

Negotiating 'Asianness' at the Tokyo International Film Festival

Local, Regional and International Dynamics Through Programming Practices and Film Markets

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Abstract In this paper I will trace a brief history of major Asian film festivals to understand how the notion of 'Asianness' evolved over time and how it is expressed nowadays through programming practices and film markets. Then I will focus on the case study of the Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF) as a problematic site where cultural and economic dynamics converge. As an A-category festival, TIFF has to balance its international status with regional relevance, negotiating 'Asianness' in a complex relationship involving the local film industry, since questions on 'Asian cinema' are deeply linked to the national. Finally, I will draw some conclusions, discussing how TIFF relates to other major film festivals in Asia, where 'Asianness' has been used as a shared effort to distinguish themselves from the paradigm set by European film festivals. However, this is an ongoing process, TIFF struggles to use 'Asianness' as a unifying element and the specific interests of each festival obstruct the possibility to create a more systematic trans-Asian model.

Keywords Tokyo International Film Festival. Asian Film Festivals. Asianness. Festival Programming. Film Festival Network.

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1 Film Festival Studies and Programming Practices

Film festival studies are an emerging research field that has flourished over the last couple of decades.¹ This field has drawn wide academic attention for its intrinsic multidisciplinary, which permits to approach film studies from a wide range of perspectives, as they are “transnational in scope, transmedia in articulation and interdisciplinary in conception” (Stevens 2018, 51).² Nowadays film festivals are a ubiquitous phenomenon, with more than 8,000 events³ spread across the year and constituting the so-called “film festival circuit” (Elsaesser 2005) or “film festival network” (de Valck 2007). To systematically approach this subject, several theories have been developed, drawing their basis from a variety of disciplines, and discourses borrowed from cultural sociology such as Latour’s ‘Actor-Network theory’ (de Valck 2007) or Bourdieu’s ‘cultural capital’ have been already convincingly deployed (Czach 2004; de Valck 2016). Film festivals are a useful tool for approaching film studies, detaching them from pure text analysis and combining social sciences with cultural studies; this is because, as Cindy Wong pointed out, film festivals are composite entities:

First, festivals showcase a complex world of films, international, historical, and especially contemporary [...] Second, film festivals actively cultivate new talents and works from all over the world through their scouting and selection, their film funds, and programs to train emerging filmmakers on a global scale [...] Third, festivals intersect with other discourses and institutions in the wider construction of film as a field of knowledge [...] Finally, all these roles raise important questions of who defines what is good for whom and how, where art and value are never defined by undisputed or neutral criteria. (Wong 2011, 14-15)

1 Even if film festivals started in the fifties to play a major role in shaping film culture, academic research in the field - outside of festival reports and personal memories - started only in the nineties. It grew substantially at the beginning of the New Millennium with the work of scholars such as Elsaesser (2005), de Valck (2007) and Loist (2016). With the appearance of the *Film Festival Yearbook* series (2009-14, directed by Dina Iordanova) and the offshoots that developed from the field, nowadays film festival studies can be considered an accomplished field of research, shedding new light on film studies and social sciences.

2 For a comprehensive overview of this study field and its interdisciplinary approach, see de Valck, Loist 2009.

3 The popular film festivals website FilmFreeway.com counts 8,946 registered film festivals to this day, not counting online film festivals (currently 697), which grew substantially in the past year (2021-01-10).

Film festivals as events are defined by a specific time and place, and they can be considered as independent worlds with their inherent dynamics. A film festival is supposed to screen the very best or the finest films produced world-wide (or locally, or by genre), but the 'immaterial' quality of the art is not always given priority. Thematic film festivals, like those centred on civil rights, represent a notorious example of a situation where the political or social message often prevails over artistic quality. At A-category festivals, like Cannes or Venice, the same thing can happen, as geopolitical choices are made to comply with certain expectations (i.e. geographical variety, equality between male and female filmmakers, etc...). This allows a kind of analysis that is unrelated to the films screened, but is useful to understand and contextualize the film world.

Therefore, in this paper I would like to focus on programming practices (i.e. the choice of which films to present in a festival, as selected by programmers, counsellors advisors etc... coordinated by the manager/artistic director) as they are revelatory of specific cultural policies. Programming can be used to shape a film festival's identity, promote certain kind of films or national industries, 'discover' New Waves,⁴ or even to achieve a political agenda. As Ma puts it,

programming can also be understood as the dynamic, networked process through which a specific film festival articulates its politics of participation, agenda-setting, and positioning within the film festival circuit. (2017a, 238)

This statement is as clear today as it would have been at the inception of film festivals. The first one took place in Venice in 1932, becoming an annual event associated with La Biennale in 1936. Film festivals are usually regarded as a European invention (Elsaesser 2005, 71), a model created with the twofold objective of responding to specific geopolitical dynamics. From a cultural perspective it was the European reply to the market-driven Hollywood spectacle, an alternative exhibition space to show 'artistic' and avant-garde films, soon developing into a sort of "Olympics of films" (de Valck 2007, 24), where each country submitted their finest works (and, therefore, their her-

⁴ From the Brazilian 'Cinema Novo' in the sixties to the Chinese 'Fifth Generation' in the late eighties-early nineties, film festivals have always tried to be the first in line in 'discovering' previously unknown directors or 'new waves' - new movements emerging in a national cinema, usually led by a group of filmmakers - and make them available to a wider public. Even if the term was introduced to address the French *nouvelle vague* in the sixties, film festivals are mostly interested in 'New Waves' from Third World and Asian countries. Nowadays these 'discoveries' concern primarily matters of prestige, but when this process started in the seventies - as it will be discussed below - it had strong political meanings and it was supported by European left-wing intellectuals and artists.

itage) to be shown internationally. At the same time, film festivals in Post-War Europe became tools of diplomacy (Corless, Drake 2007, 145), places where press attachés and diplomats could meet on 'neutral' ground to develop cultural and economic relationships. That is the reason why festivals like Venice, Cannes (1939-46) or Edinburgh (1947) were not founded by artists or curators, but by politicians. Berlin, established in 1951, is of particular relevance as it was used

as an outpost of postwar culture sanctioned by the occupying Allied forces in West Berlin, who were rebuilding it as a new cultural center. (Ahn 2011, 7)

This is characteristic of the first of the three phases that Marijke de Valck (2007, 19-20) elaborated in framing film festival history; the turning points of these phases are always related to major shifts in the cinema industry. The first phase runs from the first Venice film festival in 1932 to 1968 and the above-mentioned model of national submission and competitions characterizes it. The social movements in 1968 and the infamous protests at the Cannes film festival that year prompted the second phase. This brought a new model to the fore, less characterized by politicians and national cinemas and more focused on festival programmers and cinephilia. As a result, the organisational structure of all the major film festivals greatly changed, encouraging a growing diversification among them, as they became means to achieve social empowerment. The third phase began in the eighties, when the ever-growing number of film festivals meant that they had to professionalize themselves to survive, especially with the emergence of new festivals strongly supported by government funding.⁵ This third phase was influenced by globalization and neoliberalism, transforming major film festivals into business enterprises operating in the cultural field, where the manager/artistic director emerged as a commanding figure to carefully balance artistic choices with economic and political interests.

In this phase, the film and project markets attached to a given festival began to appear, and these soon became an almost indispensable tool to start playing an active role in the cinema world. Film markets are places where industry people can meet to pitch new projects, buy and sell film rights, finalize co-production deals etc., and they are usually held during film festivals, when all the players are gathered in the same place. When film festivals started to organise their own project markets and launch production plans, they entered a new phase, intending to promote art, and, at the same time, to discov-

5 On the other hand, Ruling (2009, 60-1) considers three passages in the development of film festivals: from community event to film showcase to industry player (and event).

er and build the loyalty of emerging filmmakers, thus shaping their set of aesthetics. These “festival films” (de Valck 2007) are usually funded by major film festivals and developed a new dynamic where film festivals became an alternative distribution route, as their main source of revenue is to travel in smaller festivals. Hence the distinction between “business festivals” (acting as producer) and “audience festivals” (acting as exhibitor), proposed by Peranson (2008). However, film markets and funds are not the only weapons film festivals deploy to affirm their status; awards and ceremonies play a similar role in raising the cultural capital in the value-adding process at festivals, thus creating a win-win system.⁶

Film festivals emerged in Asia during the third phase (earlier examples will be documented in the next chapter) and their boom in the nineties was certainly helped by several factors. Globalization and the growing importance of some national economies (especially China and South Korea) were instrumental to funding new events. At the same time, the emergence of more stable cinema industries and a renovated interest towards East Asia cinema(s) by European film festivals⁷ made these events possible. Entering the second phase, film festivals have constantly tried to find ‘New Waves’ from Third World or non-Western countries, and Asia has always been considered a Saidian ‘Other’ in terms of (cinematographic) identity since the Golden Lion awarded to Kurosawa in 1951. Cinema industries from the ‘periphery’ have been greatly affected by trends set by film festivals, as they can provide the key to accessing distribution in richer countries, as happened with the Fifth Generation of filmmakers from China (de Valck 2012, 33). Awards at a major film festival and the growing importance of festival funds could even lead national industries to exploit these trends. In this case, an issue of (self-imposed) Orientalism arises, as festivals foster a neo-colonial gaze on ‘minor’ cinema industries while taking a “‘grandfatherly’ role” (Falicov 2017, 96).

⁶ A clear example would be that of a Palm d’Or recipient at Cannes that would increase what Czach calls “critical capital” (2004, 82) and be therefore distributed widely thanks to the award and the status of the festival. At the same time, Cannes would increase its status, as its logo will appear on the poster and in the opening credits of the movie, thus enriching its influence in the (art-house) cinema world.

⁷ I include in this term first-tier film festivals (Cannes, Venice, Berlin) and other influential and long-established ones (Locarno, Rotterdam, San Sebastian, Karlovy Vary, etc.), which are – along with North American events like Toronto, Sundance and Tribeca – the most sought-after screening spaces in terms of prestige and recognition. European film festivals became a point of reference for the whole network since their inception, especially due to the extent of their hegemony when compared with the Asian, Latin America or African film festivals, thus shaping the configuration of the events that followed. The features of the European film festivals were widely analysed by the pioneering works of Turan (2002), Elsaesser (2005) and de Valck (2007).

When Asian film festivals started to have more relevance in the festival network, they had to challenge a model already established by European film festivals in a highly competitive cultural economy. Differentiation and regionalization proved to be the keys, as every major player in Asia focused on regional cinema, trying to promote a different vision of 'Asianness' which could appeal to a local and international audience. This process took place through film programmes dedicated to Asian movies (film programming),⁸ and funding and co-production programmes to support them (film markets). It also conceals huge socio-political implications as film festival provide "an important institutional framework for the study of issues of [...] post-colonial global relations" (Wong 2011, 18). Programming has a major role in this regard, as every film selected by a festival has to be considered "a cultural statement" (de Valck 2012, 30).

Therefore, in this paper I will trace a brief history of major Asian film festivals, focusing on few notable examples, to understand how notion of 'Asianness' (or Pan-Asianism) evolved over time and how it is performed today. Then I will address one particular case study, the Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF), one of the only two Asian film festivals accredited to the 'Competitive Feature Film Festivals' (the so-called 'A' festivals) of the FIAPF accreditation system.⁹ I will explore the notion of 'Asianness' and its relationship to the national film industry as expressed through TIFF programming and the related film market, the TIFFCOM. In fact, questions on 'Asian cinema' are deeply linked to the national, as festivals "strove to promote the

8 The Hong Kong International Film Festival was an early example and takes pride in its programming and subsequent developments: "the global reputation of the HKIFF was built on the pioneering work of programming Asian films and its retrospectives when Asian and Hong Kong cinema were not well known to the international community. Built on a solid reputation for programming, the HKIFF became the model for many subsequent film festivals around the region" (HKIFF Official Website, <http://www.hkiff.org.hk/society/#/AboutUs/historyCulture?lang=en>).

9 The Fédération Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films (FIAPF) is a French institution founded in 1933. In accordance with the Venice and Cannes film festivals, it created an accreditation system in 1951 to prevent award inflation and to preserve the prestige of older film festivals (de Valck 2007, 41). It is still used today to categorise film festivals and it is divided in four sections, the most prestigious being Competitive Feature Film Festivals, which nowadays comprise only fifteen film festivals. They must comply to a rigid set of parameters: "an A-festival must run for at least nine days; it should not specialize but should cover all aspects of filmmaking; [and] a feature competition with at least fourteen films without genre limitations is a requirement" (Iordanova 2006, 28). The only Asian film festivals accredited to the Competitive Feature Film Festivals section are the TIFF and the Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF). Even if the accreditation should be a sort of 'quality mark,' it is often related to political and economic decisions, as in the case of SIFF (Ma 2012), Moscow (de Valck 2007, 57), and Karlovy Vary (Iordanova 2006, 32). Emerging film festivals with global ambition try to get the accreditation to empower their prestige, but at the same time, some of the globally relevant film festivals like Toronto and Rotterdam decided not to apply for it to move freely outside its limitation.

national film industry by acting as a gateway to the global film market” (Ahn 2011, 24). Finally, I will draw some conclusions, discussing how TIFF relates to other major players in Asia, what its role in the Asian film festivals network is (business or audience festival?) and if a shared vision of 'Asianness' could effectively change their liminal position within the paradigm set by European film festivals.

2 'Asian' Film Festival

2.1 The First Asian Film Festival

As briefly noted above, film festivals have been traditionally seen as a strictly European (and, most recently, North American) affair since their inception in Venice. Scholars have challenged this notion at length, and East Asia is no exception, as the first film festival in the region traces back to the fifties. Lee Sangjong (2012; 2014; 2017) extensively researched the story of the pioneering Asian Film Festival (AFF), which started in 1954. As was typical of the first phase of film festivals history, there were specific socio-political reasons and (trans)national agendas at stake in the establishment of this event, as this was the first attempt to create a regional network between cinema industries that had only occasionally communicated with each other until then. The promoter of the initiative was a Japanese film executive, Nagata Masaichi, president of Daiei, one of Japan's cinema studios.

In the early fifties, Japanese cinema was starting to be recognised internationally (i.e. by European film festivals)¹⁰ and the studio system reached its peak later in the decade with an average annual output of 500 feature-length movies, with double and triple bills becoming common practice.¹¹ In order to consolidate the power of Japanese cinema in Asian markets and to avoid saturation of the national production, diversification and expansion seemed to be necessary. Nagata thus turned his gaze to Japan's neighbouring countries and, along with other major Asian players - like Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers - initiated the Federation of Motion Picture Producers Association in Asia (FPA) in 1953.¹² Nagata and FPA were financially and

10 *Rashōmon* (1950) by Kurosawa Akira won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1951, an award that prompted the 'discovery' of Japanese cinema in Europe.

11 This kind of production proved not to be sustainable and it soon became one of the factors contributing to the crisis of the studio system in the sixties, leading to the following emergence of the Japanese New Wave and independent producers.

12 The FPA was established during a convention in Manila in 1953 and initially included seven members: Japan, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Taiwan, Malaya and Thailand. South Korea joined the FPA in 1957.

administratively supported by The Asian Foundation (TAF), a “camouflaged association shaped and carried by the CIA” (Lee 2017, 517), whose intention was to

construct the alliance of anti-Communist film producers in Asia by supporting some of the ideologically ‘correct’ motion picture executives in Japan, Hong Kong, and Korea. (531)

TAF vanished in 1964 and its influence became more nuanced once the FPA was established, but its support was instrumental in the revival of the Korean cinema industry in the fifties, providing equipment and financial support to the Korean Motion Picture Producers Association.

Starting from 1954, the FPA organised an annual event - the Southeast Asian Film Festival (renamed the Asian Film Festival in 1957) - which was not a traditional, nation-bound film festival, as it was conceived to change location every year among the countries reunited under the umbrella of the Association. The first edition was held in May 1954 in Tokyo - the first international event hosted by Post-War Japan - and movies from seven countries were presented. The AFF was conceived as an event for industry people, since film screenings were ancillary and the public was not even involved. In fact, the participants’ main concern was to discover new filming technology from other countries and to finalize business contracts.

This first politics-driven attempt to a Pan-Asian cinema network between East and Southeast Asian countries was relevant for roughly twenty years, rapidly declining in the seventies, as it reflected the ever-changing dynamics between these industries. AFF proved to be a very profitable commercial vehicle to the Shaw Brothers, which established themselves as the most powerful production studio in the region through the sixties. At the same time, the festival witnessed the emergence of Korean cinema and its early masterpieces,¹³ as well as a Hong Kong-South Korea alliance in co-production, the crisis of the Japanese studio system and a clear drop of entries from the Southeast.¹⁴ In fact, Japan withdrew from the FPA committee in 1972 and the Association changed its constitution to include the Pacific region in 1982, becoming the organising body for the rebrand-

13 The first Korean entry to the festival, *Shijibganeun nal* (The Wedding Day, 1957) by Lee Byung-il, was made possible by the equipment provided by the TAF. The award for best comedy won that year was the first one for a Korean movie at an international film festival (Lee 2017, 530).

14 Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand thus created an ASEAN sub-committee on film in 1967, detaching themselves from the AFP and inaugurating the first Southeast Asian Film Festival in 1972. Two years later, Indonesia led the establishment of the ASEAN Motion Picture Producers Association.

ed Asia-Pacific Film Festival, still running today.

The experience of AFF reveals a series of characteristics that, even in a completely different environment, still hold true today. As Li Han-hsiang, President of the Taiwanese production company Gu-lian, admitted in an interview:

many awards at the festival were dished out under the special maneuverings of producers, who were doing a lot of PR, taking people for meals, etc. The ulterior motive for organizing a festival was to cement connections and help each other sell films. That was exactly how this particular festival was formed. (Li in Lee 2017, 532)

Even if the prime mission of a film festival is supposed to be that of spreading knowledge about film culture - making new or unknown films available - and even if it is supposed to be purely driven by cinephilia, this understanding certainly leaves out too many aspects, not necessarily related to movies. As the experience of AFF reveals, the agendas behind the constitution of a film festival hide a wide range of interests. The behind-the-scenes support of TAF represents the most telling aspect of this kind of events, one where the political agenda is on full display (but the role of TAF has not been thoroughly examined until recently), as a case of cultural capital used to influence political thinking in a subtle form of propaganda-like soft power. The other players involved, namely film executives across East and Southeast Asia, were not interested in the latest trends in a certain country's cinema, as they were trying to create a network that would have allowed them to sell more films and expand their market. The 'Asian' part of the film festival must not be understood as a well-defined space, because the members of the Association changed over the years following their respective shifts in interests. Therefore, AFF cannot be used to define a larger sphere of transnational cultural influence, nor can it be considered an attempt to create an 'Asian' cinema as opposed to Hollywood or Europe.

2.2 The Discovery of 'Asian' Cinema at the HKIFF

In recent decades, national cinemas' struggles and the ubiquity of Hollywood movies in theatres across these countries have produced an urgency to find different strategies to develop the cinema industry. The screen quota system was a partial solution in South Korea and China, but film festivals were particularly instrumental in the attempt to build this alternative model. As the pioneering Asian Film Festival rapidly declined, Eastern Asia would have to wait until 1977 to see a recognisable film festival take shape, when the first edition

of the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF) took place.¹⁵ Despite its modest dimensions, by the mid-seventies Hong Kong was the most relevant cinema industry in East Asia, the only one capable of exporting its movies all across the region. As the first Asian film festival of modern times, it soon became the main gateway to Asian art-house cinema through the eighties, especially valuable for foreign observers:

Europeans came to the festival and not only brought Hong Kong cinema into the international arena, but also started seeing the festival as a fertile ground to discover Asian cinema, especially Chinese cinema. (Wong 2011, 221-2)

It was the HKIFF to present for the first time the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers to an international audience, drawing a lot of interest from European film festivals. This festival therefore represented

an important process in the growth of an 'alternative' artistic and more innovative strand of filmmaking in a community traditionally attuned to making money. (Teo 2009, 110)

Major film festivals are quite similar in structure and organisation, as they become more and more professionalized. At the same time, they need to find a way to differentiate themselves, since it is virtually impossible to match the likes of Venice and Cannes, where the most anticipated world premieres are screened. That is why the model chosen by HKIFF to showcase 'Asian' cinema – past and present – and support its own domestic films and independent filmmakers blazed a path for Asian film festivals to come. Retrospectives played an extremely important role in this regard, as well as the (usually bilingual) catalogues published by the festival. They helped to systematize Hong Kong cinema history into a coherent canon that drew interests from foreign audiences, and contributed to the subsequent inclusion into global film knowledge, making HKIFF “a treasure trove for the excavation of Asian cinema” (Wong 2011, 222).

Even if its role diminished in the nineties due to a lack of government funding, the changing policies of the post-handover and the contemporary emergence of new film festivals (Busan was founded in 1996), HKIFF was important for (re)discovering and promoting local and Asian cinema, along with several directors regarded as mere 'artisans' at that point. As a typical 'audience festival' it did not plan a competition (nor a market) until 1999, and its

15 A previous notable example of film event is the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival (originally Golden Horse Awards), established in Taiwan in 1962.

programming during the foundational period emphasized Asian cinema, while also introducing world cinema and international auteurs to Hong Kong audiences (Ma 2017a, 240)

The HKIFF vision of 'Asianness' did not evolve until it was forced to compete with other film festivals in the region at the turning of the 21st century, when it also had to become independent (i.e. a private institution). It then reconceptualized itself as a hub for pan-Chinese cinema, screening movies from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. It also tried to remain relevant in the region by becoming "a bigger and more glamorous event" (Wong 2011, 220) through the use of a red carpet, the creation of the Asian Film Awards in 2007 and the addition of the Asian Film Financing Forum (HAF) in 2000. HAF is a co-production market dedicated to Asian filmmakers, ranging from the Middle East to the Southeast, whose collaborations extend to other similar markets like Rotterdam and Busan. Although direct government funding vanished after 2004, the Hong Kong Trade and Development Council still provides important support in organising the content market called Hong Kong International Film and TV Market (Filmart), which was conceived in 1997 as a separate event. Ever since it was integrated into the festival in 2007, Filmart, along with HAF, represents an essential instrument in the film festival, as it allows reuniting public audiences and industry people in the same place and time.¹⁶

2.3 An International Festival for Local Audience: The SIFF

The handover of Hong Kong with its political consequences, the growing Chinese film market and the emergence of new festivals in Mainland China all contributed to HKIFF decline. Originally, though, China was without a proper film festival or cinema event. This came to pass after the Huabiao Film Awards - founded in the late fifties - were dismissed due to the Cultural Revolution, and it held true until recent times. Film festivals started to reappear in China only in the early nineties, but there are now three 'official' film festivals with strong government support. The Changchun Film Festival (CFF), established in 1992 (biannual since 2005 and rotating with the Huabiao Awards), is characterised by a regional focus on Chinese language films. The Beijing International Film Festival (BIFF) is the most recent (2011) and glamorous one, frequently attended by Hollywood celebrities as it tries to attract national or Asian premieres of Hollywood blockbusters and big-budget movies. Finally, the Shanghai In-

¹⁶ For a comprehensive overview of HKIFF see Wong 2011, 190-222.

ternational Film Festival (SIFF), established in 1993 (biannual until 2004), is China's only film festival accredited by FIAPF. It is more focused on cultural capital, which means balancing film programming with opportunities for industry people, while maintaining regional and international relevance. As Nakajima puts it,

all the [three] international film festivals are internationally-oriented in some sense, but their identity within the field and relational reference groups vary substantially. (2019, 13)

China also had a very vivid independent film festival scene which grew constantly from the nineties, but such festivals faded away in the last decade, as they "have faced increased governmental scrutiny since 2011" (Neves 2013, 37). Given the aim of this paper, the festival that deserves the better part of our attention is certainly SIFF, as it clearly is the Chinese festival sharing the most similarities with (and aims to become like) the most prestigious European festivals. It is also the only one able to compete with other major players in the region, shaping its own vision of 'Asianness.' Government support aside, it was created at the behest of the city government, whose "main purpose has been to boost Shanghai itself as a world city" (Berry 2017, 28) and a cultural capital, although nowadays the cinema industry is mainly located in Beijing. However, as all 'official' film festivals in China, SIFF has its own limitations, even if it has benefited from more autonomy since 2006. In fact, it still has to submit to Chinese regulations, including the quota system and the need for censorship approval. This is something that clearly limits programming choices and "compromise[s] the quality of their programs" (Tan 2019, 212). It has been already indicated how accreditation by the FIAPF has often been used with a political agenda in mind. SIFF is a prime example, as shadows on the sought-after A-category status are cast by

the negligible number of foreign press, the disappointing number of screened Chinese films, the bleak scene of empty seats during screenings, and recurring problems with English subtitles. (Ma 2012, 151)

To comply with the rules of the most prestigious category of the FIAPF accreditation system, SIFF had to set as its centrepiece the competition, called the 'Golden Goblet Awards', which is usually composed of European and American movies, with few Asian entries.¹⁷ As Ma points out (2012, 156), this seems to be a clear programming

¹⁷ This trend was slightly inverted in the last few years, when usually half of the twenty films in Competition are from Asian countries (and half of them from Mainland China).

choice to highlight its international status, presenting it as a 'world festival' rather than an 'Asian' one. However, SIFF's motto - "Focusing on Asia, Promoting Chinese Films, and Supporting New Talents" - does not seem to share this vision.¹⁸ Actually, this change of perspective took place recently in order to respond to the evolving Asian festival scene (and the emergence of Busan). A new section was created in 2004, the 'Asian New Talent Award,' featuring debut or second films from young Asian filmmakers, and this, it seems, "accommodates legitimized Chinese independent titles" (Ma 2017a, 251). Another recently created section is 'Focus China' (divided into three parallel categories), where the majority of the Chinese-language films are screened, although Hong Kong and Taiwan are clearly under-represented in comparison to Mainland China, underlining an "underdeveloped vision of 'pan-Chinese cinema'" (Ma 2017a, 251). Furthermore, most of the Chinese filmmakers presented in the 'Asian New Talent Award' programme are 'raised' inside the SIFF itself. In fact, a recurring practice for professionalized film festivals nowadays is to use their project and co-production markets to support emerging filmmakers, in order to tie them to the festival. In this way, the festival secures the world premiere of a potential breakout talent, favouring future collaboration with him/her and becoming the film's launchpad into the film festival network, which ultimately results in a value-adding process to the prestige of the festival producer. Shanghai's project market is 'SIFF Project,' which was created in 2007 and has been recently divided into four sub-categories to encompass co-production and post-production funding. It contributed to the completion of 75 projects so far, with a prevalent inclination towards Chinese filmmakers. Concurrently with the project market, the festival has since 2,000 hosted a regular film market as well, called the 'SIFF Market'.

From an 'international' perspective, SIFF seems to focus on what is expected from an A-category and 'business' festival: prioritizing industry exchanges, co-productions deals and project markets, handing out prizes to big-budget movies in competition and organising forums aimed at professionals (Berry 2017, 24). However, since it would be unfair to compare it with other European A-category festivals, it is probably more interesting to analyse its strategy on the regional front. In order to compete with its Asian competitors, SIFF has created new programmes and new project markets, shaping a vision of 'Asianness' that seems to point in two directions at once. In past years, SIFF programming favoured countries from Central Asia, India and Middle East, while underrepresenting other Chinese-lan-

¹⁸ This motto can be read in several festival's press releases, such as: <http://www.siff.com/a/2018-08-01/2988.html> and <http://www.siff.com/a/2019-03-29/3223.html>.

guage territories and East Asia with its two most powerful cinematography (and direct competitors): South Korea and Japan. In fact, the real focus of this programming strategy is on the relevance of (Mainland) Chinese cinema in the notion of 'Asianness,' since it is much less transnational in its conception.¹⁹ Promoting national cinema is a long-standing practice in film festivals, but the case of SIFF seems more reminiscent of the primary example of the 'business festival' in Asia, Busan. At the same time, unlike its competitors, the SIFF Market does not appear to be particularly concerned with regional cinema, so much as in attracting big (mainly Hollywood) studios for co-production opportunities and launching China as a shooting location (Wong 2011, 140). These factors contribute to the general perception of SIFF "as lacking prestige and authority" (Ma 2012, 156) and, along with the scarce number of foreign press and foreign industry people attending the event,²⁰ indicates that its relevancy is limited to Chinese-speaking territories, either as an exhibitor or as an active player in the industry.

2.4 BIFF Setting a Model for Asian Film Festivals

The appearance of the Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF, 1985) and the Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF, 1987) was instrumental in cementing HKIFF's vision of 'Asian' cinema in the 1980s. However, without doubt, the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF, 1996) perfected this model, becoming the most successful and influential Asian film festival at the beginning of the new century. A thoughtfully planned event, aided by strong governmental, cultural and metropolitan funding, it quickly drew ahead of less officially supported events like HKIFF and SGIFF. Busan is located on the Southeastern coast of South Korea and it was renowned for its ports and heavy industries, far removed from the cultural capital of the country, Seoul. Although this setting seemed odd for the establishment of a new international film festival at that time, BIFF became a model also for the strong bond it was able to create with the host city, which in the contemporary festival scene "act as the nodal points on this circuit" (Stringer 2001, 128). The festival quickly drew appreciation from the Asian and international community thanks to a clear vision in its programming and a strong focus on its project

¹⁹ For example, in the 2020 Asian New Talent Award programme, six films (and one co-production) out of fourteen were Chinese. Other represented countries are: Iran and India (two films), Japan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Taiwan, Kyrgyzstan (one film).

²⁰ Between 2013 and 2017, less than 5% of the attending press was from abroad. In the same time-span, Chinese exhibitors at SIFF Market accounted for 75% or more of the total amount (FIAPF 2018, 43).

market, the Pusan Promotion Plan (PPP, renamed Asian Project Market - APM - in 2011).

Aware that it would have been impossible to win the battle for world premieres over festivals like Cannes and Venice, BIFF chose not to apply for FIAPF accreditation, unwilling to be bound by its regulations about competitions and genre limitations. Since its inception, Busan advocated for a 'Pan-Asian' cinema establishing a competitive section called 'New Currents' dedicated to first and second feature-length films from Asian directors. Focusing on Asian cinema and young talents, BIFF avoided the main problems that festivals like SIFF and TIFF have to face in their competitive programmes: an overall generalisation of programming choices and the never-ending (and usually unfruitful) quest for world premieres of European and American movies. BIFF instead aimed to become an attractive hub for young Asian filmmakers, pursuing the vision of 'Asian' cinema and modelling its programming around it, as the other main section is 'A Window on Asian Cinema,' a showcase for the 'best' Asian movies of the year.

BIFF also benefited from the spectacular achievements reached by its national cinema around the same time, when the Korean Wave was enjoying international success, and several Korean directors were acclaimed in the most prestigious film festivals (Kim Ki-duk, Park Chan-wook, Lee Chang-dong etc.). The close relationship between the Korean cinema industry and BIFF has already been largely discussed (Ahn 2011; Bossa 2013), because the festival vision of 'Asian' cinema was bolstered since the beginning by a strong focus on its national cinema. Two recurring programmes have been useful in this regard: Korean Panorama - an overview of the latest trends in Korean cinema - and Korean Cinema Retrospective, which was instrumental in re-discovering Korean masters from the past and making them available to an international audience in a particularly receptive time. The above-mentioned programmes dedicated to Asian and Korean cinema have shaped BIFF's identity, while the 'rest' is a more conventional selection of international movies mixing art-house cinema, entertainment and genre films in sections called Word Cinema, Open Cinema, Wide Angle. Close ties with the local industry constituted a win-win relationship as BIFF helped to promote its national cinema to the world, while the international success of Korean directors made BIFF even more relevant as the primary platform to discover new talents from a now-trendy cinema industry. The two parallel processes proved to be successful, as South Korean cinema took over the market shares once retained by Hong Kong films in (South) East Asia, in the same way that BIFF leapfrogged HKIFF in regional influence around the same time. Finally, the soft power exercised by the popularity of Korean pop-culture, especially in Asia, generated an "immense goodwill" towards the festival, even if these trends are "highly malleable and unpredictable" by nature (Teo 2009, 119).

However, programming practices and ties with local cinema alone cannot explain BIFF's success, as it was its industry-oriented approach that really transformed it into "The Hub of Asian Cinema" (Ma 2012, 153). The festival launched its project market PPP in 1998, modelling it after the oldest such project, CineMart, from the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Its successful implementation helped to shape the vision of a 'Pan-Asian' cinema through cooperation and film funding, quickly becoming "the largest coproduction event in Asia" (Falicov 2010, 17). It provides co-production opportunities to selected projects submitted by Asian directors and producers (including countries from Central and Southeast Asia) that are already in place but lack sufficient funding to be completed. In more than twenty years, it has successfully produced over 250 projects. APM further strengthened its central role in the region by establishing collaborations with several other project markets in Europe and Asia (Rotterdam, Hong Kong, Cannes, Berlin), building on the growing interest in 'Asian' cinema in Western film festivals in the past two decades. BIFF further extended its relevance to the Asian film industry by forging a stronger vision of 'Pan-Asian' cinema through the Asian Film Industry Network (AFIN) in 2005 and the Asian Film Market (AFM) in 2006. The latter is a canonical film market where industry people can meet to sell and buy film rights, but its spatial (Busan) and temporal (October) position made it extremely successful, since Western distributors and programmers can 'discover' new products without waiting for the European festival season, starting in February. The AFIN, on the other hand, seems to update the FPA from the fifties, as it is

an annual summit for film-makers, executives and industry personnel in the region to examine ways to promote increased cooperation and exchange among Asian film industries. (Lee 2012, 102)

This gathering of the most influential players in the region (TIFF's promoter UniJapan is one of the members) takes place mostly for economic and technological reasons. AFIN's aims to promote joint activities between these countries' film industries - and between film festivals - and to create a transnational film industry of some sort. However, what has changed since the experience of FPA is the prominent role assumed by film festivals. The first Asian Film Festival was conceived as an annual event for industry people, where film screening was only marginally involved, but it is clear that a power shift occurred in the meantime. BIFF became the quintessential 'business festival,' complementing its rich film programming with relevant film markets in order "to position South Korea and BIFF as a hub of the Asian film industry" (Ahn 2011, 103). 'Business festivals' like BIFF can also enhance collaborations between film industries

through programming itself, as it happened with China. When BIFF screened the Chinese movie *Jí jié hào* (Assembly, 2007) by Feng Xiaogang as its opening film in 2007, this marked the beginning of a decade of co-productions between the two countries. BIFF's support of Chinese cinema certainly encouraged Korean involvement in the Chinese film market, where the revenues are potentially much higher. However, as Yecies noted, this is not to be understood as a manifestation of "the nation's 'ultimate soft power' [...] but in a distinctly Korean contributory way" (Yecies 2014, 17).

It is clear that a complementary use of programming and film market is beneficial to both, as they are useful tools for major (Asian) film festivals to strengthen their position in the region, allowing them to play an active role in the film industry. BIFF's vision of 'Asianness' is certainly centred around the present success of Korean cinema in the world and its own status as the reference festival in Asia, but it also contributed to stimulating active dialogue between different film industries, to revive transnational cooperation and to attract major non-Asian players eager to watch, buy or select the latest Asian success. Busan, and on a different level Shanghai, Tokyo and Hong Kong,

are important hubs for the region and gain importance in the global market place as they offer platforms to break into new markets and have a supporting role for larger markets. (Loist 2011, 396)

Certainly, there is no unified vision of what constitutes 'Asianness,' as it changes both spatially and conceptually from festival to festival, based on economical and geopolitical interests. However, there seems to be a collective effort to focus on Asian cinema in all the film festivals analysed. Thus, the notion of a "loosely-integrated network" (Chua 2012, 10)²¹ might best be applied in this case. As the Asian presence in major European and North American film festivals is limited to a few renowned authors, Asian film festivals have focused on regional cinema to promote and develop stronger cinema industries, which can reflexively boost the prestige of these festivals. At the same time, specialization allowed them to emerge amid thousands of 'generic' film festivals. A collective focus on 'Asian' cinema is also commercially important as it can mutually help cinema industries and independent filmmakers to enter new markets, find commercial partners, develop artistic collaborations and make local audience accustomed to different aesthetics, opposing the hegemony of Hollywood movies and national cinema at the local box office.

21 Chua is here referring to East Asian 'popular culture' and its soft power dynamics, but the same can be applied to the (East) Asian cinema industry.

3 Tokyo 'International' Film Festival

3.1 TIFF's Origins and Structure

After the HKIFF established itself as the reference point for film festivals in Asia, and before the BIFF took its place, the Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF) tried to assert itself as the main Asian film festival after its inception in 1985. It is the only Japanese film festival accredited to the most prestigious category of the FIAPF, thus obtaining A-category status, since "TIFF aspires to be recognized as one of the four major film festivals in the world and in the same league as Cannes, Venice and Berlin".²² It ran biannually until 1992, when it became an annual event taking place in October (one month after Venice and right after BIFF). In the beginning, it took place at the Bunkamura in Shibuya (and other locations); in 2004 Roppongi was added and it is now the main venue, although the festival remains scattered across the city.²³ TIFF is hosted by the Japanese Association for International Promotion of the Moving Image (UniJapan), a non-profit organisation founded in 1957 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). It is also strongly supported by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the METI itself.

Even if it is not a government-controlled organisation, UniJapan has always had a direct link with the state cultural authorities and, at the same time, with the Japanese film industry. It does not limit itself to organising the festival, but, since its main purpose is to promote Japanese cinema abroad, it is involved in several initiatives taking place in other festivals or in Japanese cultural centres around the world. It was the METI to organise TIFF for the first time in 1985, handing the reins of the festival's committee to industry people from the major players in Japanese cinema. Although this has changed over the years, it is in a way still valid today, as its current director, Hisamatsu Takeo, had a long career at Shōchiku and the festival features among its 'corporate partners' all the Japanese studios: Shōchiku, Tōhō, Tōei, Nikkatsu and even Kadokawa.²⁴ Furthermore, in 2007 it entered the larger governmental project Japan International Con-

²² As stated in the "History" section of its official website: <http://history.tiff-jp.net/en/outline/index.html>.

²³ A notable exception was the 7th edition (1994), when it was held in Kyoto to commemorate the 1200th anniversary of the city's founding.

²⁴ The Festival Chairman, Andō Hiroyasu, on the other end, represents the government 'arm' of the festival, as he is the President of the Japan Foundation and had a long history in foreign politics.

tents Festival (CoFesta);²⁵ this transformed TIFF into a sort of “contents market” (Gerow 2013, 193) more than a film fair for cinephiles.

As an A-category film festival, TIFF's main programme is the International Competition, which features 14 films from around the world with an international jury awarding the top prize, the Tokyo Grand Prix. As the festival focus began to shift to 'Asian' cinema, it implemented two other competitions. The first is Asian Future, which features movies from the entire Asian region and is now dedicated to filmmakers who have directed no more than three films. This section was implemented in 1998 as the Asian Film Award, replacing the broader programme Young Cinema Competition and it was later renamed Winds of Asia (2002-12). The last competition is Japanese Cinema Splash – created in 2004 as Japanese Eyes – and it is dedicated to Japanese independent filmmakers regardless of the stage of their careers. Its 'showcase' sections are varied as well, featuring a selection of international, Asian and Japanese films that tries to successfully mix entertainment and art-house cinema. Japan Now is a 'best of' list of what the local industry produced in the previous year, and it usually features a focus on a renowned Japanese director, under the rubric Director in Focus (in 2020 it was Fukuda Kōji). World Focus is a selection of films handpicked from festivals around the world without Japanese distribution, while Special Screening is the typical 'out of competition' programme, screening the more star-packed and glamorous movies. This section allows TIFF to retain its 'international' allure and invite American and European movie stars onto its red carpet. Finally, it is worth mentioning Crosscut Asia, a thematic section featuring movies from Southeast Asia, created in 2014 in collaboration with the Japan Foundation Asia Center.²⁶

3.2 A Matter of Relevance

It is surprising to note how little academic attention TIFF has had as compared to other Asian or even Japanese film festivals. Japan has a very lively independent festival scene, which grew exponentially in the nineties. Some of them are also internationally relevant in their niche, as they are usually genre festivals, like the Yamagata Interna-

25 It is a project designed to enhance the promotional capabilities of events related to Japan's distinctive gaming, anime, manga, characters, broadcasting, music, movies, and other content industries (from CoFesta website, <https://www.cofesta.go.jp/pc/>).

26 As any film festivals showing hundreds of films (the peak was in 2016 with 584), TIFF also has several collateral sections: Japanese Animation was created in 2019 to exploit the success of this national genre in the world. Youth is dedicated to movies for children, while Japanese Classics is a retrospective section focused on past directors or actors.

tional Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF, 1989) or the Yubari International Fantastic Film Festival (YIFFF, 1990). There are events successfully addressing 'Asian' cinema as well, like the Tokyo FILMeX (founded in 2000 by Office Kitano)²⁷ and Focus on Asia Fukuoka International Film Festival (1991). One might wonder why an 'official', government-backed and heavily-funded film festival is not able to attract the same analysis as similar or smaller events. There are several possible answers, but it seems appropriate to address this matter starting from TIFF's A-category status. As briefly mentioned before, this accreditation essentially means both 'prestige' and 'limitations' for an Asian film festival. The latter soon hindered the former, as TIFF's main section, the Competition, cannot show films that have already been screened in other A-festival competitions. Since Asian festivals are hardly competitive in the film festival circuit, these regulations enormously limit the possibility of attracting renowned directors (Japanese included), who will rather choose for their world premieres venues like Cannes, Venice and Berlin above any other. Therefore, TIFF's Competition will always be composed of a number of films that did not 'make the cut' in other prestigious festivals or were screened 'out of competition' before, or are less recognized, but aspire to be the next 'discovery.' This burden should not be put entirely on the festival programmers' shoulders though, as this was a cultural dynamic already in place long before TIFF even appeared on the scene. As elegantly noted by Nornes (2014, 247), it is "as if 'A' means something different in countries that don't write with Roman letters." That is to say, that the film festival network is a product of European hegemony and festivals outside Europe and North America will never have a chance to compete on the same level. Therefore, diversification, specialisation and co-operation could all be viable ways to become relevant, detaching from the established system, just like BIFF did at the beginning of the 2000s. As we have previously analysed, one of the most pursued paths for non-European film festivals was to turn to genre productions and to focus on young filmmakers. For an Asian film festival, this usually means to focus on 'Asian' cinema and to forge its own vision of 'Asianness'.

This leads us to the second possible answer to the question of why TIFF has scarce relevance in academic analysis. Since the first edition and throughout the nineties, its 'international' - rather than its 'Asian' - dimension was stressed, as the festival wanted to challenge the likes of Venice and Cannes. A prime example is the Asian Film Week programme, a showcase of 'Asian' cinema that in 1997 was renamed Cinema Prism to encompass films from all over the world.

27 For the first time, in 2020 Tokyo FILMeX joined forces with TIFF due to the pandemic, and the two events took place at the same time (but in different venues).

Limited by A-category regulations, TIFF chose not to invest in diversification, largely neglecting Asian and Japanese independent cinema until the early 2000s. Instead, it focused on the glamorous side of the event, trying to draw media attention through its stars and paillettes more than films, as

the energy put into red carpet affairs and exclusive parties drew attention to the preponderance of Hollywood films weeks or months away from their Japanese bows. (Nornes 2014, 255)

The delay characterising foreign film distribution in Japan has always been successfully exploited by TIFF in order to screen, as a national (or East Asian) premiere, several Hollywood movies. Carefully planned media campaigns allowed the festival to invite American stars, screening these products in its most disengaged and entertainment-centred section, Special Screening. This turned out to be a win-win strategy for the TIFF and for distributors as well, as their premiere at TIFF usually precedes their national release by a few months (or weeks). It should come as no surprise, then, if one of the priorities of the programmers in a festival like Busan was to select movies "without turning the festival into an exhibition fair or showcase for predominantly Hollywood films" (Ahn 2011, 52), something that ominously recalls TIFF's choices at that point. Consequently, TIFF was never able to achieve the status of prime Asian film festival that it strove to attain, and with the emergence of BIFF (and, secondarily, SIFF and SGIFF) in the early 2000s, its relevance faded away, as it ultimately "failed to brand itself as 'prestigious' and 'world class'". (Lee 2014, 239). The attendance of press, guests and industry people from abroad has generally been higher than most of its competitors, but even its 'international' status has been challenged at times, particularly regarding the retrospective section. The technical apparatus was not always at the highest standard, as translation was seldom provided (Nornes 2014, 255) and for a long time it pursued the Japanese 'tradition' not to publish catalogues, even when these materials were fundamental to foreign audiences – something that Gerow (2013, 194) thinks is endemic to Japanese film culture.

However, as Stringer (2001) persuasively theorised, the bond between a film festival and its host city nowadays is often stronger than the one with the national cinema industry. Festivals are now able to attract capital investments and have become a form of tourism as well. Most of all, they are useful tools for city branding and cultural promotion. Therefore, their success in programming is not as valuable as their ability to attract a large number of visitors and media attention. The glamorous side of the event (movie stars on red carpets, award ceremonies, exclusive parties etc.) is what encapsulates prestige in the eyes of general public and represents therefore the

shortcut to retaining 'international' allure – a boost of cultural capital for the festival and the host city altogether. In the case of Tokyo, TIFF was instrumental in

adding a competitive edge to Tokyo as a world-class media capital, for it has always been a site of intersecting global cultural flows onto which Japan could register itself as a crucial player in regional and even international cultural industries. (Ma 2017b, 64)

Thus, considering the strong bond the festival has with the city management (and its national counterparts), TIFF's role within national cultural policies is probably best served as a value-adding event more than as a cultural one. This could be one possible answer to programming choices and the general direction the event took until the beginning of the new century. However, a film festival can hardly survive without its 'raw material' – movies – and if its programming is not attractive enough compared to its competitors, glamour alone cannot save it.

3.3 Towards a More Inclusive Asian Programming

Therefore, it is noteworthy that a major shift at TIFF took place in the early 2000s, when it was clear that the vision of 'Pan-Asian' cinema created by BIFF through a well-planned coordination between programming and project market marked a successful path to differentiation from European festivals. However, this major shift also has geopolitical reasons, as from the mid-nineties Japan became "popularly conscious of itself as part of the region in the face of the rising significance of its neighbors" (DeBoer 2014, 117). Since the Post-War era, relationships with China and South Korea and with the countries once included in the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere' were tense, but in the nineties the time came to reconnect with the neighbours for political, economic and cultural reasons. Japanese influence was growing in the region with the boom of the 'Cool Japan' campaign, and the saturation of the internal market caused industry people to look outside national borders to find new markets. China and South Korea were considered especially valuable, as can be seen in TIFF's subsequent programming choices for Opening and Closing Film of the festival, the ones with more media exposure, as in the 2005 edition they were: *Qian li zou dan ji* (Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles, 2005) by Zhang Yimou and *Yeokdosan* (Rikido-

zan, 2004) by Song Heu-sung.²⁸ Furthermore, in 2001, Hong Sang-soo won the first prize and TIFF organised a 'Korean Cinema Week' to recognize the growing importance of the Korean cinema industry (and celebrate the 2002 World Cup). In 2002 the 'Cinema Prism' programme was renamed 'Winds of Asia' to focus exclusively on Asian movies. In 2003 *Nuǎn* (2003) by Huo Jianqi won the first prize with Chinese actress Gong Li acting as Jury President. Two years later, director Zhang Yimou was appointed for the same role, as Asian personalities in the Competition's jury generally increased in number.²⁹

With this shift towards a more conscious (and Asia-oriented) programming, the organisational structure of the festival changed as well, as in 2003 programming directors were appointed for the main sections: 'Competition,' 'Winds of Asia,' 'Special Screening' and, starting from the following year, 'Japanese Eyes.' The creation of a programme dedicated to the national film industry was an attempt to expand TIFF interests not only to films produced by Japanese studios, but to the independent scene as well.³⁰ By the end of the nineties, Japanese cinema was experiencing a 'new wave' of directors drawing attention in the European film festival circuit (Kitano Takeshi, Kawase Naomi, Kurosawa Kiyoshi etc.) and TIFF tried to build on that momentum to promote the local industry. Programmes focusing on national cinema are usually viewed with suspicion by film critics and are considered less 'prestigious' than their 'international' counterparts, as explained in the research of Czach regarding Canadian movies at the Toronto International Film Festival:

Films in a national spotlight program are often seen as conforming to a political or national agenda and thus as being judged not solely on the merits of quality. (Czach 2004, 84)

In fact, festivals like Venice and Cannes do not feature similar programmes (retrospectives are notable exceptions), even if their relationship with the local industry is expressed in other forms. However,

28 Further examples from this period include: *Tian di ying xiong* (Warriors of Heaven and Earth, 2003) by He Ping was the Opening Night Film in 2003. The following year, Wong Kar-wai's *2046* (2004) was the Opening Eve Film. Again, in 2006 *Wang-ui namja* (The King and the Clown, 2005) by Lee Joon-ik was the Opening Night Film.

29 Curiously enough, in 32 editions, Asian countries took the first prize only six times, while Japanese movies won twice. The last time this happened was in 2005, although the Asian presence increased in the last decade. In 2020 the three recurring competitions exceptionally converged in a competitive section called Tokyo Premiere 2020 and prizes were awarded by the audience.

30 In the past, TIFF had already tried to implement independent Japanese cinema as a sidebar programme in Japan Cinema Now, running from 1989 to 1993, and from 1999 to 2001. Other now-dismissed sections focusing on Japan cinema include Japan Film Week (1994), Nippon Cinema Masters (1999) and Nippon Cinema Classics (1995-98, 2000-08).

this quotation is especially true for 'First Cinema' countries, but national programmes take another role when programmed in non-Western countries, as has already been explained in the case of HKIFF and BIFF. Chances to select the latest film of a renowned Japanese director were scarce for TIFF, but once 'Japanese cinema' started to be recognized again, international interest in it grew, and programmers from film festivals around the world were eager to discover the next Japanese talent to introduce to (Western) audiences. Securing films from the Japanese independent scene - usually composed of young or emerging directors - represented for TIFF the opportunity to become the place to be in order to find such talents. At the same time, national programmes help the local industry as a guaranteed venue, even when it struggles on the international film festival network. Country-centred programmes can also set up trends or define aesthetics that can prove inspirational for fellow local directors.

3.4 TIFFCOM and its Joint Strategies

The programming of Asian and Japanese independent movies in the early 2000s also had another important cause, this time an economical one. The successful implementation of PPP at BIFF, along with the growing number of content markets as a strategy for 'peripheral' festivals to become relevant players in their niche, brought TIFF to set up its own market in 1999 as the Tokyo Film Creators' Forum, then evolving in its present form, TIFFCOM, in 2004. TIFFCOM is formally organised by METI and Unijapan, but it is naturally attached to the festival, as they take place at the same time (the 2019 edition was an exception due to the celebration of the new Emperor).³¹ TIFFCOM was then rearranged in 2015 as the Japan Contents Showcase to include TIFFCOM, the Tokyo International Music Market, and the Tokyo International Anime Festival, and it was launched as "the biggest multi-content market in Asia".³² TIFFCOM has changed as well, as it now includes the MPA / DHU / TIFFCOM Masterclass Seminar and Pitching Contest, and the newly created VIPO Japanese Movie & Animation Pitching (JMAP) and Tokyo Gap-Financing Market (TGFM), under the umbrella of the Tokyo Project and Pitching Forum.

As markets became essential to competing in the film festival network, TIFF launched its own co-production market in 2005: the Tokyo

³¹ However, they are usually set in different locations (three years in Ikebukuro, formerly in Odaiba), causing logistical troubles to industry people wishing to attend the market and the festival altogether. In 2020 TIFFCOM was finally set to be held in Roppongi, near the main venue of the festival, but the pandemic forced the organisation to move entirely online.

³² Japan Content Showcase - Homepage: <http://archive.jcs.tokyo/en/>.

Project Gathering (TPG, later renamed TIFFCOM Co-Pro Connection), whose aim was to provide co-production opportunities to projects (movies, TV, animation) at any stage of their development. Although it was open to international players, it proved to be especially valuable to Asian projects, with Japan accounting for the largest number. In fact, TIFFCOM intended to “capitalize on Japan’s achievements in animation and other content creation” (Niskanen 2010, 33). The central role of the Japanese film industry at TIFFCOM is something that has been recently stressed by TIFFCOM CEO Shiina Yasushi himself:

TIFFCOM’s mission is not only the buying and selling of completed films, but also to provide a platform for collaboration between the Japanese and international film and TV industries in the early stages of production. (Screen 2020, 14)

When TIFFCOM was created in the early 2000s, the Japanese cinema industry was in a deep crisis, as its share in the domestic market was under 30%, but the number of produced films continued to grow notwithstanding. To avoid the saturation of the internal market, the historically inward-looking Japanese cinema – further damaged by the economic bubble of the nineties – needed a way to tap the foreign market. As mentioned before, there was also another ongoing trend, that of ‘Cool Japan,’ which represented growing interest in Japanese visual contents (anime, *dorama*, movies, videogames etc.). Therefore, TIFFCOM proved to be a viable tool for embedding in a coherent and internally-controlled framework

the internationalization of exported Japanese contents overseas, and the globalization of the relatively isolated Japanese domestic film industry. (Saluveer 2014, 91)

As the number of Japanese productions looking for external support grew, TIFF started to promote cinema industries in the region using its programming to further establish exchanges of people and ideas among countries. A clear indication of the effort towards a more inclusive ‘Asian’ cinema through coordination between programming and market can be seen in the already mentioned Opening and Closing Film of the 2005 edition. Two films, both born from the collaboration between Japan and other Asian countries, were chosen: *Qian li zou dan ji*, featuring Japanese legend Takakura Ken in the leading role and *Yeokdosan*, the story of a famous Korean-born wrestler in Japan. Furthermore, in recent years TIFFCOM has tried to strengthen its ties to the Chinese film industry after the latter became the second-largest market in the world. The limitations due to the Chinese quota system made co-production the safest way in; therefore symposia, focus and special events were arranged at TIFFCOM in order

to promote it, as in the case of 'China Day' in the past two editions.³³ Joint activities between festivals are another way to strengthen ties between cinema industries, as in 2015 a 'Memorandum of Cooperation' was signed between TIFF and SIFF to promote films across Asia.

The hegemony of Japanese studios in production has diminished since the second half of the 20th century, but their role as distributors and exhibitors is still dominant. Furthermore, film production in Japan relies heavily on the production committee (*seisaku iinkai*) system that severely limits independent production possibilities to find funding and screening spaces, although mini-theatres have partially solved this problem. Therefore, independent films struggle to find their way to the internal market, and their reference audience naturally becomes the film festival network and, possibly, foreign markets. However, several structural problems in the Japanese system – such as the lack of foreign language speaking professionals – hinders their possibilities to find international connections. As TIFFCOM turned to support local cinema, it played an instrumental role in operating as a 'safe net' for independent Japanese productions, providing co-production opportunities and potential funding by international and Asian players. After all, it is UniJapan's mission to 'internationalise' the national cinema and its efforts can be inserted into the wider contexts of co-production markets. This process has important ramifications, as it is slowly transforming the national cinema into a transnational industry, where the nationality of a movie can no longer be determined by its country of production. It is therefore "increasingly challenging to identify the country of origin for a film" (Ma 2017b, 56), although Japanese bureaucracy does not seem willing to favour these practices yet (Saluveer 2014, 104).

4 TIFF's 'Asianness' and Asian 'Asianness'

From 2013 onwards, TIFF has further focused on Asian and Japanese cinema, a shift that began with the rebranding of two dedicated competitions, as Winds of Asia became Asian Future and Japanese Eyes was renamed Japanese Cinema Splash.³⁴ This renaming was not a mere formal change, as these competitions have since then be-

³³ China had the second-highest number of buyers (104) and exhibitors (89) at TIFFCOM 2019, trailing only Japan (JCS 2020, 4-6).

³⁴ Meanwhile, between 2008 and 2012, TIFF experienced its 'green period' focusing on environmental issues. For five straight editions TIFF's poster had an 'Action for Earth' slogan on it and it was mostly green-coloured. It also implemented a special green carpet made by recycled bottles in place of the usual red one, and created the Toyota Earth Grand Prix programme for films related to ecology. Furthermore, in 2011 TIFF launched the Arigato Project to support film screenings in the area hit by

come more focused on programming emerging or independent filmmakers, moving more popular Asian movies in the World Focus programme. The Japan Now section was then added in 2015, providing a non-competitive space for renowned local directors (which would hardly accept the idea of premiering their films in Competition), box office hits, fan favourite movies and retrospectives on contemporary auteurs. Thus, following the model perfected by Busan on the support of Asian and national independent cinema, it seems that TIFF is trying to avoid the risk of having “left the impression of a major government subsidy to the Hollywood industry and its domestic distributors” (Nornes 2014, 255) as in the past, in order to become “the international gateway of Japanese films”³⁵ instead.

However, TIFF did not give up on its glamorous side, as Hollywood premieres and foreign movie stars on the red carpet are still necessary for retaining the international allure of the festival. Nonetheless, the second shift brought a more balanced programming even in the most ‘popular’ sections, as the Opening and Closing Film of the festival are usually equally divided between foreign productions and Japanese movies. Starting in 2012 with Maeda Atsuko, TIFF also each year appoints a Japanese movie star as ‘TIFF Ambassador’ (terms like ‘Muse’ or ‘Supporter’ have also been used) in order to attract a younger audience and boost the festival’s prestige. Although Japanese stars and films do not retain the same international status as American ones, they are being employed by TIFF as symbols of the local industry, thus enforcing TIFF’s relationship with it. This also operates on a more subtle level, as this strategy ideally elevates Japanese cinema to the same level as Hollywood. The relevance of Japanese cinema to TIFF in the last few years is something that has also been ‘officially’ recognised by the special issue of *Screen International* published for the 33rd edition, where we read:³⁶

Recent editions of TIFF have seen the festival increase its focus on Japanese and other Asian cinema, rather than acting as a launchpad for Hollywood releases as it did in the past. (*Screen* 2020, 4)

As a result, it seems that TIFF moved into BIFF ‘territory’ regarding its vision of ‘Asianness,’ as a (non-) geographically limited region, equally encompassing ‘major’ and ‘minor’ cinema in order to

the Great East Japan Heartquake, and it screened *Japan in a Day* by Ridley Scott as a Special Opening Film the following year.

35 TIFF History: <http://history.tiff-jp.net/en/overviews?no=28>.

36 Festival-centred issues are usually concerted with the festival itself through partnership; therefore, although *Screen* is an independent magazine, the special issue can be considered a promotional material of sort.

propose a model different to the one dominated by Hollywood and European movies. This is more evident in the Crosscut Asia parallel programme, which is dedicated to the Southeast. This is probably the section where programming practices shape the most recognisable 'vision,' as it acknowledges industries that are usually invisible, arranging them in country-centred or theme-based programmes. It does not matter if it actually deals with cinema industries at different stages of evolution, or tied to one another by weak connections, as it is the role of programming to find aesthetic similarities and cultural links in order to line them up into a coherent selection. Thus, as national industries with supposed shared traditions and common concerns, TIFF contributes to altering the established canon and shaping an original vision of what 'Southeast' cinema is supposed to be.³⁷

However, unlike Busan, TIFF has to retain its A-category status and conform to a set of rules to be international in scope. Therefore, the recent shift towards Asian and Japanese cinema has to be paired with a careful balance between international aspirations and regional-local specialisation, between mainstream and independent, at the same time finding a way to remain unique among other Asia competitors. International Competition, World Focus and Special Screenings are the programmes through which TIFF has earned its 'international' status, and they could be found in similar form in all major film festivals, helping to establish their position in the film festival circuit. However, its programming and the film market pointing to Asian and local cinema are what really differentiates TIFF from other A-category festivals, even if the same model has been drawn from BIFF by several regional festivals and then adapted to local contingencies.

TIFF was often criticised in the past, even from within; renowned Japanese directors Kore-eda Hirokazu voiced what many thought about it when he said that the festival "has been distracted by a national or political agenda, rather than focusing solely on the films or international cinema" (*Screen* 2020, 8). TIFF replied in 2020 by further strengthening the above-mentioned shift, embracing Kore-eda's own idea to create Asia Lounge, a 'conversation series' aiming to provide a shared space of trans-Asian dialogue by pairing a Japanese cinema personality (director or actor) with an Asian one. The panels were held online as international guests were not able to fly to Japan, thus constraining the deeper value of the new section. However, it is something clearly pointing to a transnational aspiration, in order to create a cinematic community beyond national borders,

37 In six editions, Crosscut Asia dedicated country-based programmes to Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand and thematic explorations of the Southeast focused on supernatural traditions, music and new trends. In 2020, the programme was suspended, but a commemorative booklet was published, aiming to reflect on 'Asian' cinema.

even if TIFF still firmly places Japan at its centre. The idea of establishing an 'Asian network' to promote the emergence of 'Asian' cinema can also be observed in collaborations between festivals, as they could become the prototype for all non-European events. Alliances among project markets issuing specific prizes, or funding addressed to emerging regional talents, have been an effective strategy in this regard. More eye-catching collaborations are proving to be less effective on an industry level, but they are much needed to attract media attention to 'Asian' cinema. The more glamorous is probably the Asian Film Awards Academy, jointly created in 2013 by TIFF, HKIFF and BIFF in order "to highlight, publicize and connect the achievements of Asian cinema to the world".³⁸ Based on the AFA – originally organised by HKIFF in 2007 – the Academy has been modelled after the American one. It comprises former nominees and winners of the AFA and a Board of Director composed of directors of the three festivals chairs it. Since its establishment, it has expanded its activities, as the AFA gala night has been matched with yearlong events such as masterclasses and screenings.

In Gerow's opinion (2013, 197), cinema in Japan has never been evaluated in its creation of cultural capital, except when it interested foreigners as a matter of cultural diplomacy. As previously observed, film festivals started for this very reason, and even today, geopolitical dynamics play an important role in positioning an event within the film festival network. Thus, the matter of 'Japaneseness' must be addressed, as its relation to the foreign gaze, either international (European) or regional (Asian), is fundamental to understand how to place TIFF's vision within the local culture:

[Japanese cinema] was shaped through an often contradictory relationship with the national and the transnational, one frequently manifested in the approach towards [European] film festivals. At home, Japanese cinema's relation to film festivals reveals a double bind. It must be seen, organised and labelled by foreign spectators and festivals, in order to confirm both that it is cinema and that it is Japanese. But since the domestic gaze does not enter into this equation, screenings at home in festivals, schools or museums are rarely intended to interrogate Japanese film's cinematicity or its Japaneseness. Those are taken as a given, in part because the lack of interrogation itself has become the condition for Japaneseness [as] it ironically depends on the foreign gaze for its constitution. (Gerow 2013, 197)

38 Asian Film Awards Academy Website – Vision and Mission: <https://www.afa-academy.com/page?mid=16>.

TIFF's current balance between the international and the local has to be continuously renegotiated, along with its vision of 'Asianness' and 'Japaneseness.' The Japanese "lack of interrogation" has been a criticism directed at TIFF for a long time now (by Gerow included). Since then, however, the festival seemed to have more systematically confronted issues of 'Japaneseness,' mostly in relation to the international and the 'Asian.' As an A-category film festival, TIFF still requires validation by the "foreign gaze" (i.e. FIAPF), and so must be subjected to the (post-)colonialist dynamics inherent to the film festival network. At the same time, it is increasingly detaching from these dynamics, moving towards the 'Asian' through programming, film markets and collaborations with other regional players. However, the relationship between 'Asianness' and 'Japaneseness' is still problematic, as TIFF's Asian-oriented sections do not include any Japanese film, which already has two dedicated programmes. That is to say that visions of 'Asianness' and 'Japaneseness' do not belong to the same level and direct confrontation is avoided. The two dimensions are further drifting apart and the expression coined by Iwabuchi can be used in this context to clarify the relationship between Japan and Asia, as "'in but above' or 'similar but superior'" (2002, 199). Programming fails to link the local with the regional, as support to 'Asian' and Japanese cinema takes different routes that can converge only through the co-production market, but this platform is still struggling in its early phases in Japan, which is something that often goes beyond TIFF's control. Therefore, 'Asianness' cannot be used as a unifying element for the local, the regional and the international, as it is not comprehensibly integrated, although TIFF has evolved its strategies in the last decade. On the other end, balance on the internal front has been accomplished by promoting studio movies for their glamorous appeal (in order, among other things, to satisfy the producers that back up the festival), using their exposition on national media to support the local independent scene through programming and the film market. In this regard, TIFF is filling the gap Gerow addressed in the above quotation, and is trying to become a vector for Japanese film culture.

On a regional level, we can draw from Neves' notion of "archipelago" (2012) to address the cluster of major Asian film festivals analysed in this paper, here intended as a regional network developing along the margin of the European film festival circuit. The main feature of the archipelago is to be a site of continuity and rupture at the same time. Project markets, collaborations like the AFA Academy, and a joint effort in promoting 'Asianness' are the bridges (partially) connecting these islands in "inter-Asian exchanges [...] on which to build new social, economic, and political formations" (Neves 2012, 231). The attempt to realise a transnational "imagined (film) community" (Anderson 1983) shaped by Asian festivals has been prompted

by growing globalisation and festival professionalisation as a counter-strategy to European and North American hegemony in the festival network. In addition, content creation addressed to a supposedly homogeneous Asian (or East Asian) audience is a key factor for local industries in order to expand towards new markets in the region. Therefore, the notion of 'national cinema' has been increasingly de-emphasised in favour of a shared 'Asian' identity. With the dissemination of co-production markets it is ever more difficult to define a film's country of origin and its supposed 'national' inherent qualities (Czach 2004, 86). Nowadays a film by a Chinese director could potentially win a script competition at BIFF, then a co-production grant at TIFF and finalise its completion with a post-production award at HKIFF, as these festival's markets have specific sections reserved to Asian filmmakers. However, can the finished work be defined as a proper 'Asian' film?

In recent years, film festivals have increasingly expanded their role: from exhibitors to facilitators for industry people, finally becoming active players in (co-)production. These independent films are therefore produced for and by film festivals, thus self-providing sought-after premieres. If European film markets usually support projects from Third World or 'peripheral' cinema in order to discover new talents to promote - reiterating post-colonialist dynamics in a mutually beneficial relationship - the situation is different in the case of the 'Asian archipelago.' As a regional network, Asian film festivals belong to a self-referential system where an allegedly shared vision of 'Asianness' shapes movies that "tend to embody certain aesthetic characteristics which better facilitate border-crossing" (Falicov 2017, 87). Once these movies have travelled through the Asian festival network and reached local markets in the region, they can then try to extend their route to the European festival circuit in order to increase festival-producer and 'Asian' cinema prestige.

However, since the archipelago is also a site of rupture, we should take into account those dynamics observed above in relation to TIFF that are similar for all the other major players. Even if they "rely on and facilitate inter-Asian connections" (Tan 2019, 207), they still have to confront a constant tension between regional aspiration and national interests. Furthermore, each festival has to define its own unique identity in order to stand out amidst its competitors, in a delicate balance between homogenization and diversification. Therefore, while BIFF soon affirmed itself as the promoter of 'Pan-Asianism,' other players developed their vision of 'Asianness' along similar but independent lines. Busan can be credited for the creation of new co-production channels for Asian films, although its strong focus on the project market can potentially overshadow its programming (Nornes 2014, 250). SIFF, as an A-category film festival, struggles to retain its international status partly due to national regulations, but it is

meanwhile championing Chinese-language films mostly endorsing Mainland China, which is the strongest cinema market in the entire region. HKIFF had to reinvent itself after being the most influential player through the eighties. Starting as a pure 'audience festival' for cinephiles, it slowly turned into a more glamorous (AFA) and market-oriented (HAF) event, while envisioning a more open-minded vision of Pan-Chinese cinema than SIFF, operating "as cultural interface between mainland and its native film culture" (Saluveer 2014, 99). Finally, TIFF, as the only other A-category festival in the region, has progressively tried to define its identity by balancing the international allure of its Hollywood (and Japan's studios) premieres with an Asian-centred programming, strongly supported by the film market. At the same time, a common feature of the aforementioned festivals is the particular attention they show in various ways to the local cinema industry, in an attempt to establish themselves as promoters and active players in shaping the national cinema culture.

Therefore, even if major Asian film festivals have developed in the same direction, following BIFF's model, and joined forces through several initiatives during the last decade, the analysis in this paper has highlighted that a shared vision of 'Asianness' is hardly found among them, since

what is being translated in this process is not a monolithic or essentialist notion of 'Asia' for Western consumption, but rather a diversity of lived and mediated experiences within Asia for its many inhabitants. (Yeo 2017, 303)

The notion of 'Asia' - and East Asia in particular - as a homogeneous cultural space has been developed responding to particular interests, varying from festival to festival. National and economic constraints proved to be too powerful not to affect the problematic relationship between the local and the regional, thus obstructing the possibilities to create a more systematic trans-Asian model. However, if Iwabuchi (2014, 44) famously advocated for a "de-westernisation academic production of knowledge" through inter-Asian referencing, it could be argued that the network of major Asian film festivals is currently attempting a similar 'de-westernisation production of film culture' which could potentially result in their freedom from the 'foreign gaze.'

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