Vancouver International Film Festival 2005—Part 3

Strengths and weaknesses of Asian cinema

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This is the third and final article in a series on the recent Vancouver International Film Festival

In recent years Asian art films have accumulated a certain reputation in critical circles, if not within wide layers of the population (to whom, at least in the US, they are largely unknown), for their greater seriousness. When the undeniable crisis of cinema comes up in a discussion, one often hears "Asian films" advanced as an exception. And with a certain, if limited, legitimacy.

In the past decade films from East Asia (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong in particular), South Asia (India, Sri Lanka), Southeast Asia (Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam), the Middle East (Iran, Palestine) and even Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan) have made their mark. The best films possess an honesty, a directness, a type of brutal elegance unseen elsewhere at present. A specific contribution has been made in the field of lyrical social realism.

In the final analysis, the overall superiority of these films lies in their closer correspondence to reality. A largely insulated and privileged social grouping makes cinema in North America, Europe and Japan, to whom discovering and revealing the truth about existence is a matter of no great consequence. It is difficult to accomplish anything important without painstaking effort, ruthless honesty and a critical attitude toward everything that oppresses human beings. These qualities have been in short supply in large studio filmmaking in recent years. If the celestial bodies are properly aligned (i.e., a script of substance, top-notch actors, etc.), director X or Y may come up with something of note. With his or her next mediocre film, however, the relatively accidental character of the previous work becomes exposed. And this striking unevenness, or perhaps lack of commitment, fails to bother anyone terribly much, least of all the filmmakers themselves. A shrug of the shoulders, 'Oh, well ...', and it's on to the next.

Cinema as a whole is likely to be in a healthier state wherever it does not form one portion of a vast entertainment-media industry. "Likely to be," *not* "guaranteed to be." A giant, hostile corporate apparatus may engender the most trenchant oppositional sentiment within its own bowels, so to speak, particularly if such filmmakers have access to the most advanced technology and at least the possibility of addressing a mass audience.

Nor is a non-commercial setting a guarantee of first-rate artistic work. Everything depends on whether one has talent and something compelling to say.

It would be mistaken to idealize Asian cinema, as some have, or approach its temporary 'advantage' over European and North American filmmaking complacently. Let us contend that *hardly anyone* in contemporary cinema is entitled to pat him or herself on the back. In any event, isn't it possible that the superiority of Asian works lies in their carrying out the more or less 'normal' function of film, telling something honestly about the world and human relations, while Italian, Japanese, French, American and Russian cinema, for a variety of reasons, have for the moment largely abandoned their truth-telling responsibilities and sunk to unprecedented depths? In other words, might not the apparent brilliance of Asian films be largely a *relative* phenomenon. I have seen insightful and thoughtful works, made with tremendous care and skill, but 'great' films, truly 'immortal' ones? ... Time will tell.

Life produces drama in abundance. One has to have an interest in human realities and their infinite complications to make art out of life, one has to be in a state of anticipation, 'available' for the stimuli. At present most filmmakers are oriented differently, toward career and status, toward the tried and true. They miss the essentials, the simplest, most telling elements.

Non-fiction film continues to contribute some of those elements.

China Blue (directed by Micha Peled) documents the horrendous conditions of young, mostly female textile workers. When orders are plentiful, girls like Jasmine and Orchid work in the blue-jeans jeans factory in Shaxi, in southern China, from 8 a.m. to 2 or 3 in the morning, sometimes all night (one shift lasts 27 hours). They receive no pay for the first month of their employment. Meals, they discover, are deducted from their pay. But they do receive a midnight snack (after 16 hours of work!) free of charge.

The teenage employees live 12 to a room, in the factory building. That is their life. They use clothespins to keep their eyes open during the interminable hours of work. Visitors come and admire the workplace and the convenience of the living quarters.

The employer is a former peasant, turned police chief, turned small capitalist. His backward wife prays endlessly. This is a picture of nascent Chinese capitalism, the "New Era." Mr. Lam, the owner, praises Deng Xiaoping, who gave opportunities to "farm-boys like me." He dismisses his workers as "uneducated, low-caliber" employees without a work ethic.

China Blue notes that some 130 million Chinese peasants have left the countryside to work in factories. Jasmine comes from a small village. Her parents were too busy to see her off at the train station, although she was likely to be gone for years. At the factory, cutting excess threads from a pair of jeans, she earns half a Yuan an hour, approximately six cents.

The film's material is devastating, even if the outlook of the filmmaker is not. The production notes, geared toward the Western consumer, assure you that after seeing the film, "shopping will never be the same." That's hardly the point. In fact, the film provides evidence of the social explosion building up in China. Pushed beyond the point of endurance, the workers strike Mr. Lam's operation briefly at one point, an illegal act. This is a giant iceberg with a small tip.

Most of the Chinese (and Asian) films screened seemed somewhat secondary, in some cases even evasive. Few dared to take on the immense social dilemmas that dominate the region. Perhaps this is a temporary weakening, perhaps not.

Shanghai Dreams (directed by Wang Xiaoshuai—*So Close to Paradise*, *Beijing Bicycle*) is something of a disappointment, although the director's work has previously been inconsistent. At times Wang seems dedicated to

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an exposure of the ruthlessness of present-day Chinese economic life, at others, he inclines toward rather conventional, and even self-involved, melodrama.

Shanghai Dreams, which apparently contains an autobiographical element, treats a significant social phenomenon. In the mid-1960s, at the height of its dispute and fearing war with the Soviet Stalinists, the Maoist regime insisted that strategically important factories be located inland to form a "Third Line of Defense." Countless workers and their families, many from cosmopolitan centers such as Shanghai and Beijing, responded and followed the plants to the desolate reaches of western China. Many remain there to this day.

The film takes place in Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou province, in the early 1980s. Qinghong's parents have uprooted the family years before and moved to this remote southwestern locale from Shanghai. Her father, who blames his wife for the move, is adamant about returning to the big city—so much so that he deliberately sabotages any relationships Qinghong might develop in Guiyang. He doesn't want his children to suffer his fate, to be frustrated by dreams of a life elsewhere. He relentlessly pushes Qinghong about her school work ("Review some more, don't go out"), punishes her when she dares to wear unconventional clothing. She's grounded indefinitely when she lies and goes to an 'underground' dance party.

In the background of the film lie the great economic changes that occurred in the 1980s in China. The father also wants to return to Shanghai because he believes he can earn far more there. "Money is what matters now." If the factory won't let him go, he intends to take matters into his own hands, and leave without permission. When Qinghong tells the local boy who has been virtually stalking her that the family is leaving, he assaults her. The family leaves under distressing conditions. The future hardly looks idyllic.

But those momentous changes are only in the background. The family drama, in the foreground, is rather predictably done, with a largely extraneous subplot about a local 'juvenile delinquent' and one of Qinghong's friends that one feels one has seen before—more than a few times. The events feel reduced to the level of small change, even with a small dose of self-pity. The girl is not that sympathetic; one feels, all in all, that greater tragedy lurks in the Chinese situation.

Also set in the early 1980s, *Peacock* (directed by Changwei Gu) treats another Chinese family's traumas, told from the points of the view of the three children: an impulsive girl with dreams of escaping a drab reality, her somewhat retarded older brother and a younger, bright brother, determined to get away from the family's misery. The girl's behavior provokes continual disapproval from her mother in particular. She falls for a paratrooper who has other things on his mind. She attaches a parachute to the back of her bicycle and rides madly through the town, and inevitably crashes.

Nothing goes right for any of the siblings. The most traumatic moment arrives when the younger brother feels obliged to disavow his mentally handicapped older brother, from shame, in a schoolyard fight. "He's not my brother," he wails, and helps his schoolmates beat up the older boy. It's a disturbing moment, and the picture presented in the film is disturbing, of a dysfunctional family in a dysfunctional society, but, again, it hardly breaks new ground.

Korean-Chinese Cui Shunji, in Zhang Lu's *Grain in Ear*, sells kimchi, a Korean delicacy, from an unlicensed cart. She lives, with her young son, in the most modest circumstances in an industrial town in northern China. Her life is grim, until she begins an affair with a Korean man and a policeman obtains a license for her. But the Korean man's wife discovers the affair, and to deny the importance of the relationship, he tells her that he paid Shunji for sex. The latter is arrested as a prostitute, the first in a series of tragedies. In the end, she exacts a terrible revenge (based on a real incident).

This is a serious work. The grim circumstances are detailed with compassion. In response to a question about the significance of the lead character's Korean-Chinese heritage, director Lu told a Vancouver audience that there is "nothing [ethnically] specific about it ... her fate was not representative ... Korean, Chinese or Canadian women at the bottom of society face the same situation."

He recently told an interviewer from the *Korea Times*, "I would say my film is set in a non-identified small town in Northern China equally blighted by industrial and agricultural depression. And, as displayed by the official checking people's temperature at the railway station, the times are still those of the SARS fear."

Speaking of his protagonist, Lu commented, "I am a Sino-Korean, too. You can find these women selling kimchi along the roads all over China, especially in the North. When you see them, you know they're Korean, and you know they live on the lower edge of society. ...

"As for the vicissitudes of my character, I haven't taken inspiration from one precise story, but just took details or episodes from many bitter realities I might have come in contact with."

Lu, a novelist and short-story writer, also told the audience in Vancouver that he did not believe in any "isms." This is not terribly original, or meaningful. Every artist looks at the world in a definite social manner, whether he or she knows it or not. Artists today, in the prevailing political confusion (and it is hardly more 'prevailing' anywhere than in China!), like to distance themselves from ideology, which of course is an ideology itself. Translated, the comment means: 'I am simply an observer of life, I take no position. I neither condemn nor approve of the society.'

The artist needs to observe keenly and avoid an ideological template that he or she imposes on reality. But that is not the same thing as avoiding partisanship. One is always partisan, by omission or commission. Making nonpartisanship into a principle is not so far removed from a passivity and lack of commitment which are also false roads for the artist. Lu's film suffers, along with a great many of the Chinese, South Korean and Taiwanese works, from this passivity. The virtually unmoving camera, the stoical performances, the grim reality treated with detachment—these threaten to become clichés.

One has no reason to search for bad intentions. The filmmakers do not know what to make of their societies and the immense transformations taking place. Maoism, Stalinism and various other trends have made things highly confusing. One understands this, but still ... the lack of social and historical precision is damaging to art. Under conditions in which North American and European cinema is impoverished, the difficulties in East Asian cinema may not stand out as sharply as they might under other circumstances, but one should not be comforted by this. There are real difficulties in Chinese cinema and they will only become more pronounced unless this historical and social passivity is consciously addressed.

Stolen Life, also from China, directed by Li Shaohong, is a very weak film, in my opinion. It tells the story of a girl from difficult and repressive family conditions, who manages to be accepted in university. On her very first day, she encounters a delivery truck driver, who eventually becomes her lover. She becomes pregnant, leaves school and ends up living in a miserable room in Beijing's 'underground city.' Her boy-friend turns out to be married and a serial seducer of college girls, selling their babies for cash. Some sort of misguided 'peasant revenge' seems to be at work. In any event, the story takes on the character of a rather unpleasant and sensationalized cautionary tale for middle class families.

Hou Hsiao-Hsien, the veteran Taiwanese filmmaker, has produced a three-part work, *Three Times*. Three stories in three different years (with the same performers playing the lead roles in each episode): 1966, 1911, 2005. In the first, a semi-autobiographical piece, a young man meets a girl who works in a pool-hall. He falls for her, but joins the military. On his release he tries to find her, but she has quit her job. He pursues her...

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In the second, a nationalist revolutionary visits his favorite courtesan. He has his mind on overthrowing the old order, she is concerned with her own emotional and financial security. It seems he abandons her in the end. "The tears of the oppressed are not assuaged."

In 2005, a girl singer (also epileptic) has an affair with a photographer. He already has a girl-friend, but so does she. They seem overwhelmed by modern life and destined to be unhappy.

Hou made a number of important films from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. He detailed the conditions and hopes of a generation of working class youth, growing up under the hothouse conditions of Taiwan's economic transformation, and also laid bare the brutal repression of the US-backed Chiang Kai-shek regime over the course of 40 years. The period since the end of emergency rule in Taiwan has proven more difficult to treat artistically. Hou has seemed at sea since *Flowers of Shanghai* in 1998.

The new film is no exception. The first episode is the strongest, recalling Hou's early work (such as *The Boys From Fengkuei* [1983]). It 'recalls' these earlier films, but an artist cannot return untouched to an earlier stage in his or her development. One either enriches the previous work, transcending it, or one merely catches desperately at its outline, while its essence slips through one's fingers. In his films in the 1980s an element of social protest was present, consciously or otherwise; this has largely been replaced by nostalgia.

Hou seems as overwhelmed by present-day Taiwan as his characters in the 2005 episode of *Three Times* and *Millennium Mambo* (2001). Something artistically unsatisfying is occurring. One senses that Hou is deeply disapproving of certain aspects of Taiwanese life, but feels obliged to be Olympian and 'non-judgmental' about them. It would be far better if he were to stick his neck out and say, 'I find this or that repugnant, self-defeating, mindless.' Instead he censors himself and attempts to contain this obvious and deep ambivalence in unconvincingly 'objective' pictures of life.

Because they are so obviously gifted and perceptive, one continues to expect great things from South Korean filmmakers, but largely those expectations go unfulfilled. About so many of the Korean films, the critic is tempted to say, "It goes so far, but no farther..."

Unhappily, *Tale of Cinema* and *This Charming Girl* both merit that response. The first, directed by Hong Sang-Soo, is a bit of a tour de force. In the first portion of the film a rather unstable young man meets a woman with whom he had a relationship two years before. They go to a hotel, try to have sex and, before the night is through, decide on a suicide pact. When that fails, the young man has an unpleasant encounter with his family. His mother has no sympathy for him: "You little shit, you blame me?" He ends up on the roof, alone, crying out his mother's name in melodramatic fashion.

We discover that this was a film. Two spectators leave the cinema, one of them the actress in the film, Young-shil, the other a young man, Dong-soo, on whom the unstable character seems based. The director of the film is ill, perhaps dying. The actress and the young man, broke and floundering in his life, eventually end up together, try to have sex and discuss dying. We learn that the director has 'stolen' an episode from Dong-soo's life for his film. Dong-soo visits the dying director. At the end, Dong-soo concludes, "If I think, I can figure a way out of this."

Hong is concerned with some of the complexities of the relationship between life and art. Dong-soo, in particular, a failed director, seems moved by cinema to mount an effort in his real life. The actress, Young-shil, is largely passive in both roles, a victim of fantasy. The director has stolen life from Dong-soo and has the life drained out of him in return.

Hong's musings, which are wide open to interpretation, are interesting enough, but rather amorphous and abstract. More interesting, as always, is his observant depiction of Korean life. The filmmaker seems pulled in various directions. As a critic of Korean petty bourgeois narcissism and self-importance, particularly the male variety, he seems unsurpassed. His portraits of everyday life, chance encounters, late-night drinking sessions, are brilliantly composed. But to what effect, in the end? What are the director's burning concerns? He plays his cards a little too close to the vest. We are all the poorer for it.

Lee Yoon-Ki, in *This Charming Girl*, provides us with another portrait of a repressed, alienating society. Jeong-Hae works in a busy post office, lives alone, pays attention to advice directed toward the "modern woman." She has a chilly little encounter in a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant with a man; we assume he's an old boy-friend. Better than that, it turns out they were married and she fled before the consummation of the marriage! She tries another relationship, it doesn't go well either. She seems driven to the brink of madness.

Again, the film is carefully and perceptively made, but even more than *Tale of Cinema*, its intellectual quiescence weakens the work. We have seen this before, the coldness and consumerist materialism of South Korean society. Is there not something else, something that perhaps has been overlooked?

Bashing, directed by Kobayashi Masahiro, fictionally treats the experience of the Japanese volunteers in Iraq who were held hostage and then released. Yuko has been back in Japan for some months. Instead of being treated as a hero or a victim, she is vilified, abused by anonymous phone-callers. She has brought shame on the country, she was selfish, etc. "You embarrassed everyone." Her father eventually kills himself, she is more or less driven out of the country. "I won't be coming back ... Everybody hates me."

No doubt the response reflected the enormous political confusion that exists in Japan, including conformist and xenophobic tendencies. But is everyone in Japan a monster? The film would lead you to believe so.

Is any Japanese filmmaker going to come along and shed some sympathetic and revealing light on that society? None has done so in recent memory. Years of slump and stagnation and a deep political impasse, as well as their psychological impact—will someone treat this without contempt for the population? The Japanese filmmakers at present seem among the most insulated and remote from problems of social life.

Amir Muhammad, the Malaysian director, made *The Big Durian* in 2003, a critical and sometimes amusing look at ethnic and political issues in Malaysia. His *The Year of Living Vicariously* was made during the filming of Indonesian director Riri Riza's film *Gie*, about postwar Indonesian life.

The Year of Living Vicariously consists of interviews with *Gie* crew and cast members about the upcoming Indonesian elections and their feelings about the present situation in that country. Muhammad uses a split screen, and as he explains, means this as a metaphor for his meditations on the differences and similarities of Indonesian and Malaysian society. The only drawback is that the opinions of the cast and crew are not particularly profound or insightful. More than anything else, one senses that this social layer in Indonesia understands little of what has already happened and is ill-prepared for what might happen in the future.

Portrait of a Lady Far Away (directed by Ali Mossaffa) and *One Night* (Niki Karimi) are two ultimately unsatisfying Iranian films. Both have their extraordinary moments, as their protagonists drive through the Tehran night searching for some degree of freedom and personal meaning in their lives, but dissolve in rather gloomy self-importance.

Care and sensitivity have gone into each work. The actors perform with intelligence. Yet one cannot help but feel that the work expresses the concerns of a relatively privileged layer of Iranian society, a layer that treats its own dilemmas, which are real ones, as the greatest of tragedies. Where does that leave the rest of the population?

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