

KINDRED SPIRIT & WITNESS CULTURAL & CREATIVE

present



LOCUST

a film by KEFF

2024 – TAIWAN, US, FRANCE, QATAR – THRILLER, DRAMA
MANDARIN, HOKKIEN, HAKKA – 133'



SYNOPSIS

As the 2019 Hong Kong protests erupt across the strait, Zhong-Han, a silent twenty-something in Taiwan, leads a double life - working at a family restaurant by day, and running with a group of local gangsters by night. But when the ownership of the restaurant changes hands, it sets off an unexpected chain reaction that forces Zhong-Han to witness and confront the corrupt power games of his country.

INTERVIEW WITH KEFF - Director

You lived in many countries in Asia and you studied in the United States. Can you talk a bit about your journey?

I was born in Singapore, moved to Taipei, spent my formative years in Hong Kong, and then emigrated to the United States when I was 10 years old. My parents are born-and-raised in Taiwan, though my mother is half-Korean, and we can trace our family roots back to mainland China. But I have always been Taiwanese, raised by two Taiwanese, in a household with Taiwanese values and characteristics. 5 years ago, caught between a personal longing and a souring feeling about the state of minorities in the United States, I decided to move back to Taiwan for a fresh start, and to get to know my homeland better. I've been here ever since.

How did LOCUST start?

I moved back to Taipei in June 2019, right when the Hong Kong protests were really starting to escalate. Naturally, it was a bizarre circumstance for me to begin reconnecting and reabsorbing everything about my homeland during this time, and many of my initial impressions and observations about Taiwan are intrinsically intertwined with my memories that summer, and to the protest itself (which as a former Hong Konger, I followed closely.)

I spent the next year or so living all over the island, listening to hundreds of Taiwanese peoples' stories - particularly to the stories of my fellow youth, who openly shared with me all their hopes, dreams, fears, and despairs. I suddenly felt there was a great urgency and opportunity to tell their stories honestly – and from their collective stories, a story of my own that was a sum of their collected experiences began to emerge. But a lingering question still remained in my heart, one that remained unanswered since 2019: why didn't more of us Taiwanese people seem to care about what was happening in Hong Kong at the time?

And so, LOCUST was born, as an experiment. As I continued to live and learn more about Taiwan, I started to distill the stories I heard into a story of my own, and simultaneously tried to use it to answer the question I didn't have an answer to. To me, it seemed inexplicable and inexcusable at the time, especially given that there were signs being waved in Hong Kong saying "yesterday Tibet, today Hong Kong, tomorrow Taiwan." Did we not understand the implications of what was happening? Or did we really just not care? My answer to this changed as I wrote the film, and you can feel it change in the film as your understanding of the world, the characters, and their situations changes, just as mine did. In the end, I feel in my search for answers, I dug deep into Taiwan's soul, and along the way unearthed new revelations and connections not just about our island, but ones that provoked bigger universal questions about power, exploitation, ethics, and human nature.

Why did those questions propel you to make a gangster genre film?

I love genre because there's something very punk and rebellious about its excess/tastelessness and general non-conformity that resonates with me and who I am. I often end up challenging the status quo and provoking my audience in some way with my work, so it's very comfortable for me to lean into genre and all its conventions, especially when I want to hyperbolize and get certain feelings or points across in a more incisive, interesting manner.

In Hong Kong and Taiwan, there is no shortage of gangster films. But for some reason in the last twenty years, most of the gangster films have been about the 40 or 50 something year-olds, like Johnnie To's *ELECTION* – big suits and cigars. Whereas I found myself drawn to films like Edward Yang's *A BRIGHTER SUMMER DAY*, with 16-year-olds characters. Or *DUST OF ANGELS* – they're just kids. I was more interested in the portrayal of the angry and the ostracized, the lost youth who seek to be part of something. It's a feeling I know all too well. So when it came to making *LOCUST*, my first thought was that I wanted to capture that feeling. Leaning into the gangster genre enabled me to exaggerate the electrifying energy of being young, of living in the fast lane with reckless abandon and naïve hubris. It also provided for great dramatic contrast between Zhong-Han's daily life and his night life. So naturally, the gangster genre emerged as the right vehicle for this story. But I'm of course also a fan of all kinds of films – you can feel in *LOCUST* my influences from Taiwanese New Wave, Chinese Sixth Generation, as well as Korean, Japanese, Italian, and American films.

The aesthetic of *Locust* is striking, from the camera work to the color processing, from the sound to the editing. What was the guideline for you, as well as for your technical and artistic team?

Thank you. The key guiding principle is that we let Taiwan, its colors, its sounds, and its faces be the center of attention, and stayed out of the way as much as possible. My director of photography Nadim Carlsen and I were intent on faithfully serving the world, the characters, and the story, avoiding creative choices that felt like we were showing off or being self-congratulatory about our contributions. We even specifically looked for lenses that had minimal-to-no flaring, distortion, or breathing. Taiwan is striking enough, and all we tried to do was to harness the cinematic potential of what is already there. In some ways, I felt like I was making a time capsule for Taiwan. Because we don't know what is going to happen to Taiwan tomorrow.

Throughout production, I constantly stressed to our team that we were making 滷肉飯電影 : “a braised pork rice film.” Braised pork rice is arguably the humblest of Taiwanese dishes, with the most pedestrian ingredients... but when it's done right, it's incredibly complex, and unbelievably delicious. That was our task: to create complex flavors, using the simplest ingredients. A strange ask for a film that's at least half a genre film, but I think the result is that our film has some sort of understated quality to it, without losing any power and intensity.

What was the process of finding your cast like? How did you come to decide LIU Wei Chen was your Zhong-Han?

Casting was challenging for us because of the political nature of the film. Many actors stayed away from our film for fear of jeopardizing their career in China, which is an unfortunate dilemma Taiwanese people must constantly contend with. Wei Chen was the very first actor I met with for the lead role, and without me requesting it, he showed up to the meeting in character, and didn't say a word for a whole hour. He was a surprising discovery, as he had previously only acted in supporting roles and web-series. As I got to know him, I became impressed with his intuitive understanding of the character and his excitement to take on this challenging role. It also felt fated that he grew up with a similar background as Zhong-Han. That became a guiding principle in how I approached casting – I looked for actors who had inherent qualities that mirrored their characters', so that we could build upon a foundation of authenticity. This was crucial because our film covers a wide spectrum of Taiwanese identities and languages. I was fortunate to have found a group of kind, dedicated and incredibly talented actors, who were willing to put in the time, work, and explorations in empathy for their characters.

What went into the choice of centering the film around a silent protagonist?

In my mission to portray the essence of being Taiwanese, I needed a protagonist who would represent a generation in a country that can't speak for itself. Taiwan is constantly denied its rightful place at the table – during the pandemic, we weren't even allowed to attend the W.H.O. meetings, even though we had proven and invaluable expertise in combating COVID to share. As a country, we are often rendered voiceless on the world stage, and that is felt the hardest by our youth, who are repressed by vast economic inequality and an uncertain future.

At the same time, I didn't want to reduce Zhong-Han to a metaphor. I think what is so important in my understanding of him is that someone who is in that situation must protect his dignity at all times. When I was writing it, I spoke to people who were non-verbal and I always asked them "if I make a movie with a non-verbal person, how do you want them to be perceived?". And everyone answered the same way: "Can he just be a normal person?" So that's what we did.

As a multidisciplinary artist, what do you particularly appreciate about writing and directing films?

To me, filmmaking is the most immersive way to tell a story, in the most intentional sort of way. You really have to think about what and how you communicate, and consider how and what your audience takes in and interprets. You have to consider how your audience's relationship and emotions with your work changes while they are experiencing it, and what sort of hopes, fears, beliefs and expectations develop along the way... and what you want to do with them. I kind of enjoy that challenge, of deciding what to give and take as part of a greater designed experience, knowing that every choice creates all kinds of different consequences.

There's a whole historical, political and social context in the background of your film. How did you want to include it in your story?

My goal was to make a film with many layers for audiences to choose from. I'm sure there are some people who will engage with the film on a more plot-driven, surface-level experience, and that's okay: the film still works for them as just a thrilling gangster film, or a coming-of-age love story. But for those who are curious and willing to engage with the film on a deeper level, they'll find all sorts of hidden meanings and connections to unlock, as well as new intriguing, difficult questions to consider - along with some difficult possible answers to stomach.

ABOUT KEFF - Director

BIOGRAPHY

KEFF is a Taiwanese-American multidisciplinary artist based in New York and Taipei.

He is a writer/film director that recently completed the NYU Graduate Film program on scholarship. His first short film, "*Secret Lives of Asians at Night*", was supported by the Spike Lee Film Fellowship, and awarded the Jury Prize for Best Asian-American Film by the Director's Guild of America. His second short film and NYU thesis, "*Taipei Suicide Story*", had its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival (Cinéfondation), and won the Grand Jury Prize (Narrative Feature) at the Slamdance Film Festival.

He is also an open-format DJ and producer that has performed with countless international artists at parties such as Brownies & Lemonade (LA), SHOWER @ Soap (Korea), SUBBEAT @ Cakeshop (Korea) and BangOn! (NYC). His mixes have over 400k streams, and his first remix premiered on Skrillex's NEST HQ.

FILMOGRAPHY

2020 *Taipei Suicide Story* - short film

- * Winner - Grand Jury Prize, Narrative Feature (Slamdance Film Festival)

- * Official Selection - Cannes Film Festival (Cinéfondation)

2019 *Secret Lives of Asians at Night* - short film

- * Winner - Jury Award, Best Asian-American Student Film, East Region (DGA Student Film Awards)

2016 *Dream Girl* - short film

BACKGROUND & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

TAIWAN

Taiwan is a democratic island nation of 23 million people, about 100 miles east of Mainland China, across the Taiwan Strait.

Initially established as a Dutch trading post, it was annexed into the Qing dynasty in China by 1683. It was then ceded to Japan as a colony in 1894 after the Sino-Japanese War, before being returned to China following the conclusion of World War II.

After their defeat at the hands of Mao Zedong and the Communists in the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the Nationalist government, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, fled to Taiwan with 2 million refugees. A formal cease-fire was never signed, and to this day, an informal war exists between the ROC (Taiwan) and the PROC (Mainland China.)

China claims sovereignty over Taiwan, and has vowed to take over the island by force, if necessary. It has used economic and diplomatic pressure on the world to isolate Taiwan - Taiwan cannot participate in the UN or WHO, cannot compete in international competitions under its own name or flag, and only has formal diplomatic relations with 14 of the 193 UN Member States.

In the meantime, calls in Taiwan to formally declare independence and establish a separate Taiwanese identity have increased in recent years, culminating with the recent election of independence-favoring Tsai Ing- Wen as president in 2016. Unsurprisingly, relations with mainland China have fallen to an all-time low.

HONG KONG

Hong Kong is a territory of 7.5 million people in China. A former British colony that was established after the conclusion of the Opium War, it was returned back to China in 1997.

Under Britain, HK residents enjoyed certain civil rights and liberties. Following the handover, many were concerned such a way of life would be eroded, leading China to guarantee HK 50 years of political and economic autonomy ("one country two systems.")

Distrust and dissatisfaction with Chinese rule led to massive protests: first in 2014, for universal suffrage, then in 2019, against a bill that would've allowed extradition to China. Millions marched in the streets in the summer of 2019, subject to violence and arrests and making headlines all around the world.

In 2020, while the world was distracted by the COVID-19 pandemic, China quickly passed a security law establishing the crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism, and treason,

effectively extinguishing the protest. Many of the 2019 protesters have since been arrested, imprisoned, gone missing, or gone into hiding.

LANGUAGE

Locals in Taiwan mostly speak three languages: Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hakka. Each language has its own subtext that gives greater context to a character, a situation, or a relationship, depending on who is using which language when, and with who.

For example: a man who speaks Taiwanese can be presumed to be from the Southern areas, and of working-class roots. He may switch to Mandarin (though with an accent) at a business meeting in Taipei to try to conceal this, but may switch back to Taiwanese when he discovers his counterpart is from the same town as him.

CURRENCY

The New Taiwanese Dollar (NTD) trades at roughly 30 NTD / 1 USD.

NTD coins come in various denominations: 1, 5, 10, and 50. There are only three major types of NTD paper bills: the 100 NTD note (red), the 500 NTD note (brown), and the 1,000 NTD note (blue).

Taiwan enjoys a general lower cost of living, but also lower salaries: a college graduate is lucky to make \$30,000 NTD / month. Taipei is by far the most expensive city in Taiwan, where housing prices can be comparable to even that of New York City.

END CREDITS SONG - LYRICS

“暗流 Undercurrent”

Performed by Sorry Youth

Written by Sorry Youth

Courtesy of HAIKHAU CO.,LTD.

是傷心的滋味啊	it's a heartbreaking feeling
想著過去的風景	scenery of the past
猶原囡佇我心肝內	clutched within my chest
袂當袂記	cannot forget
是孤單的感覺啊	it's a lonely feeling
夢中看見你的臉	saw your face within a dream
目屎掰袂離	can't wipe away the tears
無暝無日	through night and day
欲安怎來講出喙	how can I even speak?
欲安怎來講出心內話	how can I express my feelings?
彼个懵懂的少年家 啊	just an ignorant kid, ah
著放予去	let it go
著放袂記啊	leave it all behind
人生	that's life
以前的咱 是無共現實看佇眼內	before, we defied reality together
這馬的我 是勤儉拍拚為著未來	now, I work and save for a future
故鄉的風 是日日夜夜吹著阮心肝啊 佇遮啊	the wind from my hometown is forever swirling within me
夢醒的歌聲啊	the song that wakes you up

佇我心內唱啊	sings within my heart
平凡的人 頂真的生活	ordinary people, real life
是歌啊	is a song
這幾年 行入全款的社會	these few years, I have entered normal society
賺著滿腹的怨感 欲按怎對你來解釋	I am filled with resentment, how can I explain it to you?
這幾年 行入全款的社會	these few years, I have entered normal society
賺著滿腹的怨感 欲按怎對你來解釋	I am filled with resentment, how can I explain it to you?
聽 咱的歌聲	hear our voices
共阮的故事 唱予你聽	our story, sung for you
聽 咱的歌聲	hear our voices
共阮的故事 唱予你聽	our story, sung for you
聽 咱的歌聲	hear our voices
共阮的故事 唱予你聽	our story, sung for you
聽 咱的歌聲	hear our voices
共阮的故事 唱予你聽	our story, sung for you

CAST

ZHONG-HAN

Liu Wei Chen

I-JU

Rimong Ihwar

KOBE

Devin Pan

AH-RONG

Yu An Shun

YU-JIE

Wu Yi-Jung

CREW

Director	KEFF
Writer	KEFF
	Junu Wu
Producers	Anita Gou
	Siuloku O.
Executive Producers	Pratixa
	Philipp Engelhorn
	Sam Intili
Co-producers	Nathanaël Karmitz
	Fionnuala Jamison
	Yasmine Talli
Director of Photography	Nadim Carlsen, DFF
Production Manager	Lu Yen Chiu
First Assistant Director	Ping. P
Production Design	Liang Shuo-lin
Costumes	Blue Heart
Editors	KEFF
	Siuloku O.
	Jenson Tay Yi
Post-Production Supervisor - Taiwan	Han Lee
Post-Production Manager - France	Pascal Metge
Music	Yoshihiro Hanno
Colorist	Yov Moor
Sound Designer	Agnes Liu
Sound Mixer	Samuel Aïchoun
Production Companies	Kindred Spirit
	Witness Cultural & Creative
In association with	Cinereach
	Plot Pictures
	mk2 Films
In co-production with	LHB Films
	MK Productions
With the support of	TAICCA
	Aide aux Cinémas du Monde - Centre
	National du Cinéma et de l'Image
	Animée - Institut Français
	DOHA Film Institute
International Sales	mk2 Films

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