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East goes West

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Cannes' Asian bent underlines an already growing global appetite for Far East pics

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HOLLYWOOD — There could hardly have been a more perfect year in which to appoint Quentin Tarantino president of the feature film jury at Cannes. Hard on the heels of a grueling promotional tour for “Kill Bill Vol. 2,” his homage to every possible hard-core genre of Asian pop movie, Tarantino the jurist confronts a slate of films more heavily tilted East than any in recent memory: Five out of 18 films screening in Competition are from Asia.

And when you widen the search to include films that are screening out of Competition, a pattern emerges. The lineup includes:

Two period martial arts pictures: Lee Kwang-hoon’s medieval Korean detective story “Sword in the Moon” and Zhang Yimou’s Chinese production “House of Flying Daggers.”

Mamoru Oshii’s “Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence,” only the fifth animated film (or sixth, depending on if you count fellow 2004 competish pic “Shrek 2” as the fifth) to be accepted into the feature competition, and the first from Japan. (As director Oshii observed in a prepared statement, “This nomination is yet more proof that Japanese (anime) is finally being recognized as a ‘movie’.”)

Wong Kar-wei's "2046," a no-doubt idiosyncratic variation on the science-fiction movie by an alchemist director who in the past has made high art in genres such as martial arts ("Ashes of Time") and the Hitchcockian thriller ("In the Mood for Love").

That it's Tarantino who is sitting in judgment over these films seems almost too perfect, add in the fact that this year's Cannes includes particular genre of Asian pics. Tarantino says he's excited that the Competition includes an anime pic and vengeance film "Old Boy," from Park Chan-wook, the South Korean helmer of actioner "Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance" (2002).

In the past it was only the elite auteur offerings that made it to the major film fests and into art theaters in a few big cities. By and large — with a few often cheesy exceptions — mass-audience films were assumed to be too local in style or flavor to travel well.

These days the situation has flipped. Cannes vets Wong and Spain's Pedro Almodovar are two of the few commercially significant brand-name auteurs working on films in their own language. (Almodovar's "Bad Education" opens the fest out of Competition.) Now, in contrast, it is the popular cinemas of East Asia that are attracting the most attention on the world stage.

The first signs of this sea change came in the 1980s, when Japanese animation and Hong Kong action films began to attract an audience in the U.S. outside Chinatown and Little Tokyo; the video revolution was instrumental. Now the most obvious indicators of how much farther these films can travel take form in a couple of trends. Hoards of Asian horror films and comedies are being snapped up by U.S. companies for remakes. And there's a growing international craze for a ravenous breed of extreme action/horror films by a new generation of alternative helmers such as Japan's Takeshi Miike and Kiyoshi Kurosawa, and South Korea's Kim Ki-duk.

The remake trend has been chronicled in the past.

The list of remake options seems to get longer by the week: DreamWorks went to South Korea for Kim Ji-woon's ghost thriller "Tale of Two Sisters" (2003); Miramax has Cho Jin-gyu's "My Wife Is a Gangster" (2001) and Jang Gyu-seong's "Teacher Mr. Kim" (2003); Warner Bros. is transposing Lau Wai-keung and Mak Siu-fai's Hong Kong cat-and-mouse police procedural "Infernal Affairs" (2002) to Gotham for Brad Pitt; and from Japan, United Artists has acquired Kurosawa's grueling serial-killer chiller "The Cure" (1997).

In a dizzying cross-cultural move, DreamWorks is developing a version of Kwak Jae-yong's quirky Korean romantic comedy "My Sassy Girl" (2001) to be helmed by Brit helmer Gurinder Chadha ("Bend It Like Beckham").

Rob Straight does not believe that the current remake race is just a development fad, as some critics have charged. Prexy of Vancouver-based Horizon Ent., Straight is an independent distrib who has wrangled theatrical exhibition for many of the new Asian films that are hot properties on the remake market, including Hideo Nakata's "The Ring" and "Dark Water," and Takashi Shimizu's "Ju-on" (The Grudge), which will see a summer release via Lions Gate Films Stateside.

"Many of the films that we've handled have been based on bestselling novels," Straight says, "so they tend to have strong stories. They are terrifying in a cerebral kind of way. Asian cultures provide supporting mythologies of spirits and demons that are new to us and that make the terror feel more rooted, less arbitrary. These are not the usual kind of slash-and-cut horror films, and I think people were ready for a change."

"Slash and cut" could describe some of the movies in the second category — for which the term "Asia Extreme" has been coined (and copyrighted) by Hamish McAlpine of London-based distrib Tartan.

McAlpine broke ground distributing John Woo films such as “The Killer” and “Hard Boiled” in the U.K. in the 1980s, and made waves in 2000 releasing Kinji Fukasaku teen death-game thriller “Battle Royale,” one of the initial classics of the Asia Extreme subgenre. He’s opening a Stateside operation in fall that will release pics such as “A Tale of Two Sisters”; “Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance”; and Cannes competitor “Old Boy,” whose remake rights went to Universal. Tartan also plans to bring its three home entertainment labels, Tartan Video, Tartan Terror and Asia Extreme, to the U.S. this year.

McAlpine identifies two components within the catch-all designation Asia Extreme: “(They) are, slick and glossy with fast, MTV-style editing ... and sensibility, typified by something like the opening sequence of Takeshi Miike’s ‘Dead or Alive,’ which is over-the-top grotesque to the point of being surreal. And then there are horror films like Miike’s ‘Audition,’ that start soft and then go to more extreme places than an American movie ever would. In both cases what is exciting is that the rule book seems to have been thrown away. You can never predict where these movie are going to go.”

McAlpine likens the Asia Extreme audience to the middle-brow crowd that in the 1960s patronized art theaters. “They went to foreign films because of the sexual elements in films like ‘I Am Curious (Yellow),” he says. “The audience we have found in the U.K. for ‘Battle Royale’ and the rest has been a young goth or heavy metal crowd that is attracted by a certain level of weirdness or even just by the ultraviolence in the case of the Miike films. These are people who would not otherwise be prepared to put up with subtitles.”

In L.A., the movement was spearheaded by programmers Dennis Bartok and Chris D. at the American Cinematheque in their annual showcase series Japanese Outlaw Masters. Their colleague David Schultz, who shepherded the American Cinematheque Presents line of transgressive

Asian videos on the Image label, will help Tartan with the theatrical distribution of the first wave of U.S. releases.

“From the Asian perspective,” Schultz says, “this is more than just a trend. It’s a whole new culture. The people who are making and watching these films are the otaku, the people who used to be comicbook nerds or videogamers, and they bring that sensibility to the movies.”

None of this will be news to Cannes jury prexy. But some of the larger questions might be. What does it tell us, for example, that Asians are turning out stories that can be transplanted, that embody a form of postpunk youth culture as meaningful to kids in London and L.A. as those in Tokyo and Seoul?

“I don’t think it means that the filmmakers are homogenizing their art,” McAlpine says. “In terms of pop culture we are in fact becoming more and more of a global community, and the new films simply reflect that fact. Then of course that makes it much easier for these cultural products to travel from one world to another.”

This view is echoed by Hong Kong producer Peter Chan, whose Applause Pictures has been specializing in pan-Asian co-productions like the Thai-Chinese creepshow “The Eye,” which has attracted remake interest from Tom Cruise.

“The people who are portrayed in the movies that strike Americans as very Chinese, such as martial arts films, are not real people,” Chan told the L.A. Times. “The truth is we are alike. America’s way of life has become the world’s way of life.”

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