Emerging Chinese Cinema

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As Australians become more conscious of the ways our fortunes are tied to China, media companies and government agencies are putting out feelers to increase regional film activity. All the more reason then, why events such as the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF) should assume increased significance for Australians.

This year was the festival’s 30th anniversary as it continues to change in response to the fluctuations of Asian film industries. At a panel discussion on the importance of HKIFF for Chinese cinema, Jia Zhangke (director of Platform and The World) said that for him, the festival had been like meeting the Chinese audience for the first time. Taiwan’s Hou Hsiao-hsien stressed the importance of the exposure given to Taiwan’s new wave movement in the 1980s and invoked the 1985 screening of Yellow Earth, which famously launched the international reputation of the Fifth Generation.

A few years ago it was difficult to see mainland Chinese films at Hong Kong. Programmers were faced with the dilemma that if they accepted films shot without official sanction they would have the films withdrawn. The Chinese government has worked to heal this breach and draw the underground filmmakers back into the industry, but the question remains: what to do with them?

The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) recently announced that while China is now making more films, only 10% of them are being screened with any kind of success. Of the 260 films made last year, only 90 screened domestically and two-thirds of those were withdrawn the day after release due to lack of popular response.

As Hong Kong’s own production has declined, HKIFF has become a major venue for viewing the diversity of mainland Chinese production. While we saw the usual mixture of special effects spectacles spiralling down the same lush, sterile path established by Hero and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, there were also films to suggest that a viable, popular, smaller scale cinema might be emerging.

After the miserabilist tradition of Sixth Generation filmmaking, it is strangely heartening to see a well-crafted sentimental piece like Ma Liwen’s You and Me. Centring on the relationship between a crotchety old granny and her feisty young student tenant, it tracks a predictable enough path from initial antipathy to deep attachment. There are no great surprises here, no buckets tipped on the transition to the market economy. Given that we’ve had so many dystopian visions of China recently, it seems significant to acknowledge that the relation between generations goes on with its usual mixture of love, irritation and poignancy. Director Ma understands the need to push against sentimentality to produce true sentiment. Her film proceeds on its understated and elliptical way until its final, heartfelt scenes have shed the need for any dialogue at all. Australian screenwriters might take note.

Dam Street is another fine, restrained achievement. Its story of lost children and sundered generations has become a recurring theme in recent Chinese films such as Wang Chao’s The Orphan of Anyang and Li Shaohong’s A Stolen Life. Li Yu is another in a wave of impressive women directors and her film tells of a woman’s rediscovery of a son she gave up after a teenage pregnancy in the early 1980s. It is full of the understated felicities of mise en scène-effects, where we need to keep track of both sides of the frame and elliptical cutting which begins scenes just after crucial actions which we are forced to reconstruct. Its long takes don’t call attention to themselves but build to a quite complex achievement.

Zhang Yuan is a relatively well-known director (Beijing Bastards, Seventeen Years) and he has significant international investment in Little Red Flowers. This is another film built around children—source material that has always been a central element of art cinema, to the extent that it even launched the international profile of Iranian cinema. We all know that Chinese tykes are unbearably cute, but in this story of a little boy’s experiences in kindergarten, a dark undertone is never far away. Four year-old Qiang is a fairly standard kid, interested in peeing, farting and pooping as keys to life’s
mysteries. The film chronicles his descent into naughtiness and finally aloneness. It deals with the ways that socialisation is applied through children’s conceptions of their own bodies and bodily functions.

Combining static camera, flat compositions, little dialogue, extensive and imaginative use of framing and off-screen space, Korean-Chinese director Zhang Lu’s Grain in Ear represents a major follow up to the promise of Tang Poetry and marks him as a leading figure in Chinese art cinema. There is a skilful synthesis of character development along with a rigorous play within the formal restrictions Zhang has set himself. He pulls off an unusual combination—generating emotional warmth while making a minimalist film. Grain in Ear uses its restricted formal options to set up a final departure from them, though given the strength of a style based on suggestion and understatement, I wish he hadn’t found it necessary to pound his characters into the ground.

While China has become some sort of economic monolith in Australian mythology of late, it is important to keep track of its internal diversity and of the emerging social issues which are generating debate within China. Zhao Hao’s documentary, Senior Year, is a revealing portrait of the education system in a small provincial town. The students cram furiously for university entrance exams, spurred on relentlessly by teachers. For parents, who are generally uneducated and doing long hours of manual labour, it is clear that what is at stake is nothing less than the ability of their children to make the breathtaking leap to the new world of economic modernity.

We never see teachers doing much actual teaching, but rather driving students on with exhortations drawn from the vocabulary stretching back through revolutionary Party rhetoric to the May 4th Movement. Students must learn to “eat bitterness” for the year as they gird themselves up for “the conflict without gunfire” that will decide their fates. This is not always a pleasant film to watch as the filmmakers often seem complicit in the humiliation of students, and the girls who comprise the bulk of the class are never developed in any depth. It is, however, a fascinating account of the way a society is changing along the lines set down in its recent past.

Giving video cameras to ordinary people so that they can document the issues affecting them is one of those ideas that technological utopians proclaim as the hope of the digitally democratic future. It’s hard to argue against in theory and so the European Union had documentarist Wu Wenguang devise a project whereby 10 villagers were given cameras and instruction on how to use them and then sent out to make their own films about local elections. It seems churlish to report that the results are pretty uninspired. Maybe the format is the problem with each segment lasting only eight minutes; maybe we’re talking about the wrong medium for coming to grips with the complex and abstract processes of Chinese democracy. Maybe the tools of insightful exposition and political analysis aren’t inherently in everyone’s hands and this is what makes thoughtful artists such a valuable resource.

It is worth noting that an Australian film, Candy, closed the festival this year, due in no small part to the involvement of Fortissimo, an international sales agency with a strong base in Hong Kong. Prioritising institutional connections such as these are vital if Australian films are to have a regional future.