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## Shakers

Amid the Scandinavian snow storms late in January, film experts from Asia sat down to discuss whether there's a way for their independent cinema to find a firm footing in Europe. No conclusive action plan was reached, but the "Second Asia-Europe Film Development Plan Meeting", held by the [Asia-Europe Foundation](#), succeeded in sketching a broad picture of the status of indie film-making in different Asian countries.

Small, arty movies from the Orient may have racked up a solid reputation in European film circles over the past decade, but the immediate task is to facilitate the distribution network for them in the foreign market, the meeting concludes. With burgeoning artistry, what Asian cinema also needs is the long-term commitment from producers, support from the government, and patience \_ lots of patience \_ while it's in the process of building confidence among local and international viewers.

Following the first discussion in Manila last year, the recent Film Development Plan Meeting took place as part of the 27th Goteberg Film Festival, Scandinavia's most influential cinefest that drew tens of thousands participants to this Swedish city. During the two-day seminar the Asia-Europe Foundation, a cultural organ spawned by members of the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem), gathered film-makers, producers, curators and distributors from China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Italy, and Sweden. Each of them expressed a shared optimism of using Asian films as a means of cultural exchange, though acknowledged that the road ahead is not entirely smooth.

### SUCCESS IS NOT SO EASY

Take China, for example. Famous indie directors like Jia Zhangke and Zhang Wian may have proven their artistic might to European film buffs, but that doesn't reflect the difficulty most Chinese film-makers still have to deal with. "

Independent film-making is a concept that's still new to many in the film industry," says Wei Shyu Louisa, director of Blue Queen Cultural Communication Ltd. "Before 1993, the state owned 16 major film studios all over the country. In the mid-1990s the first wave of indie directors started producing works that had problems passing the censor or had no distribution channel, and were screened only at foreign film festivals.

"At the end of 1990s, a young generation of video makers began to produce their works on DV cameras. But their outlets, again, so far are international film festivals. Right now in mainland China there are a few independent production companies, but they have not put distribution on their daily agenda."

The issue of international distribution comes into spotlight because it's impossible for small movies with limited home releases to recover their costs without expanding their market abroad. Even the success story of Korea has a blind spot when it comes to distribution

It's well-known that the Korean government throws its full support behind its national film industry, mainstream as well as indie. Through the Korean Film Commission, the government gives financial backing to young, up-and-coming film-makers. That means the industry is nourished by a variety of ideas, of styles, of stories, which is a sign of a healthy film environment.

"But still the question of how to distribute independent films, even locally, remains one of the biggest problems," says Jenna Ku, chief curator of Seoul European Film Festival and Seoul Independent Film Festival.

"This could be applied to overseas distribution as well. Without the proper network, most Korean indie films are just being presented to the [limited audience] of film festivals only."

Independent films are sometimes viewed as a cultural representation offering a more authentic vision than those of commercial, profiteering movie-making, and many times the recklessness, the bold experiments of indie film-makers become a "discovery" that alters the face of global cinema during a given period \_ like what happens with Takeshi Kitano after his film *Hana-bi* won a top prize at Venice Film Festival in 1996.

"After the success of Kitano's films in Europe, many independent producers expected to get revenues from foreign territories, but such expectations were fruitless," says Shozo Ichiyama, programme director of Tokyo Filmex. "Indeed most of the films by other indie film-makers couldn't find distribution in Europe, even if they were shown in prestigious film festivals.

"Last year the Japanese government finally decided to widen the financial support for Japanese films. But what we need to do now is find the reason why most Japanese films can't find distribution, and decide how to solve it."

## VIEWS FROM THE BOTTOM

If established film scenes like China, Korea and Japan mumble complaints about the state of indie cinema, the picture is even more murky in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. With burning passion but without support from the government and local audiences, the three Southeast Asian nations find themselves in a yearly struggle \_ to stabilise the quality and to realise their dreams about blossoming internationally like their North Asian counterparts.

In Indonesia, young indie talents have created sensations at various festivals with films like *Eliana*, *Whispering Sands*, while a legendary jackpot of a low-budget horror flick *Jelangkung*, a Malay flavoured Blair Witch Project whose directors were later contracted to make films in Hollywood, has stirred up high hopes. "However, in the long run, Indonesia's film industry needs solid production infrastructure," says Shanty Harmayn, director of Jakarta International Film Festival.

"We also need a strong educational base and government financing, as well as policies to support independent talent and the development of a unique Indonesian cinema."

Meanwhile in Malaysia, which produces the average of 10 films a year, the government has shown signs of interest in upgrading the film industry into a real money-making sector, but somehow film people believe that the authority's heart is not in the right place. "The [government] funding bodies have no interest so far in financing small independent movies," says Yo Huhang, an indie film director.

"On the good side, Malaysian independent films have only begun to taste the fruit of festival exposure, but there is still no distribution for these films as we are only starting to generate some minor interest outside our country." At the recent Bangkok International Film Festival, a much-discussed Malay entry was a drama called Room To Let. But despite the positive reception, the film is unlikely to get a regular release here.

Ironically, as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand bemoan a lack of help from local governments and viewers, an underground force that lurks and nourishes the cinematic passion of these countries comes in the form of video and DVD piracy. "Yes, video piracy has nurtured a new generation of film audience," says Shanty of Indonesia. But for Huhang of Malaysia, the guys who run the vast network of bootlegged DVDs in his country contributed to his quest in a more practical way.

"Those guys offered to finance my movie," he said with a bewildering laugh. "It's funny because the government's funding bodies wouldn't be interested in backing my DV feature, but these people, who're obviously loaded because they do good business, have the guts to invest in my film. They have this attitude about taking risk, which is sometimes needed to take a step forward."

For Thailand, the picture is not so different. While the mainstream cinema is trying to stage a permanent comeback, the indie movement exists outside the public's consciousness despite some astonishing successes, especially with Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Blissfully Yours*. "Although the film won an award at Cannes, it didn't help promote the independent film scene in the country," says Panu Aree, programme co-ordinator of Thai Film Foundation. "When the film was released last year in Bangkok, it became one of the biggest flops."

Getting distribution \_ locally and internationally \_ is an apparent difficulty. An indie director often finds it impossible to convince theatre owners to screen their work, and this discourages a greenhorned filmmaker to start working. The only Thai director whose films have established a fan base outside the country is Pen-ek Ratanaruang, but he's long stepped out of the indie mould to work in a solid production channel and thus his case cannot represent the issue being discussed here.

In all, the meeting may not have produced a concrete solution, but what matters is the meeting itself, since it functioned as an open field of communication where Asian film people can share ideas and learn something from each other. One can only wish that the Asia-Europe Foundation will continue to act as a medium and bring these people to the discussion table more regularly.

*by Kong Rithdee*

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