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Asian Cinema, Swimming in Crime and Cuteness

By DAVE KEHR

HORROR is over, gangsters are losing ground, and the coming thing is camp comedy dressed up in electric pink.

At least those are a few conclusions that can be drawn from sampling this year's edition of the New York Asian Film Festival, which begins Friday at the IFC Center in the West Village. (On July 5 the festival moves to Japan Society, where it will present several titles as part of the society's "Japan Cuts: Festival of New Japanese Films.")

Now in its sixth year, the scruffy, fan-fueled Asian Film Festival continues to serve as a reliable road map of the new directions in Asian popular cinema. Let the uptown art houses take the latest, made-for-export costume epics, like "Curse of the Golden Flower" or "House of Flying Daggers." The Asian Film Festival, which seems to run largely on the energy of its chief programmer, the film journalist Grady Hendrix (with sponsorships this year from the video label Dragon Dynasty and Midway Games, among others), has little use for such elevated fare. The house specialty is the disreputable genre film, made for the Asian domestic market with a fast buck in mind.

Asian genre films of course have been building a steady following in the West ever since the Hong Kong cinema broke out of Chinatown theaters during the 1980s and introduced filmmakers like John Woo and Tsui Hark. In the years since, Hong Kong has faded as the primary supplier of popular entertainment in East Asia, done in by financial woes and the suspicions of Beijing, while South Korea has emerged as the epicenter of Asian pop culture, both in film and in music.

South Korea remains the primary creative force this year, although the genre that led its renaissance — the brooding, violent crime film — seems to be in serious decline. Even at last year's festival the genre seemed to be achieving a classical fullness with Kim Jee-woon's stylish and philosophical "Bittersweet Life," starring the matinee idol Lee Byung-hun as a soulful enforcer right out of Jean-Pierre Melville. But this year's crop betrays dissatisfaction with idealized gangster heroes and a distrust of the form's romantic roots.

"Cruel Winter Blues," a 2006 film by the newcomer Lee Jeong-beom, picks up a plotline that was used to different effect in Takeshi Kitano's 1993 Japanese film "Sonatine." Sol Kyung-gu, the star of one of the founding films of Korean crime cinema, Kang Woo-suk's 2002 "Public Enemy," returns, older but wiser, as a respected elder hoodlum who thinks of nothing more than murdering the man who killed his boyhood friend; he takes a younger mob recruit with him (Jo Han-seon) and sets out for the small southern town where his enemy's mother lives, the plan being to integrate himself into the commu-



Lotte Entertainment

"Dasepo Naughty Girls," starring Lee Kyun, center, a South Korean film at the New York Asian Film Festival, seemingly takes the Japanese penchant for industrialized cuteness and raises it a few notches.

nity and strike when his nemesis pays a visit. But these two refugees from Seoul are soon lulled by the rhythms of village life, to the point where they seem to have forgotten their reasons for being there. As in all self-respecting noirs, the past will not stay past, and they must eventually face up to the task at hand, leading to a finish that is more poignant than cathartic.

Song Kang-ho, the sad-sack comedian who saved Seoul from a mutant sea creature in "The Host," brings his comic diffidence to the gangster spoof "The Show Must Go On," directed by Han Jae-rim. In a story influenced by "The Sopranos" and "Analyze This," Mr. Song plays a "wholesale produce distributor" whose real interests run to include nightclubs and strip bars. His business isn't going so well, and neither is his marriage; his wife is threatening to leave him and to take their daughter along.

For a spell, the picture coasts along on the familiar, formula gag of juxtaposing humdrum reality with the powers and privileges of a gangster's life, as in a nicely underplayed scene that

THE NEW YORK ASIAN FILM FESTIVAL

IFC CENTER AND THE JAPAN SOCIETY

The festival runs from June 22 until July 5 at IFC, 323 Avenue of the Americas, (212) 924-7771, ifccenter.com, \$11; and from July 5 until July 8 at Japan Society, 333 East 47th Street, Manhattan, (212) 715-1258, japansociety.org, \$10. Schedule: subwaycinema.com.

finds Mr. Song's character summoned for a parent-teacher conference. Told his daughter isn't doing well, he stuffs a wad of bills in the teacher's hand and tells him to "look out for her." But the violence increases and the tone darkens, until there is very little comedy left in the lonely, desperate character Mr. Song has become.

If Korean gangsters are softening up, their Hong Kong counterparts are turning into feral killers, red in tooth and claw. One of the few Category 3 (adults only) films to be released in Hong Kong since its return to mainland control, "Dog Bite Dog" is a viciously Darwinian drama about a boy raised to be a street fighter in Cambodia who is smuggled into Hong Kong Harbor to carry out an assassination. The violence is not of the stylized, exhilarating variety pioneered by John Woo (whose 1992 "Hard Boiled" will have a special screening at the festival), but of the sticky, sweaty, close-up gore of the new breed of American horror films.

Asian films have mostly been free of the curse of self-consciousness that has now turned

practically every American movie into a winking takeoff on itself (like the "Pirates of the Caribbean" pictures). But while Hong Kong has not yet succumbed to a camp sensibility (Johnnie To's "Exiled," which will receive one showing in the festival but is set to open theatrically in New York on Aug. 24, is absolutely straight, sincere, classically constructed and one of the best Asian films in years), South Korea and, with even greater enthusiasm, Japan, have thrown themselves into the postmodern cauldron of self-parody and scrambled styles.

Perhaps as a reaction to half a century of Japanese industrialized cuteness — the "Hello Kitty" empire is only the tip of a pink rhinestone iceberg — films like the Korean "Dasepo Naughty Girls" and the Japanese "Memories of Matsuko" turn sentimental sweetness back on itself, using digital technology to create coloring-book worlds filled with Disneyesque animated birds, Day-Glo environments that seem less real than a dollhouse and characters so saccharine that they make the French "Amélie" (clearly an inspiration for "Matsuko") look like a Kubrick film.

Japanese horror, on its last legs since Hollywood raided its talent, receives a sardonic send-off in Sion Sono's "Exte," a curdled spoof that puts the genre's curious obsession with long, limp black hair to its ultimate use: Death takes the form of evil hair extensions, infiltrating human bodies through open orifices and multiplying therein. Who else can confront this scourge but a plucky young hairdresser, played by "Kill Bill Vol. 1's" Chiaki Kuriyama?

A self-conscious cuteness is also at the base of Park Chanwook's "I'm a Cyborg but That's O.K.," this Korean director's first film since "Lady Vengeance." Mr. Park has put his revenge trilogy behind him ("Oldboy," "Lady Vengeance," "Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance"), and is starting on a new path with this wildly experimental, unclassifiable film.

Executed with Mr. Park's usual attention to the tiniest details of visual style, it is a sort of "David and Lisa" story in which a suicidal young woman (Lim Su-jeong) whose ability to communicate with the vending machines she believes to be her fellow beings leads her to a mental institution. There she meets and, after much effort, opens herself up to a no-less-disturbed young man, a skinny kleptomaniac (the hugely successful pop singer Rain).

The actors are attractive, the rainbow colors abound, the other inmates reveal their lovable eccentricities, a magnificent score by Mr. Park's regular composer, Jo Yeong-wook, swells in surround sound, and yet the film is no endearing fable of nonconformism like "King of Hearts" or "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," but something ambivalent and disquieting. Happiness, Mr. Park suggests, is only another way of filtering out reality — insanity with a smile — but no less essential for that.