

Hong Kong 2002

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THE 26th HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

(27 March - 7 April 2002) marked the first time the event was solely organized by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, a statutory body beyond the direct bureaucratic control of the HK government. After absence caused by the recent administrative turmoil, many of the festival's former programmers have returned to their posts, with the aim of giving the festival a new look and direction. The festival also managed to bring off a coup with the help of the Hong Kong Film Archives which organized a nostalgic retrospective of Mandarin film classics made by Cathay in the 1960s titled "Back to Dreamland: Cathay Showcase". The screenings were extended past the closing of the festival.

With budget constraints, however, the usual 16-day event was trimmed to 12 days with over 200 films, instead of more than 300. Happily, the quality of films, particularly that of the new Asian and Chinese films, was not compromised. Unlike last year, the 26th edition presented an encouraging number of films by newly emerging filmmakers, particularly from Japan, Hong Kong, China, South Korea, India, Thailand.

There were bold experimental works, sometimes successful, sometimes not, with many of the younger ones dabbling in digital video and working in both fiction films and documentaries. What united these directors were the themes of youth and urban alienation, the search for identity and a sense of loss in a world veering towards globalization.

In this regard, three feature films made assured debuts: Vincent Chiu's *Leaving in Sorrow* (Hong Kong, 2001) and Emily Tang's *Conjugation* (China /Hong Kong, 2001) both deal with the ghosts of a traumatic past haunting the present. One of the main characters in *Leaving*, the editor of a Hong Kong gossip magazine called *Chris*, suffers deep emotional scars from the Tiananmen Massacre on 4th June 1989.

The same incident affects the lives of four dissidents and a cohabiting couple in *Conjugation* who survived the tragic episode but who are experiencing a winter of discontent six months later. *Chen Mo and Meiting* (China, 2002) deftly directed by talented newcomer Liu Hao, tells the touching story of children conceived by incarcerated intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and who have since become adults in an increasingly impersonal world. The title characters are two lonely young people who meet and fall in love, living in their own innocent and romantic world until reality intrudes harshly upon them.

Japan impressed with a number of first features, all highly promising. Two of these were about slackers, a subject seldom explored in modern Japanese films. Yamashita Nobuhiro's *Hazy Life* (Japan, 1999) and Motoki Takashi's *When Slackers Dream of the Moon* (Japan, 2001) look at their lifestyle without sentimentality. Toyoda Toshiaki's *Blue Spring* (Japan, 2001) is almost a fascinating look at high school gangsterism, with a violent and callous protagonist endowed with pretty-boy looks and the tragic hero-worship of an admirer whose idolatry says something about today's Japanese youths.

Another film about teenage adulation Shunji Iwai's *All about Lily Chou Chou* (2001). The story centres on the growing pains and loss of innocence of a shy schoolboy, bullied at school, who seeks solace in an internet chatroom in honour of the (virtual) pop music diva Lily Chou Chou.

This year's most bizarre Japanese film is an underground gem called *Kichiku* (literally 'Banquet for Demonic Beasts') -- a 1997 student thesis film directed by the then unknown Kumakiri Kazuyoshi. The story is about a group of 1970s ultra-leftists who degenerate into paranoia, murder and madness in their internal purges after their leader commits suicide by seppuku in prison. The jerky movement of a hand-held camera depicts the film's stomach-churning violence and sexuality.

The Chinese selection was unfortunately affected by the withdrawal of Zhang Yang's *Quitting* (2001), a well-acted film starring Jia Hongshen who plays himself in this account of a former television actor and drug user who physically abuses his father. Another film that failed to make the screening was Ning Ying's

documentary *Railroad of Hope* (2001) in which the director interviews the peasants of Sichuan province who speak frankly about their views and hopes.

Ironically, it was the American documentary filmmaker Ruby Yang whose *China 21* (USA, 2001) introduced festival viewers to the true state of peasantry and modernization in China. The documentary features a gifted primary school girl and her labourer father in Guangdong, and a university couple who aspire to more in life in Shanghai and abroad.

Of the Chinese films, Zhu Wen's controversial film, *Seafood* (Hong Kong /China 2001) and Andrew Cheng's slacker film, *Shanghai Panic* (Australia /China, 2001) caught the critics' attention. These two co-productions somehow managed to escape censure by the Beijing authorities. The former is about a seafood loving policeman in Beijing who abuses his authority in raping a prostitute. The latter film features a good-looking egoist who believes he has contracted AIDS, sowing panic among his sophisticated friends who live empty lives in the bright lights of Shanghai. Also noteworthy was Echo Y Windy's gay study of two lesbians in *The Box* (China, 2001) shot on video in seven days.

Debut feature *Take Care of My Cat* (South Korea, 2001) by Jeong Jae-un is an engaging coming-of-age film which studies the troubled aspirations of five young women from Incheon. Controversial filmmaker Kim Ki-duk's *Address Unknown* (South Korea, 2001) focuses on the legacy of American soldiers whose presence in the Korean Peninsula is felt in the convoluted and violent story of Chang-Guk and his mother who writes unanswered letters to her American soldier-lover. The characters in this diverting tale of love, lust and pain include a sensual one-eyed schoolgirl, her devoted admirer, a lonely young American soldier and the mother's callous but protective lover, the local dog-meat seller.

Toe Yuen's *My Life as McDull* (Hong Kong, 2001) is a universal story of a good-natured piglet prevailing over the economic setbacks in post-1997 Hong Kong. This animated film, which uses live object photography and 3-D computer graphics, is the winner of this year's FIPRESCI award. Among the nominees were *Take Care of My Cat*, *Chen Mo and Meiting*, *Seafood* and Du Haibin's *Along the Railway* (China, 2001), a documentary about vagabonds of various age groups who eke out a daily existence near Baojing Railway in Shaanxi Province.

The Age of Independents (AOI) section, launched four years ago, presented the world premiere of the digital-video film, *Let Us Love Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 2002), by academic-turned-director Yau Ching. This true-blue woman's film is described in the catalogue literature as "made by a woman in Hong Kong for the first time, about women in love with each other, and therefore it can be seen as the first lesbian movie in the history of Hong Kong cinema." This excellent work has yet to find funding for the 35mm kine-transfer.

Fruit Chan, who seems to be the darling of Hong Kong's independent filmmakers, directed *Hollywood Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 2001), the second part of his *Prostitutes from China* trilogy. This uneven but brilliant feature, set in a shanty town earmarked for demolition, is about three porcine butchers and a sexually gullible gangster whose fates are intertwined with the arrival of a young Mainland Chinese prostitute.

Tsai Ming-liang's acclaimed film *What Time Is It There?* (Taiwan /France, 2001) closed the festival. Shot in Taipei and Paris, the story centres on a watch seller who becomes obsessed with a Taipei girl who buys a watch from him before leaving for France. This minimalist film is a study in loneliness, despair, obsession and superstition.

In the Hong Kong Panorama 2001-2002 section, Stephen Chow's commercial hit last year, *Shaolin Soccer* (Hong Kong, 2001), proves a crowd pleaser again in this story about a group of underdogs comprising ex-Shaolin monks who form a soccer team and who, against all odds, prevail. Chow seamlessly merges the 3-D computer-generated special effects with live action, creating a magical and one of the most hilarious films in post-1997 Hong Kong.

Stanley Kwan's over-rated *Lan Yu* (Hong Kong, 2001) failed to interest home audiences with this story of doomed love between two men -- one a middle-aged businessman, the other, a student. Neither could Tsui Hark's legendary name help the commercially disastrous remake of his earlier cult classic *The Legend of Zu* (Hong Kong, 2001) where excessive use of special effects just about kills the story.

The regular team of maverick Johnnie To and Wai Ka Fai, however, still works magic in *Fulltime Killer*

(Hong Kong, 2001) in this clash of two hitmen. In another story about professional killers, Edmond Pang's *You Shoot, I Shoot* (Hong Kong, 2001), is a hilarious send-up of hired killers and the entertainment industry. Here, a formerly wealthy assassin teams up with an unwilling drug-dealer /filmmaker who "shoots" with his camera to drum up business from high society ladies and rich housewives.

Hopefully, now that the HKIFF is under the new leadership of the independent Arts Development Council, more controversial films will be shown in future editions without the political interference of the Chinese government. With some improvements to an otherwise well-executed event, the festival looks set to grow from strength to strength.

Author Information

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