

Hong Kong & Singapore 1997

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Fall 1997 Issue of KINEMA

THE PRESTIGIOUS 21st HONG KONG International Film Festival, which concluded on 9 April 1997, presented its largest and perhaps the greatest collection of global cinema with some 280 films and video works. This year, this non-competitive festival attracted more than three hundred festival guests and major critics from all over the world with more than half of them coming from Japan and East Asia.

Its humbler counterpart, the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) is now in its 10th year. Some 220 films were shown there (including a number of fringe films and videos presented at the Goethe Institute, and a retrospective of François Truffaut's films screened at the Alliance Française). Film critics and festival directors flew over to the Republic to view the sensitive selection of Asian cinema by the festival programmer Philip Cheah. In its competitive section for Asian films, the SIFF honours the winners with its Silver Screen awards.

The HKIFF, though without film awards, proved to the world that it is serious about showing good films with good stories. 1997 also reflected the uncertainty regarding the British Colony's transfer to Chinese rule in June 1997; critics and the media people can only speculate over its future and staying power. Personally, I am sure the festival will proceed as normal into 1998 and plans are being discussed to make it a five-year cultural affair. Hong Kong FF celebrated the Handover with an intensive 3-day seminar appropriately titled *Conference on the Hong Kong Cinema: Fifty Years of Electric Shadows*, held at the Science Museum Lecture Hall, between 10-12 April 1997. It included contributions from overseas and local filmmakers, from academics and scholars.

The opening films were two world-class Chinese productions - the new Yim Ho's film, *Kitchen*, an adaptation of the Banana Yoshimoto novel transplanted into Hong Kong soil, and a powerful Taiwanese film, *The River*, directed by Malaysian-born, Taiwan-based filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang (*Rebels of the Neon God, Vive L'amour*). *The River*, an uncommon tale of a dysfunctional family in contemporary Taipei, had just won the Special Jury Prize at this February's Berlin Film Festival.

The closing film of the festival King Hu's *The Valiant Ones*, generally considered the masterpiece of Hong Kong Mandarin *gongfu* (martial arts/swordplay) cinema, was an extraordinarily poignant and sad event - the legendary King Hu died in January. Shortly before, he struck a new print of his 1975 masterwork from his negative. This restored print was shown on 9 April 1997 to an appreciative audience. The beautiful Jade Hsu, younger sister of Hsu Feng who played the female lead in King's *Valiant Ones* and *A Touch of Zen*, read the closing speech written by her elder sister.

The Singapore FF opened with Mohsen Makhmalbaf's Iranian picture *Gabbeh*, a captivating sixty-nine minutes of images skilfully interweaving the process of traditional carpet-making with the love story of a young country girl named Gabbeh. The magical film richly deserves the Silver Screen's Best Film award. The festival's closing feature was Lars Von Trier's *Breaking The Waves*, last year's Cannes Grand Prix winner, a romantic melodrama about the bizarre love of a young woman for her crippled oil-rig-worker husband.

Both Singapore and Hong Kong shared Clara Law's new Australian-funded cross-cultural movie, *A Floating Life*, a portrait of Hong Kong family life in Australia and Germany, and a stylised Ozu-like homage to the *shomin-geki* film genre. The other notable filmmaker, Chang Sun-woo, presented *A Petal*, a heartrending story about a young girl (her frailty and vulnerability symbolised by a petal she wore on her head) caught in the violent crossfire of the Kwajū 1980 massacre (its perpetrators, Chun Doohwan and Roh Tae-woo, were later punished with heavy prison sentences). The film was arguably the greatest among the best shown.

On the Hong Kong side, gala screenings from overseas included Jan Sverák's *Kolya*, the Czech Oscar winner for Best Foreign Film, British director Ken Loach's *Carla's Song*, the follow-up to the acclaimed *Land And Freedom*, and the mercurial Al Pacino's directorial debut, *Looking For Richard*.

The Hong Kong Panorama 96-97 looked back in retrospect at Hong Kong's most representative films; these included Peter Chan's *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*, the multiple Hong Kong Film Awards winner (9 awards out of 11 major categories, including Best Director, Best Film, Best Actress for Maggie Cheung). Gordon Chan's explosive actioner called *First Option*, with macho Michael Wong in the lead, was a follow-up to his acclaimed *Final Option*. Other entries included Andrew Lau's phenomenally successful "rascal or triad youths" film, *Young And Dangerous 3*; a spoof of the "triad film," Cha Chuen-yee's *Once Upon a Time In Triad Society II* which de-glamourises the allure of triad chiefs as role models; Stanley Kwan's *Yang and Yin: Gender In Chinese Cinema*, a 'coming-into-the-open' confession of his homosexual sensibility and insightful documentary about gender study in Chinese films for British Film Institute's Centenary of Film series; Johnnie To's engaging *Lifeline*, with fire scenes and action sequences that dwarfed its Hollywood 1991 predecessor *Backdraft* by Ron Howard; Derek Yee's and Lo Chi-leung's slick Category III adult film, *Viva Erotica*, the first witty and arty Hong Kong porn movie ever made and henceforth never will be after 1997, showing off the nubile talents of a soft-porn Taiwanese actress named Shu Kei (not to be confused with the acclaimed former critic and the director of *Hudumen* and *A Queer Story* which were also screened at the festival!)

The Asian Visions selection picked up twenty of the best movies from Asia in the past year, including *Gabbeh*, Taiwan's Wu Nien-jen's *Buddha Bless America*, a satirical masterpiece about Yankee domination of Taiwan, and Ari Folman's *Saint Clara*, a delightful and intelligent Israeli film.

As in the previous two years, the festival was sadly lacking Mainland China's masterpieces. This year, Zhang Min's *In Expectation*, was withdrawn without explanation. Fortunately, I was able to catch the withdrawn film on video. It is a drama evolving around a cop, a single mother working as a receptionist in a state-run hotel moonlighting as a part-time prostitute, and her client, a river-station manager. It was replaced by *Signal Left, Turn Right*, Huang Jianxin's wickedly ironical and satirical tale of guileful driving instructors.

As a departure from previous years, the festival included a quixotic and peculiar section containing examples of censorship with the addition of a five-film section titled *I Have A Date With The Censors*. It was dedicated to works that fell foul of the Hong Kong censors due to fear that the films might provoke diplomatic rows with other countries - of course, with China as a constant reference! The films were: Tang Shuxuan's *China Behind* (1975) which looks at Mainland intellectuals escaping the excesses of the Cultural Revolution by swimming to Hong Kong from across Shenzhen, Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) for its anti-colonial propaganda, Akira Kurosawa's *Dersu Uzala* (1975) for its anti-Chinese themes, Ann Hui's *Boat People* (1982) for reference to post-Vietnam materialism, and David King's *Home at Hong Kong* (1982), starring Andy Lau and Cora Miao and only released after references to growing jitters over Hong Kong's uncertainty were taken out.

This year, the HKIFF paid tribute to the late Filipino director, Ishmael Bernal, showing five of his films. The darkly pessimistic and masochistic Mexican auteur, Arturo Ripstein, was represented with seven of his movies, most of them about long-suffering women, desperately seeking the love of their sons or husbands: *Time to Die* (1965), *The Castle of Purity* (1972), *The Realm of Fortune* (1985), *The Woman of The Port* (1991), *Beginning and End* (1993), *The Queen of The Night* (1994) and *Deep Crimson* (1996).

In three sections reflecting last year's Centenary of Cinema, *Film on Film*, *Truth or Dare: Documentaries East and West*, and *Documentaries by Fiction Film Masters*, thirty films were offered, including the late Krzysztof Kieslowski sought-after biography *I'm So So*; Wim Wenders' *A Trick of The Light*, also known as *The Brothers Skladanowsky*; *Sergei Eisenstein: An Autobiography* with bare minimum facts about his life but lots of images from his great films; Ken Loach's *Which Side Are You On?*; Adam Simon's perceptive documentary *The Typewriter, The Rifle, And The Movie Camera*, an homage to the Hollywood maverick Sam Fuller, with lots of clips from Fuller's seminal works.

Hong Kong cinema retrospective: 50 Years of Electric Shadows, a section with a repertory of 45 archival films - 1930s to 1970s Cantonese and Mandarin masterpieces - attracted buffs and foreign film scholars alike. Among my favourites were Fei Mu's and Zhu Shilin's *Sons of The Earth* (1952), Yi Wen's *Blood Will Tell* (1955, starring Li Li Hua), Fang Peilin's *Song of a Songstress* (starring Zhou Xuan, 1948), Lee Sun-fung's *Cold Nights* (1955), loosely adapted from Ba Jin's novel of the same name (with great performances by Ng Chor Fun, and the beautiful Pak Yin) and, yes, the neglected Li Han-xiang's masterpiece, *The Enchanting Shadow*

(1960) attended mostly by Li fans and faithful admirers! Festival guests/critics who had no complimentary tickets had to wait 20 minutes after the film had started before they were allowed in. By then, some had left.

The other seminal works were Wu Ma's 1971 masterpiece, *The Deaf and Mute Heroine* (in Mandarin), a swordplay-gongfu film, starring the young and graceful Helen Ma as a resourceful swordswoman; and the brilliant noirish mystery-martial arts film, *Butterfly Murders* (1979, in Cantonese), by Tsui Hark, the doyen of the 80s Hong Kong New Wave. Other New Wave films included Allen Fong's cinema vérité-style *Ah Ying* (1983); the *Homecoming* (1984), Yim Ho's best 1980s film about a clash of culture and values; Ann Hui's sizzling debut about a murder mystery *The Secret* (1979); Patrick Tam's *Final Victory* (1987, scripted by Wong Kar-wai, the famous Hong Kong post-modernist); *Love Unto Waste* (1986) by Stanley Kwan, the director of *Rouge*; Ringo Lam's prison film, *Prison On Fire* (1987); John Woo's *Bullet In the Head* (1990).

There were also more recent works of the early 1990s by younger directors - Mak Don Kit's 1991 period film, pompously titled *Sex And Zen*, inspired by tales collected in the erotic classic *Rou Putuan* (known in literary circles as "The Human Hassock"), starring the ravishing Isabella Chow and bosomy Amy Yip; Derek Yee's melodrama breakthrough *C'est la vie, mon chérie* (*That's Life, My Love*, 1993), a nostalgic reference to Lin Dai's *Love Without End*; Peter Chan's *He's a Woman, She's a Man* (1994), a superb rendition of the Blake Edwards' 1982 *Victor/Victoria*, and of course, Wong Kar-wai's impressionistic and abstract swordplay film, *Ashes of Time* (1994).

At present, the Singapore IFF cannot match the resiliency and creativity of the phenomenally popular commercial Hong Kong cinema. That environment has bred and nurtured the new generation of New Wave filmmakers who took the notion of film art to new heights. This was the case of Allen Fong, Wong Kar-wai, Ann Hui, Jacob Cheung, Peter Chan, Clara Law and Eddie Fong, Mabel Cheung and Alex Law, et al. Last year, Singapore produced three films of artistic merit, namely Lim Suat Yen's *The Road Less Travelled*, Eric Khoo's *Twelve Storeys* and Hugo Ng's *God or Dog*.

As of now, the SIFF is forging a strong reputation for itself by showing Asian films and considering the progress of the region's film production activities. Additional impetus must also come from the Singaporean Government in setting up funds to encourage talents like Lim Suat Yen and others who have nowhere to go to get financial support for their projects. This is what the Australian Government did for the Australian Film Commission which produced films like Clara Law's 1996 *Floating Life*.

The HKIFF has earned itself the reputation of being Asia's finest festival. If the SIFF programmer Philip Cheah is successful in his quest, Singapore might just be on the right track to take over Hong Kong's place in the festivals of Asia.

Author Information

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Figure 1: Gabbeh by Mohsen Makhmalbaf