

The 51st Berlinale: Part 5

Asian films at the Berlin Film Festival

By Stefan Steinberg
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A number of Asian films were amongst the most satisfying as well as thought provoking experiences at this year's Berlin Film Festival.

Wang Xiaoshuais is a member of the so-called "sixth generation" of Chinese filmmakers who acknowledges his debt to Taiwanese film, in particular the work of the Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien (see interview with Wang Xiaoshuais at the 1999 Toronto Film Festival—link below). In his latest work Wang takes up a theme which he has dealt with before (notably in *So Close to Paradise* 1995)—the experiences of a provincial youth trying to find his feet in the big city. *Beijing Bicycle* won second prize (Silver Bear) at the Berlin Film Festival with best young actor awards going to the film's two main characters.

Newly arrived in Beijing, Guo is "lucky" enough to find work as a bicycle courier. In the opening scene we see the ranks of scrubbed new recruits to the courier firm standing alongside their gleaming new bicycles. The manager of the firm explains proudly and sternly to his assembled workers that, in line with the company's emphasis on professionalism, every courier has been given a shower, hair-cut, new uniforms and a sturdy modern mountain bike. The boss explains the feudal-type contract which binds the workers to the company. The company gets 80 percent of everything the couriers earn, from the remaining 20 percent the workers are then expected to pay for the cost of their bikes in instalments. The boss points to a huge wall map of the arteries of Beijing. Their first job, he tells them, is to learn every street thoroughly! Guo and his fellow workers are the new generation of rickshaw coolies.

Guo sets to work in the bewildering chaos of the streets of Beijing. In one hilarious scene he rides to a luxury hotel to pick up a parcel from a customer. Entering the lobby he asks for the customer who has a very common Chinese name. He is told the man is waiting for him in the sauna. With wide eyes Guo passes through the luxurious surroundings of the hotel. At the entrance to the sauna he is asked to divest his shoes and clothes and then directed to the shower. After taking his shower he is finally directed to his alleged customer, enjoying a massage with other members of the Chinese capitalist elite. However it is someone with the right name, but the wrong man.

Guo is curtly dismissed, dresses, travels back to the hotel lobby to once again find his customer. He has lost time and, what is more, the receptionist insists he pay for his shower—a price evidently equivalent to a few weeks wages. He tries to make a run for it only to be apprehended by the hotel's security force. With a marvellously light touch Xiaoshuai's handling of the entire scene casts a withering glance at the gulf between rich and poor in contemporary China.

In feudal times the peasant possessed his own plot of land. All Guo has in modern day China is his bicycle. The loss of his bicycle means the loss of his job, income and means of survival. First stolen and then recovered, Guo throws all of life's energy into a struggle to stubbornly hold onto his bike. A theme which could have been merely banal in fact develops into a compelling tale of Guo's attempts to measure up to the demands made

upon him by the big city, throwing light in particular on the extreme competitive pressures bearing down on the young generation of workers and students.

Wang's work has previously run into problems with the Chinese authorities. *So Close to Paradise* was held up for three years by the Chinese censors. Although Wang's new film was completed some time ago, it is still awaiting approval from the Chinese Filmbureau. With or without approval from the authorities, *Beijing Bicycle* is confirmation of the current vitality of filmmaking in various pockets of the Asian subcontinent.

Particular attention was given at this year's Berlin festival to new films from Vietnam. Of particular interest were a number of films dealing with the two wars fought by Vietnam, first against French occupying colonial powers (1946-56) and then against American aggression. The vast majority of Vietnamese films dealing with the wars have stressed the heroism of the Vietnamese soldiers. With two films at the festival Luu Trong Ninh directs his attention instead to the role of Vietnamese women in the war. *The Crossing at Dong Loc* deals with a team of young women whose job it was to detonate US bombs which had failed to explode. Made in 1997, the film contrasts the spontaneity and vitality of the women with the ominous nature of the work they carry out. Luu Trong Ninh's most recent film *Wharf of Widows* deals with the tribulations of Vietnamese women living for nearly two generations in villages almost entirely depopulated of men and is a much more sober treatment of the repercussions of the war for ordinary Vietnamese.

Van, the main figure in *Wharf of Widows*, returns to his village as a young man and combat hero after the war against France. The older women in the village have all lost their men in the war. Those young men in the village available for the younger women are soon to be commandeered in a new war. Traditional Vietnamese life was strongly based on the family, now the young women have to adapt to lives where they will probably never have husbands. Their mothers will never have grandchildren. Van is drawn towards the war widow Nhan, but she is a former landowner and the expropriation of land is in full swing—a relationship is impossible between the war hero Van and the former landowner. The only available man in the village is frustrated in his choice of partner.

With a minimum of dialogue Luu Trong Ninh's attentive camera conjures up images of people and scenery expressing the grim determination with which the villagers attempt to come to terms with their fate. Perhaps the most poignant image in the film is an old woman of the village literally bent double—her back buckled under the burden Vietnamese women were forced to carry in the war.

In terms of audience attendance, Park Chan Wook's new work *Joint Security Area* is the most popular and successful film in the history of South Korean cinema, drawing bigger crowds than any of the recent Hollywood blockbusters. Its theme is the division of North and South Korea. The scene of the action is the Joint Security Area (JSA), a circle

with a diameter of 800 metres situated in the demilitarised zone separating North and South. Since being established in 1954 after the bloody Korean war and following a stream of incidents and provocations leading to shoot-outs between the two sides, the militarised zone between Stalinist North and capitalist South Korea has gained the reputation of being the most dangerous border in the world.

In Park Chan Wook's film a shootout between soldiers from the North and South results in the death of two North Koreans and the wounding of another. At the same time a South Korean soldier is discovered cowering on the bridge (The Bridge of No Return) spanning the two antagonistic nations. Lieutenant Sophie Jean is given the job of investigating the incident. Piecing together diverse, conflicting bits of information, Jean discovers that the background to the shooting was, in fact, fraternisation between soldiers of both sides.

Director Park Chan Wook has drawn from his previous experience making gangster-milieu films to weave his story into a dense investigative drama. On occasion the graphic repetition of the shootout between the soldiers irritates. The strongest scenes in the film are those dealing with the extent of Cold War propaganda pursued by the two regimes on their respective sides of the border and, something very rare in South Korean cinema, the sympathetic portrayal of North Koreans.

At the heart of the JSA is the border line between North and South, which at one point reduces to a marking drawn on the ground. Both sides of the line are continuously patrolled by soldiers of the two sides. Parties of foreign tourists have the opportunity of visiting the border. In the course of one such visit by Americans and South Koreans, a gust of wind blows the hat of one female tourist across the dividing line into North Korea. Immediately soldiers on both sides become tense. For the woman to walk the two metres across the line to retrieve her hat is out of the question.

The problem is resolved when a North Korean soldier picks up the hat. While his feet remain firmly on the northern side of the demarcation line, the camera follows his arm as it crosses the line and he returns the woman's property. He informs us that in crossing the line with his arm he was, according to North Korean military law, committing a punishable offence.

In another memorable scene, South Korean soldiers with the latest military high-tech equipment are on patrol. They discover that they have mistakenly strayed into the JSA. Their commander orders a rapid retreat. One of the South Korean soldiers, Lee, has separated from the group to relieve himself. As he attempts to hurriedly return to his patrol he feels a pressure on his boot—a trip line attached to a mine. If he takes a step the mine will be activated, blowing him to smithereens. The sweat runs down his face as he waits, petrified, in the woods until he is discovered by a rival patrol of North Koreans.

Instinctively Lee levels his rifle at the three enemy soldiers and orders them to leave or he will shoot. They turn on their heels to go but he calls them back—they are, after all, his only chance of rescue. They dismantle the trip-wire and the incident becomes the first step in a process of fraternisation between Lee and the North Korean trio. Over time both sides come to realise that the Cold War *fiends* of official propaganda, North and South, are simply human beings with similar aims, desires and expectations.

In her investigation to find out what has really taken place, Lt. Jean confronts a wall of official obstruction. Neither of the two Korean political establishments is interested in helping uncover details of an incident that might lead to an easing of tensions between North and South.

The director of the film, Park Chan Wook, is 37 years old and studied philosophy at Sogang University before going on to make films. His films prior to *Joint Security Area* include *Moon is the Sun's Dream* (1992) and *The Threesome* (1997).

In the notes to his new film the director writes that he wants to examine

the issue of the division of Korea from the standpoint of a new generation. He writes that the division of the country “is not a tragedy, it is ironic”. He goes on to say that his aim is to expose the system of “double-talking about maintaining peace” on both sides, and that he hopes “to show with his film how ideologies drive people into catastrophe”.

Such views have a familiar ring. In much university philosophy and current schools of thought, it is popular to brusquely damn all “ideologies”, i.e., all expansive theories dealing with the development of society. The evidence usually given to demonstrate the illegitimacy of “ideologies” is the series of wars and catastrophes that occurred in the twentieth century. In fact, the general condemnation of “ideology” by postmodernists, adherents of the Frankfurt School and others is almost invariably bound up with a stubborn avoidance, or refusal, to undertake a concrete examination of the historical experiences of the last century.

Park Chan Wook denies that the division of Korea was a tragedy, but how else can you characterise a war which ended in 1953 with the loss of over one million Korean lives, leading to the transformation of both halves of the country into military camps? It is, moreover, a historical distortion to mechanically equate the regime in the South with that in the North. The former was from its origins a puppet of Western imperialism, while the latter was bound up with a revolutionary upsurge of the oppressed masses against colonial rule. This historical fact, however, does not constitute an apology for the despotic and corrupt ruling elite in the North, which, like its Maoist mentors in China, has provided the world with another example of the reactionary and anti-Marxist essence of petty-bourgeois nationalism in the guise of “peasant socialism.”

For a half a century millions of Koreans have been prevented access to members of their own families by a border maintained by the two largest armies in the world. Some 37,000 US troops are still stationed in the south. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Stalinist North has been left increasingly isolated and, after decades of sanctions initiated by the US, confronts widespread famine. Is this merely “ironic”?

I was able to speak to the director after the showing of his film and he conceded his own uncertainty concerning the way forward in the process of reconciliation. Politically, he places his trust in the form of reunification currently being proposed by the South Korean government of Kim Dae Jung. I reminded him of the devastating consequences of capitalist restoration for East Germany and the rest of the former Stalinist eastern bloc, and asked about his view with regard to the current negotiations for a reconciliation between the North and South of Korea. He expressed his own reservations about a rapid capitalist take-over of the North, and said that in his view there would have to remain some sort of divide over a long period between the two halves of the country.

The enthusiastic public reaction to Park Chan Wook's new film is understandable in the sense that he has raised issues that have been suppressed for decades in the South. At the same time, due to the limitations of his political outlook and his unwillingness to make a historical analysis of the situation in his country, Park Chan Wook has made a film that, wittingly or not, buttresses the South Korean government's plans to open up the North as a cheap market for big business.

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