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Chinese cinema looks for its next generation

Film festivals are affected by fashion as much as any cultural industry. And fashions are not always in tune with what is creatively exciting in any particular year or even decade. For example, international interest in Russian cinema was tuned to the public's fascination with Mikhail Gorbachev and "perestroika" but waned long before Russian cinema entered one of its most exciting decades.

Sometimes cinematic fashions and cinematic golden ages coincide. Examples in Asia include the emergence of the "Fifth Generation" of Chinese cinema in the mid-1980s and the rise of South Korean cinema over the past decade. Both had the good fortune of nearby international film festivals that acted as gateways to bring the world's attention, in Hong Kong and Pusan respectively. Russian cinema never had that one-stop festival.

Just as any festival that ignored South Korean films over the past decade would be considered out of touch with the best of contemporary cinema, any festival that ignores (or misrepresents) Chinese cinema over the next decade will be similarly dismissed. While neighboring industries are looking to China for growth, no Asian film festival has yet positioned itself as a gateway for the breadth of Chinese cinema.

In 2007, China will produce over 400 licensed feature films. Six years ago, the figure was just 71. Despite the small number of movies, of which only a handful were foreign co-productions, 2001 was a breakthrough year for Chinese cinema with the debut films of an exciting generation of new directors. They weren't screened at film festivals in Asia, instead receiving their world premieres in Europe.

Meng Qi's *What a Snowy Day*, Teng Huatao's *One Hundred...* and Zhang Yibai's *Spring Subway* premiered at the relatively unimportant Far East Film Festival in Udine, Italy in April 2002. *Snowy Day* is a wry comedy about an ordinary family trying to better themselves, *One Hundred...* is about two teenagers who believe they can join the police force if they can snare 100 pickpockets, and *Spring Subway* is a stylish-to-the-extreme look at relationships in modern Shanghai.

One of the key Chinese films of the past decade premiered in Udine the following year. Chen Daming's vulgar black comedy *Manhole* is about a just-released prisoner coming to terms with modern China. It reflects the director's own experiences after returning from an acting career in Hollywood. While it was never theatrically released, its influence within the industry can be clearly seen in Liu Fendou's *Green Hat* (2005) and Ning Hao's *Crazy Stone* (2006).

When an industry grows six-fold in as many years, it can't depend solely on foreign directors and co-productions, it also needs to find a new generation of homegrown directors among its ranks. 2006-7 has been an exciting period for Chinese cinema, giving opportunities not only to new directors but also to the talented directors who debuted five years ago who had struggled to find the financing for their second features.

Last year, Chen Daming completed ensemble drama *One Foot off the Ground* about an opera troupe whose sponsorship has dried up while Zhang Yibai directed dark thriller about the impact of a marital affair. Both were shot in their directors' hometowns - Kaifeng and Chongqing respectively - representative of a wider shift to regional filmmaking in China. They have so far only received overseas screenings at European film festivals.

Among the compelling films to emerge from new directors in the past eighteen months are Zhuang Yuxin's *Teeth of Love*, Hu Yaozhi's *Empty Town* and Wang Wei's *Ta Pu*. *Teeth*, about the painful relationships experienced by women over a period of ten years, premiered in competition at Europe's

relationships experienced by a woman over a period of ten years, premiered in competition at France's Deauville Asian Film Festival in March. Other recent debuts of note include Zhang Meng's *Lucky Dog*, Leon Yang's *The Cold Flame*, Yin Lichuan's *The Park* and Wang Fen's *The Case*.

It's not that European film festivals somehow see the "real China". Europe has the advantage of many film festivals with different visions of Asian cinema, including some of the world's most stereotypical. The strength of the Pusan International Film Festival in Asia has helped create a single regional vision of Chinese cinema that has been reinforced by the departure of imaginative programmers at festivals in Taipei and Tokyo.

Chinese cinema is exciting right now because it has a bounty of stories to tell about a country that is changing at a rapid pace. Festivals that only show films about oppressed factory workers and displaced farmers are putting politics before art. Korean cinema found an international audience because it had sassy romances, hammer-wielding antiheroes and monsters that crawled out of rivers. Chinese filmmakers deserve a chance to tell their stories too, not just the stories that feed an anxiety of a rising China.

by Stephen Cremin

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