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East Asia

The Cinemania International Film Festival and the Jakarta International Film Festival has just turned 10 years old this year. It seems to be high time that we had a look at the history and recent developments of the international film festivals in South-East Asia.

Honors and kudos go, of course, to the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF), the oldest in the region, launched in 1987. Ironically, when it was created, the island-state had no local film industry: no local films were produced between 1979 and 1990. Right from the start, the SIFF focused on South-East Asian cinema, and the festival has played an essential role in introducing and promoting films and artists from this region to the audience, critics, programmers and distributors abroad.

The SIFF has had to face numerous problems related to the severe censorship of the government, including screening cancellation of some programmed films. Apart from the censorship problems, the festival has been struggling to secure massive public funding to be on a par with its international reputation.

The festival has been asked several times by the local media authority to move to December and to incorporate series of events dedicated to media, TV and contents, but it has always refused this request and kept its original April dates.

Now, the SIFF has to compete with European international film festivals - which favor international premieres and have become more and more interested in the cinema of this region - in order to get films from the countries and authors that it has introduced and cherished over the years.

If festivals often rely on public funding, local and national authorities see a film festival as a tool for promoting national cinema and cultural policies, and in some cases, for presenting their cities or countries as tourist or business destinations.

The creation of a film festival is often related to political interests and tourism business. The Venice and Cannes festivals are good examples since they were created during the conflicts of the pre World War II era, and their original purpose was to extend the summer tourist peak season.

A more recent example can be found in the Bangkok International Film Festival.

Designed, launched and backed by the tourism authority of the kingdom, the Bangkok festival was subcontracted to a private American company for its organization and spent a lavish amount of money in its inaugural years. The festival was criticized for having focused on publicizing Bangkok as a tourism destination instead of caring about films. Even though the festival did deal with South-East Asian cinema as one of its main programs, it was often overshadowed by the presence of Hollywood and European stars, who arrived in private jets and charged the festival 'appearance fees'. The local audiences were neglected as the screened films were not subtitled in the Thai language. As a consequence, the festival lost the support of local filmmakers and film companies. In December 2007, the director of the American company was arrested and charged with corruption for paying bribes to Thai officials in order to obtain the organizational contract of the event. The scandal severely affected the reputation of the festival. After the scandal, the festival was passed to another organization (Federation of National Film Association of Thailand), its budget was severely

cut, and the last edition was re-adapted more adequately to the expectations of the local industry, as it focused predominantly on regional cinema and artists. Yet it will take a few more years for the festival to recover from its hectic past and to find its new identity.

Other festivals in the region are more often suffering from lack of funding and government support.

The coming Jakarta International Film Festival (JIFFEST, 5-9 December) had to cut its duration by half because of short-funding. Launched and organized by a passionate team of people and volunteers, the festival has had to rely more on the funding from foreign embassies and the private sector than governmental money. This year, the event will celebrate its 10th anniversary. With a new generation of filmmakers emerging in the country, the local market growing and more and more Indonesian films being exposed abroad, observers expected that governmental organizations will support the festival. With its experience and growing reputation gained over the years, the JIFFEST may become an excellent platform not only for exposing local cinema abroad and but also for introducing to the audience numerous films from all over the world, which are not available in local cinemas. But it did not happen and the financial crisis didn't do good either, not mentioning the weakness of the local currency (some films require screening fees to be paid in dollar or euro).

Cinemanila International Film Festival in the Philippines is a pioneer in the region. Right from its early days, it set up a co-production project market and put a strong emphasis on digital cinema. Nonetheless, it is also facing difficulties every year due to the last minute confirmation of financial support from public authorities and its dependence on the local municipality. Over the years, the festival has changed its dates and its location a few times. For any film festival, lack of steady funding is a major obstacle for its long-term vision and development. However, with the increasing interest in Philippino cinema abroad and the invitation of one of the world's most famous directors, Quentin Tarantino, in 2007, Cinemanila has gained both a great deal of respect and credibility in the festival circuit and emerged as one of the leading festivals of the region.

A new player has lately appeared on the map – the Kuala Lumpur International Film Festival (KLIFF), which was first held in 2007.

Jointly organized by a consortium of entertainment companies and the film authority of Malaysia (National Film Development Corporation, also known as FINAS), this new festival is fairly ambitious. Its website announces it straightly; the KLIFF wants to be "the most prestigious international film festival and the most successful film marketing hub in the Asian region".

A quick look at the structure of the KLIFF shows that the event is designed more like an award ceremony than a film festival in the most common form that we are familiar with. Interestingly, there are several prizes distributed to films that represent their regions – for example, the Best South American Film, the Best Asian Film and so on.

Oddly enough, local digital films are nowhere to be found at this festival. Malaysian digital films characterize the so-called Malaysian New Wave and are often featured and awarded in festivals all around the world. It is not surprising if we take into account that these films, which are in majority in the Chinese language, do not officially exist since they are produced out of the studios and FINAS grants' system and often self-distributed. On the other hand, the KLIFF presents several Malaysian films coming from the mainstream studios. These films are rarely shown outside the country and neglected by film festivals. This aspect could attract attention of Asian cinema experts and festival programmers in search for 'new stuff'.

Nonetheless, without embracing and showcasing the diversity of its own cinema, especially the films most celebrated abroad, the KLIFF might have difficulty gaining credibility in the highly competitive festival circuit.

As is the case elsewhere, festivals in the region are facing difficulties dealing with public authorities and politics. It has never been easy for passionate festival organizers to be faithful to their desires and visions as they have an inseparable relationship with the local political organizations, which sometimes see a film festival merely as a must-have item in their agenda, just like a convention center and a tennis tournament. True, there is no perfect model for festival, and yet, public authorities should remember that a long term vision is essential for festivals to find their identities and develop.

After all, the Cannes, Berlin, Locarno and Venice festivals, which are nearly 60 years old, were not built overnight, and have their shares of love-hate relationship with politicians and local film industry

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