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Korean culture has made its way into France as it has been the case in most countries in Asia. But different from these Asian countries where pop music and TV series are widely popular, in France, Korean culture has used cinema as its main medium. With more than 10 Korean films annually released in theatres and several more on DVD, France is the leading country in Europe in terms of diffusion of Korean cinema. However, until the late 90s, Korean cinema was almost absent in France. It is quite amazing that Korean cinema has gone from zero to a leading position among Asian cinemas. Let us look back in order to better understand how such a phenomenon could be possible.

Looking at the demonstrations of the Korean film industry to protect its film quota system during the late 90s, many French film professionals realised that there were some similarities between the two countries – both of them knew the importance of the cultural diversity.

The fight for cultural diversity, a strong domestic share of local films at the Box office, the rising popularity of Korean films among its neighbours, and the growing importance of the Pusan International Film Festival were reviewed in French media and fostered curiosity in French film professionals and cinéphiles. They wanted to have a better look at this country and its cinema and explore them.

The milestone for Korean cinema in France was the Cannes Festival of the year 2000, in which a Korean film was selected in the competition for the first time (IM Kwon-Taek's Chunhyang) and three others in the sidebar sections.

This made it possible for the films of the festival favourites (IM Kwon-Taek, HONG Sang-Soo and LEE Chang-Dong) to be released in France. These films were released on a small scale, but received good critiques and were quite successful.

Thank to the effort of some French film festivals and publications, a more commercial, genre-oriented type of Korean cinema was introduced in the same period, and later on, some of them were released.

Since then, the number of Korean titles both in the cinema and on DVD has increased each year, and French buyers and Korean sales companies are signing more and more deals at every film market.

In terms of business, an important turning point was American Film Market 2003, in which a French distributor – Wild Side Films – pre-bought A Tale of Two Sisters and Old Boy on script basis. This had been very rare for Asian films, and was the first time for a Korean film. It seems now that this way of purchasing has become a trend among French buyers as they compete with one another for Korean titles.

The paradox is that everybody is running after Korean films, and yet, nobody has seen any major hit in France that could be equivalent to some Hong Kong films such as In the Mood for Love and Shaolin Soccer.

A glimpse at the French Box Office of Korean films shows a few important things. On the one hand, the majority of Korean films released in France were shown in art-house cinema. There is no doubt that France is now a niche market for Korean art-house films. Commercial ones, which were big hits back home, proved to be failures in France.

So far, Chihwaseon and Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring have been the only ones that were successful in terms of box office and had more than 200 000 admissions. These two films have at least two things in common: both of them attracted attention at international film festivals and exploit exotic, traditional and historical aspects of Korea.

Korean cinema is not limited to the silver screen in France. A visit to any French DVD shop will prove that there are numerous titles available on DVD, the majority of which are commercial and action films. The last edition of the Cannes Film Festival was another milestone as there were 6 Korean feature films selected in all the different sections. Other films have also well performed in other festivals around the globe, and Korean films have now a high position in the map of world cinema. Different type of films succeeded in finding their own audiences in France through different mediums such as festivals, movie theatres, DVD, and so on.

2006 will see French cinemas flooded with even more Korean films since it is the 120th anniversary of the relation between the two countries and many Korean cultural events will take place.

by J  r  my Segay

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