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Films from Asia, attention around the world: 18th Far East Film Festival, Udine

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Debuting in 1999, Udine's Far East Film Festival is the only film festival in Europe dedicated to East Asian popular cinema. Over the course of its 18-year existence the festival has been recognised as one of the most prestigious for Asian cinema worldwide, renowned for showcasing a broad range of East Asian films, organising retrospectives, and providing audiences with access to selected archives. Where one has come to expect crowded venues and limited ticket availability at major Asian film festivals like Busan,[1] Shanghai, and Hong Kong,[2] Far East by contrast offers a more serene experience and ease of access. The festival is situated in the charming historic city of Udine,[3] located in the north of Italy, and offers various season tickets and accreditation packages that are both affordable and readily available. Apart from attracting media professionals and fans Far East also seeks to attract those in academia. Not only does the festival provide accreditation discounts, it also offers hospitality assistance for both professors and students. Incentivising academic participation provides Far East with 'insightful observations on the functioning of [the] festival and ... suggestions for [its] development'.[4]

Far East was co-founded by Sabrina Baracetti and Thomas Bertacche, who now serve as president of programming and festival coordinator respectively. Baracetti and Bertacche also founded the distribution company Tucker Film[5] in 2008 with a clear double mission: first, to give a voice to authors from the Friuli Venezia Giulia region of Italy, and second, to build a direct relationship with the festival.[6] During the 18th edition of the Far East Film Festival, which took place in April 2016, Baracetti addressed current political concerns, praising the Brussels Fantastic Film Festival's perseverance in the wake of the recent airport attacks in the Belgian capital, and

the Busan International Film Festival,[7] which endured strong governmental pressure over the festival's screening programme. Baracetti commended both festivals' courage and audacity in the face of adversity.

Far East has gone from strength to strength. More than 60,000 spectators from over 20 countries took part in 2016, generating in excess of €120,000 in box office revenue over the course of the nine-day event.[8] The festival screened 77 films from nine countries and regions in Asia, including China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. The 2016 edition provided a diverse array of fiction and nonfiction productions, including the programs *Beyond Godzilla* (part of the long-running Japanese series), info screenings, *China Now* (consisting of independent films), Fresh Wave shorts, and restored classics. A growing number of Asian filmmakers recognise the significance of Far East as an international promotional platform and utilise it as the primary festival through which to premiere their latest works. This year six Asian films had their first screenings as part of the World Premiere section. These included Chinese director Zhang Wei's *Destiny* (2016), Japanese director Yoshida Keisuke's *Hime-Anole* (2016), Hijikata Masato's *The Kodai Family* (2016), Toyoshima Keisuke's *Maniac Hero* (2016), and South Korean director Cho Jin-mo's *Making Family* (2016). There were also noteworthy archival and retrospective events, including the 4K restoration of *Fist of Fury* (Lo Wei, 1972) starring Bruce Lee, a tribute to Japanese maverick sci-fi director Obayashi Nobuhiko, a quartet of Chinese indie films, and more. South Korean and Japanese films provide the majority of Udine's genre cinema offerings, yet Southeast Asia remains underrepresented, with no entry from Indonesia, only one film each from Vietnam and Malaysia, and only limited showings from Thailand and the Philippines.

Films from China

The People's Republic of China is by far the largest producer, distributor, and consumer of films in East Asia. In many respects it has come to resemble Hollywood, in terms of seeking entertainment value, industry practices, and production standards. Yet on the basis of the Far East showings the industry seems to be struggling to produce high quality attractive blockbusters. The products that Chinese cinema offers these days are more like consumer goods that have come from a conveyor belt rather than hand-

crafted exquisite pieces of art that would match the cinematic achievements of filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. The masterpieces of the Fifth Generation Chinese directors from just two decades ago appear as distant memories despite the fact that the industry is becoming increasingly prosperous. As Chris Berry has noted in his review of this festival's edition, high quality no longer seems to be synonymous with Chinese cinema.[9]

The Chinese embrace a wide range of genres including comedies, romances, and drama – and examples of each were exhibited at Far East. Some notable examples included *Gui Chui Deng zhi Xun Long Jue/Mojin: The Lost Legend* (Wuershan, 2015) and *Lie Ri Zhuo Xin/The Dead End* (Cao Baoping, 2015). The first film is a thriller – not a typical genre in the Chinese tradition. The film's production values are outstanding thanks to its huge budget, yet it remains underdeveloped dramaturgically. *The Dead End* also suffered from a convoluted narrative, which alienated audiences who gave it a lukewarm reception in Udine. Nonetheless it was recognised that the film is an unorthodox crime thriller with excellent performances, effectively incorporating psychological elements and a taboo-breaking homosexual subplot.

One of the most interesting Chinese films was *Huo Guo Ying Xiong/Chongqing Hotpot* (Yang Qing, 2016). The narrative is tight and the performances of Chen Kun, Bai Baihe, Qin Hao, and Yu Entai are praiseworthy. The film effectively captures the regional Chongqing culture, emphasising local dialect and familiar sights while simultaneously adopting ironic humour to address universal values such as friendship, love, and responsibility. The location and style of *Chongqing Hotpot* seem to mimic an older film, *Feng Kuang de Shi Tou/Crazy Stone* (Ning Hao, 2006), which, at the time of its release, was widely regarded as a new hope for Chinese cinema.[10] A decade later *Chongqing Hotpot* proves those hopes are yet to be fulfilled.

South Korean and Japanese film: Standing tall

The festival's top prize, the Golden Mulberry, was awarded to Korean director Lee Han for his war drama *Oppa Saenggak/A Melody to Remember* (2016). The Silver Mulberry went to the Korean feature *Sori: Voice from the Heart* (Lee Ho-jae, 2016). The Japanese film *Mohican Comes Home* (Okita Shuichi, 2016) received the Bronze Mulberry as well as the Black Dragon

Award given by the audience. Although the rise of China was the major talking point at Fat East the films from South Korea and Japan demonstrated that high quality cinema is still being produced in these countries rather than in the PRC. Not only did South Korea and Japan provide more genres (the Gold, Silver, and Bronze winners were a drama, sci-fi, and comedy respectively) but they clearly showed that their films are skilfully crafted. For many festival participants the quality of South Korean and Japanese films supplied a contrasting background that stressed the extreme commercial emphasis of Chinese cinema, which often comes at the expense of artistry. The Chinese film industry may be the largest and most prosperous in East Asia, yet South Korea and Japan are still the leading players.

Transnational cooperation

Following the exponential rise in cinema-going and the expansion of the region's film markets in recent years China has become the centre of East Asian cinema and consequently has been key in the rise of transnational co-productions in the region. During the early years of Chinese cinema's growth foreign films were frequently modified to include a few special Chinese scenes and characters in order to satisfy the 'local content' requirements made by the Chinese authorities. Today the Chinese market is vital to any given East Asian film's box office success. Thus, foreign production companies collaborate with their Chinese counterparts during the scriptwriting stage, prioritising cinema for Chinese audiences. This form of Chinese influence was evident at Far East. For instance, in the South Korean film *Making Family* (Cho Jin-mo, 2016) a boy discovers that his biological father is a Chinese sperm donor and travels to China to find him. Nearly the entire story of this film takes place in China, with predominantly Chinese characters. Actors from other countries also shift their performances to better suit Chinese-related film production. The Japanese star Takumi Saitoh, who plays the lead in *The Kodai Family*, mentioned that he is keen on taking roles in transnational co-productions and actively works with Chinese producers who seek out suitable parts for him. He believes that most of his fans in the future will come from China.[11]

One might argue that given this easy domestic success Chinese producers have grown complacent. However, they also seek opportunities abroad. The Far East opening film, *The Tiger: An Old Hunter's Tale* (Park

Hoon-Jung, 2015), was South Korean production co-funded by a Chinese distribution company via pre-sales.[12] It told the story of Japan's attempt to kill the last Korean tiger in the mountains at the beginning of the colonial era. In this case Chinese money is used to promote South Korean patriotism through a story set in the time of Japanese dominance, revealing an interesting geopolitical configuration and specific synergy between these three East Asian countries.

Cultural discount

Far East aims to build bridges between East and West and to promote cultural communication. This aim has never changed since its inception. However, even though Asian films receive plenty of recognition at this year's as well as previous editions the 'cultural discount' (reduced commercial value of an audio-visual product due to cultural specifics that remain illegible abroad) still exists. As Hoskins and Mirus pointed out, a cultural product rooted in one culture 'will have a diminished appeal elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the style, values, beliefs, institutions, and behavioral patterns of the material in question'.[13] Wildman also observed that

other things [being] equal, [viewers] would prefer films and programs produced in their native language. While foreign language productions can be subtitled or dubbed, something is always lost in translation. [14]

'Cultural discount' is the result of cultural differences and the degree to which audiences accept and understand unfamiliar cultures, customs, and practices. There were numerous examples of this form of cultural discount at this year's festival.

In addition, the language barrier is still the most serious issue in foreign language films. Cao Baoping, a famous Chinese director, complained that his films feature strong Chinese dialects which when translated into English or Italian becomes distorted and at times lost in translation. After the screening of *The Dead End* some members of the local audience told me that they could not properly follow the plot and they felt that the translation was confusing and inadequate. Eventually this same film received a less favourable critical response. Nevertheless, with increasing Eastern-Western coop-

eration backed by an effort to break the language barrier the cultural discount phenomenon is likely to diminish in the future.

As Davis and Yeh point out,

[t]he 'Far East' may seem a unique and mysterious region, hard to decipher given linguistic and geographical remoteness from Europe and North America... The veil has gradually lifted as global technological flows have intensified contact between cultures, peoples and information. [15]

Indeed, the Far East Film Festival in Udine provides a fantastic platform in which the work toward reducing cultural discount can progress. Festivals enhance the exposure of films, and thus the dialogue of cultures. Without film festivals global film culture would not be possible.[16] As previously mentioned, Far East successfully reaches out to different Western communities: scholars, fans, and professionals. The abundance of screenings, panel discussions, and forums enable participants to engage with other cultures and thus overcome cultural barriers. The cinema industry truly needs such festivals to continually provide platforms to share and echo the diversity of the world. As Baracetti said during the closing ceremony, 'We are not ready to say goodbye!' So let us look forward to meeting again at the 19th Far East Film Festival.

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Notes

- [1] Pusan International Film Festival changed its name to Busan International Festival at its 16th edition in 2011.
- [2] Davis & Yeh 2008, pp. 143-148.
- [3] The film studies department of University of Udine, an internationally renowned research institution, has been hosting a series of important events in film studies over the last two decades. The university also helps the film festival to invite students as volunteers.
- [4] Iordanova 2013, p. 4.
- [5] *Tucker Film* on the Cinando Joint and Connect Website.
- [6] Weber 2016.
- [7] See Berry & Iordanova & Kim 2015, pp. 80-90.
- [8] <http://www.fareastfilm.com/easyn2/eng/news/far-east-film-festival-18.aspx?IDLYT=13308> (accessed on 5 October 2016).
- [9] Berry 2016.
- [10] Zhang 2007.
- [11] Personal interview with Takumi Saitoh at Far East, 24 April 2016.
- [12] The Chinese Zhejiang Huace Media paid \$52 million USD for a stake in the Korean N.E.W (Next Entertainment World), the distributor of Tiger. Information available at: <http://variety.com/2014/biz/asia/chinas-huace-pays-52-million-for-stake-in-korean-distributor-n-e-w-1201325558/> and <http://www.its-new.co.kr/pastMovie.aspx?year=2015> (accessed on 5 October 2016).
- [13] Hoskins & Mirus 1988, p. 500.
- [14] Wildman 1994, p.123 (cited in Lee 2006, p. 261).
- [15] Davis & Yeh 2008, p. 7.
- [16] Iordanova 2013, p. 2.