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The Times

October 01, 2005

All's not quiet on the eastern front

BY IAN JOHNS

South Korea is the newest pretender to the world-cinema throne, and it has the energy and diversity to back up its claim

::nobreak::

EVERY ten years or so a new country seems to take the lead in ground-breaking cinema. After the Second World War it was the Italian neo-realists. In the 1960s it was the French New Wave. More recently, in the 1990s, China led the field before being edged out by Iran. Now South Korea has seized the baton with a group of eclectic, provocative film-makers producing a diverse range of work, a taste of which can be experienced in this year's festival.

The films include Kim Dae-Seung's *Blood Rain*, in which an imperial investigator in the early 1800s is faced with a series of grisly murders on an island. It's a labyrinthine mystery, full of evocative period detail, involving a paper-mill-owning family, a reclusive young swordsman and sins of the past.

Another mystery, Wang Cheol-Mean's *Spying Cam*, couldn't be more different as political and sexual barriers break down between two men as they tape themselves trapped in a motel room.

A rising directors making an impact overseas is Park Chan-Wook. His festival film *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* is a funny, violent story about a murderess pursuing a vendetta that should provide a slightly less daunting experience for mainstream audiences than his gruesome but gripping cult hit *Oldboy*. Just as the hero of that film was abducted and detained for 15 years without knowing the reason why, the heroine of *Lady Vengeance* serves 13 years in jail on false charges of kidnapping and infanticide.

"I'm often misunderstood as a director of violence," Park has said, "but really I want to show how violence makes the perpetrator and the victim destroy themselves." And always wrapped up in his fascination with violence, vengeance and taboos is an interest in ethical questions.

Park's high energy, provocative film-making reflects an erupting energy among Korean film-makers. Since South Korea's military dictatorship ended in 1992 with the election of a civilian president, there has been a breaking down of censorship barriers and a rapid growth in production, helped by a quota system that ensures a high

Are house
prices falling?

proportion of screen time for local films.

Park describes himself as part of "a generation thirsty for more cinematic expression and the richness and diversity of cinema". According to Anthony Leong, the author of *Korean Cinema: The New Hong Kong*, "Korean cinema is a melting pot of different types of film-making". He cites many of the film-makers now making an impact as being young, Western-educated and fans of Western, Hong Kong and Japanese cinema, as well as the French New Wave. "They take all these techniques, perspectives and genres and meld them into something unique."

Kim Ki-Duk has a reputation as one of the bad boys of Korean cinema. His films include *Samaritan Girl*, a gritty tale of teen prostitution, *Bad Guy*, a sordid account of a pimp's brutal recruitment of a student, and the revenge yarn *3-Iron*. Yet he also made *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter . . . and Spring* (2003), a quasi-Buddhist tale filled with serene natural imagery. It made less than \$300,000 in Korea but became the most successful Korean film at the US box office, earning \$2.3 million.

Success abroad is becoming increasingly important for the Korean film industry, which has moved beyond domestic crowd-pleasers such as cop dramas and romantic comedies into darker thrillers, martial-arts adventures, reality-based war epics and distinctive auteur offerings. Even two of South Korea's biggest mainstream hits — *Silmido* (about a convict commando unit brutally trained in 1968 to kill the North Korean leader) and *Taegukgi* (two brothers pitted against each other during the Korean war) — are tackling the country's troubled past.

For Kim Dong-Ju, the head of the Seoul-based production and distribution company Show West, "Korea used to be an importing nation, now it will be an exporter". He is working with other Asian backers on such projects as Chen Kaige's *The Promise*, touted as "the *Lord of the Rings* of the East". "We are just a beginner," Kim says, "but we want to learn how to make movies like *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*."

At the same time the French company MK2 has invested in two of Hong Sang-Soo's recent films, *Woman is the Future of Man* and *Tale of Cinema*. The latter, a London festival screening, is an intriguing blurring of fact and fiction as a struggling film-maker bumps into a film star outside a cinema after seeing a movie that was inspired by his life. For film-makers such as Hong, whose low-key, observant style has a relaxed charm reminiscent of Eric Rohmer, foreign backing is invaluable.

It also means that first-time directors such as Lee Yoon-Ki can hope to carve out a career. His festival film *This Charming Girl*, shot entirely with a hand-held camera, is a gentle portrait of a shy post-office worker who summons up the courage to invite a regular customer to dinner but is stood up and later offered a lame excuse. We're left, like her, wondering whether to believe him or not.

An indication of South Korea's passion for cinema was amply demonstrated in 1999 when a change to South Korea's film quota system was suggested. There were hunger strikes and boycotts of

Hollywood films — 100 film professionals even shaved their heads in protest. But while Kim acknowledges that the industry now boasts many committed, talented people, he doesn't see it as guaranteeing a rosy future: "We just need to try harder to make better films."

- Blood Rain, Oct 28, NFT1 & Oct 31, Odeon West End 2; Spying Cam, Oct 21 & 24, ICA; Sympathy for Lady Vengeance, Oct 22, Odeon West End 2; Tale of Cinema Oct 30 & Nov 2, NFT1; This Charming Girl, Oct 28, NFT2, & 31, NFT1

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