, Tai, is a nobody who wanders on the margins of society. He has no social relations and cut himself away from all familial relationships. All he has left is his lonely, beating heart. The two encounter each other and fall in love under the constant threat of death. Would their love save them? Certainly not. They are meant to be a couple who love each other but will not live happily ever after. All they can do is look upon their fate bravely and allow themselves to advance toward their own paths until death separates them. They are neither each other's salvation nor dependent. They have both conflicting elements and shared aspirations. Once they decide to give up everything, they will no longer feel any pain.

Why did you choose to shoot the film in three cities? What would the different temperaments of each city add to the film?

Firstly, we chose the three cities because of Faye Wong's concert in the main storyline. Faye Wong is an influential singer in China and even all of Asia. Between 2011 and 2012, she gave touring performances in Shanghai, Wuhan, and Chongqing. The time and locations in the film were real. Secondly, Shanghai, Wuhan, and Chongqing are all located along the Yangtze River. By deciding to shoot in these three cities, we hope to show these cities' unique characteristics in the film. Shanghai is bustling but alienated; Wuhan is exuberant and lively; and Chongqing is dream-like and surreal. Meanwhile, the three types of transportation – the subway in Shanghai, ferries in Wuhan, and cable cars in Chongqing – represent the underground, the earthly world, and Heaven. The two protagonists travel from shore to shore, sailing upstream towards their final destination. Yet, they will eventually reach the source of the river.

How would you describe the temperament of this film?

It's a poignant yet beautiful film, just like the fireworks at the end.

I felt a hint of tragedy after I watched the film. But you have put a lot of emphasis on Yo and Tai's mutual support. What is your intention for that? Do you think the audience would see this film as a comedy or tragedy?

This is certainly a poignant story. But it is not depressing or desperate. By supporting each other, Yo and Tai also help themselves. Some people might ask why Yo would fall in love with a loser like Tai. But Yo doesn't think Tai is a loser. He's not afraid of death, and he managed to keep his dignity and pride until the last moments of his life. Therefore, they struggled desperately, despite the rapid deterioration in their life, to find moments that only belonged to them. When they nap in the small restaurant or walk to the empty plaza from the bustling food street, they find a corner to nestle. Their inner peace and tranquility form a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of the outside world.

What about the film do you think will move the audience? What do you want to leave the audience with, and how do you want them to feel after they watch the film?

I think it's the emotion and the love between the two of them. There might be a moment in everyone's life when they want to take a risk, break away from something, be reckless without thinking about the consequences, and care less about other people's opinions. In reality, this is very hard to achieve. But in the film, our two protagonists did it. Their relationship is like a dream and a game. They really enjoy it, and do their best to live it to the fullest. I hope the audience will enjoy the process as much as they do.

NI NI

(as Xia Yo)

Ni Ni's works

The Flowers Of War (2011)
Fleet of Time (2014)
Wukong (2017)
Savages (2018)
Shock Wave 2 (2020)
Yanagawa (2021)
Lost in the stars (2022)
Bound in Heaven (2024)
Un homme et une femme (2024)

How did you become an actor?

At first, I participated in the casting and training for The Flowers of War and was cast for the first role of my life, Yu Mo. Looking back now, I still think I was very fortunate.

Who's your favorite or most respected actor?

I like many experienced actors with whom I have worked in the past, such as Andy Lau, Zhang Zhen, and Kara Wai (Hui Yinghong). I learned a lot of experience from them, which can enrich my inner world.

Are there any directors you really want to work with?

I have watched works by many young directors at the Shanghai International Film Festival, and I really like their creative style. I wish to work with some emerging directors.

What do you think is the key to becoming a good actor?

Sincerity, I believe! I think sincerity should be the most important thing for an actor in terms of treating the roles we play, the actors we work with, and the audience.

How would you describe the character "Yo" you played?

From the aspect of the story, I think she's an ordinary person above all. In the real world, many people must be in the same situation as her. Sure, they might not be encountering or experiencing the same thing. On the other hand, she's also a very conflicted person. She must accept reality, but she's reluctant to take it without putting up a fight, which puts her in a very ambivalent and lonely state.

From an actor's perspective, I don't think Yo would be understood and accepted by everyone in a traditional sense. She has a strong personality, and she might not be a very likable character. But I'm not very fond of playing likable characters. I don't know why, but I always think perfect things don't seem beautiful on me. I like Yo's flaws. They make her unique.

How do you feel about your cooperation with Zhou You?

Zhou You is incredible. One thing that makes him remarkable is his unique personality at such a young age. He suits his character perfectly, including his skeletally lean figure in the Chongqing part of the film. He really brought a personal trainer to the set. By the end, he only drank a little water daily to keep up with the essential energy needed to survive. I really admire that willpower. Not a lot of people can do that. It's tough for me.

Why do you think Yo and Tai would fall for each other?

They both have a wounded soul. A lonely entity is relatively insignificant and helpless in this society. But at the same time, you can't say they are tenacious. I don't think they were that tenacious before they met each other. Or rather, they did not have such a strong will to survive. They muddled along the days and took it one day at a time before they met each other. But after they met, something much like the "vitality" appeared, as described by Mr. Li Xiuwen, author of the original novel. Once the two people become emotionally connected, they would really feel a sense of responsibility, or a type of human instinct, something like an intuitive good faith for affection, which will make the two lovers want to keep each other company and spend the rest of their lives together, no matter what will happen in the future.

How do you feel about the ending of the film?

Actually, she already expected something like that to happen in the future. But when the day really comes, and they are met by their destined end, they would still feel a mixture of emotions. It's very complicated. Therefore, is this ending really a tragedy for Yo? Yes, for sure. Because Tai already told her. Yo said she knows the result but still insists on going down the same path.

What did you gain from this film?

A lot of new angles to see the world.

BOUND IN HEAVEN

ZHOU YOU

(as Xu Zitai)

Zhou You's works

Striding into the Wind (2021)

Caught By The Tides (2024)

Black Dog (2024)

Bound in Heaven (2024)

Girls on the Wire (To be released)

The Lord of Weddings (To be released)

How did you become an actor?

I had many jobs before becoming an actor – a bar liquor salesman, a clothing store clerk, a still model, etc. I fell in love with acting while working as a model and I decided to leave home to seek acting opportunities in Beijing. After coming to Beijing, I started working as a commercial actor. After that, I had opportunities to work on TV shows and films. I was gradually noticed and received offers from some directors. That's how I gradually became an actor today.

Who's your favorite or most respected actor?

After working with Ni Ni on the film Bound in Heaven, she became an actor I greatly respect. Another actor I like and respect very much is Mr. Liao Fan, with whom I also worked on this film. I also like other Chinese actors, including Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung. Among international actors, I love Jake Gyllenhaal, Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Marion Cotillard, etc.

Are there any directors you want to work with?

After our cooperation on Bound in Heaven, I still wish to work more with Director Huo Xin. I hope we have another chance to work together. As for international directors, I really like Xavier Dolan, Sean Baker, Wong Karwai, Gus Van Sant, etc. I wish I would have a chance to work with the directors I respect in the future.

What do you think is the key to becoming a good actor?

I think you must be passionate about acting. At the same time, an actor must possess strong learning abilities, be confident, have faith in the role, maintain a child-like innocence, have an acute sense of touch, and have a strong ability to survive. Because the roles you will play in the future will also need to survive in the story.

How would you describe the character "Tai" you played?

In the past, I've never felt the embodiment of "utter despair" and "tenacity of life," all in the same person. Tai is someone like that. In the story, he's tightly bound by death and love. During his "escape" process, he stretched the limit of his endurance, explosive force, persistence, struggle, and attitude toward love and death. At last, his vitality burst out when he finally chose the way to leave on his own. This character is one of a kind. During the process of the performance, I felt the coexistence of pain and happiness as well as fear and fascination as if "Hell and Heaven exist side by side."

How do you feel about your cooperation with Ni Ni?

There's a highly charismatic energy about Ni Ni. When I first watched her film *The Flowers of War* in 2011, that energy deeply attracted me. At the time, I had a frightening intuition when I sat in the movie theater that I might work with this actress someday. I never told anyone about this crazy idea because I wasn't an actor yet. Many years later, when I worked with Ni Ni on this film, it felt like a miracle. In my heart, I should be calling Ni Ni "Ms. Ni". But we are both from Nanjing. When we speak our native dialect, we will have a tacit understanding of old pals. There were many scenes in which we played opposite each other in this film. I felt that the energy that attracted me back then was more prominent and powerful, which inspired me greatly. During the shooting process, I had to lose a lot of weight within a short time to fit into "Tai's" severely ill state. Ni Ni was also under a lot of pressure. She holds herself to high standards in her work as an actor. She made great efforts in this film. One time, we ran into each other at the gym. I said to her while I was running like crazy on the treadmill, "I will certainly do my best to play "Tai." Let's work hard together to finish this project..." At that moment, I felt like we were Tai and Yo in the story who supported and encouraged each other.

Why do you think Yo and Tai would fall for each other?

At first, it was fate that brought these two lonely souls together. But that sort of encounter isn't sporadic. There are a lot of lonely souls in the world. Most of the time, these lonely souls comfort each other and break apart easily. Yo and Tai's relationship is different because whenever they heal each other's wounds, they would "bind each other with a rope and tie a fast knot" for their relationship. They tied fast knots like that over and over again until no one could break them apart. I believe two people should heal each other in the most healthy and beautiful relationships. Yo and Tai are very much alike. They are nourishing each other's lives with love and igniting each other. The sparkles burst out like fireworks, short-lived yet eternal.

How do you feel about the ending of the film?

I think the best blessing for love is "till death do them part." But sometimes, even death cannot break two lovers apart. That's my understanding of the ending in this film.

I believe this film is a mixture of harsh reality and beauty. In the latter part of the film, when life is about to end for one of them and the other fights desperately to hang on to him, that's a harsh reality wrapped in beauty. When Tai jumped off and Yo let him go and left at the end of the film, they were still bound to each other. Be it Heaven or Hell, they will always be together. That's beauty wrapped in the harsh reality.

I always believe the core of this ending is pleasant if you look at it from another perspective. I imagine when Tai fell from a height, his soul left his body, soared up into the sky, and dissipated with fireworks. Maybe everything was just an illusion. But I truly lived and loved. They will never forget how it felt to be the only one for each other. That's the most precious part of love. Yes, that's what I think.

What did you gain from this film?

I already knew it would be a thrill for me to perform this role when I read the script. However, I was keen and aware that the process of this performance would stretch my limits. Although I was already mentally prepared, the pressure during the shooting process still far exceeded my expectations. Besides losing a tremendous amount of weight until I reach a skeletal state, I also must dig deep into Tai's inner world, where he's loved and tortured by the threat of death, and accompany him through the last stage of his life. When I was in character, I was even prepared to "destroy" myself and give myself entirely to "Tai." Nothing would be better or worse than that. However, everything was fine when I checked my heartbeat after completing the film. I'm still alive. Plus, I am no longer afraid of some things after that. Maybe I will have to "leap off" once again in the future. For that, I'll say, "Bring it on." I wonder if that counts as my gain. Maybe at some point in the future, I will finally realize what I took away from this film.

LIAO FAN

(as Song)

Liao Fan's works

Green Hat (2005)
Curiosity Kills the Cat (2006)
Going Home (2007)
Assembly (2007)
Ocean Flame (2008)
Let The Bullets Fly (2010)
IF YOU ARE THE ONE II (2010)
Black Coal, Thin Ice (2014)
The Master (2015)
Guilty of Mind (2017)
Hidden Man (2018)
Ash Is Purest White (2018)
Savages (2019)
Wild Goose Lake (2019)
Here We Go (2024)
Bound in Heaven (2024)

How would you describe the character “Song” you played?

The character Song I played is a successful businessman who feels superior because of his social stratum. He also likes to take control of everything. He lives in a self-constructed world and is skilled at manipulating people's minds.

How do you think “Song” views love and the character “Yo”?

To Song, Yo is just an accessory of his. In his understanding, Yo could only advance in the social stratum because of his favor. They weren't equal in this relationship from the beginning. It's a superior-subordinate relationship, one between a giver and a receiver. That's why he would manipulate Yo through language and violence to suppress her self-awareness and destroy her spirits. Even if Yo escaped his control, he was still very confident in his abilities. Of course, he did it all in the name of love.

How do you feel about the ending for “Song”?

This ending was certainly not a part of Song's plan. He never took a nobody like Tai seriously, much like his attitude towards Yo. Tai was no match for him. He was just a plaything to Song. But he never expected his death to come so suddenly.

How would you describe the temperament of the film?

It's a romance film with artistic qualities.

What did you gain from this film?

I tried my best to show the complexity of the role within a limited space by relying more on body language, such as my hands, to achieve power and tension in the performance. That's very interesting.

PIAO SONGRI

(Director of Photography)

Were there any unique designs, or did you make bold attempts when working on this film?

We didn't use a lot of techniques or image designs. It was more of an organic integration to satisfy the needs of the script, the actors, the director, and the cinematography. Beauty is the foundation, but accuracy is the most essential quality. Why would someone be attracted or moved by a shot or an angle of the actor? Because it's accurate. It doesn't matter how beautiful the lighting is or how rich the colors are. If it doesn't suit the performance or the scene in the story, it won't mean anything, no matter how beautiful it is.

Based on the story, we needed to shoot on bustling streets. A lot of the shots were taken secretly. We did that through many different means and made many props resembling road maintenance to hide the cameras and the camera operators. We rehearsed the scenes in the middle of the night. We would let the actors just be part of the crowd and shoot secretly when the crowd gathered. At first, we came up with many ideas about doing long takes or following the actors with the camera through the bustling streets. Then, we tried to consolidate these ideas and thought about how to avoid goofs among the crowd on such busy streets. We've racked our brains on how to shoot that scene. At last, we came up with the most basic method. Yes, we will only use the camera to document the process and use the crowd to set off the story of this scene. The actual shooting process wasn't complicated. But we achieved the effects we needed to tell the story. During that process, I truly realized what it means to serve the story, what we pursue in filmmaking, and what is right. It is often inaccurate. But there should be a way or a particular angle that's infinitely close to being accurate.

The shooting took place in three cities. Has the cinematic style changed in each city?

I think the part in Shanghai doesn't feel as lively as the parts later in the film. The vitality expressed through the camera isn't as strong as the latter parts as well. Or rather, the colors are less vibrant than the cities shown in the latter part of the film. I'm not a big fan of symbols. Instead, I would rather just emphasize the connection between the people and the city through the temperament, lighting, texture, and the context it can provide for this part of the story as the background.

ZHAI TAO

(Art Director)

How would you describe the temperament of this film? How did you portray the story development through the art design?

I think it should be unrestrained, free, romantic, passionate, and splendid. This story takes place in many cities, including Shanghai, Chongqing, and Wuhan. As the art director, I must first find different characteristics that correspond to each city. After that, I will find environments that conform to the logic of these characters' lives, refine these environments, and find colors that would manifest in each city. That is the thinking process I went through to present the material world in this film. We did location scouting repeatedly in these three cities and discovered beauty in the real world that is highly compatible with our characters through our eyes, our bodies, and our minds. I created a term for it called "accidental beauty." We encountered them accidentally, but they seem very appropriate. We incorporated them into the film and pieced them together. For example, in terms of set design, we discovered a living domain unique to Wuhan but not a landmark. There's a massive patch of exuberantly green ivy, which makes it seem very Southern. What's incredibly marvelous is that a ray of light often shines upon it, which makes it brimming with vigorous vitality. It perfectly portrays the relationship between the protagonists while they were in Wuhan.

The art design and arrangements in each city must echo the life journey of our two protagonists. Shanghai is where the female protagonist was hurt. We chose to use a greyish tone. Wuhan is the place where she felt sunlight and warmth. We put her in this luxuriant, sunny, and enthusiastic city. In Chongqing, the dwelling we designed for the two protagonists is a cramped apartment among a cluster of densely packed residential buildings, which gives a direct and accurate impression of their struggling, interdependent lives.

DORAN NG

(Makeup & Styling Director)

How did you portray the temperaments of the characters and the film through makeup and styling?

I've always been thinking about how to make the styling in films more accurate to life. Sure, we always say films are above real life. So, how should we embellish something that's commonly seen in reality? For example, when I think about "Yo," she's a white-collar worker at an investment company. Typically, people would imagine suits and formal wear. But I think that kind of design would seem stiff. While reading the script, she gave me the feeling of fog floating in the air. I don't know why I feel that way. Her sense of fragility isn't the type that seems cowardly or weak. It's the kind that makes you want to protect her. For the part in Shanghai, I don't want to put her in work outfits that would seem rigid. I think she should be gently wrapped. Therefore, I found some sweaters and oversized coats with dropped shoulder designs, which made it seem like the character was hiding in her clothes and covering herself up. Her wardrobe in the earlier stages of the film is mostly beige or light-colored, making her seem spiritless. After she met "Tai," her wardrobe became more colorful as if she was releasing her emotions.

In the earlier stages, "Tai" had curly, long hair and wore leather clothing with many layers. The long hair and flipped collar instantly bring you back ten years. When they were in Chongqing, we found him cotton-padded loungewear to make him seem even more skinny, fragile, and afraid of cold due to his illness. I designed "Song's" wardrobe to suit the personality of his character, which is refined and cultured on the outside but violent and irritable on the inside. Thus, I chose to put him in a beige suit. Plus, he somewhat belongs to the upper class and he would look trendy. That way, the audience will sense that he's not as warm as the beige suit makes him seem, and he's actually extremely violent and irritable inside, which will create a strong contrast.

FILM SPECIFICATION

Original Title: 捆绑上天堂

English Title: BOUND IN HEAVEN

Year: 2024

Country: China

Language: Mandarin Chinese

Runtime: 109min

Camera: ARRI Alexa Mini LF

Format: Digital, Color

Screening format: DCP

Aspect Ratio: 2.39:1

Frame rate: 24 fps

Sound: 5.1

Resolution: 2K

DIRECTOR'S PROFILE

Graduated from the Drama Literature Department of the Central Academy of Drama, Huo Xin is a screenwriter and filmmaker. She's written or co-written films including SHOWER (1999), KUNG FU HUSTLE (2004), FULL CIRCLE (2012), and CRIMES OF PASSION (2013). BOUND IN HEAVEN is her directorial debut.

DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY

Feature Film Shower (Screenwriter)
Feature Film Quitting (Screenwriter)
Feature Film Kung Fu Hustle (Screenwriter)
Feature Film Sunflower (Screenwriter)
Feature Film Curiosity Kills the Cat (Screenwriter)
Feature Film Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons (Screenwriter)
Feature Film Crimes of Passion (Screenwriter)
Feature Film Full Circle (Screenwriter)
Feature Film The Monkey King (Screenwriter)
Feature Film Savages (Screenwriter)

CAST

Ni Ni as Xia Yo

Zhou You as Xu Zitai

Liao Fan as Song

CREW

Original Novel by: **Li Xiuwen**

Director/Screenwriter: **Huo Xin**

Executive Producer: **Gao Nan**

Producer: **An Hanjin Justine O.**

Publicity Director: **Li Xin**

Director of Photography: **Piao Songri**

Art Director: **Zhai Tao**

Makeup and Styling Director: **Dora Ng**

Editor: **Matthieu Laclau Zhang Zhao Yann-Shan Tsai**

Sound Director: **Fu Kang**

Composer: **ZHI16 Radiax**

VFX Director: **Lorin Guo Junqiu**

VFX Producer: **Chen Jianwei**

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