



FESTIVAL DE CANNES

Rolling out the red carpet for Korean films at Cannes

By Park Soo-mee, Ines Cho Staff Writers

As "Tale of Cinema," a new film by Hong Sang-soo, was hurriedly added to the official competition section at the last minute, the number of Korean films selected for presentation at this year's Cannes International Film Festival, which began Wednesday, set a record for the event.

A total of eight Korean films were chosen, including seven features and one short, directed by familiar names in the local film industry. But, except for Chung Chang-hwa's 1972 classic "Five Fingers of Death" and "Grain in Ear," a chronicle of Korean exiles living in China by Korean-Chinese director Zhang Lu, the Korean feature films at Cannes this year were a rather predictable selection.

"The Bow," a new film by Kim Ki-duk, will have its premiere at Cannes even before it is shown to the Korean press. Kim Jee-woon's "A Bittersweet Life," which styles itself as a modern film noir, is running as a non-competition selection, while "The President's Last Bang" by Lim Sang-su and "Crying Fist" by Ryu Seung-wan, both of which were box office hits here, were selected for special screenings in the festival's Critics' Week section. In addition, "Walk On a Little More," a short by Shim Min-young, was selected for Cine Foundation, a section judged by Taiwanese director Edward Yang that gathers the works of film students worldwide. The festival ends May 22.

As the numbers suggest, Cannes has been very keen on Korean films in the past few years.

Im Kwon-taek won the best director award with his "Chiwaseon" (Painted Fire) in 2002, and last year the festival awarded its Grand Prix to Park Chan-wook's action revenge thriller "Old Boy." Hong Sang-soo, whose new film was recommended for submission as an official selection this year by Cannes' art director Thierry Fremaux, has been invited to the festival two years in a row, as his "Woman is the Future of Man" was in competition last year. His films "The Power of Gangwon Province" and "Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors" were screened at Cannes in past years.

But as the Korean industry builds a reputation, various aspects such as quality, style, distribution or commercial viability can easily become debatable subjects among critics.

Jeremy Segay, a French national who is an Asian film expert and is working for the Directors' Fortnight project, said the definition and perception of what makes a Korean film "commercial" are different in Korea and France.

"In France, the two most successful Korean films at the box office are 'Chiwaseon' by Im Kwon-taek and 'Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring' by Kim Ki-duk, but they are not considered commercial in Korea. Films like 'My Sassy Girl,' 'Friends' and 'Silmdo' did not have theatrical releases [in France] but went straight to video. It was maybe a turning point that last year a film like 'Old Boy' was in competition. The film was undoubtedly a commercial success in Korea, but it was not really one in France."

Still, Korean film industry professionals are taking advantage of Korean films' reputation at Cannes to actively promote their business. Those who got to walk on the red carpet last year — the producers, distributors and buyers — might not do so again this year, but they have a different agenda: They are simply

'Korean directors are becoming better known in France.'

going after the Cannes market.

For major distributors like CJ Entertainment, the focus will be on the big releases, "Sympathy for Lady Angel," "Shadow of Sword" and "Wig." According to CJ's Catherine Park, Park Chan-wook's film "Sympathy for Lady Angel" was "presold" in France, meaning that buyers purchase a film after only reviewing the trailer or sample footage, rather than the entire film. Similarly, "Antarctic Journal" was presold in Japan.

"Korean films' becoming commercial is actually a good phenomenon," Ms. Park noted. "The international film market has so far been dominated by Hollywood. It's about time high-quality, entertaining films that have Asian characteristics do well worldwide. Besides, Asian viewers can better identify with Korean films."

Mr. Segay observed that French companies are competing more and more to buy Korean films. "Since Hollywood films are expensive, independent [studios] can try their luck with high-quality Asian films. Since Korea is leading the trend in Asia, Korean films are getting popular among French buyers. And the DVD market for Asian films is growing these days in France."

Taking advantage of the Cannes market also involves lavish parties that attract attention and forge connections. Kanggyu Films, another Korean distributor, is seeking out the Cannes market as well. On Wednesday, last year's blockbuster "Taegukgi" opened on 80 screens in France under the title "Freres de Sang" (Blood Brothers). After France, the film will open all over Europe, according to Mark Yoon, who is in charge of the film's international distribution. Movers and shakers have been invited to exclusive parties hosted by Kanggyu Films for "Taegukgi" and Studio Canal and CJ for "A Bittersweet Life."

By forming partnerships with French companies, the Koreans have learned better marketing techniques. Three Korean features selected in the official selections — Competition, Out of Competition and A Certain Regard — had French distributors or co-producers when they were selected. Hong Sang-soo worked with MK2 for "Tale of Cinema," Kim Ji-won with Studio Canal for "A Bittersweet Life" and Kim Ki-duk with TF1 for "The Bow."

"I assume it's because these directors have strong festival backgrounds from their previous films and because there are advantages in having a French partner to submit a film to the Cannes official selections," Mr. Segay said. "But the Korean films shown in the sidebar sections — 'Crying Fist' and 'The President's Last Bang' for Directors' Fortnight and 'Grain in Ear' for Critics Week — didn't have French distributors at the time the selection was announced."

Mr. Segay said the important point is that the Cannes festival wants to be open to the new currents in cinema. "The festival tries to reflect the current force, vitality and new direction of Korean cinema. This is a very positive point for Korean films in particular."

"The golden age of Hong Kong cinema, from the late 1980s to early 1990s, was totally ignored by Cannes, and a major director like Tsui Hark never had any of his films presented at the festival," he added.

Among industry professionals, however, some voice critical views about the objective programming of Asian films at Cannes.

Derek Elley, a senior film editor of Variety, recently wrote in a local weekly that some festival programmers seem to "have no coherent view of world cinema," at least in their East Asian selections.

"On a more serious level, it's becoming difficult to know exactly what Cannes' programming philosophy is — and if it even has one nowadays," Mr. Elley wrote.

But why is that the case? Does South Korea have "an automatic pass-key to Cannes' inner sanctum," as Mr. Elley sarcastically put it, or is it because Korean films suit the taste of a few European film professionals in power who don't know very much about the history of Korean cinema?

Darcy Paquet, who writes for Screen International, partially shares Mr. Elley's view.

"I think most people would agree that, as a European festival, Cannes understands contemporary European film much better than it does Asian film," Mr. Paquet said. "I don't think the standards are different, but because they have less knowledge about contemporary Asian cinema, they tend to pick only the most famous names for the competition section."

"Some people also suggest that, for less famous films from Asia or other parts of the world, it is much easier to get selected if a film has some sort of French connection. If a big French company lobbies the Cannes festival in favor of a certain film, then it seems to have a better chance of being selected."

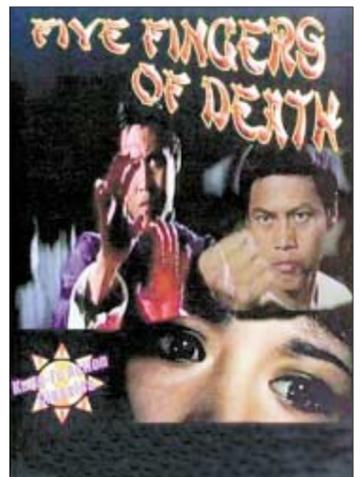
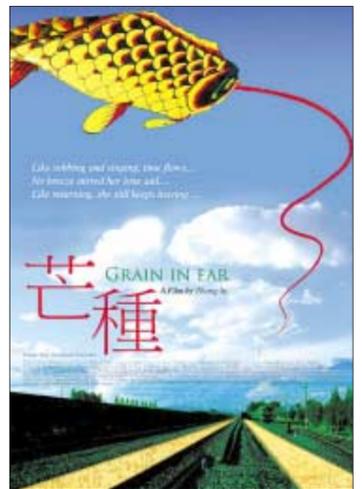
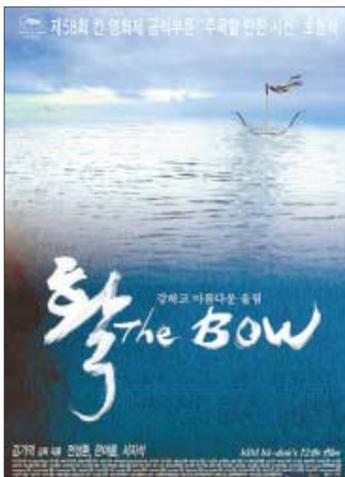
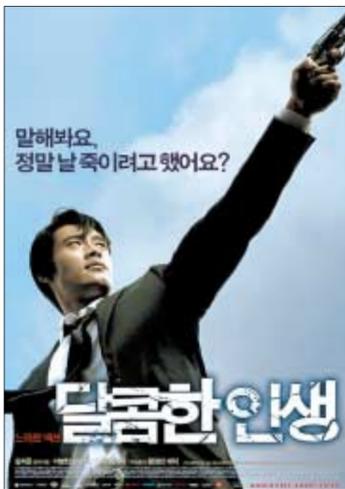
In an interview with the IHT-JoongAng Daily last year, Tony Rayns, a British film critic and a programmer of the Asian section for the Vancouver International Film Festival, also said some programmers of major festivals don't always make the quality of a film the top priority.

"When Alberto Barbera invited Kim Ki-duk's 'The Isle' to Venice, for example, I don't believe that he did so from a position of broad knowledge of Korean cinema or with the interests of Korean cinema at heart," Mr. Rayns said. "I think he cynically selected the film specifically to engender controversy, to draw attention to himself and the festival."

Despite the continuing frenzy over Korean films, experts note that the festival is more careful when it comes to choosing films directly related to market distribution. For Cannes' official selection, which is considered to be the festival's most critical section to gain worldwide distributors, only one out of six Korean feature films had been chosen to represent Korea, after Kim Ki-duk's "The Bow" was turned down from the official competition.

"This reflects the fact that Korean directors are becoming better known in France," Mr. Paquet said. "Of course, the festival was very conservative in deciding which Korean film to put in the main competition, but I think that Hong Sang-soo is a very talented director, and he deserves to be there."

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From top, "Grain in Ear," by Korean-Chinese director Zhang Lu, "Tale of Cinema" by Hong Sang-soo, an official selection, and "Five Fingers of Death" by Chung Chang-hwa.

From top, The film noir "A Bittersweet Life" by Kim Ji-woon, "The President's Last Bang" by Lim Sang-su, and "The Bow," a new film by Kim Ki-duk that will have its premiere at Cannes.