

Transnational East Asian Cinema Since 1997 – A One-Day Symposium and International Videoconference

Saturday 06th December 2008, University of Southampton, UK

Conference Report

Following our successful proposal to *Screen* for an award to host a postgraduate-organised event, the one-day symposium and international videoconference on ‘Transnational East Asian Cinema Since 1997’ took place at the University of Southampton on Saturday 06th December 2008. Sponsored by *Screen* as part of its 50th anniversary, the event was organised by Richard Donne, Daniel Hickin and Aramchan Lee from the University of Southampton, in association with Goldsmiths University of London and the University of Hong Kong. In addition to the award we received from *Screen*, the Department of Film at the University of Southampton agreed to provide us with additional funding and doubled our original budget. We would therefore like to express our thanks to *Screen* and the University of Southampton for making this event possible.

Planning

Organising the symposium proved a new and challenging experience for all of us, and we were grateful to Professor Tim Bergfelder for supporting us throughout the process. As postgraduate students, each of us has an academic interest in East Asian cinema and this proved to be the ideal theme for our event. In order to present a more specific topic, we centred on exploring contemporary cinema, which allowed us to acknowledge the cultural and socio-economic changes that have occurred within East Asia since 1997, and the effects of globalisation and intercultural communication between East and West.

Having established our theme and chosen a date, we invited a number of speakers to participate in the symposium, all of whom are acknowledged for their expertise in the field of East Asian cinema. The invitation was to present a 30-minute paper on any topic of their choosing relating to our overall theme. Thanks to our funding, we would be able to cover their expenses. Those who could attend were asked to submit abstracts, all of which were of a high quality and offered a diverse range of papers. Once we confirmed our speakers, we were able to draft a timetable in conjunction with the University of Hong Kong, who would be joining us on the day via a live videoconference link. Although initially daunting, organising the technical side of the conference proved reasonably straight-forward. Having booked an appropriate venue and hired a technician for the event - which was expensive due to the

symposium being held on a Saturday - we were able to complete a successful test-run with Hong Kong in the days leading up to the conference.

With our confirmed timetable, we were able to promote the event and invite interested students and academics to join us in Southampton. In the months leading up to the event, a total of 60 people expressed their interest in attending. Promoting the event also led to us being contacted by a number of publishing companies, including I.B. Tauris and Intellect, who offered to send us promotional materials relating to East Asian cinema that we could distribute to our guests. Together with materials from *Screen* and the University of Southampton, these would be added to our conference packs and placed on display. Other arrangements we made included booking hotels for our speakers for the night prior to the event, and organising the food and drink for the day. The week before the symposium proved to be the most important and stressful, as all the arrangements needed to be finalised and confirmed. With no major problems, the preparation for the event was deemed a success. The day before the symposium, we meet our speakers upon their arrival at the hotel booked for them, and took them out for a welcoming meal in the evening. In hindsight, having a chance to meet the speakers prior to the event was a useful way of introducing ourselves and discussing the arrangements for the following day. At this point, we were happy that all of our costs had been totalled (and estimated where necessary), and that we were within budget.

Symposium

The day of the symposium started with some preparation at the venue prior to the arrival of our speakers and our guests, including setting up a desk for registration, preparing the tea and coffee and establishing our videolink with Hong Kong. Assisting us with these tasks and throughout the day were our fellow Southampton PhD students, Olivia Hamilton, Daniel O'Brien and Cecile Renaud. The symposium began as planned, with our first panel consisting of two papers given via the videolink from the University of Hong Kong. These papers by Dr. Gina Marchetti and Dr. Esther Cheung were scheduled early because of the time difference between the UK and Hong Kong, and because we wanted to keep the videoconferenced papers together in case any technical problems could occur later on.

Opening the symposium, Dr Cheung's paper was entitled 'Capturing Reality: the Personal and the Authentic Appeal in Chinese-language Cinemas'. The paper focussed on directors Fruit Chan and Jia Zhang-ke, defining them as filmmakers who directly link ideas of space and spatial representation to concepts of ruptured time, specifically the fast-shifting recent histories of Hong Kong and China. Additionally, both were posited as being indicative of a contemporary trend in Chinese and Hong Kong filmmaking for profoundly autobiographical films. Continuing the theme of Chinese cinema, Dr. Marchetti employed a

specific case study in her paper 'Gender Politics and History: Ann Hui's *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*' (2006). In discussing Hui's film, Dr. Marchetti focused on its authorial concerns of border crossing and transnationalism, developing her ideas about the film in the context of Hui's personal history, her cast and the actual form of the film, as it was Hong-Kong financed but shot in mainland China. The paper further situated the film as a political allegory concerned with addressing issues of identity formation and conception in modern China, taking into account perceptions and realities of China's self-image in the current world economic climate.

Following a brief break, the next panel consisted of papers by Prof. Chris Berry from Goldsmiths University of London, and Dr. Julian Stringer from the University of Nottingham. Placed together, these papers provided an important function by directly examining the terminology at the centre of our theme. Beginning the second panel, Prof. Berry's paper was entitled 'Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinema' - and sought to question what it means to speak of the 'transnational' aspects within Chinese cinema. In this sense, the paper explored the ways in which transnational Chinese Cinema can be seen as an emergent transborder assemblage, which is closely linked to the geographical distribution and market structures of Chinese languages and cultures. The next paper by Dr. Stringer was entitled 'Feature Film as Short Film: Notes on the Ontology of Transnational East Asian Cinema', and made an interesting companion piece to Prof. Berry's paper. Dr Stringer used his topic as a springboard from which to question the very definition (or lack thereof) of 'transnational'. This insight was exceptionally helpful to everyone in attendance, as it provoked a debate about the exact purpose and function of the symposium through a reconsideration of the parameters within which it was conceived.

After lunch, the final panel of the afternoon consisted of three papers from Dr. Mark Morris from the University of Cambridge, Dr. Isolde Standish from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London and Dr. Rayna Denison from the University of East Anglia. The reason for the long session was again due to our videolink with the University of Hong Kong, and a desire to keep to our agreed schedule.

With his paper on 'Korean Monsters, Inc: Trans-Nationalistic Passions from *Pulgasari* to *D-War*', Dr. Morris provided an entertaining talk on two Korean monster films, *Pulgasari*, which was a co-production between North Korea and Japan, and the more recent *Dragon Wars* (aka *D-War*), which was also a co-production, this time between South Korea and US film companies and CGI practitioners. As popular genre films, they have arguably been neglected and under-explored by academia, and Dr. Morris provided a timely re-evaluation of both films as cross-border co-productions and transnational cultural products. Dr. Standish's paper on 'Software, Soft-power: Japanese Film Policy After 1997, the Issues' outlined the issues and vicissitudes of Japanese film policy from 1997 onwards, and was of particular

interest as it focussed in great detail on the development of the East Asian film policy as influenced by Japanese policy. The paper also considered how cinema and cultural policy both shape and are themselves shaped, by national identity. Dr. Standish finished by emphasising the role of academics and archivists in the process of film preservation in particular and film consumption in general. With the final paper of the symposium, Dr. Denison explored the theme of Japanese film policy with her paper entitled 'Responsible Piracy?: Fansubbing and the Transnational Anime Industry'. In addition to exploring the concepts of fansubbing and its relationship to anime, Dr. Denison discussed the hierarchy of fandom and the use of cultural capital in these sub-cultural groups. Equally, issues of consumption and the implicit promotion of illegal fansubbing by anime distribution companies play a key role, as there appears to be a covert industry approval of fansubbing and Internet distribution by fans.

Response

The response we've had following the conference from our speakers and guests has been exceptional, both in terms of the organisation of the event and in the quality of the papers. Each paper proved a fascinating addition to the symposium and contributed to the wider debates and exchange of ideas. The original motivation behind the symposium was to create an open dialogue between students, academics and institutions in both the UK and Hong Kong, from which we can all participate in developing our mutual knowledge and understanding of transnational East Asian cinema. Following the positive feedback from our speakers and guests, we are on the right path to achieving these aims and look forward to developing our links further through our second event, 'Transnational East Asian Cinema Since 1997' – the seminar series.

As outlined in our proposal to *Screen*, the symposium acted as the forerunner to the student seminar series by presenting a number of keynote papers from notable academics, which could then motivate and inspire interested students to produce their own papers. The seminar series (due to be held in Spring 2009, details still to be confirmed) will feature exclusively postgraduate student papers. We are currently discussing the format of the series in association with Goldsmiths, University of London and the University of Hong Kong, and will consider proposals from postgraduate students who have attended the symposium event. For those wishing to express an interest, abstracts (between 200-300 words) should be sent to: Richard Donne (richarddonne@hotmail.co.uk), Daniel Hickin (djh104@soton.ac.uk) and Aramchan Lee (filmtheory@gmail.com).