



65th CRITICS'
WEEK
CANNES 2026
OFFICIAL SELECTION

A GIRL UNKNOWN

A FILM BY
ZOU Jing



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PRESENT



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A Chinese girl is passed between three families from the age of 6 to 18, receiving each time a new name and identity. As she searches for belonging and the possibility of love, she has to navigate between the weight of her past and the uncertainty of her future, until she finds her own way.



INTERVIEW WITH ZOU JING

Conducted by Anne-Claire Cieutat

How did the characters in this story, shaped by abandonment, loss, and resilience, come into being?

This screenplay was inspired by my family history — my Nai Nai (paternal grandmother), who partly raised me and to whom I was very close, was abandoned shortly after her birth in 1936 and taken in by a family in another village. I only learned this after she passed away. I have found myself imagining her childhood — wondering what it felt like to grow up carrying that absence. Beneath her strength, did she ever cry quietly at night? She was unyielding in the face of hardship, yet always gentle and tender toward others. The character in this film carries her spirit: a quiet endurance, a capacity for love shaped by loss, and a strength that does not harden, but remains deeply human.

A few years ago I came across an article about a couple who had entrusted their little girl to another couple and who, ten years later, began searching for her in an attempt to get her back. The journalist followed their efforts over several years and specified that, after being abandoned once, their daughter had ended up with a second adoptive family. These real-life events, which resonated so deeply with what my grandmother had experienced, moved me profoundly and inspired my character's trajectory.

I then interviewed several young women who had lived through similar experiences. They were born in the late 1980s and grew up in the 1990s, as I did, when girls being abandoned or given away seemed to be quietly accepted. I therefore decided to anchor my story in that era, convinced that it was important to shed light on this social phenomenon, linked to the long held belief that girls were less valuable than boys. While much has

changed over the years, the imprint of that history remains, and its generational trauma continues to resonate today.

I am deeply grateful to these women for sharing their stories with me. The characters in the film emerge from this intersection — between stories and memories, between lived experience and the echoes of my own childhood.

Is there a link between this phenomenon and China's one-child policy?

A Girl Unknown does not deal at all with the one-child policy, which was not yet in force when my grandmother was born. This policy is very well known in the West, and the two are often conflated. The problem, once again, was the deeply rooted concept of girls not being as valuable as boys — which is thankfully changing with the younger generations.

Back in these days when a couple had a first daughter, they would try for a second child, and if it was still a girl, there was a risk that she would be abandoned and make way for a possible boy to come. It was common for this second daughter to not even be officially registered, so people could say, for instance, that the mother had had a miscarriage. As a result, that child had no status: it was as if she had never existed. All of this was extremely cruel and took place quietly and silently.

Your short film, *Lili Alone*, shone a light on the situation of surrogate mothers in China: there too, tragedy unfolded quietly.

I think both films come from the same place. I am drawn to lives that are shaped by forces beyond individual control — social, cultural, historical forces that remain mostly invisible, yet leave very enduring, intimate marks.

In *Lili Alone*, it was the body of a woman becoming a site of negotiation. In this film, it is a girl's identity that is repeatedly displaced.

What connects the two is this idea of silent tragedy — stories that unfold without spectacle, but leave deep emotional traces. And perhaps that is what I am trying to observe — how people continue to live, to love, even when something essential has been taken from them.

How do you perceive the three father and three mother figures in this film?

I see the three father figures as three different relationships to love — and to the absence of it.

The first father represents a form of pure, unconditional love. His tenderness and love shaped her and gave her strength, he embodies her fondest memories, the most innocent period of her life.

The second father is a man marked by tragedy; he is drowning in grief for much of the film, but I wanted to allow him the possibility of renewal. By the end, he begins to reconnect with life, and I feel a deep empathy for him.

The third father is, for me, another kind of tragic figure. He represents a generation that grew up without tenderness, and became, in turn, emotionally impaired. He does not know how to express affection — his gestures are limited, almost transactional, like offering her a phone. For him, abandoning a daughter is not experienced as a rupture, but as something almost ordinary. Their relationship ends abruptly — by design — so we never truly get to

know him. That absence is a choice.

With the mothers, I really want to show how strong and resilient these women are. The biological mother, like the biological father, is a tragic figure — perhaps even more so. She was likely forced by her family to give her child away, and when the child returns, she no longer knows how to love her. As a mother, she has been traumatized just as deeply as the child; over time, her capacity for love has hardened.

The second adoptive mother is the pillar of the family. She keeps everyone afloat, burying her own wounds so that she can continue to live and to love.

The first mother is a survivor. When she entrusts Wu Lian to another household, it is an act of survival. Her selfishness and harshness is what makes her humane.

Wu Lian goes through countless ordeals, from which she emerges upright and at peace.

Resilience lies at the heart of this story. Wu Lian is buffeted by fate, but she is capable of rebelling. She falls, and finds a way to rise again. I wanted to make her an inspiring figure in that respect. I think we all have this inside of us. She reminds us of it.

This notion of destiny unfolds through the elliptical structure of your narrative. How did you build it?

I structured the film in three major chapters, from the age of 6-18. Each chapter takes its title from the name she is given by the different families she passes through.

She grows up with the second family until the age of seventeen. Between six and sixteen, there is a large ellipsis. I chose not to depict those years directly, but to let them exist as an absence — something that shapes her without being fully seen.

At sixteen, she is confronted not only with the question of her identity, but also with the turbulence of adolescence. It is a time of confusion and imbalance for a young girl who does not know where she comes from. This shadowy past continues to haunt her.

As the story unfolds, we grow alongside her. At eighteen, she



begins to find answers—and above all, a form of love that brings her a sense of peace, even if it comes from people other than her biological parents. It allows her to open a new chapter of her life.

Her scars remain, but she learns how to live with them.

The gravity of your subject is offset by the airy quality of elements such as veils and curtains, the grace of certain gestures and dance sequences, and the fluidity of the water that runs through the film...

The subject of the film is serious, but visually I wanted to create a sense of lightness and softness. That is why the sequences in nature mattered so much to me. Also because they are imbued with my childhood memories, and with those I imagine my grandmother might have had, growing up in the countryside. When you move through an environment of such beauty, cruelty, when it operates, seems intensified by the sunlight that illuminates it. But above all, I wanted spectators to feel a certain sweetness of life - something that persists, quietly, even alongside pain.

The question of light, understood in its tangible form, returns in your dialogue, through questions Wu Lian asks herself or in the words of a teacher. What does this notion convey for you?

Wu Lian has the feeling of growing up in the shadows. She is searching for light, which changes status throughout her life. At the beginning, it is radiant: the sunlight that bathes nature, the waterfalls, a world filled with openness and innocence. In her second family, when she learns that she has been abandoned, the atmosphere shifts. The house is plunged into semi-darkness. Her adoptive parents seem to live with a shadow hanging over their heads, as though the tragedy they have experienced haunted them. Wu Lian wonders what becomes of the dead. In the end, when she is sitting in the classroom studying the trajectory of light waves, brightness returns, and hope comes in its wake. She goes on with her life with a regained sense of lightness.

How did you work with your cinematographer LIANG Zhongqiang?

Having worked together for many years, including on *Lili Alone*, LIANG Zhongqiang and I share a deep bond and a common sensibility when it comes to aesthetics and visual storytelling. We had many conversations about the role of light and shadow in the film. They are not only aesthetic choices, but emotional ones—each character carries their own wounds, and light becomes a way of revealing or concealing them.

It was essential for me that the film carry a certain beauty. I felt I owed that to Wu Lian—she is wounded, but also deeply strong and luminous. The beauty of the image had to support her, and in a way, honor her resilience. I was seeking a sense of grace in every scene. My director of photography has a strong intuition for capturing and creating that grace.

We worked primarily with natural light, moving from nature to the city, from intimate domestic spaces to big monotonic factory, allowing each space to retain its own atmosphere. The film travels through a wide range of landscapes—geographical as much as emotional—and light becomes the thread that binds them together.

How did you conceive your mise-en-scène and the color palette of the film?

The film unfolds in a very intimate way, as if we are experiencing Wu Lian's story alongside her. The audience is never allowed to know or experience more than she does. This principle guided the mise-en-scène. At the beginning, we are in a more innocent world—filled with nature, sunlight, and lush greenery. The camera moves more freely. As the story evolves, a greater sense of restraint gradually emerges.

I wanted the camera to adapt to the spaces, just as Wu Lian does. As she moves from one environment to another, the mise-en-scène shifts with her, reflecting both the physical and emotional landscapes she passes through.

I approached each set instinctively, with the camera adapting to all these spaces just as Wu Lian does, forced as she is to keep changing where she lives.

I'm interested in how light, color, and texture can express what remains unspoken—how the inner life of the characters can be felt through the environment.

As for color, I worked closely with XING Jun, a very talented production designer. Each character was associated with a specific palette connected to their inner world. The young girl, for example, always carries a touch of red—it evokes blood, but also a kind of vital energy. The second mother, on the other hand, is surrounded by greens, yellows, and browns, reflecting her grounded, nurturing presence.

How did you choose your cast, especially that astonishing little girl, CAO Ruofan?

We spent a great deal of time searching for the child. I didn't want a trained child actress, but a new face—someone untouched, who could exist naturally in front of the camera. When I met CAO Ruofan, it was immediate. Her presence is instinctive, extremely natural. I chose not to give her the script, so she would never anticipate what was coming and could remain fully present in each moment. I guided her step by step, and she continually surprised me.

LI Gengxi, who plays Wu Lian as a teenager, brought a different kind of depth. She has great experience and sensitivity, and it was very easy to work with her. We understood each other instinctively. Watching her become sixteen again was quite moving.

With SHEN Jiani who plays the second mother, the transformation was almost instantaneous. In costume, she was already the character. There is a strength in her, as in the role—a resilience that comes from life itself.

For the second father, ZU Feng was an obvious choice. He is a well-known actor in China, and I felt he could embody the character's fragility and inner wounds with great subtlety. He

brings to the role a sense of quiet resentment, but also something deeply human and relatable. There is a vulnerability in his presence, and his eyes carry a great deal of empathy.

What pulse did you want for this film?

Similarly to *Lili Alone*, I tend to work with very few words. I'm drawn to a cinema of sensation—inviting the audience to feel rather than to intellectualize. I try to leave space, trusting that what remains unspoken can be just as powerful.

I worked with the French editor Tina Baz, and together we shaped the film's pulse. We opted for relatively abrupt transitions to convey the brutality with which Wu Lian is moved from one family to another. That sense of rupture is essential, and the minimalism helps to intensify it.

I tried to tell the story as simply as possible, often favoring long takes. This also creates a space that is more organic for the actors to inhabit.

How did you work on sound and music?

Sound is a crucial—perhaps even the most important—part of post-production for me. I wanted it to feel realistic, natural, vivid, and highly detailed, as if we were fully immersed in the girl's world.

The film relies heavily on ambient sound, as it moves through different landscapes and regions—from the countryside and nature to various cities. Each environment has its own sonic texture, which we explored and expanded with my sound editor, Émeline Aldeguer. Sometimes the sound comes from the outside world; at other times, it reflects her inner world. We also experimented with sound design to blur that boundary.

Working with sound mixer Stéphane Thiébaud and composer Valentin Hadjadj was built on a deep mutual understanding of what the film needed.

I deeply admire Valentin's style of intimate minimalism. I wanted the music to carry a certain emotional opacity—

suggesting feelings rather than declaring them, allowing the audience to project their own emotions.

We often spoke about “space” within the music—how silence and negative space can become active elements. The patience within these spaces allows something to breathe. This approach felt very true to the film, where emotions are often restrained or unspoken. The music does not need to speak loudly; it creates the conditions in which feeling can quietly emerge.





ZOU Jing

ZOU Jing is a Chinese writer/director. She started her career on TV documentaries and commercials before pursuing her dream of writing and directing films. Her first narrative short *Duo Li* ("*Lili Alone*") has won numerous international awards and screened at more than 80 international film festivals, including Leitz Cine Discovery Prize for Best Short Film at the 60th Cannes Critic's Week 2021, the Best Fiction Short Film at the 69th Melbourne International Film Festival, ND/NF... Her first feature script *A Girl Unknown* won the Cannes Critic's Week Next Step Prize 2024. Her goal is to write and direct feature films that explore truths of modern life in China.

CREW

Director and Screenwriter

DOP

Art director

Editors

Costume Design

Etalonnage

Sound

Music

Hair & make up

Executive production

Postproduction

Producer

Production

Coproduction

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XING Jun

ZOU Jing, Tina BAZ

LI Nan

Yov MOOR

Stéphane THIÉBAUT, Emeline ALDEGUER

Valentin HADJADJ

JIANG An, LIU Chuanhui

Tyler PAN

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Arte France

Aide aux Cinémas du Monde, Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée,

Institut français and La Sacem

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CAST

LI Gengxi

SHEN Jiani

ZU Feng

CAO Ruofan

WANG Juan / WU Lian

DING Meishuang

WANG Weiqiang

LIN Juan / young WANG Juan



