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ASIAN POP Korean Movies, Hold The Koreans
The world's hottest cinema is coming to a multiplex near you -- as a remake.

Thursday, July 1, 2004

by Vera H-C Chan, special to SF Gate



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By all rights, South Korean film should be the next wave of cinema to hit American shores.

Not only is it beating out Hollywood at home -- a rare accomplishment for any country -- but South Korean cinema has also doubled its take at the international box office in 56 countries within the last two years.

Park Chan-wook's neo-noir revenge flick "Oldboy" rode the Asian wave at Cannes this year to become the first South Korean film ever to win the prestigious Grand Prize -- and the prizes at international film festivals just keep piling up.

South Korean film has "established its own brand ... of cutting-edge mainstream cinema," says Paul Yi, president of E Pictures, a production and sales company with offices in Los Angeles and Seoul.

So, why aren't American screens flooded with hot South Korean product?

Citing the notorious fickleness of U.S. audiences, who object to reading and viewing movies at the same time, Hollywood plans to skip the subtitles for profitable remakes.

End result: Story line and plot, please, hold the South Koreans.

"Oldboy," for example, was presold to Universal Pictures months before its Cannes honor. The picture, about a family man who sets out to learn why he had been imprisoned by gangsters for 15 years, will be reshaped into an American copycat, with director Justin Lin ("Better Luck Tomorrow") set to take the helm.

At least six other South Korean box-office

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successes are getting the same makeover treatment: "Il Mare" and "Marrying the Mafia" (Warner Bros.), "A Tale of Two Sisters" and "My Sassy Girl" (Dreamworks) and "My Wife Is a Gangster" and "My Teacher Mr. Kim" (Miramax/Dimension Films).

This remake-mania "reinforces the confidence in the [South Korean industry's] momentum," says Chiu-hui Yang, director of the San Francisco International Asian Film Festival (SFIAFF). On the other hand, Yang adds, "it's unfortunate that there're all these great ideas, but American audiences are only going to see American versions, not the original."

South Korea, the New Hong Kong?

South Korea has produced internationally recognized masters such as the incomparable Im Kwon-taek, and some of his 98 films have made it to the art-house and festival circuits. Until the recent turnaround in the late '90s, however, the South Korean motion-picture industry was largely underfunded and censored, and it produced films that routinely bombed at the box office. In fact, in the 1980s, the South Korean press had declared the industry to be on its deathbed.

But political seismic shifts -- from assassinations to the 1988 Seoul Olympics -- and, most notably, the reinvention of the government-supported Korean Film Council in 1999, created the fertile soil that led to the powerhouse cinema South Korea is producing today. A big sign in the government's faith in the nation's film industry came when director Lee Chang-dong, whose "Oasis" is making the U.S. art-house rounds in its original version, was appointed as the country's minister of culture and tourism.

Today's South Korean films showcase high production values boasting atmospheric cinematography and Tinseltown-style special effects. Output has risen since 1998; 78 movies were released in 2002. Replacing indifferent business conglomerates, small independents and five major sales and distribution companies now rule the industry.

Co-productions and international investments from France, Germany and, ironically, Japan (which decimated the early Korean film industry during its occupation of the Korean peninsula during World War II) have streamlined distribution. The Pusan International Film Festival (Pusan is, next to Seoul, the largest city in South Korea), coming up in its ninth incarnation Oct. 7-15, has eclipsed the former leading Asian event, the Hong Kong International Film Festival, in influence.

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So, joining directors such as Im Kwon-Taek, art-house regular Hong Sang-soo (whose "Woman Is the Future of Man" vied with "Oldboy" at Cannes) and father of cult cinema Kim Ki-duk ("Spring, Summer, Winter, Fall and Spring" was recently released in the United States) are up-and-comers such as blockbuster king Je-gyu Kang ("Shiri," "Taegugki"), Kwak Jae-young ("My Sassy Girl") and Lee Je-yong, whose period drama "Untold Scandal" recently swept the Shanghai Film Festival.

The appeal comes from kinetic, genre-bending plots and bold, nonlinear narratives, reflecting both first-time directors' international schooling and their native training. A distinctive "crazy schizoid" aesthetic, says E Pictures producer Paul Yi, also stems from the divided country's sense of identity.

"It's kind of this melting pot of different styles, whether it's French New Wave or Hollywood blockbuster or introspective Japanese cinema," explains Canadian Anthony Leong, author of "Korean Cinema: The New Hong Kong."

But Will It Sell in Peoria?

The U.S. film-festival circuit has increasingly recognized the allure of South Korean fare. In spring, Chicago's Gene Siskel Center presented the mini-festival Korean Cinema: The Newest Wave in Chicago and the Philadelphia Film Festival featured 11 recent releases. The Film Society of Lincoln Center expects that thousands of patrons will attend the South Korean film screenings in its New York Film Festival this November. Not surprisingly, the Bay Area has long spotlighted this cinema, with a 1996 SFIAFF retrospective of Jang Sun-woo's works and the S. F. International Film Festival 1998 presentation of a lifetime-achievement tribute to Im Kwon-taek.

Theatrical distribution, however, is a different picture, even with Korean cinema's exuberant mainstream fare, which mixes gangster, horror, sci-fi, romance and comedy genres.

"If they were in English, they would be in multiplexes across America everywhere," says Matt Brodlie, senior vice president of acquisitions for Miramax. With American audiences split between teen multiplex males and over-30 art-house patrons, "it's very rare you can have crossover [foreign-language] films like 'Crouching Tiger,' 'Amélie,' 'Life Is Beautiful.'"

"Taegugki," a Spielbergesque blockbuster filmed at 18 locations with 25,000 extras on a \$14 million budget, may have that crossover potential. The

military extravaganza by director Kang Je-gyu, which comes this fall courtesy of Samuel Goldwyn Pictures, is one of a handful of South Korean films Americans will see in their original incarnations (logical, given that Korean War tales don't lend themselves to remake treatment).

The blockbuster drew 10 million moviegoers throughout Asia in the first 40 days of its release, however, which bodes well for American success. Then again, the 1999 espionage thriller "Shiri" (also directed by Kang Je-gyu), which jump started South Korean cinema, flopped in the United States, partly due to a release date four months after Sept. 11.

"It's a harder sell," producer Roy Lee says of Asian cinema. Known as the Remake Man, Lee co-founded Vertigo Entertainment based on reselling Asian properties to U.S. studios. Remakes go by an entirely different set of economics; a ready-made film is a proven investment and lets studio execs see what worked and what didn't the first time around.

The most recent affirmation of the remake formula is "The Ring." Dreamworks paid out \$1 million for the rights to the Japanese horror film "Ringu," cranked out its version in 2002 and grossed \$129 million in box-office receipts.

"If you look at the success of 'The Ring' and compare it with any Japanese[-language] film released in the United States, there's no comparison," the SFIAFF's Chiu-hui Yang says. "If they're able to get an idea and repackage it and sell it, that's what they're going to do."

That process strikes some, like Frances Gateward, an assistant professor of cinema studies at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, as "lazy."

"What happens is, all [Hollywood is] doing is remaking '70s films and TV shows," says Gateward, editor of the upcoming anthology "Made In Korea: Contemporary Cinema and Society." At least there, audiences know they're watching their own repackaged past. But few moviegoers here will know to credit Asian films when they watch the Americanized version.

Moreover, remakes bleed identity. "When things comes to Hollywood, they're going to whiten it up," Gateward says. "Cultural nuances are lost."

"When you're relocating that story in a Hollywood setting, in a U.S. city and with U.S. characters, you lose all of the richness and flavor of international cultures," agrees Meyer Gottlieb, president of Samuel Goldwyn Pictures. "The Hollywood

audience sadly will not see [the original]."

Still, he points out that cinema has always been a democratic marketplace of ideas. A leading lender, Hollywood has also freely borrowed, cadging from the United Kingdom ("The Ladykillers," from the British film of the same name), Japan ("The Magnificent Seven" from "The Seven Samurai") and France ("Three Men and a Baby" from "Trois Hommes et un Couffin").

American audiences have been fed an international diet since the beginning, often without knowing it. Gottlieb points out that as movie audiences continue to grow, so do the number of patrons of foreign-language films. That shift just might pressure Hollywood to cater to moviegoers' increasing taste for authentic fare.

Aesthetic Preservation

Although purists such as Frances Gateward object to whitewashing original works, according to several accounts, South Korean filmmakers don't seem to mind.

When Miramax negotiated remake rights for four titles, including "Jail Breakers" and "My Wife Is a Gangster," the South Korean sales agents insisted that the studio also buy distribution rights.

Not only do "they want to make a sale," Miramax's Matt Brodlie explains, but the sales agents "want to show the filmmakers that we admire their filmmaking as well as their ideas."

The Korean filmmakers are realistic about what selling their film to a U.S. studio entails. "They know the movie has to be rewritten for a different audience," Roy "Remake Man" Lee explains. "They don't really have much concern making sure that it's exactly the same." When Lee pitched "Oldboy," Universal Pictures emerged as the only studio intent on preserving the tone and ending. "It was a plus," he says. But "it wasn't a condition [of the sale] at all."

Different companies can own the rights to remakes and distribution. U.K. distributor Tartan Films, for instance, will test its new American arm, Tartan USA, with the original "Oldboy" in its line-up, while Universal holds the remake rights.

Critics argue that studios owning both rights suppress distribution of the original to avoid competition or comparison. DreamWorks, for example, sent "Ringu" straight to video, and Miramax often has been accused of sitting on hot Asian properties. Fans bitterly complain that these

companies and others squander films deserving of theatrical fanfare and deny audiences true recognition of a cinema, be it from Hong Kong or South Korea.

"Our response is that [film] is not widgets. You can't just throw a movie out in to the marketplace," Brodlie says. "We're not going to jump on any bandwagons, because there are a lot of bandwagons around." Also, assembling a remake dream team can take time: The 1996 Japanese film "Shall We Dance" finally hits theaters this October in a version penned by Audrey Wells ("Under the Tuscan Sun") and starring Jennifer Lopez and Richard Gere.

Now Available (Mainly) on DVD

U.S. moviegoers eager to get acquainted with South Korean film will have recourse to festivals and a small number of art-house releases, and, of course, the Americanized versions that will eventually hit the multiplexes. Many movies are, of course, available right now on video or DVD. Ironically, however, that scenario, in turn, may preempt theatrical success.

"When we deal with Korean films in particular, we find ourselves competing with the local video stores in its video inventory," Gottlieb says. With Korean Americans and Chinese Americans as part of their target audience, Samuel Goldwyn Pictures has sped up "Taegukgi"'s premiere to beat the pirates.

"Taegukgi"'s box-office victory on American soil could send studios scrambling to shift strategies. More likely, though, the math dictates that Americans will get the world's hottest cinema secondhand.

"In the long run, it's probably better for Hollywood to do its remake," Leong says. "Companies have taken [the original] Asian films and kind of butchered them by redubbing or editing them, dumbing them down for mainstream audiences."

Imitation, in the end, may be Hollywood's sincerest form of flattery. Says Leong, "It can only help spread the word."

Vera H-C Chan traces her pop-culture fascination with Asian cinema to her childhood weekends in Boston Chinatown theaters. A former features reporter and events editor at The Contra Costa Times, she covers pop culture, lifestyle, travel and business for various Bay Area publications.



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