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Chinese Cinema

Other View On

This month Sea-Images meets with Derek Elley, Senior Film Critic of Variety magazine and curator of an important programme of Chinese films recently programmed during the [47th edition of the Thessaloniki International Film Festival](#) in Greece (18-27 November 2006).

Can you introduce us to the Thessaloniki Film Festival ?

TIFF is now in its 47th edition and has been an international festival, with a competition, for about the past 15 years, with a solid reputation. Last year, a new head took over, Despina Mouzaki, a movie producer and businesswoman, who has brought it a higher, glitzier profile and introduced more Asian cinema.

This year, you are working for this festival on a programme of Chinese films. What is the origin of such a project?

As I knew Despina for many years, when she was working at the Greek Film Centre, I was one of the people she asked for advice when she took over. I recommended more Asian cinema - and not just the "auteurist" movies that go to festivals like Cannes. Last year TIFF profiled several South Korean directors (Park Chan-wook, Kim Jee-woon) and for this year she asked me to do a programme on Mainland Chinese cinema. This fitted with a government-to-government idea between China and Greece, as one country handing over the Olympic flame to another.

The title of the programme is New cinema from China: Another view. Can you tell us about this other view of Chinese cinema as this "other Chinese cinema" remains almost totally unknown and ignored ? Especially in Europe, "Chinese cinema" means either big-budget action period dramas or social-themes-driven films, sometimes shot on DV by so-called Sixth Generation of directors. So the conception of Chinese cinema understood by an outsider is very different from that by the local audience in China?

I suggested a sidebar of lesser-known Mainland directors who have largely been overlooked by auteurist/arthouse western festivals.

Every country's cinema, in both the West and the East suffers to a certain extent from being put into convenient "boxes": it's an understandable way for foreign audiences to get to grips with them and also a marketing tool for distributors.

When mainland Chinese cinema first started hitting the West, via festivals, in the 1980s, with films like Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, the country was only just opening up from three decades of hardline communist rule and many of the films were marked by the psychological traumas of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). The movies that made it to the West were by so-called Fifth Generation directors - technically, those who had graduated from the first course of the Beijing Film Academy when it reopened in 1978 - and these films, like any New Wave, challenged many of the norms of accepted filmmaking in the country.

Several encountered censorship problems as the authorities struggled to cope with these new voices, and so the Fifth Generation was seen by the West as a "cinema of protest" against a repressive bureaucracy. Western festivals and distributors - and some of the filmmakers themselves - were happy to encourage this idea: it was all good publicity and, after all, China was still viewed by the "democratic" West as a "communist" country. As with Soviet and East European production in the old days, "banned" was automatically seen as "good".

As Fifth Generation directors gradually turned towards making more audience-friendly movies during the 1990s, the so-called Sixth Generation (since typified by the films of Jia Zhangke) started to appear, making hardline arty movies which took European "festival films" as their model. With no experience of the Cultural Revolution to draw upon, these directors often focused on disoriented youth and other social problems. Again, the West eagerly embraced these movies: they were in a style that was already familiar, dealt with problems that were recognizable, and also showed the negative side of a country still branded as a totalitarian state. In every way, they chimed with traditional western perceptions of China.

In fact, China was going through a social, political and economic revolution that was unparalleled for its size and speed. It still is. But few of the movies that have reflected this, or dealt with everyday urban life rather than "exotic", rural life, have reached the West via the major festivals that form viewing trends.

All the discussion at the moment in China is about so-called "big films" (da pian): large-budget, costume spectacles - started by Zhang Yimou's *Hero* and followed by *House of Flying Daggers*, *The Promise* and *The Banquet* - that can revive the theatrical market within China and draw recognition and business overseas. But between those and the tiny, artier movies that are still feted by western festivals and distributors but are hardly released within China (such as Jia's recent Venice Golden Lion winner, *Still Life*) there exists a host of well-made, highly accessible films by a generation of directors that is still "lost" overseas.

It's those kinds of films and some of those directors that TIFF celebrates this year in its sidebar "New Cinema from China: Another View".

As an intriguing fact, two films from your programme Waiting alone and Manhole, which have received praises from Chinese audience, are directed by Chinese filmmakers who lived in the US. What do you think of that? Are their foreign experiences giving them a different way of looking at Chinese society?

The experience in the US of those two directors, CHEN Daming and Dayyan ENG, is not coincidental, and certainly gave them a more finely-tuned commercial approach to filmmaking. But both films are thoroughly mainland Chinese in content and outlook, and not made from a "foreigner's" viewpoint. All the others are by Mainlanders who have travelled little, and certainly not worked abroad. It's more about a different outlook on making movies:

not peddling an "exotic" view of China for western audiences. In many respects, films by Sixth Generation directors like JIA Zhangke that are always selected by festivals are more "foreign" (to Chinese eyes) than the ones I've selected.

Can you think of other cinematographies in Asia, huge parts of which have been ignored or less appreciated in the same way as this new Chinese cinema?

Most Asian film industries have an "ignored" section that doesn't fit with traditional western views of the country, including Japan. Since the '90s, Taiwan has been heavily misrepresented by its younger generation of directors, who have focused on stories about social alienation, sexual dysfunction, gay themes, etc. There's now a small group of directors and producers who are trying to correct this image, but the industry there is still very small, without a commercial rump like China's.

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