



# K

## Emyr ap Richard, Darhad Erdenibulag

**Producer** Jia Zhangke, Emyr ap Richard, Justine O, Zhang Dong, Tao Li, Tsiring, Zhao Siyuan. **Production companies** Xstream Pictures (Peking, People's Republic of China); East Light Film Limited (Hongkong, People's Republic of China); Beijing Y&Y Film Development Co., Ltd. (Beijing, People's Republic of China). **Director** Emyr ap Richard, Darhad Erdenibulag. **Screenplay** Emyr ap Richard. **Director of photography** Matthieu Laclau. **Production design** Emyr ap Richard, Darhad Erdenibulag. **Costume** Yang Yunyi, Liu Shuwei. **Make-up** Imp Chan. **Sound** Yang Zhang. **Sound design** Yang Zhang. **Editor** Matthieu Laclau. **Cast** Bayin (K), Jula (Frieda), Yirgui (Olga), Altanochir (Artur), Zandaraa (Jeremias), Nomindalai (Barnabas), Ariuna (Amalia), Urinshaa (Landlady), Norbu (Landlord), Oyunsang (Village Mayor).

DCP, colour. 86 min. Mongolian.

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You've heard this one before, a land surveyor named K arrives in a distant village and becomes ensnared in the nearby castle's procedural machinations. Yet this time round, things are different. As K traverses the vast Inner Mongolian plain, there's no castle on the horizon and his arrival in the village is merely an abrupt awakening on a sunny afternoon. His two leather-clad assistants are hardly as alike as snakes, and Jeremiah, not Artur is to be their name.

This village is nearly all interiors, tight shots of hallways, lobbies and antechambers in various shades of white, green and blue. Old wirelesses play crackly 40s-tinged jazz, calls are taken on an orange rotary dial telephone and jumbo jets thunder overhead, a place archaic and modern in equal measure.

As the shifting maze of mayors, secretaries and ministers increasingly engulfs K, each passage begins to resemble the next and new rooms contain new visions. For in this spare, quietly radical adaptation of the Kafka classic, bureaucratic capriciousness becomes channelled into spatial confusion. A castle never seen, but always felt, like a half-remembered dream, bathed in the diffuse light of dawn.

*James Lattimer*

**"I thought the best idea would be to set it in a language that no one would understand"**

*What difficulties were there in adapting a novel that isn't just Kafkaesque, it is actually Kafka?*

**Darhad Erdenibulag:** The biggest difficulty was getting the material into a form appropriate for cinema. When you examine the text of the novel, what you find is that most of the narrative takes the form of seated conversations in or near beds. About eighty per cent or more of the novel is like this: K. talks to the Mayor while he lies in bed, the Landlady confronts K. when he's getting out of bed, the long Olga scene takes place around a kitchen table while Olga's parents and Amalia sleep in a bed at the back of the room, etc. Kafka even manages to turn the schoolhouse into a bedroom.

In this respect, we tried many different approaches, like filming a lot of supplementary material to help make the film more watchable. And in our earlier edits, the film was very different, longer, more flashy and stylised. But none of these approaches worked. They all lacked that key emotional component. Jia Zhang-ke helped us to find the emotional core, revolving around K.'s relationship to the women in the story, particularly in the character of Frieda and once that was in place, all the supplementary material fell away.

*Emyr, you come from a photography background; how important are the images in K for you?*

**Emyr ap Richard:** Darhad Erdenibulag and I both come from photographic backgrounds. The photography of the film was very important to us. We had always talked of shooting a film entirely by natural light and we tried to do this with our first film, *Tabun mahabuda* (*The First Aggregate*, 2012), but the demands of the script were too much of a constraint. One of the advantages of adapting *The Castle* is that the physical setting is very loose; it's not set in any particular place. But where Kafka's novel takes place in deep snow and an almost endless night, *K* takes place on an endless day with no night.

*What do you think the film gained by transporting it to Mongolia?*

**Darhad Erdenibulag/Emyr ap Richard:** This gets back to the way the book is written. It's not really clear where the book is set, in that the physical location is not so important to the story. 'Place' isn't a character in the work as it would be in another novel. Instead it takes place in an unnamed snowy village in an unnamed country. There are only two or three references in the book that ground it to any particular geography, and those are Frieda's comment about running away to France or Spain, and the Mayor's reference to the official named Sordini – an 'Italian'. In terms of the actual story, all you need are some rooms and a few village exteriors. I didn't feel these three references were enough to demand that the story be set in Europe. I also felt that if you were to make this in Europe, it would have to be a period piece and people would have trouble relating. By switching everything to an unnamed Central Asian village, and a language that almost no one would speak, we could 'level the playing field'. For example, if it the film were shot in Europe, in German, then you'd have at least one audience who could watch the film without any textual support. So for me, I thought the best idea would be to set it in a language that almost no one would understand. This forces most viewers to interact with the film textually, i.e. through the subtitles. Then most people are

at the same disadvantage when they see it. The physical location is not obvious, and the language is hard to identify – there are even five separate dialects of Mongolian spoken in the film, not all of which would be easily understood by some Mongolian viewers. That's not to say that we had an idea and went to look for a minority language in which to shoot it. We've both lived in the capital Hohhot for many years, and you do what you can with the resources available and try to use what you have in the most effective way.

*'What you say is not untrue, only hostile.' The film features some great dialogue. Was much of it your own?*

Almost none. It's based entirely on Kafka's dialogue. Of course, some of the dialogue is combined and summarised and reworked. But it's all essentially from the novel. There was actually no Mongolian script for the actors. There was a reference script in Chinese but we used it only as a guide to the content of the scenes. Bulag and I would sit down with the actors and discuss the meaning of the dialogue, and then through experimentation and consensus, we would decide on the rough form of the Mongolian. We would only do this immediately prior to shooting so as to preserve the freshness. It was also important to do it this way because each of the actors speaks a different dialect of Mongolian, each of which is sonically different from one another. If we had produced a Mongolian screenplay, it could only have been written in the standard script and each of the actors would then have felt pressure to produce the dialogue in the standard dialect. By forcing everyone to translate the meaning of the words into their own dialects, it gave the dialogue a lot more life and in a sense all of the actors were the authors of their own dialogue.

*I'm sure you're aware of Haneke's adaptation of Kafka's The Castle, but did you ever look to it for inspiration in solving problems or did you make sure to go as far away as possible from it?*

Of course, we watched all the other versions we could find. Rudolf Noelte, Alexei Balabanov, and Michael Haneke's were the main adaptations. We also read various stage adaptations. We didn't really look to Haneke's version for inspiration because the aims of that film were entirely different to ours. I think Haneke was commissioned to make it for Austrian television and he himself said that its only purpose was to encourage people to read the novel. So it wasn't really appropriate for us to draw inspiration from that version. Our aim was to make a watchable film from difficult material.

*Considering that Kafka died before completing the novel, was there a big discussion about the film's ending? What made you choose the ending you did?*

I think there are two schools of thought on the ending. For example, some commentators consider *The Castle* to be more complete than, say, *The Trial*. Whilst it's true that *The Trial* has a more definitive beginning and end, there are enormous gaps in the body of the narrative, and the precise arrangement of the chapters was not known to Max Brod when he put the manuscript together for publication. I personally feel *The Trial* to be more incomplete. But if you look at *The Castle*, it feels like the more singular work. What you have in the novel is a blow-by-blow account of where K. is and what he does over the course of six days. The only gaps in this chronology are the sections where K. is asleep. And if you think about where he is by the end



of the novel, everything that's been set up has run its course. There are, of course, some loose ends, like his plans with the young boy at the school, but all the major plot lines have come full circle. In our earliest plans, we knew the film could not end in the same way as a book. The novel famously breaks off mid-sentence, which creates a strange high point that works as the ending for the book. But if you then ask what the cinematic equivalent is, it can only be an unexpected cut. We didn't feel this would work, and searched around the book for an alternative. Our original plan was to have the film end with a recreation of a beautiful scene hidden in the early part of the book, when K. remembers a childhood adventure where he scaled the high wall of a church. We filmed all of these scenes, set in a very obviously modern Inner Mongolia, and in Chinese. But in the end they didn't really work and broke the sense of isolation we feel in the rest of the film. The eventual ending was probably the most difficult thing to find, and not finding it was the source of our biggest problems.

*Many actors will be unknown to the audience. Where did you find them and was it difficult to cast?*

We've both worked in Inner Mongolia for many years, and over the years we've come to know many great actors. It was a dream of ours to find a project that would appeal to audiences outside of Inner Mongolia, that would require an ensemble cast, which would allow us to offer roles to all of the great Mongolian actors we know who otherwise wouldn't have a chance to work together. In this sense, Bayin was the glue that would tie everything together. Casting Bayin as K. was crucial, because we had to have someone with a very specific set of attributes, who would have the necessary authority to act as a natural focus for the rest of the cast. We didn't think there were any other actors who could play the role of K. and if Bayin had refused, we would have dropped the idea and done something else. He's a well-known and well-respected actor, and a lot of the cast are not so well known, so we hoped that for them, playing alongside Bayin would emulate the feeling in the novel where K. is the odd man out. His very real stage presence and celebrity created a tension in the supporting cast that we hoped would emphasise K.'s status as a stranger in the midst of a close-knit village community.

*Interview: Ashley Norris*

## The flow of the Mongolian language

Adapting *The Castle* in Mongolian is an excellent idea. When I first watched the film, I was struck by the fact that all the actors spoke Mongolian. The rhythm and flow of the Mongolian language is a great attraction for me; it feels alien yet strangely familiar, bringing with it a kind of abstract feeling that matches the novel. It allows us to move past specifics of place or person, and transposes the story into the universal. We can all relate to *The Castle*; it's a concept each of us carries inside. When the lead actor says, 'Every relationship has its flaws', I feel we glimpse a truth that transcends boundaries. This film moves me.

*Jia Zhang-ke*



**Emyr ap Richard** was born in Carmarthenshire, Wales, in 1981 and worked for the Welsh-language television station S4C before moving to live in Inner Mongolia, where he worked as a freelance photographer, writer, and English-Mongolian translator. After *Tabun mahabuda / The First Aggregate* (2012, 90 min.), which he co-directed with Darhad Erdenibulag, *K* is Emyr ap Richard's second feature-length film.



**Darhad Erdenibulag** was born in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, in 1978. He studied Fine Art at Inner Mongolia University's College of Art. After graduation, he first worked as a freelance interior designer before starting as a documentary filmmaker for Inner Mongolia Television. To date, he has made two films in collaboration with Emyr ap Richard: *Tabun mahabuda / The First Aggregate* (2012, 90 min.) and *K*.