

Southeast Asia: A Reinvented Cinema

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In 1987 when the Singapore International Film Festival made its debut, only a handful of Asian festivals were in existence, notably Hong Kong.

As the only Southeast Asian film festival then, the Singapore Int'l Film Festival decided that it had to provide a platform for the region again. Hence, numerous retrospectives of regional legends were organized — Cherd Songsri, Prince Chattri Chalerm Yukol and Ratana Pestonji were some of the legendary Thai directors celebrated. Even newcomer Apitchatpong Weerasethakul had his first international retrospective in 2001 before he was picked up in Cannes.

Lino Brocka was on the Singapore Int'l film festival's first competition jury in 1991 and later on, retrospectives were held for other Filipino legends including Ishmael Bernal, Mario O'Hara and Roxlee. Other regional heroes celebrated were P Ramlee (Singapore and Malaysia), Arifin C Noer, Sjumandjaya and Gotot Prakosa (Indonesia) as well as regional surveys on Vietnam and Myanmar.

The motivation then was that the region could not be written off. Following the renewed interest in Southeast Asian film, young directors started sending their films to the Singapore Int'l Film Festival. They knew there was a place for them. Eric Khoo, for

example, had his first retrospective in 1990, long before he made *Mee Pok Man*, his first feature in 1995.

But the watershed was really the Asian digital revolution. By the late 90s, there was a full-blown digital new wave. Riri Riza, Nan Achnas, Mira Lesmana and Rizal Mantovani co-directed *Kuldesak*, the feature anthology that signposted the Indonesian new wave in 1999. Malaysia was close behind with Amir Muhammad's *Lips to Lips* in 2000 that opened the door for his other new wave colleagues — James Lee and Ho Yuhang.

Today, it is fair to say that the region has totally re-invented itself. For example, independent cinema now accounts for about 50 per cent of the Philippines annual film output. The Philippines now leads South-east Asia as its most dynamic film industry. Indonesia is close behind. Both countries have a deep multicultural history that has served them as a fount of new stories.

In the new world of virtual connectivity, Southeast Asians have fallen back on an old idea. It is that we were always connected already in history through our oceans and migration. The SEA (Southeast Asian) Screen Academy set up by Riri Riza last year, actively reveals our common cinema heritage through screenings and workshops mentored by fellow Southeast Asian directors. Our voyage together continues.