Vancouver International Film Festival 2004—Part 1

Asian films and Asian life

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The Vancouver film festival, taking place in a city perched on the Pacific Ocean, makes something of a specialty of screening East Asian films. That is all to the good. Every glimpse provided North American audiences into the lives, problems and thinking of peoples around the world, including their artistic circles, is a blow against provincialism and narrowness. It could probably be demonstrated by careful research that the exposure of young people in particular of a given city to international cinema has a generally civilizing and humanizing effect. How could it not?

This year the Vancouver festival presented dozens of features, mid-length films and shorts from eleven East Asian nations or "city-states" (Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand).

A quarter of a century ago "East Asian cinema," at least to Western audiences, would have meant Japanese filmmaking, already in decline, and very little else. In China the artistic community remained silent or traumatized under the Beijing Stalinist bureaucracy. The populations in South Korea and Taiwan suffered at the hands of brutal, US-backed authoritarian regimes. Hong Kong was known largely for its martial arts films. Films from Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore or Indonesia were virtually unheard of.

In the two-volume *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary—The Major Filmmakers*, edited by Richard Roud and published in 1980, for example, treatment of Asian filmmaking consists of six articles devoted to individual Japanese directors (Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, Ozu, Naruse, Ichikawa and Teinosuke Kinugasa), one entitled "Nagisa Oshima and Japanese Cinema in the 60s" and a short piece on "Hong Kong Cinema" by Tony Rayns (presently the East Asian film programmer at the Vancouver festival).

In his essay Rayns refers to mainland Chinese film production "having dwindled under Mao and almost halted since the 1967 'cultural revolution,'" and to filmmaking in Singapore and Taiwan as offshoots of the Hong Kong industry.

A great deal has changed, and not simply in the film world. The revolution in Asian filmmaking is a reflection, in the final analysis, of the revolution in Asian life.

The expansion of the Asian Pacific economies is one of the most striking features of the past several decades. The Asian share (including Japan) of world Gross Domestic Product (GDP) stood at about 13 percent in 1960; by 2002 it had reached 25 percent, according to the World Bank's "World Development Indicators." The exclusively East Asian share in global trade increased from 14.1 percent in 1953 to 24.1 percent in 2002.

While the US accounts for close to 22 percent of the world GDP, reports the International Monetary Fund, based on "Purchasing-Power-Parity," China now accounts for 13 percent, a 270 percent increase since 1980. China is now the world's third largest trading nation and the number one destination of foreign direct investment. Taiwan, Indonesia and Thailand combined possess a greater share of the world's GDP than the UK, the great power of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The expansion of these economies has meant a massive growth of the working class and the big cities. Predominantly peasant populations in some cases have been urbanized, herded into factories, every aspect of their lives turned upside down. The most modern industrial and communications technology has been introduced into countries whose state systems still possess semi-feudal vestiges.

All this has produced explosive social contradictions, including a vast chasm between the wealthy elites and the mass of the population. The Asian "economic miracle" was only made possible by ruthless exploitation of the working population, defended in many cases by military-police dictatorships or regimes that are democratic in name only. More than 700 million people in Asia and the Pacific survive on less than $1 a day, nearly two billion on less than $2 a day. Social upheavals lie ahead.

If the evolution of art is determined by the evolution of the world, then these extraordinary changes had to find expression in cinema. The turbulence of the past several decades stirred up the boldest artistic minds in the region, gave them confidence and directed them toward examining life. The speed and dimensions of the developments, combined with inevitable ideological confusion (generated by Maoism and Stalinism in particular), meant that the filmmakers' strong point has not been social analysis as such, but concrete, astonishingly fresh pictures of everyday life.

Especially in the expanding cities. Above all, one gets a sense of the taste and rhythm of life in Taipei, Seoul and Beijing, and the other great urban centers. In many cases the artists were treating aspects of life that had never appeared in feature films before. One recalls elaborately detailed scenes, choreographed with obvious enthusiasm and delight, of meals, drinking, card-playing; portraits of family life, of work, of the petty criminal milieu. The filmmakers brought sensuously to life the irrepressible energy of the youth and the poor, the rapacity of the *nouveau riche*, the alienation and loneliness of the big cities, the collision of archaic traditions—with their hint of a more secure, collective existence—and lives conducted on cell-phone, fax machine and laptop computer.

All in all, one experiences in the best of the work that healthy and objective appetite for reality, what the Soviet critic Voronsky called "a special feeling of the *givenness*, of the self-sufficiency of the world, independent of the artist's impressions." Unlike many of their counterparts in Europe, North America and Japan, the East Asian artists were not so consumed, in the face of remarkable changes in life taking place in front of their eyes, with their own subjective perceptions, but took the world as it was and tried to make sense of it on its own terms.

The breakdown of the repressive postwar political conditions in Taiwan, South Korea and elsewhere—brought about in part by the same destabilizing global economic tendencies—released a great deal of

intellectual and emotional energy. Tragic episodes in history could be explored. Not only in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness* (about the 1947 massacre carried out by Nationalist forces in Taiwan) and *Good Men, Good Women* (on the anti-communist terror of the early 1950s), but also in lesser known Taiwanese works, such as *Heartbreak Island* (Hsu Hsiao-ming) and *Super Citizen Ko* (Wan Jen).

South Korean directors treated some of their own past traumas: for example, Lee Chang-dong's *Peppermint Candy* (the biography of a secret policeman and torturer) and Park Kwang-su's *A Single Spark* (about workers' conditions in the 1960s).

Historical films were one element of the Asian film renaissance, but the lid had come off and filmmakers treated the human situation in many of its aspects. Fifth and Sixth Generation films from China made remarkable advances. In addition to Zhang Yimou's early works, *The Postman* (He Jianjun), *So Close to Paradise* and *Drifters* (Wang Xiaoshuai), *Blind Shaft* (Li Yang), *Cry Woman* (Liu Bingjian), *The Orphan of Anyang* (Wang Chao) and the various films directed by Jia Zhang-ke (*Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*, *The World*), stand out in the memory in particular for their sympathetic portrayal of suffering, ordinary humanity.

Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang, Wu Nien-jen (*A Borrowed Life*), Lin Cheng-sheng (*Murmur of Youth*) and Chang Tso-chi (*Darkness and Light*) from Taiwan, Hong Sang-soo, Song Hae-sung (*Failan*) and Bong Joon-ho **(***Memories of Murder***)** from South Korea, Fruit Chan (*Little Cheung*) from Hong Kong and others as well have produced psychologically and socially convincing films.

In the generally bleak landscape of international filmmaking in the 1990s and early 2000s, East Asian directors have undoubtedly created some of the more truthful and elegant works.

However, this phenomenon, the result of a temporary state of social and political affairs (and in part a commentary on the generally deplorable state of global cinema), seduced certain critics and programmers into imagining that Asian filmmakers had somehow discovered a magical formula that exempted them from the general crisis of perspective in art and society.

They had not, and indeed subsequent works from most of the directors named above have exposed some of the difficulties: a limited understanding of the history of their own societies; a failure to appreciate the volcanic character of the class conflicts; little or no grasp of the role of Stalinism in China, North Korea, Vietnam and elsewhere; the rather abstract, diffuse defense of "democracy" (so that South Korean director Lee Chang-dong, for example, saw no problem in joining a bourgeois government as its culture minister); and certain stylistic elements that threaten to become clichés: elliptical or oblique story-telling, the unmoving camera, long takes, emotional matter of factness, an obsessive focus on small pieces of reality often at the expense of the whole.

Numerous critics and programmers choose to ignore these limitations. Inevitably a small, but active industry has developed around the presentation of Asian films and filmmakers. And, as is always the case with such "little artistic factories," vested interests arise and individuals feel the need to defend themselves and those they have promoted. So in certain circles no one cares to hear the elementary truth that Hou Hsiao-hsien, for example, has apparently run out of things to say, at least for the moment [see a further article in this series], or that Taiwanese (and East Asian) filmmaking in general has reached something of an impasse.

The very prominence of a figure like Hong Kong's Wong Kar-wai (*Happy Together*, *In the Mood for Love*), whose films' complacent dreaminess and veneer of emotional seriousness encourage a certain type of viewer into imagining his or her own affairs have a world-historical dimension, is an unmistakable sign of decline. Wong's narcissistic films represent an attack on precisely that sense of the "self-sufficiency of the world, independent of the artist's impressions" that gave the best East Asian films such force.

Now that Asian filmmaking has "come back to earth," so to speak—and with it, one hopes, some of the critics—it may be possible to look at its efforts with a more sober and objective eye.

Taipei 21, directed by Alex Yang (who has worked with director Edward Yang), possesses some of that combination of spontaneity and formal seriousness that made the Taiwanese films of the late 1980s and early 1990s so compelling.

Jean and Hong have been a couple for seven years, but problems loom. When she puts down a deposit on a studio he claims they can't afford, their relations strain to the breaking point.

Hong sells real estate during the daytime and works in a hostess bar run by the lively Lady Gigi in the evening. Jean has family problems and finds herself the object of a wealthy businessman's affections. Centrifugal force sends the two young people in different directions one night, Hong in the company of a young Japanese man who wants to buy a villa, Jean with her new admirer.

A review in the *Taipei Times* neatly captures the flavor of the film: "Everyday he [Hong] wears his cheap suit, rides his second-hand motorbike around the streets of Taipei, posting house-for-sale ads on poles. She [Jean] is always elegantly-clad but in reality she also lives in a shabby house with family debts. She has a father who is a gambler, a mom having an affair with the father's creditor, a criminal older brother who lives at home with his drug-addict wife and a baby daughter. In the beginning of the film, one sees the typical scenery of Taipei. People work hard every day, earning just enough to pay the rent."

The sequences of Jean's family are the strongest—the gambling father, the discontented mother, the brother's "drug-addict wife." The latter makes a particular impression, seated on a couch, obviously in pain. One feels the presence of life itself and not something imposed on life. The film has a happy ending, which is not particularly convincing, but it doesn't matter that much. We have already seen the Taipei of those just getting by, in their "cheap suits" and "shabby houses."

The director is not so young, born in 1965, but this is his second feature and it has the spontaneity and vigor of an early work. Artists often bring a good deal of energy, even anger to their initial efforts, particularly if they come from working class or lower middle class backgrounds. These are their first, chaotic, intense impressions. The artists are "upstarts," fighting for a place in the sun, unafraid to confront or even elbow aside their elders. "You've been around 30 or 40 years, and what do you have to show for it?"

This first burst of energy, in which an entire early life, with all its frustrations and dreams, finds expression, exhausts itself eventually. The initial longings may be satisfied, a position in the world may be gained. What then? Sometimes the artist adopts a more sedate, more "classical" style. He perhaps finds himself reconciled with the artistic establishment, even incorporated into it. He may treat secondary questions, perhaps turn inward. Only those rare artists, with something important and enduring to say, manage to retain their spontaneity with a growing knowledge, with consciousness. In the case of Yang, we shall see.

South Korea's Hung Sang-soo has been a cooler, more intellectual filmmaker. His films—*The Power of Kongwon Province*, *Virgin Stripped Bare by her Bachelors*, *The Turning Gate*—have not always succeeded, but they have always impressed with their seriousness and intelligence. His new film, *Woman is the Future of Man*, is one of his better works.

Two male friends, rather unpleasant middle class types, meet after one, Heonjun, an aspiring filmmaker returns from an extended stay in the US. The other, Munho, is now a lecturer on Western art. Their first conversation is marred by Munho's complaint that the other man has hugged his wife, "American-style." Heonjun tries to pick up the young waitress as soon as his friend is out of the room. His friend will try the same thing later on.

They remember a woman, Sunhwa, they both dated, and decide to go

see her. It turns out that Heonjun treated her badly, not even inviting her to the airport to see him off. Munho took up with her after his friend left, pushing himself on her. Both men are insensitive, opportunist, crude. The one desires an important film career ("I don't want to teach"), the other simply wants tenure at the university.

Sunhwa, who seems to have drifted into prostitution, finds a means of revenging herself on Heonjun, sleeping with his friend while he is in the next room. The final sequences treat Munho's relations with his students during a night of drinking. He ends up in a hotel with a girl student; but they've been followed by a boy he's argued with. It may lead to trouble on the job and in his marriage. Finally, he's on a street corner by himself in the cold.

Whatever else it may be, the film is an unflattering portrait of this egotistical, self-important professional layer in South Korea, conformist but bullying. Sunhwa, chiefly a victim, is less well-defined and, in general, the film's "feminism" may be a little too easy, but the picture is indelible.

The Big Durian is a fascinating look at ethnic politics in Malaysia, directed by Amir Muhammad. It combines voiceover comments from the director, documentary footage, reenactments, talking heads and comic bits in a lively and pointed manner.

In October 1987 a Malay soldier, Private Adam, ran "amok" (a Malay word) with an M16 in a predominantly Chinese neighborhood, sparking fears of a race riot. Nothing appeared in the media about the incident and the government declared, "Don't listen to rumors," but, as someone remarks in the film, "There's always speculation in Malaysia ... because the truth never comes out."

Muhammad asks those he interviews where they were and what they remember of that day. A woman of Indian descent explains that she was worried about her job and so set out for work, to discover not a single soul on the road. People remembered the bloody riots of May 1969 in which nearly 200 died and hundreds more were wounded.

The film unravels the mystery of October 1987. The low-ranking soldier's action was not an aberration. The ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was embroiled in a bitter leadership fight. The party was whipping up anti-Chinese racism and urging "Malay unity." A major rally had been held only days before, with banners proclaiming, "My kris [dagger] wants to drink Chinese blood." A further, even larger rally was planned for November to celebrate the UMNO's 41st anniversary. As Muhammad notes sardonically, it was unclear the special significance of a "41st" birthday.

These were racist provocations, aimed at shoring up the leadership of Dr. Mahathir Mohammad. The soldier who ran "amok" was simply drawing the logical conclusion from the official propaganda.

The film explains that the various ethnic parties in Malaysia—Malay, Chinese, Indian—were all set up by the British in the last period of colonialism to continue the policies of imperial rule through "divide and conquer." The filmmaker exposes the "thuggish" manner in which ethnic politics, communalism, have been used to set the various national groups at one another's throats. *The Big Durian* manages to enlighten, disturb and amuse. It's a valuable work.

Repatriation is a fascinating, tragic work from South Korea, directed by leftist filmmaker Kim Dong-won (*Six-Day Fight in Myungdong Cathedral*). The film examines the fate of political prisoners in South Korea jailed for decades as spies for the North Korean Stalinist regime, who began to be released in the early 1990s and demanded repatriation to the North. In fact, they were not truly spies, but propagandists sent in the early 1960s to promote anti-American nationalism and pro-unification sentiment in the South.

The "spies" were tortured in prison, some "converted" and were eventually released, others remain "unconverted" despite years of brutal treatment, isolation. Men come out of prison after 34, 37 and 38 years of incarceration. An astonishing reunion takes place between a former prisoner, locked up for a record 45 years, and his aging mother. Some of the "unconverted" are not broken in spirit.

What sustained them? The content of their outlook is not clear, aside from a fierce Korean nationalism and anti-Americanism. They loyally defended a regime in North Korea that long ago forgot them or viewed them merely as pawns in a diplomatic game. Their tragedy is a doubly terrible one.

The director admits his misgivings about the Pyongyang regime, which he used to defend. A Japanese supporter tells him that the "original socialist cause is long gone." The impact of the crimes of Stalinism continues to be a very real factor in political life.

There is a great deal of mediocrity in the film world, in Asian film too. *The Macabre Case of Prompiram* (Manop Udomdej) from Thailand is a police drama, about the murder and rape of a retarded woman. Local politicians play a role in the cover-up. Nothing here is surprising or hard-hitting. In the way of social critique something far sharper and harsher is required.

The Foliage, from China (Lü Yue), is set during the Cultural Revolution. It follows a group of young "intellectuals" who have been sent to the country to "learn from the people." The film has a promising beginning, with its glimpse of bureaucratic tyranny. But the two leading performers—a lovely heroine, handsome 'bandit'—are too attractive and the picture of life in the countryside too sanitized for the film's own good. It drifts off into sentimentality and nostalgia.

South of the Clouds is another slight work from China, about a disappointed retired man who sets out on a journey to capture something from what remains of his life. The film leaves little impression. Nor does *Electric Shadows*, a perfectly pleasant but rather innocuous work about the 'magic' power of the cinema to enthrall and heal. Another rather sentimental and sanitized look at China's past, which manages to take some shots at the ruling bureaucracy, but only of the safest kind.

From Taiwan, directed by filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang's favorite lead actor, Lee Kang-Sheng (*Vive l'amour*), *The Missing* is a virtually silent portrait of Taipei as desolate, bleak, wet and unfriendly. A grandmother searches for her grandson, a boy for his grandfather. The film is self-indulgent and empty, as, unfortunately, Tsai's films have also become (*What Time Is It There?, Goodbye Dragon Inn).*