

## INSIGHTS > Asian And Bulgarian Cinema – So Far, So Close

BY KERRINE GOH  
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# Asian And Bulgarian Cinema – So Far, So Close

Every Asian film shown in Bulgaria is like a rare gift from an unknown planet. Although during the last several years, the audience is more familiar with the recent production due to the International Sofia Film Festival /1/, Bulgarians are still provoked, sometimes even shocked by the Eastern aesthetics of visible contemplativeness and inner dynamics.

In the socialist past (1944 – 1989), Asian films were not quite popular among the audience in Bulgaria and probably the single exception was the works of Akira Kurosawa. Asian cinema, as a cultural and art phenomenon, was a property and discussion topic mostly for the professionals – directors and critics.

The situation nowadays is considerably different and although the audience is still not very large, there are better opportunities to see contemporary Asian movies in Bulgaria. The International Sofia Film Festival, the biggest forum for worldwide cinema in the country, which is held March, is the best way for a “self education” in this direction. In recent years, the festival has focused several times on the most famous contemporary Asian directors. ISFF 2003 was the edition of Takeshi Kitano. We saw some of his most important films, such as *Fireworks*, *Kikujiro*, *Brother and Dolls*. The moviegoers were split into two positions – some fell in love at first sight, others denounced him as an impostor.

Maybe the most successful focus was dedicated to Wong Kar Wai – for two weeks in 2004 at the festival, all his films by that time were shown

(from *As Tears Go By* to *In the Mood for Love*). The audience seemed to be engaged but not as puzzled and quickly got used to his distinctive style – a postmodern mixture of European art cinema, Hollywood pragmatism and Asian sensuality. The following year, 2046 was regularly distributed in the multiplexes and maybe because of its limited success, his last film *Blueberry Nights* still hasn't come to Bulgaria.

The festival favorite and the people's most beloved director is Kim Ki Duk, which is understandable – his films are full of Eastern philosophy but seem to be made for foreign recipients. His works were not united in a separate panorama but were shown consecutively every year since *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring*.

The perception of Hirukazu Koreeda last year was the complete opposite. His extreme themes and naturalistic style could be interpreted only by professionals so the screening halls were almost empty.

This year, there were only three Asian titles within the ISFF program. A Tsai Ming Liang's movie was presented for the first time here – *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*. Unfortunately, it remained misunderstood because local audiences are not familiar with his earlier works and it's almost impossible to comprehend his style from his last film alone. Almost the same happened with *Help Me, Eros* by Lee Kang-sheng which is created in similar aesthetics (the producer is Tsai Ming Liang). The Drummer by Kenneth Bi participated in the competition program but remained basically unnoticed.

Usually in June there is a week dedicated to Chinese cinema, organized by the National Palace of Culture in Sofia /2/. Within this event, there are not just first class movies but a chance for people to discover some the early, infamous films by Zhang Yimou. Incidentally, titles such as *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers* and *Curse of the Golden Flower* are usually distributed in the multiplexes and that makes Yimou the most popular Chinese director in Bulgaria. The other Asian director, very well accepted by a wide audience, is Ang Lee with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, but also with his less native works.

What about the Bulgarian films in Asia? Of course, they are much less than Asian films in Bulgaria and started to travel far only during the last several years. At the Pusan International Film Festival some pretty successful

Bulgarian titles have been shown, such as *Mila From Mars* by Zornitza Sofia, *Stolen Eyes* by Radoslav Spasov, *The Mosquito Problem* and *Other Stories* by Andrey Paounov, but none of them received any prizes. One animation – *Air Ace* by the very young director Svilen Dimitrov – won the audience award at The International Short and Video Festival in Beijing. Certainly, Asia offers lots of opportunities for Bulgarian films to be seen by different and various audiences, but in my opinion, directors here still don't think about their works globally and often they just don't participate. Hopefully, this situation will change because nowadays the new Bulgarian cinema needs more attention and self-confidence.

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*by Mariana Hristova*

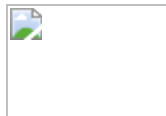
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