



The Emperor and the Assassin

Chen Kaige

JAPAN/CHINA/France, 1999

163 minutes ■ Colour/35mm

Production Company: **Shin Corporation/Beijing Film/Le Studio Canal+**

Executive Producers: **Tsuguhiko**

Kadokawa, Han Sanping,

Hirimitsu Furukawa

Producers: **Chen Kaige, Shirley Kao,**

Satoru Iseki

Screenplay: **Chen Kaige, Wang Peigong**

Cinematographer: **Zhao Fei**

Editor: **Zhao Xinxia**

Production Designer: **Tu Juhua**

Sound: **Tao Jing**

Music: **Zhao Jiping**

Principal Cast: **Gong Li, Zhang Fengyi, Li Xuejian, Wang Zhiwen, Chen Kaige, Gu Yongfei**

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In the rich yields of art cinema this decade, one classic flavour has been mostly absent. The historical epic, with its cast of thousands, sumptuous settings, fantastical costumes, scheming princes, compromised women and awesome images of war and destruction, can provide some of cinema's most powerful experiences. *The Emperor and the Assassin* is a particularly fine and spectacularly wrought example of the genre; it also features one of the greatest performances of Gong Li's distinguished career.

Kaige is no stranger to the large canvas. His Academy Award®-nominated *Farewell My Concubine* managed to bring one of China's great classical arts, the Peking Opera, to the Western public with extraordinary cinematic imagination.

Emperor is a darker film, both narratively and visually. Its sombre, imperial grey and beige detailing – interrupted by Gong Li's occasional vibrant robes – perfectly suits its central themes: what men and women will do to protect their beliefs and avenge the past. A *Rashomon*-like performance style, featuring grand exhortations and tearful reproaches, amplifies the intensity and profundity of the project.

The complex story is set in third century B.C. China is divided into several warring kingdoms, each covetous of its neighbour's territory. An ambitious king, Ying Zheng, is obsessed with unifying all of China and becoming its first emperor. He embarks on a reign of terror, employing a "scorched earth" policy on vanquished states. Bound

by childhood ties to Lady Zhao (Gong Li), the two devise an intricate fake assassination plot against Ying Zheng as an excuse to attack the neighbouring kingdom of Yan, his greatest obstacle to unification.

Part of the plan involves Lady Zhao going to Yan as a hostage. There she encounters a noble assassin who refuses to kill after seeing the results of his destruction. She hires him at once.

Back at the palace, the king's mother reveals a terrible secret which prompts him to attack the place where he was raised: the homeland of Lady Zhao, against which he still harbours resentful memories.

As revenge wells inside Lady Zhao, the simple, noble assassin is forced to make a decision about his role in history.

■ **Noah Cowan**



Chen Kaige was born in Beijing, China in 1952. During the Cultural Revolution, he was sent to work on a rubber plantation as part of the re-education programme. Chen was admitted to the Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution, where his classmates included Zhang Yimou,

Tian Zhuangzhuang and Wu Ziniu, collectively known as the "Fifth Generation" of Chinese cinema. Selected filmography: *Yellow Earth* (84), *Big Parade* (85), *King of the Children* (87), *Life on a String* (91), *Farewell My Concubine* (93), *Temp-tress Moon* (96) and *The Emperor and the Assassin* (99).