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翡翠之城

Fei cui zhi cheng

City of Jade

Midi Z

Producer Wang Shin-hong, Midi Z, Isabella Ho, Lin Sheng-wen. **Production companies** Myanmar Montage Productions (Rangoon, Myanmar), Seashore Image Productions (Taipei, Taiwan). **Director** Midi Z. **Screenplay** Midi Z, Wu Pei-chi. **Director of photography** Midi Z, Wang Fu-ang. **Editor** Midi Z, Lin Sheng-wen. **Music** Lim Giong. **Sound design** Tu Duu-chih. **Sound** Tu Duu-chih.

DCP, colour. 99 min. Burmese.

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World sales Seashore Image Productions

Director Midi Z was only five years old when his oldest brother abandoned the family, himself just sixteen at the time. There were rumours that he'd found riches in the mythical "City of Jade". The family only saw him again at the father's funeral in 1997 – poor and addicted to opium. Years later, by which time Midi Z had moved to Taiwan and become a film director, he was released from the Mandalay prison. Weak, but still hopeful of finding a big jade gemstone to become rich overnight, he set off once again for the mines, just like countless others in Myanmar's war-torn Kachin state on the border with China. Midi Z accompanied him with his camera, following him on his motorbike through the jungle, pushing ever further into the dangerous inner core of an inaccessible man's world. This is a place where heroes, adventurers and desperate souls live and toil, digging, drilling and searching for jade, hunted down by bands of soldiers and plagued by malaria, with opium spurring them as they pursue their dream of great wealth. *Fei cui zhi cheng* documents a moving cinematic attempt to bring two very different brothers closer together.

Dorothee Wenner

Mad about photos

For years, a photo has hung in our living room in which my father faces the camera, smoking while my mother cooks noodles behind him. In the background is a muddy street in a market. My mother told me that the photo was taken by a mad photographer in Jade City in 1990.

Later I followed my eldest brother to Jade City to make a documentary. When people saw me with a camera, they always asked me to take photos of them.

Many times while shooting *Fei cui zhi cheng*, I could not see through the viewfinder; it appeared to simply not be there. Moreover, the ideas of 'frame' and 'composition', or concepts such as 'aesthetics', 'poetic feel', and 'image' as analysed in cinema studies did not seem to exist either. Back then, they meant nothing, let alone helping me explain what was happening before my eyes.

Midi Z

"We artists must act faster than the so-called changes of the government"

What are the most important themes in Fei cui zhi cheng and what motivated you to choose them?

Midi Z: Myanmar is rapidly opening itself up, and it seems to be becoming more prosperous, peaceful and stable. However, there are signs everywhere that show the 'unchanged' things hidden behind the 'changes'. The value of the jade mined in Jade City makes up to twenty-five per cent of the GDP in Myanmar, and it is contributed by those who risk their lives at the bottom of society; this fact has not changed for fifty or even a hundred years. The protagonists in *Fei cui zhi cheng* often look into the camera, waiting for changes to come. However, they never pin their hopes on the government or any policy; instead, it is jade and fate in which they believe.

To what extent were you able to express yourself through your work during the times of censorship?

Any restriction (including censorship) resulting from anything other than the creative process itself isn't the biggest restriction for an artist. The biggest restriction comes from the creative process itself. Actually, when restriction permeates the environment, it fails to restrict you at all, and you become completely free. I never think about any restriction imposed; if I did, I could never create anything.

Can you give some practical examples of censorship and the ways you found to circumvent those restrictions?

When you want to make a feature film in Myanmar, you have to send your screenplay for approval. Only when the screenplay is approved will you be allowed to shoot the film. After you finish shooting and editing, you have to submit the film to the authorities. Again, only when it passes the censors will it be allowed to be released. But for me such censorship doesn't exist since I never intend to show my films in public in Myanmar. Shooting films in Myanmar is a very personal creative process for me; it's not part of the industry. Of course not only the commercial films are censored, so are personal works, hence it imposes restrictions on one's freedom. Maybe the situation will change in the future, but not for now. Nevertheless, as an individual artist, I'm very used to it; I work under these restrictions, but also

enjoy the freedom since we know only too well that we'll never crack into mainstream market or comply with censorship. So we never consider the market or a commercial release. Of course it's a contradictory idea because I really want to show my films to the Burmese, but I'm not allowed. Nonetheless, that's how art exists; when a work is created, it is completed.

What are the conditions like for artists in Myanmar now? What do you see as the main changes for you and your work?

As for the conditions for artists in Myanmar now, I don't really have a clear understanding of it. I feel what is more serious than censorship or the restrictions imposed by the authorities are the lack of information and the lack of stimulation. Films, books, art exhibitions and criticism are scarce in Myanmar. The lack of information sometimes results in the gap between the development of the world or human beings and the artists' works. For me, the biggest challenge always comes from the creative process itself. Cinema has a history of just over a hundred years; when films are treated as a commercial product, the production methods or the styles have in fact stayed the same as they were sixty years ago. It hasn't been innovated or re-invented; most of the innovation in film is old-fashioned. The only thing that has improved greatly is the method of 'packaging' films as products.

Since Myanmar cannot separate itself from the rest of the world, capitalism and economic liberalism will eventually dominate the country. Of course what lies behind capitalism and economic liberalism are the superpowers disguised in another form. The changes taking place in Myanmar are mainly in its economy; it still doesn't have the ability to focus on art and culture. I feel what is needed more urgently than art and culture are education and medical care.

Changes may not directly influence our work, but eventually they will. As long as there are changes in freedom and democratisation, it'll have a huge impact on the artists' creative process.

What do you consider your main challenge in working in present-day Burma/Myanmar?

The biggest challenge remains my ideas of cinema; cinema and art themselves pose the biggest challenge for me. Of course the biggest challenge from the outside is to work in fear.

Has the less restrictive climate had an impact on the themes you choose?

In terms of creativity per se, there is no impact. However, it is due to censorship and restrictions that my films are shot and presented in this way. Nevertheless, it has no impact on the themes or how I express them.

Is there any project you have been dreaming about for a long time and think now the time has come to work on?

I've got a lot of scripts in mind, and most of them are set in the 1980s/1990s Myanmar. But in the current political atmosphere, they still cannot be tolerated or accepted. Maybe these stories could be shot with such restrictions imposed, and they would look very different. But to assess it rationally, it is still not a good time to make these films.

How confident are you that these changes will be sustainable in the future?

I'm quite optimistic about these changes. Maybe they are quite slow, but little by little, things will change for the better in the future. But we artists must act faster than those so-called changes made by the government. We cannot rely on them, and we have to express that in our work.

What do you hope is the impact of your work on society, especially on Burmese society?

When I make films, I rarely think of their impact on society. Of course, I hope that at least people in my hometown can get to see them, and that's enough.

Can you elaborate on what the importance is of art in a country like Burma/Myanmar where so many people still struggle to make ends meet?

I think, firstly, that art is most meaningful to the artists themselves, and then its importance extends to the country and society. Only when art is the most important thing to the artists can artists struggle to keep the existence of art despite all the difficulties they have to confront. Art provides artists a way to express their views and an outlet for their happiness as well as suffering, and therefore it means a lot to them. For the masses in the country... An ancient Chinese saying goes, 'People have to be fed and clothed before learning honour and morals.' Maybe we can say, 'People have to be fed and clothed before learning art.'

What would you like to say to the audience?

I hope everyone can be open-minded about everything, including being completely open-minded about art and film.

Are you planning to settle in Burma/Myanmar or will you remain in Taiwan?

We set up a company in Myanmar in 2010. In recent years, I've spent half the time making films in Myanmar and the other half in Taiwan. In 2015, I was mostly in Thailand and finished shooting a film there. I think my life will remain like this; I always miss the comfortable life in Taiwan when I'm in Myanmar, and I miss the tough life in Myanmar when I'm in Taiwan. The tough life is what drives me to make films.

Source: Production company



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Midi Z was born in Lashio, Myanmar in 1982, and he has lived in Taiwan since the age of sixteen. From 2001 to 2006, he studied Visual and Graphic Design at the National Taiwan University of Technology and Science, where he also completed a degree in Information and Interactive Design in 2010. Midi Z made his first short film, *Bai ge/Paloma Blanca* in 2006. *Fei cui zhi cheng / City of Jade* is his fifth full-length film.

Films

2006: *Bai ge/Paloma Blanca* (14 min.). 2008: *Mo tuo che fu/Motorcycle Driver* (28 min.). 2009: *Hua xin jie ji shi/Hua-xin Incident* (24 min.), *Jia xiang lai de ren/The Man From Hometown* (16 min.). 2010: *Cai cai wo shi shui/Guess Who I Am?* (15 min.). 2011: *Gui lai de ren/Return to Burma* (84 min.). 2012: *Qiong ren liu lian ma yao tou du ke/Poor Folk* (115 min.). 2013: *Che mo pi hu/Silent Asylum* (15 min.). 2014: *Hai shang huang gong/The Palace on the Sea* (16 min.), *Bing du/Ice Poison* (95 min., Berlinale Panorama 2014). 2015: *Wa yu shi de ren/Jade Miners* (104 min.). 2016: *Fei cui zhi cheng / City of Jade*.