

Cinematic revival



Hong Kong actor Carl Ng stars in Magazine Gap Road by Nicholas Chin. Photos courtesy of HKAIFF

While Hong Kong cinema is long past its prime of box office successes and international popularity, there may lie great potential among the city's younger generation of budding filmmakers attempting to pave a new direction for the industry.

The inaugural Hong Kong Asian Independent Film Festival (HKAIFF) is a testament to this creativity. Featuring 45 feature films, documentaries and shorts in 30 programs, the festival brings to Hong Kong audiences a wealth of local and regional sensibilities.

Bold ambitions

For festival organizer Ying E Chi - a non-profit organization that advocates Hong Kong independent films - the launch of HKAIFF is an important move in promoting local independent filmmakers to the general public.

"At the heart of HKAIFF is the independent spirit," said Venus Wong, general manager of Ying E Chi. "The filmmakers channel their individual visions and messages through their works, which take on very diverse expressions."

The festival's opening film, King of Spy, is a celebration of this vision. With a budget of HK\$5,000, director Chu Ka Yat created an action thriller that features meticulously choreographed fight scenes, fake guns and Hong Kong as an totalitarian society.



HKAIFF 2008 opening film King of Spy by Chu Ka Yat.

Despite its low production value, the movie's visuals were greatly enhanced by the director's techniques and editing, which helped the film transcend some of its limitations, according to Lawrence Wong, chairman of Ying E Chi.

"This film is truly inspirational," Lawrence Wong said. "It shows that you can find a way to make a film as long as you're determined. I'm hoping it will encourage aspiring filmmakers in the audience to start their own projects."

Such inspirations are crucial to the growth of Hong Kong's independent-film community. Lawrence Wong pegged the average number of annual independent film productions at two in recent years,

although it has begun to pick up recently.

"Funding is tough when the industry is in a down time," he said. "There are 20 to 30 commercial films out a year now, which leaves little room for independent films. The investors are very conservative, and they count on formulaic box office hits."

These crises of Hong Kong cinema, however, may prove a turning point for independent filmmakers. When commercial success seems an unlikely prospect, some directors may focus on independent productions and their personal artistry.

"I'm positive there will be new possibilities for our community," Lawrence Wong said. "For example, Taiwanese cinema was so down some years ago that most directors gave up on success. That's when they made good films again and bounced back."

Wider audience

A supportive audience is another key to the community's development. As Venus Wong remarked, the festival aims to cultivate a stronger interest in independent films, among the audience, with the festival's regional selections.

"These are very meaningful films from nearby markets such as Japan and Korea, to faraway corners as Laos and Bangladesh," she elaborated. "We hope they'll attract more viewers to the festival, which will then draw their attention to local productions."

The regional programs touch on a wide range of topics and forms. Korean film *Synching Blue* depicts a love story between two loners, using stunning visuals and no dialogue, while Iranian selection *Banana Skin* offers a comical take on death.

For those seeking further insight on independent films as a medium, the HKAIFF also offers a series of seminars and workshops. The topics range from production techniques and screening talks, to the role of independent films in art education.

With the HKAIFF in full swing, the festival has received very positive responses from local media and film lovers so far. Ticket sales have been strong, despite limited publicity by Ying E Chi.

"Naturally, I hope the festival will draw a wider audience than the usual film bugs," Lawrence Wong said. "At this stage, it's hard to say how successful the festival will be, and we'll be looking out for audience feedback."

Public support is instrumental to the continuation of HKAIFF, since the festival runs on limited resources. Besides the Art Development Council, Ying E Chi also secured a number of commercial sponsors this year.

The venue for the festival, the Grand Cinema in Elements, Kowloon Station, is another step forward for the independent film community, since the company is keen on including local independent productions in its screening schedules.

"There are 12 houses in Grand Cinema, which allows room for both mainstream and alternative films," Venus Wong explained. "Most movie-goers aren't used to hitting that theater yet, but that should change soon."

Going global

Among the select Hong Kong directors, Nicholas Chin has achieved international acclaim with his Cannes-selected short film, *Tai Tai*. At HKAIFF, Chin presents to Hong Kong audiences his first full-length feature film, *Magazine Gap Road*.

The story revolves around a former high-class prostitute, whose new-found life of luxury on the Peak is at stake when past returns to haunt her. In Chin's view, the film represents a different side to Hong Kong that eludes most people.

"Hong Kong is generally chaotic, warm, fast-paced; the Peak is cold and mysterious," Chin said. "In my film, there's a mixture of people from Hong Kong, the mainland and overseas, and a mixture of



Bangladesh-Hong Kong production Port Unknown by Mamunur Rashid.

languages that represents my idea of the city."

Born in Shanghai, Chin was raised and educated in England, and he worked in the US before moving to Hong Kong to work for a production company. Chin maintains close contact with other independent filmmakers, as the community boasts mutual support.

Another positive for the community's development, Chin noted, is that the Hong Kong style of filmmaking involves a great deal of spontaneity on the set, which can be easily attuned to independent production.

"There's a lot on the fly, even with a medium-budget production. It's very similar to independent filmmaking in England and the US and other places. That's why I love shooting and working with the people here."

The HKAIFF runs from tomorrow to Nov 30. For more information, visit www.hkaiff.hk/.



**Korean selection Synching Blue by Seo Won
Tae.**

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