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"The 19th Annual Asian American International Film Festival"
A project of Asian CineVision, Florence Gould Hall, French
Institute, New York City. July 19-21, 25-28, 1996

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THE 19TH ANNUAL ASIAN AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

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The Monkey Kid

An institution for nearly two decades, the Asian American International Film Festival (which mercifully abbreviates to AAIFF) is not as grand an event as other similarly aged international festivals, such as Toronto or Montreal. But within its own purview it definitely rules as one of the best venues for Asian and Asian American filmmakers to screen their work and meet their audience.

This year, the people at Asian CineVision have, typically, cast their net wide. On any particular day, one might view a lesbian student short from NYU, a Hong Kong studio made sword and costume epic, a Japanese/East Village comedy of manners, a Taiwanese political drama, a Korean supernatural thriller, or an Indo-Canadian feature about a Vietnamese mail order bride. Which just begins to indicate the wealth of genre and nationality available in the fifty films showcased over two extended July weekends, many of them New York, U.S. and even World Premieres.

The AAIFF is a nourishing experience for anyone interested in Asian cinema, as archly indicated in the festival logo: a bowl of popcorn augmented with a pair of chopsticks to suggest a bowl of rice, the staple of the continent. Any way you slice, dice, boil or stir fry it, there's

a lot to eat here. And this is certainly not a bad time to give some attention to Asian cinema, which is taking a larger place in the international film arena, with films by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou appearing regularly at Cannes, auteur directors Wong Kar-wai and Takeshi Kitano emerging from cult status, and Vietnamese cinema given its own sidebar at this year's Toronto festival. Add to this a more visible Asian presence in the American marketplace, with Jackie Chan and soon Chow Yun-fat enthroned as marquee idols, John Woo and Ringo Lam directing Hollywood features, and Ang Lee bringing Jane Austen to the screen.

There were a number of significant AAIFF precedents this year: their first film from Singapore, and the first time they did not invite me to the opening night gala, which reportedly included an award to actor Russell Wong, currently starring in the TV series *Vanishing Son*. An honorary retro screening of Wong's 1989 film, *Eat A Bowl Of Tea*, directed by Wayne Wang (*Smoke*, *Blue In The Face*), was also scheduled.

AAIFF really kicked off with Tsui Hark's *The Blade*, the latest special effects actioner from the veteran HK producer/director responsible for such previous dazzlers as *Once Upon A Time In China* and *A Chinese Ghost Story*.



Mee Pok Man

The Blade tells the story of a young man who inherits his father's broken sword, apprentices to a master sword maker, loses his arm in battle, eventually learns to forge a unity of body, soul and blade, and goes on to take revenge on his father's slayer, but at great personal cost. Set in a heady milieu of thieves, prostitutes and bounty hunters — a Chinese equivalent of the Wild West similar to the settings conjured by Hark in previous films — *The Blade* explores a loaded psychosexual iconography of amputation and potency. Its climax, a deliriously choreographed fight scene of swords slashing through water, is alone worth the price of admission. Director Hark was supposed to make an appearance at AAIFF (with whom he has a long association dating back to the late 70s) to introduce *The Blade* at its New York premiere. He had to cancel, but is well represented by a film that will both please his fans and create new ones.

The Monkey Kid, directed by Xiao-Yan Wang, is her personal, autobiographical remembrance of the Cultural Revolution, and is possibly the closest a Chinese film has come to the tone of an American TV sitcom; and I intend this as a compliment. Trained as a production designer at the Beijing Film Academy, Wang has worked on some of the milestone films of the Fifth Generation. Some of these Fifth Generation films, like *To Live* and *The Blue Kite*, have also dealt with youth spent amid the turmoil of the CultRev.

But as a first time director on *Monkey Kid*, Wang leaves the larger historical issues behind to center on young Shi-Wei, the daughter of intellectuals who, in the best CultRev style, have been sent to the countryside to learn from the peasants. Shi-Wei remains in the city with her extended family. But her story is not the potential tearjerker of bereavement and crisis. It is, rather, one of happiness and hope in the face of hardship.

A charmingly presented and bittersweet memoir, *Monkey Kid* deals with the universal experiences of nine years old the world over: school, home, food, games, playmates. The adult world, with its serious imperatives, is held at a distance. Shi-Wei's particular bane is a gang of young boys from the nearby Worker's Project who habitually waylay her on her path to school and taunt her with derisory comments (calling her "intellectual doglet"). But through it all she maintains her equanimity and naïve optimism. *Monkey Kid* is brought to life with a sunny performance by seven years old actress Fu Di, and manages to transmit an idea of childhood as a privileged and magical moment, immune to the darker currents of life. It is a rare film, good enough to merit comparison with classics like *The 400 Blows*.

Lulu, the second feature film by Canadian director Srinivas Krishna, follows the heady inventiveness and



Synthetic Pleasures

dry wit of his debut, *Masala*, which was shown at AAIFF back in 1992. *Masala* incorporated Krishna's Indian heritage within the context of contemporary Canadian multiculturalism. An image from the film that remains indelibly imprinted is Krishna (the Great God, not the filmmaker), dressed in a Maple Leaf uniform, slapping at a hockey puck. *Lulu*, adapted from the Alan Berg opera, is also a multicultural experience, but darker and more subdued.

The eponymous heroine is a Vietnamese mail order bride, a flawless but inscrutable apparition who works behind the cosmetics counter of a Toronto department store. *Lulu* seems the ultimate, insouciant object of male desire, mysterious and exotic, a blank slate that inspires voyeuristic obsessions and desires in the men around her: her loser husband, his scheming friend, and a documentary filmmaker who keeps following her around. Then there are her traditional parents, whom she has brought over to Canada, and who berate her for their unhappiness and dislocation. But while all might claim some part of *Lulu*, none can truly own her. As her story unravels, we get caught up in a series of picaresque plot developments, including a sinister human organ piracy scheme. Director Krishna has created a taut, atmospheric film fraught with urban malaise: not really

a thriller, but infused with the spirit of early Roman Polanski. The film was screened at Cannes, but this is its American premiere.

Mee Pok Man, directed by Eric Khoo, is another strange, urban tale, but this time the city is Singapore. *Mee pok* is the local fast food, a fish ball noodle soup, and the main character runs a 24 hour stall that serves it up to a sleazy clientele of pimps and hookers. The *mee pok man* is lonely and introverted, a social misfit in thrall to a glowering photograph of his dead father (from whom he inherited the business). Weak and a little slow, he is regularly taunted and victimized by his hoodlum customers. But secretly, he develops a crush on one of their string of prostitutes. He wants to be her knight in shining armor and save her from a tawdry life. When she is run down by a car outside the shop, he has his chance. He brings her home and diligently feeds and cares for her, even after she has obviously died from the accident and is starting to decompose.

The first film from Singapore to screen at AAIFF, *Mee Pok Man* renders a brooding, realistic peek at life in the lower depths of this island city. Director Khoo obviously revels in the details of seedy apartments and bad behavior, but he ups the ante on his kitchen sink realism when he jolts us with the weird, necrophiliac subtext.



Super Citizen Ko

The title of *Super Citizen Ko* might at first suggest a campy hero: bespectacled salaryman drops his briefcase and leaps tall buildings in a single bound. In fact, this heartfelt film from director Wan Jen is an examination of recent Taiwanese history through the eyes of its aged protagonist. Mr. Ko, who wakes up in the relatively prosperous and permissive Taiwan of the 90s, is haunted by memories of martial law imposed in the 60s. (This period, known as the “White Terror”, was also the subject of Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *Good Men, Good Women*). As a student, Ko was rounded up by the police for attending clandestine political meetings. His jailhouse confession led to the execution of a good friend.

Now, thirty years later, Ko wants to find this friend’s grave and apologize. This quest for forgiveness leads him on an exploration of the new Taiwan. Buildings where he was once tortured have become shopping malls. And students now openly take to the streets to protest government policy.

But graves are hard to find. History, especially the unpleasant parts, has been quickly swept aside. In following Ko’s small, personal act of atonement, of coming to terms with his past, director Wan Jen creates a powerful, if somewhat overlong, warning on the transience of memory.

Also at AAIFF this year were several Asian American films of note: *The Year Of My Japanese Cousin*, set in the post grunge music scene of Seattle, and *Synthetic Pleasures*, a cyber doc dealing with transformations of body and consciousness through new technologies. Plus programs of short films entitled “It’s A She Thing” and “Boys To Men To Boys”. The festival’s closing night film was the original, full length, director’s cut of Richard Gordon and Cara Hinton’s *The Gate Of Heavenly Peace*, the masterful documentary on the student revolt and government crackdown in Tiananmen Square.

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