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Dooman River

(South Korea-France) An Arizona Films (in France) release of a Lu Films, Arizona Films production, in association with Arte France, with participation of Korean Film Council, CNC, Global Film Initiative. (International sales: Arizona Films, Paris.) Produced by Lee Jeong Jin, Guillaume de Seille, Woo Hye Kyung. Executive producers, Li Zhan, Zhang Xueyan. Directed, written by Zhang Lu.

With: Cui Jian, Yin Lan, Li Jinglin, Lin Jinlong, Xin Xhuangshen, Jin Xinyan, Yuan Yonglan. (Korean, Mandarin dialogue)

By **JORDAN MINTZER**

Named after the icy body of water bordering China and North Korea, Zhang Lu's "Dooman River" is a minimalist study of rural miserabilism that never develops into a real narrative, but does offer a rare glimpse into a harsh, politically unpleasant corner of East Asia. Told from the viewpoint of a 12-year-old Chinese boy whose village is a rest stop for refugees fleeing Kim Jong-il's regime, the pic uses long (often too long) takes to capture the slightest of actions and dialogue, relying almost purely on atmosphere to tell its gloomy tale. Franco-Korean co-production should cross mostly into fest territory.

Since debuting with 2004's "Tang Poetry," Zhang has made a handful of dark, extremely sparse dramas, including 2007's Mongolia-set "Desert Dream," which also dealt with the plight of North Koreans fleeing their homeland.

In "Dooman River" (usually written as "Tumen River" in English), the focus is on the forlorn lives of a family of three -- playful pre-adolescent Chang-ho (Cui Jian); his mute older sister, Soon-hee (Yin Lan); and their equally untalkative grandfather (Lin Jinlong) -- who reside in an impoverished village near the titular border. When Chang-ho meets a Korean escapee (Li Jinglin) his own age, they form an erstwhile bond based on a mutual love of soccer, while the other villagers grow fearful of crimes committed by famine-stricken refugees seeking food and shelter.

If the story starts off convincingly, with a one-take shot set on the frozen river itself, it soon veers into a no-man's land of purely observational, often elliptical filmmaking, and then piles on the melodrama in the final reel (including an overdone scene in which a refugee is driven to commit a hideous act after watching one of his nation's propaganda broadcasts on TV).

Such closing antics are unfortunately too little, too late, in a film whose best moments offer up a

docu-style depiction of life in a village that's far removed from China's industrialized economy, and whose small, joyless population survives on the occasional fish delivery, or on monies sent home by relatives working in the south. While the starving Koreans are much worse off, the Chinese seem to be barely scraping by, and the frontier that separates the two groups turns out to be smaller than it appears.

Thesping is simple but passable, while tech is polished in a very minimalist way, with d.p. Xu Wei ("Esquire Runway") offering up scant camera movement but plenty of colorless, snow-covered landscapes.

Pic recently nabbed the Paris Cinema Fest's jury prize, and will receive a small theatrical release in France in late August.

Camera (color), Xu Wei; editor, Francois Quinquere; production designer, Zhy Guangxuan; sound (Dolby Digital), Wang Ran, Marc Nouyrigat, Frederic They; associate producer, Remy Roy. Reviewed at Paris Cinema Film Festival (Premieres), July 6, 2010. (Also in Berlin Film Festival -- Generation 14plus.) Running time: 92 MIN.

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