

# Eastern Promises

Film festivals – and audiences – in Europe are shifting their focus towards East Asian productions, writes  
MATHEW SCOTT from the Far East Film Festival in Italy

DIAO YINAN CUTS right to the chase when asked to describe what impact international festivals have played in terms of both promoting and encouraging his work.

Look no further than the case of *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, says the Chinese director. That film picked up the Golden Bear for best picture

at February's prestigious Berlin International Film Festival, as well as the Silver Bear for best actor for its lead, Liao Fan.

While the 44-year-old Diao had seen his two previous dramas, *Uniform* (2003) and *Night Train* (2007), both tour various international festivals, they were only afforded limited theatrical release across China and – for all intents and purposes – quickly vanished from view.

So it's easy to see why Diao lets a wry smile creep across his face as he starts to explain how *Black Coal* has faced a far different fate.

On the back of that success in Berlin, Diao says, the film's distributors decided to haul forward its release date to make full use of all the publicity it had received. And

*BLACK COAL, THIN ICE*



they also conjured up a deal hitherto unheard of in China for what is essentially an art-house production – *Black Coal* hit 2,000 screens simultaneously when released across the mainland in March. The result has been that *Black Coal* has become the first non-mainstream Chinese film to earn more than 100 million yuan from a domestic box office previously dominated by

glitzy, big-budgeted epics and soft-focus rom-coms. And *Black Coal* is as far from both as a film can get, following the story of a down-and-out ex-cop as he's dragged into the case of a series of unsolved murders in an unnamed and grimly snow-bound northern Chinese city.

"It all comes back to the festival in Berlin," says Diao. "The awards were extremely important for this movie. Most of the audience in China hadn't appreciated my earlier films, but since it won the Golden Bear, they've all wanted to watch this

movie. The cinema scene in China is expanding and I hope that the audience's interests are expanding too. I think the success of this film reflects that fact and the attention it received after Berlin made people take notice."

The first half of the year is traditionally the time when the world is given an insight into the many and varied contemporary

## CULTURE FILM



moods of Asian cinema, thanks to major festivals such as Berlin (February) and Cannes (May), as well as an ever-increasing number of smaller festivals that are either dedicated entirely to films from our region or make sure they are well represented across their various programmes.

Diao this year also took *Black Coal* to the Far East Film Festival (FEFF, April-May) in the northern Italian city of Udine, a smaller-scale festival which over the past 16 years has given European audiences their first taste of the productions – and the trends – that are charting the course of commercial cinema out in this neck of the woods.

That *Black Coal* found itself

on a programme alongside such distinctly commercial fare as the pure and distinctly Hong Kong brand of slapstick found in Sandra Ng's *Golden Chickensss* and Thailand's youth-oriented horror-comedy *Pee Mak*, from director Banjong Pisanthanaku, shows how varied is the commercial fare now on offer from the region, says the Udine festival's president, Sabrina Baracetti.

"We like to think our festival is like a bridge between the two markets of Asia and Europe and between the two audiences," she says. "By introducing these films to Europe, and sometimes to the world, we hope that people can find common ground, and that can open up communication too. We hope that Asian film-makers see us as the first step they take onto the global stage."

To that end, FEFF has over the years given European audiences their first tastes of the likes

of Hong Kong veteran Johnnie To (*Election*), as well as Japan's Tetsuya Nakashima (*Confessions*) and Korea's Bong Joon-ho (*The Host*). This year the festival screened 60 films, including the surrealist Japanese comedy *Fuku-chan of FukuFuku Flats*, which was co-produced by an FEFF commercial offshoot, Tucker Film.

Interest in Asia has never been stronger, in terms of both cinema and global community, says FEFF coordinator Thomas Bertacche. And the imminent onset of the European video-on-demand market and its need for content means there'll be even more opportunities for Asian film-makers – and their product.

"Co-productions between the two regions are increasing, and we're able to use the contacts we've made over the years to become involved in the film-making process," says Bertacche. "The whole world is interested in Asia and wants to get involved with what's happening in the region."

Ran Huang would certainly agree. The multimedia artist became the first Chinese filmmaker since 1965 to have a film short-listed for the Palme d'Or award for short films at



TOP: *GOLDEN CHICKENSSS*  
ABOVE: *THE ADMINISTRATION OF GLORY*

last month's Cannes International Film Festival, which picked up his *The Administration of Glory*.

The short has been described as a film that "brings together five parallel narratives covering themes of deception, theft and violations both sacred and mundane" – and the 31-year-old says the festival's decision to include his work reflects a widening international interest in all forms of art from this region.

"I've really felt the full support and encouragement of the Chinese community and feel the interest of the global community in what is an interesting shift in China's creative realm," says Ran, whose work is represented by Long March Space in Beijing and by the Simon Lee Gallery in both London and Hong Kong.

And, like Diao and so many other Asian artists, Ran is hoping the attention he's been receiving will help further fuel his career.

"The Chinese film industry is booming and many more people are engaged with film now," says Ran. "In the contemporary arts community, there are a number of artists focusing on film and people seem very keen to engage. Looking at the landscape for cinema in China and my work in particular, there's probably a slight distinction to make, as for the moment it's a slightly different audience for contemporary art in film and mass-media cinema. I do feel there's an audience for my work, across the spectrum; there's always an interest in individuality and creativity, whether you're in the art world or the film industry. I look forward to pushing forward creatively and reaching new audiences in China, Hong Kong and abroad with challenging new platforms such as the Cannes Film Festival." 

## FESTIVAL FAVOURITES

*Three Asian films that shone at the Far East Film Festival this year*



**ABERDEEN (2014).**  
 Hong Kong, Pang Ho-cheung (director)

A contemporary family drama reflects on modern Hong Kong. Visually stunning, with director Pang Ho-cheung revealing a newfound maturity in his ability to convince a star-studded cast (Miriam Yeung and Eric Tsang among them) to keep to their characters within the framework of the narrative.



**BLACK COAL, THIN ICE (2014)**

China, Diao Yinan (director)  
 Gritty, noirish realism hinged by Liao Fan's measured and mesmerising central performance as a cop whose life goes wrong. He's offered a chance at a redemption, of sorts, when the case that cruelled his career pops up again and he's drawn into the murky underbelly of life in a grim northern Chinese city.



**THE FACE READER (2013)**  
 Korea, Han Jae-rim (director)

Fiction weaved into history with the grand master of Korean cinema Song Kang-ho (*The Attorney*, *The Host*) playing a man whose ability to read people's faces sees him co-opted into the various intrigues of the 15th-century Korean court. Stylish period drama infused with light comedic touches, and yet another star turn from Song.