Shattered dreams and new beginnings: how history and politics blazed a trail through East Asian cinema

ESSAY
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When *Parasite* became the first foreign-language film to win Best Picture at this year's Oscars, it not only marked a crowning moment for South Korea's film industry, but a long overdue recognition of East Asian cinema's rich and dynamic history.

Far from a homogenous product, cinema in East Asia reflects the complex, mutating network of geopolitics and national discourses that define the region's past and present. These forces are in perpetual motion – their ebb and flow demanding continuous investigation through beautifully expressive films that pioneer new genres.

Many are considered cornerstones of global cinema yet despite their international appeal, East Asian films address local issues and shared histories, salving old wounds and externalising national psyches. In this sense, the current prosperity of South Korea's socially conscious cinema is no different to similar periods of success in China, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong, whose world-renowned national cinema's trace the region's ruptured history over the last 70 years.

Civil war, revolution, censorship, migration, dictatorships, and martial law form repeating patterns that have moulded cinema in East Asia, at times wielding it as a political weapon and at others encouraging boundless creativity. The sheer scale of these events has left indelible imprints on the films they helped produce, many of which tell universally human stories that preserve a record of time and place.

By considering specific films, periods or trends alongside historical events that precipitated them, the true brilliance of East Asian cinema is revealed, reminding us of the unique power of film and the significance of this latest breakthrough.

Atomic nightmares in Japan

Within East Asia, few countries can rival Japanese cinema for historical prestige. Since its Golden Age of the 1950s, shaped by key directors Yasujirō Ozu and Akira Kurosawa, Japanese cinema has led the region's global success, accumulating more Oscars for Best International Feature Film than any of its neighbours. The towering contributions of Kurosawa continued throughout the 60s and 70s, opening up Western audiences to Japanese cinema for the first time and inspiring numerous Hollywood remakes. Since the 1980s, the rise of anime has built on this globalised success, with directors including Katsuhiro Otomo, Satoshi Kon and Hayao Miyazaki helping define the genre with their respective classics: *Akira* (1988), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Spirited Away* (2001). More recently, Japanese horror films have brought significant commercial success, with *Ring* (1998), *Dark Water* (2002) and the *Ju-On* (1998–2003) franchise transforming an underground genre into some of Japan's most successful cinematic exports.

Nowhere is the impact of historical events on cinematic narrative and style better demonstrated than in Japan during the 1950s. Following defeat in the Second World War and the trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, cinema became a vehicle for collective introspection and national mourning. Those whose lives had been irreversibly altered by the atomic bombings were known as *hibakusha*, literally translated as "bomb-affected person." The term became an artistic genre in its own right, encompassing music and literature as well as film. Key among *hibakusha* films is Ishirō Honda's 1954 *Godzilla*, whose mythical status and countless adaptations have somewhat blunted its initial potency as the first *kaiju* (monster) film ever made. Unlike the more explicit *hibakusha* references to nuclear war in Kaneto Shindō's powerful 1952 docudrama *Children of Hiroshima*, or Takashi Nagai's first-person account in *The Bells of Nagasaki* (1949), *Godzilla* tapped into Japan's national psyche, embodying the nation's collective fear and survivor's guilt.

In 1954, months before production on the film began, a fifteen-megaton thermonuclear bomb was tested by the US at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean. It was the largest ever artificial explosion at the time and a terrifying spectacle of man's growing capacity for armageddon. What followed became known as the Lucky Dragon 5 Incident, in which the crew onboard a Japanese fishing vessel became exposed to lethal doses of radiation from the blast, reawakening the fear of nuclear holocaust in Japan and memories of 1945. The event is mirrored in the opening half-hour of Honda's classic. Once Godzilla is roused from his ancient slumber in the South Seas by US underwater hydrogen bomb testing, he initiates his siege of Tokyo with an attack on a fishing boat, but this time, no one survives. Godzilla not only embodied the destructive power of the atom bomb and memories of war, but also its victims. In Japan, the South Seas are mystical heartlands of colonial utopia, where the souls of those who died abroad are kept in limbo, unable to rest and return to their homeland. By arriving from the South Seas, Godzilla confronted Japan with its fallen dead from the Pacific War, who had returned to wreak their vengeance on those who survived and now prospered in a new democracy. Interestingly, the US remake of the film two years later (*Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*) harnessed the same historical trauma that had resonated so strongly in Japan but inverted it to rationalise the atomic bombings and pacify any sense of American guilt. Both versions end with Godzilla's destruction by a special weapon that also kills its creator, but unlike the portentous message of the Japanese original, the US version uses Godzilla as evidence of the exceptional circumstances under which the use of atomic weapons are justified as the only option to ensure world peace.

Studio struggles in Hong Kong

Throughout its history, Hong Kong has straddled competing cultural identities: East vs West, Mandarin vs Cantonese, autonomy vs colonisation. During the latter half of the 20th century, when these polarities were at their strongest under British colonial rule (ending in 1997), Hong Kong's film industry was at its distinctive best, with a level of influence briefly comparable to Hollywood. Aided by fewer censorship laws and limited state control, it provided the ideal conditions for Chinese-speaking filmmakers to pioneer new and experimental genres. Chief among them are its martial arts movies, particularly kung fu, which defined Hong Kong's most recognised cultural export from the 70s and 80s until today. The universal success of kung fu benefitted the emergence of Hong Kong's New Wave generation, who, alongside more commercially slick productions from the likes of John Woo and Tsui Hark, established a new reputation for Hong Kong arthouse cinema, with Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994) and Stanley Kwan's *Center Stage* (1991) bringing notable international success. The territory's return to mainland China altered the landscape of its cinema drastically, and although it has continued to produce hugely successful films, most notably *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), *Shaolin Soccer* (2001), *Lust, Caution* (2007) and *Infernal Affairs* (2002), the distinct identity of Hong Kong's proud film industry is now under considerable threat.

During the 70s in Hong Kong, kung fu emerged in earnest, a new genre of martial arts movie that initiated an arms race between its two biggest studios and brought international audiences for the first time. Until then, Hong Kong's film industry was dominated by pioneering film producers the Shaw Brothers: Runje, Runme, and Runde, who had overseen its early formation and dominated regional markets. Throughout the 50s and 60s they popularised the mystical sword-fighting genre 'wuxia' with Mandarin productions like *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967) and *Golden Swallow* (1968), the former becoming the first film to make HK$1 million at local box offices. The genre had been banned in mainland China (where it began as a literary movement in the early 20th century) for promoting "superstition, feudalism and unscientific thinking". In Hong Kong however, where many Shanghai filmmakers had emigrated to escape Mao, it was given space to flourish, eventually leading to kung fu, which was conceived as a more down to earth, hand-to-hand response to wuxia.

At the beginning of the 70s, the Shaw Brothers' grip on the industry and the prominence of Mandarin films looked unassailable. Their key failure however, was not signing a young Bruce Lee, the former child star of Cantonese cinema who had returned to Hong Kong following a failed move to Hollywood. That foresight belonged to Golden Harvest, founded by Raymond Chow and Leonard Ho, former executives at Shaw Brothers who had set up their own rival studio in 1970. The ensuing power struggle between the two studios spilled onto the international scene, marking the first significant entry of Hong Kong cinema into Western consciousness. Fearing a potentially catastrophic market loss, the Shaw Brothers preemptively released *The Chinese Boxer* (1970) and *Five Fingers of Death* (1972) in quick succession, tapping into the new wave of kung fu films that was gaining global momentum. Those international inroads were dwarfed by Golden Harvest, whose decision to offer Bruce Lee a lucrative contract and creative freedom proved enlightened. Films like *The Big Boss* (1971) and *Fist of Fury* (1972) signalled a golden age of kung fu, elevated to new heights by Lee and his hybrid style of Jeet Kune Do. With the stage set, 1973 brought the crowning release of *Enter the Dragon*, a landmark co-production with Warner Brothers that remains one of the greatest martial arts films of all time. The film's aggressive marketing in the US, where Warner Bros. offered free karate lessons and endless ephemera, contributed to a kung fu craze that swept the country. These were the momentous years of transition, in which Golden Harvest usurped their former employers as the preeminent power of Hong Kong's film industry, ensuring future success with Jackie Chan, the Hui brothers and Jet Li that continues today.

National soul-searching in Taiwan

Like many of its neighbours, Taiwanese cinema in the 20th century has been shaped by its colonisers. The Japanese introduced the medium as a means of cultural assimilation during their rule from 1895 to 1945, and were succeeded by the Kuomintang Nationalists, who retreated to Taiwan following their defeat to Mao's Communists in 1949. Both periods brought oppressive control over the country's cinema, holding the industry hostage as a tool of cultural annexation and political propaganda. It was only during the early 1980s, when democracy emerged from the shadows of authoritarianism, that Taiwanese New Cinema took hold in a newly urbanised and technologically advanced Taiwan. Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* (1989), Chen Kun-hou's *Growing Up* (1983) and Edward Yang's *Taipei Story* (1985) led Taiwan's global emergence during that decade, addressing the nuances of Taiwanese identity with unprecedented candour. These pioneers of the New Wave continued to produce influential films throughout the 90s, laying the foundations for Taiwan's Second Wave generation to establish mainstream prominence. After their initial success, many of these later filmmakers, including Tsai Ming-liang, Ang Lee and Wei Te-sheng, overcame an influx of foreign imports to lead a revival of Taiwanese cinema in the last 20 years, with films like *Cape No. 7* (Wei Te-sheng, 2008), *Lust, Caution* (Ang Lee, 2007) and *What Time Is It There?* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2001) yielding significant mainstream success.

The growing influence of Hong Kong's cinema during the 1970s was felt across East Asian markets but particularly in Taiwan, where it inspired a new generation of filmmakers to question their country's identity and develop its own voice. Until the late 70s, Taiwan's fledgling film industry was limited to a political mouthpiece for various occupying regimes. Japan's 50 years of colonial rule ended in 1945, after former President of the Republic of China Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist Kuomintang party fled Mao's mainland Communist forces to declare Taiwan the new Republic of China. Twenty years of repressive martial law followed, until Chiang Kai-shek's death in 1975 signalled a loosening of state censorship and the genesis of Taiwan's national cinema.

Two anthology films, *In Our Time* (1982) and *The Sandwich Man* (1983), marked the beginning of a decade that has shaped Taiwanese cinema until now. These films proved a breakthrough, not just in terms of technique but subject matter. Departing from the fantasy of imported kung fu films, they probed beneath the surface of Taiwanese life, questioning its complex history and transition towards modernity. Made by young and emerging Taiwanese talent, both films heralded an age unlike any other in the country's history. Cinema suddenly provided a place for introspection and critical thinking, where the problems of everyday life were played out and an understanding of national identity was actively encouraged.

Among those nascent directors were Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-hsien, both born in China but raised in Taiwan. Their films helped define a crucial decade within Taiwanese cinema, in which the questions surrounding national identity were investigated

like never before. Though they often worked in collaboration – as was the norm among Taiwan's community of directors in the 80s – Yang focussed on the city and effects of recent urbanisation while Hsiao-hsien cherished the serenity and nostalgia of the countryside. Yang's beautifully languid debut feature *That Day, on the Beach* (1983) was followed by *Taipei Story* in 1985 (both starring Hsiao-hsien, who mortgaged his house to fund the latter) and *A Brighter Summer Day* in 1991. All three borrowed heavily from the likes of Wim Wenders and Michelangelo Antonioni (European masters idolised by Yang), while reconciling Taiwan's industrial, consumer-focused present with its traditional, agrarian past. Hsiao-hsien meanwhile, drew heavily from his experience of rural life and Taiwan's colonial past. His films were an opportunity for Taiwanese to heal old wounds and contemplate the intersecting histories that bound them. In his excellent 'Taiwan Trilogy' (1989–95), Hou revisits the Japanese occupation and the period following their surrender in 1945, including the 1947 massacre of Taiwanese natives by Kuomintang troops (documented in *A City of Sadness*, 1989). These films alone were instrumental in triggering a vital re-examination of Taiwanese history from within.

Chinese transnational dreams

No country within East Asia embodies the difficulties of discussing singular, homogenous national cinemas better than China. Put simply, it is the biggest country with the most widely spoken language (Mandarin), and its influence in the region is therefore profound and far-reaching. Shanghai was for a long period the centre of a cultural triangle of Chinese-language film, comprising the mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong, from which it oversaw the country's Golden Age of the 1930s and 40s, with films like *The Spring River Flows East* (1947) and *Spring in a Small Town* (1948). Mao's Cultural Revolution paralysed the country's film production for a decade (1966–76) yet in many ways provided the political impetus for the country's Fifth Generation directors to emerge shortly after. Beginning in the mid-80s with Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984), the international acclaim of these Beijing Film Academy graduates continued with Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987) and Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), eschewing the ideological purity of the Cultural Revolution in favour of real stories about real people. The Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 brought tighter government censorship, sparking a largely underground Sixth generation whose emergence was characterised by low budgets and amateur visuals. Wang Xiaoshuai *(The Days*, 1993, *Beijing Bicycle*, 2001, *So Long, My Son*, 2019), Jia Zhangke (*Unknown Pleasures*, 2002, *A Touch of Sin*, 2013, *Ash Is Purest White*, 2018) and Zhang Yuan (*Beijing Bastards*, 1993, *East Palace, West Palace*, 1996) all remain instrumental voices within contemporary Chinese cinema.

The last 30 years have seen Chinese cinema extend beyond its borders, harnessing a transnational diaspora that's brought unprecedented global success. While this hardly constitutes a 'new' development, considering regional film production involved the movement of directors, actors and crews across borders since the 60s, in China it converged with Western involvement during the 90s to produce some of the country's most successful films. From *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), these international sensations were the product of combined industries in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Hollywood that evade any singular national classification. The strength of this movement is symptomatic of China's turbulent political history and its waves of emigration that saw native filmmakers scattered across the world. This culminated in films that hybridise genres and tastes, encompassing a multiplicity of industries and aesthetic affiliations which enable them to straddle both arthouse and mainstream audiences.

No film epitomises the complexities of China's transnational cinema better than Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a global phenomenon that received ten Oscar nominations (winning four), grossed over $200 million at box-offices worldwide and became the first Chinese-language film to find a mass American audience. Lee was born in Taiwan, but his parents were Chinese migrants who had left the mainland in 1949 and by the time he made the film, Lee had lived in America almost as long as Taiwan. Many of the film's stars were Chinese but of its three screenwriters, one was American and two from Taiwan. Beijing-based production company Huyai Brothers provided some funding and domestic marketing, but the principle funders were Columbia Pictures, the US-based studio, owned by Japanese tech giants Sony. The soundtrack was recorded in Shanghai, the post-production looping took place in Hong Kong and the film was edited in New York. Things get even more blurred when it comes to the film's production, which involved five different companies in five different countries. This atomised assembly line led the film to be perceived by some as evidence of just how far Hollywood's colonisation had reached, with many accusing it of creating an inauthentic appropriation of East Asian culture made palatable for Western audiences. For many others, it represented the emancipation of East Asian cinema from Hollywood's clutches, a watershed moment with the potential to dismantle America's monopoly. The truth is likely to be found somewhere between these two binaries, but more revealing is what the film says about China's international community of filmmakers. For Ang Lee, who has no lived experience of China, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was a means of reconnecting with a lost, largely imagined homeland, saying in an interview, "In some ways, we're all looking for that old cultural, historical, abstract China – the big dream of China that probably never existed."

Externalised angst in South Korea

Like so many of its neighbours, South Korea's cinema has been closely defined by government control. A faltering industry emerged from the end of Japanese occupation in 1945 and was slowly rehabilitated in the following decade, culminating in a Golden Era during the late 1950s. In spite of government censorship, films like Kim Ki-young's *The Housemaid* (1960) and Yu Hyun-mok's *Obaltan* (1960) marked a period of international prominence, albeit one curtailed by state intervention. Import quotas, production company closures and the ever-present fear of Communism continued to stifle South Korean film, climaxing under President Park Chung-hee's authoritarian Yushin Constitution of the 70s. It was only during the 80s, following Chung-hee's assassination in 1979, that South Korean cinema showed signs of recovery. Influenced by avant-garde cultural movements in Europe, particularly French New Wave Cinema, a young generation of directors formed the Seoul Film Collective in 1982 as a platform to tell critical and reflective stories on years of military dictatorship with a distinctly Korean aesthetic. The change was precipitated by a relaxation of censorship and screen quota laws that had previously restricted the number of days a foreign film could be screened, and South Korean cinema began a new period of ascendency, led by the likes of Park Kwang-su, Im Kwon-taek and Jang Sun-woo. Fast forward to the present day and the global renaissance of South Korean cinema is grounded in the success of this period. Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area* (2000) and *Olboy* (2003), Kang Woo-suk's *Silmido* (2003) and Bong Joon-ho's *The Host* (2006) all heralded the early international success of a newly liberalised, censorship-free South Korea, committed to becoming the world's leading exporter of popular culture as part of 'Hallyu' or Korean Wave.

Supported by massive state investment in cultural industries, Hallyu aided the development of a new generation of filmmakers who have since shaped South Korea's current status as one of the region's leading soft powers. The towering contributions of Park Chan-wook (*Oldboy,* 2003, *The Handmaiden,* 2016 and *Stoker,* 2013), Lee Chang-dong (*Peppermint Candy,* 1999 and *Burning*, 2018) and of course Bong Joon-ho (*Snowpiercer*, 2013 *Okja*, 2017 and *Parasite*, 2019) have brought a level of international acclaim matched by K-dramas and K-pop (other constituents of Hallyu), yet somewhat obscured by their brilliance is the late arrival of South Korea's zombie genre. Like in the West, where zombie films have long externalised societal anxieties (think racial tension in *Night of the Living Dead*, 1968, or Soviet aggression in *Zombies of the Stratosphere*, 1952), the genre's growing popularity in South Korea over the last ten years owes itself to a number of changing societal conditions. Beginning with *Ambulance*, a short story of viral outbreak in the 2012 omnibus film *Horror Stories*, before stepping up its success with *Train to Busan* (the 11th highest-grossing South Korean film of all time) and its animated prequel *Seoul Station* (both 2016), the most recent major zombie release was *Rampant* in 2018. Like *Godzilla* in Japan nearly 70 years previously, these films externalise collective fears and revisit former horrors, from nuclear armageddon and war with the North to global pandemics, nefarious corporations and a moral breakdown facilitating societal collapse.

Parasite is rightly lauded for addressing the grim social inequalities that have accompanied South Korea's explosion of wealth, but its zombie films have harnessed a similar sense of outcry to promote social cohesion and collective altruism. Each of the aforementioned films feature decisive moments where the privileged turn their back on the common people in order to save themselves, while those who survive do so through collaboration. During one revealing scene in *Ambulance,* for example, riot police mistake the homeless for the undead, alluding not only to South Korea's neglected underclass but painful memories of martial law and repressive government during the 80s. In *Train to Busan*, the self-serving interests of corporations are embodied by Yong-suk, an egotistical businessman who blockades himself in a carriage, condemning the other passengers to death. Similarly, the opening fifteen minutes of *Seoul Station* illustrate the dangers of debilitating social divides as a homeless old man wanders the streets while bleeding from the neck. Not only are his pleas for help ignored, onlookers physically recoil from him, shooing him along until he transitions into a zombie. The genre therefore not only warns of external threats but those within, whose egotistical greed and vacuous morals must be subject to the same vigilance.

Few mediums provide a more instructive and engaging prism through which to understand East Asia's history as its film. Cinema has always held up a mirror to society, yet no time or place can compete with the sheer scale and complexity that makes East Asia such a unique geo-political entity. Its precarious political configuration seesaws between freedom and oppression, a perpetual cycle that shows no sign of slowing, particularly in Hong Kong, whose political autonomy is increasingly under threat from the mainland, itself locked in a bitter trade war with the US. These tensions, and others like it, will invariably find their way onto screen, where, armed with a better understanding of the forces that shaped them, the true extent of their genius is revealed.