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Ethan Juan

Facing paradise

Acclaimed Taiwanese director **Doze Niu** and Golden Horse-winning actor **Ethan Juan** tell Arthur Tam about sensitive new period drama *Paradise in Service* and why the history of their motherland still resonates so strongly. Portraits by Calvin Sit

China and Taiwan's relationship has never been an easy topic. The two nations share a bitter history, borne from their split after the Chinese Civil War. After the breakup, which saw the People's Republic of China established on the Mainland, families were torn apart – with some members escaping to Taiwan and others left in the newly formed communist state, never to see each other again.

Acclaimed Taiwanese director Doze Niu Chen-zer approaches this complex and ever-pertinent part of history in his new period drama *Paradise in Service*, which opened this year's Busan Film Festival in South Korea. The movie is set after the First Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954 and 1955 on the island of Quemoy (more commonly known now as Kinmen), a part of Taiwan that lies just off the coast of southern China and is used as a strategic military base due to its ideal location.

Throughout the film, Niu touches on the tragedy and difficulty of the times with a romantic, delicate and sensitive perspective layered on top of a beautifully nostalgic and colourful setting. The film follows the story of young, innocent virgin Lo Pao-tai, played by Ethan Juan, who arrives on the island one summer for a three-year conscription to the famous Sea Dragons – a tough amphibious training battalion (Juan worked out specifically for this part, exemplified by several semi-naked, sweat-drenched scenes on the beach). However, Lo has a problem – he can't swim. So, instead, he is sent to manage a state-run brothel and, in doing so, he discovers that the island is anything but a paradise, and is filled with deeply troubled characters. The film stars a mixed cast of notable Mainland and Taiwanese actors, including Chen Jiabien, Wan Qian and Ivy Chen.

This is the fourth time that Niu and Juan have worked together – they are the Taiwanese Scorsese and DiCaprio, if you will. The duo worked together on romance flick *Love* in 2012 and then moved on to open a talent management agency

together last year. But their most notable collaboration remains the 2010 hit *Monga*, which was Taiwan's submission for the 83rd Academy Awards and nabbed Juan the title of Best Actor at the prestigious Taiwanese Golden Horse Awards for his portrayal of Monk – an intense, yet-kindhearted and sexually confused gangster. Juan has been immensely popular ever since, after breaking out from overly saccharine idol TV dramas and moving into more challenging big screen characters. The tall, charming and handsome 31-year-old has already got two more films slated to be released early next year.

Paradise in Service is the duo's biggest budget film to date, with a whopping US\$8.3million behind it. There were concerns for the movie when Niu was indicted on charges of smuggling Mainland cinematographer, Cao Yu, into Kinmen – Taiwan has strict policies forbidding Chinese nationals on to sensitive military land – and whether the director is completely out of hot water is yet to be seen. But luckily this incident hasn't affected the release of the film. *Time Out Hong Kong* chats with both the director and his lead star about the meaning behind the movie and how they've come to appreciate the history of their native land.

ETHAN JUAN

Nice to meet you Ethan. Tell us about your new role as Li Pao-tai...

Xiao Pao is like an eye. He's just like you and me. When we see all that's happening, it's through my character's eyes. Pao is faced with many choices. In some of these choices, he feels like he's made the wrong decision, and can't make up for them. Within his three years of his service, he went from a pure-souled, virgin boy to a smooth-talking, gambling, smoking man with lots of indiscretions. Life brings us such changes. Eventually someone smacks you in the head and wakes you up, and you start to examine the choices you have made. And that can be scary.



Doze Niu



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Was this a particularly challenging role?

When we trained for our roles, we placed ourselves on that little island for three months without any contact with our loved ones. We couldn't go home. In the beginning, the army training was very hard. The trainers didn't treat me like an actor but like a soldier. If I didn't do as I was told there would be consequences like there would have been back when there was martial law. We were made to feel lonely and helpless under the immense pressure to get into character. That was special to me – but it was also challenging.

You've worked with Doze Niu before. What felt different about your collaboration this time?

He used to be very bad-tempered but now he's a little softer, and he's able to listen and see the pressure and pain in other people. This time, he's keener to give a hand to others, which is kind of strange [laughs]. Sometimes when we mess up, he'll deal with it with jokes. It's like, all of a sudden he has a sense of humour.

How were you or your family affected by the historical events that this film aims to depict?

My grandfather was from that era and I grew up with him and heard his stories. I would tell him then that 'you've just told me the same story five minutes ago, so don't tell me again.' Now, I understand why he missed his home so much and why he wanted to tell me so much about it.

So you have newfound appreciation of your grandfather?

Absolutely. When he saw this movie, he was brought back to that time when he was younger and full of life. This meant a lot to me. I was brought up by my grandfather and I love him very much, even more than my parents. To understand his stories and to have that connection with him is very meaningful to me. This was one of the main reasons that I took this role.

What left the most lasting impression on you while shooting this movie?

That every choice a person makes

will shape who they will eventually become. Pao felt like he made a wrong choice regarding a friend that resulted in the loss of two lives. This was the hardest pill for him to swallow. Sometimes you make a choice even when you feel it is wrong, then spend the rest of your days regretting it and making up for it, but it changes nothing.

Is this the most serious and important role in your career so far?

Yes. This is a turning point for me. I used to be very lost, just wanting to work for money and fame. But my inner self didn't grow during this period. I was confused, just like a child. I couldn't handle what was to come after such success. I often made wrong decisions and felt regret, but I couldn't change anything like my character. The story of this movie cleverly strung together the plot and my life experiences. Also because of this movie, my soul grew like a seed. I feel like I'm looking forward to my future roles without fear.

DOZE NIU

Nice to meet you director Niu. What inspired you to make this film and touch upon such a sensitive topic?

It feels like it's just a story set on the island of Kinmen – but the story that the movie conveys happens to everybody. I recently realised that it continues to happen to this day, like in the Gaza Strip, where kids are bombed to death. ISIS is always looking for another sacrificial lamb. There is always discrimination between different people – always prejudice. There are lots of wounds that haven't healed within our people. We speak the same language, are of the same ethnicity, are of the same blood, but why are we in the state we are in right now? By properly understanding the history behind everything, the chains will unlock and the wounds will heal. That's why I insisted on making this movie.

Are you worried that this film might offend some people?

I know this material is a little dangerous in today's media market. It's a very sensitive subject that doesn't actually settle well in China or Taiwan. It's not a film you'd really see in either markets.

Will this film be released in the Mainland?

I can't decide that – but I'm optimistic. This film might be viewing history from the angle of the Taiwanese military, but it's about a common memory and the emotion of the people back then. I'm hoping the movie will be seen by those who were meant to see it. I believe this is going to be good for the relations between China and Taiwan.

Tell us about the controversy over smuggling in a cameraman...

I was wrong and I admit my mistake. I thought it wasn't a big deal. We were just making a movie. All I can do now is face the consequences.

How come you didn't play a character in this film like you usually do?

It's a lot of work to direct and act at the same time. I'd go mad and everyone would hate me. I want to separate myself from that. I just want to be a proper director. Plus, some people thought I was greedy to direct [*Love*] with a sex scene involving myself and Shu Qi. I also don't want people to be offended by the way I look [laughs]. Had I played a role in this film, I might've ruined it.

How do you personally resonate with this period of history?

I am of Mainland descent and both of my parents came over to Taiwan in 1949 as soldiers. They had no way back home. Some of my mum's family eventually came over but nobody came from my dad's. We never bought land because we were planning to go back. Someone asked my grandfather back then if he'd like to purchase a piece of land in what is now one of the busiest areas in Taipei. It was NT\$0.50 (\$0.13) per three square metres back then. We would've been rich now if we bought it! My dad was often unhappy, angry even. The only time the members in my family were truly happy was when they reminisced about the past, but that wasn't healthy. Chiang Kai-shek made a promise to bring them back home but after his death, the Mainlanders were not mourning for him, but instead mourning a promise that would never be fulfilled. This all affected me. My dad was later diagnosed with ALS. He was bedridden for 20 years, hooked up to tubes before he passed. I tried to imagine how he lived as a youngster in Beijing. How much he wanted his mother. How did he end up in Taiwan? Did his unhappiness contribute to his illness? I felt sad for the life he led. He wasn't the only one – there were thousands upon thousands just like him. We all have our own sorrows and wounds, but, for them, it was crueler. I wanted to leave a little something behind for them with this film.

What do you ultimately want to strive for as a director?

I want my movies to mean something to the world. I want them to elevate me, elevate this life and to stop this world from collapsing. No matter what I do, I want to fill it with love. Some of it might be dark but I hope my movies can dissolve the prejudices that we all carry. That's what I strive for.

Paradise in Service
In cinemas now.