



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2023 OFFICIAL SELECTION

THE BREAKING ICE

燃冬

A FILM BY
ANTHONY CHEN



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SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2023

THE BREAKING ICE

(RAN DONG)

A FILM BY
ANTHONY CHEN

2023 | CHINA | DRAMA | 97 MIN | COLOR | MANDARIN, KOREAN WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

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LOGLINE

Set in Yanji, a border city in the north of China, the film follows the blossoming relationship among three young adults in their twenties, set over a few short days in the winter snow.



SYNOPSIS

In cold wintry Yanji, a city on China's northern border, young urbanite Haofeng, visiting from Shanghai, feels lost and adrift. By chance, he goes on a tour led by Nana, a charming tour guide who instantly fascinates him. She introduces him to Xiao, a personable but frustrated restaurant worker. The three bond quickly over a drunken weekend. Confronting their individual traumas, their frozen desires slowly thaw as they seek to liberate themselves from an icy world.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

THE BREAKING ICE was born out of impulse and spontaneity.

I was desperate to make a film after two years of being cooped up at home during the pandemic when I had a huge existential crisis. And when certain projects got delayed, I was determined to make something. I was searching for a sense of identity, to "exist" as a filmmaker.

Looking to liberate myself from my old ways, and challenge myself outside my comfort zone, I thus forced myself to make film in an unfamiliar country, terrain and climate. I wanted to capture the spirit of the current generation of young Chinese whom I have been reading about so much in recent time.

The end result is I hope as freeing as the process of making it. This is a film I made in the shortest time ever from conception to completion. And the craziest endeavor I have embarked on in the longest time.

It was a leap of faith for all of us. A wild adventure in a cold, icy winter. And for me, a love letter to the young people of China.

INTERVIEW

The image of ice plays an important role in the film. What led you to tell a story in this frigid environment?

When I decided to set the film in winter, I thought we should make it a proper winter film, hence we should head up north to one of the coldest places in China. Before this film, I hadn't been to the Northeast of China, but I do remember vividly from my childhood a Harbin ice sculpture exhibition that was brought to Singapore. When I think of winter, it's not just snow, but the idea of ice comes to mind.

I find it fascinating that water solidifies into ice quite quickly under low temperatures, and when the sun or some heat comes into play, it melts back into water rapidly. There is something about this idea that attracted me, and without having a sense of what story or plot I wanted to write, I knew I wanted to capture this feeling – of three young people bonding and developing a relationship in a relatively short time. They all end up splitting up eventually, but have all left something in one another, that changes each individual forever.

The landscape shots of Changbai Mountain and Heaven Lake strongly echoes with Chinese paintings in the film, what is the significance of the geography and the connection with traditional artwork?

When I visited Changbai Mountain for the first time, I was astounded by its beauty, particularly for the breathtaking Heaven Lake which sits halfway between China and the Korean Peninsula. Some of

the landscapes that I observed felt so painterly, it was as though they were Chinese paintings, which are mostly monochromatic, with a stirring tension within their beauty.

I knew I wanted to capture that, or rather photograph the mountains as though they were traditional Chinese paintings come to life. I got my production designer to research actual paintings painted of that area through the centuries and also featured them in the film.

In *THE BREAKING ICE* you combine folklores, surreal scenes, and metaphor in a way that you have not explored in your previous work, can you talk a little about the shift?

The whole process of making this film was about embracing change, about trying to break the mold of my work and the process of it, it was both nerve-racking and exciting at the same time. So many elements in the film were inspired by the things I observed during my scouting in Yanji and the surrounding areas. Even the legend about the bear in the film was part of my research of Changbai Mountain. I was surprised that the foreignness of the place sparked many ideas that organically found their way into my script. There is a magical quality to Yanji when I discovered it and I wanted to capture that.



There seems to be a sense of freedom in the filmmaking in this film. Can you talk about this?

It mostly came from the spontaneity of making this film. We had no script when I decided to embark on this crazy endeavor. Ironically, this freedom also came from setting up a list of restrictions and choosing to put myself outside my comfort zone. I forced myself to make a film in a place I haven't been to, in a climate I haven't worked in, and locking down a shooting window before I have figured out what story we were actually making.

It felt like an adventure, albeit a risky one. I wanted to make a film about the current generation of young people in China, and a sense of spiritual freedom that they are all seeking. In a way, the approach I took to execute this film was as freeing as the themes I was exploring.

All three protagonists are out-of-towners in Yanji, how does this relate to your position as a foreigner working in mainland China?

It has become more and more apparent that no matter what I do, or where I make my films, there will be certain themes that will recur and reverberate.

Strangely, all my films seem to deal with outsiders or foreigners and the complex and intimate bonds shared between strangers. In my film *ILO ILO*, it was one between a Filipino helper and the 10-year-old kid she takes care of. In *WET SEASON*, it was a Chinese-language middle-aged teacher from Malaysia and her 16-year-old male student. In *DRIFT*, it was that of an African refugee and an American tour guide.

I actually feel comfortable having this "outsider" or "foreigner" identity, in certain ways it has freed me of baggage, I will find poetry and beauty in things that locals might find mundane or commonplace or even banal. It was intentional that all three characters don't



hail from the area, I didn't want to end up tripping over myself just to find the honesty and truth of their backgrounds.

There are also quite a lot of Korean elements, how does this cross-cultural background relate to the protagonists narratively and thematically?

This was very much what intrigued and excited me

about Yanji as half of the population are of Korean ancestry and speak the language. As we explore the city, sometimes you forget that you are in China. It sits on the border between China and the Korean Peninsula and what you get is a hybrid of both cultures. That fits in even more with some of the themes the film is exploring as it's a film where these young characters are all searching for a sense of identity and they have all ended up in this semi-foreign land.



The music is very distinctive, can you explain some of your choices there?

Speaking about music, it is worth noting that both my first two films *ILO ILO* and *WET SEASON* have no musical score at all. There are several cues in my last film *DRIFT* which premiered earlier this year and it was rather minimalist in style too.

For *THE BREAKING ICE*, I knew right away that I needed music in the film to bring out the energy, complexities and emotions of youth. I brought on Kin Leonn, a young Singaporean musician in his twenties. I discovered his music on Spotify and met him some time back when we both still resided in London. I love the textures and emotions of his music and my hunch was that he would be the right person to score the

film. It was a leap of faith as he hasn't scored a feature before, but it paid off wonderfully and resulted in a lovely collaboration. I also hope that this film will introduce more of Kin Leonn's work to the world. I find him incredibly talented.

The three characters are like a triptych of a new generation, what are your thoughts on them individually and their dynamic as a group?

I was reading a lot of articles and write-ups about the disillusionment of this current generation of young people in China. Because I didn't grow up or live in China, I don't feel I have the authority to sculpt an authentic social realist portrait of what life feels like for a young person in the country. Hence, I was attempting to translate those ideas that I was reading about through broader strokes, and ideally expressing the emotions and anxieties of this generation. Our trio are individuals who have failed and been failed in different ways and struggle with their failures and disappointments in varying manners. For me, these three have found each other at a particular crossroad of their lives, and their interactions will have changed one another forever.

This youthful love triangle is a familiar theme in cinema, are there any films that inspired you when making this? Where did the idea for this film come from?

I have always loved François Truffaut's *JULES AND JIM* and when I thought about making a film about young people set over just a few short days, I knew like *JULES AND JIM*, it will be a trio of two men and a lady. But for me it was important that this isn't just a typical trite love triangle with two men falling for the same girl, I wanted to establish some form of ambiguity and complexity in the relationships.

One might also notice in the film at the bookstore, a fun homage to Jean-Luc Godard's *BANDE À PART* (*BAND OF OUTSIDERS*), specifically the long running scene inside the Louvre. I challenged the team to recreate our version of it in one long take.

Zhou Dongyu, Liu Haoran, and Qu Chuxiao are all very well known in China, can you tell us a little bit about the casting process and what they bring to the roles?

I wanted to work with actors that would want to come along this adventure and give themselves completely to it. I first rang up Zhou Dongyu, even before I had written a word on the script. We worked together for the first time on my short film contribution to the

pandemic anthology *THE YEAR OF THE EVERLASTING STORM* (which premiered in Cannes in 2021), but it was shot during the pandemic and I directed the entire film remotely in London. I felt we should definitely collaborate again, but properly physically on set together and on a much longer film. She said yes almost instantly. Liu Haoran was an actor I got to know during my travels to the Shanghai International Film Festival as jury member in 2021. I had only seen him in commercial films (he was well known in the *DETECTIVE CHINATOWN* franchise which enjoyed blockbuster success), when I got to know him, I found him deeply knowledgeable and perceptive.

For Qu Chuxiao, I was introduced to his film *LOVE WILL TEAR US APART* by my producing partner Meng Xie, I hadn't confirmed him until I met him in person in China but I was writing the role with him in mind. For these actors, I attempted to bring a lot of personal characteristics and also their backgrounds in the writing of the roles. For example, Zhou Dongyu trained at sports school in gymnastics before she was discovered as an actress, hence I created the role of an ex-athlete. I even ended up approaching her own mother to voice the role of Nana's mother so they spoke in their own dialect.



ANTHONY CHEN DIRECTOR

Anthony Chen is an award-winning writer, director and producer from Singapore. Anthony Chen became the first Singaporean to be awarded at Cannes with short film *AH MA* in 2007. His debut feature *ILO ILO* (2013) was awarded the Caméra d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, followed by 40 awards internationally including 4 Golden Horse Awards.

His sophomore film *WET SEASON* (2019) was nominated for the Platform Prize at the Toronto International Film Festival. Both films are Singapore's official submissions for the Academy Awards.

In 2021, he contributed a short to the anthology film *THE YEAR OF THE EVERLASTING STORM*, which premiered at Cannes.

DRIFT marked his English-language debut and premiered at Sundance 2023. *THE BREAKING ICE* is his first Chinese-language film made in China.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2023 THE BREAKING ICE
Writer & Director
Cannes (Un Certain Regard)
- 2023 DRIFT Director
Sundance (Premieres)
- 2021 THE YEAR OF THE EVERLASTING STORM Writer & Director
Cannes (Special Screenings)
- 2019 WET SEASON Writer & Director
TIFF (Platform Competition) / Singapore's Official Entry for the Academy Awards / Best Film, Best Actress and Cinephilia Critics' Award at Pingyao Film Festival / Best Film at the London East Asia FF / Nominated for 6 Golden Horse Awards
- 2013 ILO ILO Writer & Director
Caméra d'Or at Cannes IFF / Singapore's Official Entry for the Academy Awards / Best Feature, Best Screenplay, Best New Director and Best Supporting Actress at the Golden Horse Awards





ZHOU DONGYU AS ZHOU LUONA

A graduate from the Beijing Film Academy, Zhou Dongyu rose to stardom for the leading role in *UNDER THE HAWTHORN TREE* (Berlinale main competition, 2010) directed by Zhang Yimou. She received the Golden Horse Award for best lead actress for *SOUL MATE* (2016) and the Best Actress at the 33rd Golden Rooster Awards, 39th Hong Kong Film Awards, 35th People's Hundred Flowers Awards for Oscar nominated *BETTER DAYS* (Berlinale, 2019), both directed by Derek Tsang. Before *THE BREAKING ICE*, she starred in Anthony Chen's Cannes premiered short *THE BREAK AWAY* (2021) and co-starred with Liu Haoran in San Sebastian Film Festival official selection *FIRE ON THE PLAIN* (2021).



LIU HAORAN AS LI HAOFENG

A graduate from the Central Academy of Drama, Liu Haoran is widely regarded as one of the best actors among the young generation. The «*DETECTIVE CHINATOWN*» franchises he starred in are some of the highest-grossing films of Chinese box office history. He also co-starred with Zhou Dongyu in San Sebastian Film Festival official selection's *FIRE ON THE PLAIN* (2021).



QU CHUXIAO AS HAN XIAO

A graduate from the Central Academy of Drama, Qu Chuxiao is best known for his character in China's second highest-grossing non-English film of all time *THE WANDERING EARTH* (loosely based on a shorty story by Liu Cixin, 2019) and another commercial success, a romantic film *LOVE WILL TEAR US APART* (2021).

CREW

Director/Screenplay	Anthony Chen
Producers	Meng Xie Anthony Chen
Director of photography	Yu Jing-Pin
Production Designer	Du Luxi
Costume Designer	Li Hua
Sound Designer	Zhe Wu
Editors	Hoping Chen, Soo Mun Thye
Original Music	Kin Leonn

FILM SPECS

Original Title	RAN DONG
English Title	The Breaking ice
Year	2023
Runtime	97 min
Country	China
Language	Mandarin, Korean
Format	Digital, Color
Screening Format	DCP
Camera	Arri mini LF
Aspect Ratio	16:9
Frame rate	24 fps
Sound	5.1
Resolution	2K

INTERNATIONAL SALES

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