The establishment of film festivals in Asia as a form of cultural practice and recognition of cinema as an artistic medium was a process that began in the mid-1970s. Hong Kong provided a model that set the process in motion. The British colony (as it was then) was known as a manufacturing centre with a popular film industry, but its film culture was at best rudimentary, being spawned by local film buffs who could only watch limited selections of art films through organised film societies. By the late 1970s, Hong Kong was on its way to becoming a newly-industrialised economy. As its citizens became more educated and more affluent, calls were sounded to install a film festival devoted not to the commercial interests of the industry but to cinema as film culture and art. Such a type of film festival virtually did not exist in Asia – until the installation of the Hong Kong International Film Festival.1

The first edition of HKIFF, which took place in 1977, was devised as a festival organised by cinephiles for cinephiles. The festival was purely a showcase of films from all over the world, and there was no competition category. It soon gained a reputation over the years as a platform for Asian films.
The Hong Kong New Wave had gotten under way in 1979, and Asian films with hardly any international exposure at the time (films of the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, South Korea, Sri Lanka and so on) found a natural home at HKIFF. In fact, HKIFF became the most prestigious film festival in Asia in the 1980s for its comprehensive selections of the best of Asian cinemas. Hong Kong became known as the best festival for foreign critics to watch new Asian films and make discoveries which could then be introduced to the whole world. One of its most memorable moments occurred in 1985 when it premiered *The Yellow Earth* and presented the Fifth Generation filmmakers Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou to audiences outside of China for the first time. Of equal importance to the esteem of HKIFF was the retrospective programmes of classic Hong Kong cinema, a permanent feature of the festival for some twenty-odd years until it was superceded by the Hong Kong Film Archive’s own programming imperatives in 2001 (HKFA having been established the previous year). HKIFF also ran retrospectives of Asian masters: Ozu, Gosho, Oshima, Naruse, Teguh Karya, Gerardo De Leon, Fei Mu, Zhu Shilin, Ritwik Ghatak, and Lester James Peries.

In the first ten or fifteen years of HKIFF, its importance as a seminal event in the film-cultural milieu of Hong Kong cannot be denied. It was a forum for Hong Kong and other Asian filmmakers to introduce their works to the watching world. In this regard, never was Hong Kong’s role as a crossroads between East and West more pronounced than at HKIFF. The festival promoted the Hong Kong New Wave, the Fifth Generation, the Sixth Generation and the New Taiwan Cinema to the West, and it introduced the best of European cinemas to the East. The role of the festival was also to fasten the bonds between the Chinese filmmakers from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China and between them and an appreciative audience in Hong Kong – an important process in the growth of an ‘alternative’ artistic and more innovative strand of filmmaking in a community traditionally attuned to making money or making ends meet. It fostered a film culture where a local audience who could appreciate films was a morale booster for filmmakers who are otherwise constantly pressured into making commercial entertainments. HKIFF also provided the impetus for the rise of a more institutionalised film criticism through its publication of catalogues which are in fact more like critical journals, in particular, the bilingual catalogues devoted to the Hong
Kong Retrospective containing scholarly essays and valuable biographical and filmographical data. The retrospective paved the way for the establishment of a film archive committed to preserving and restoring old films of the Hong Kong cinema which normally ended up in trash bins.

On a personal level, HKIFF has meant a lot to my career as a critic and now as an academic, having been involved in the festival for over ten years from the mid-1980s onwards. I worked for HKIFF as the English editor and occasional translator of the Hong Kong retrospective catalogues. These retrospectives reintroduced to my memory the Cantonese and Mandarin films which I had watched in my childhood and teenage years as I grew up in the 1960s in a small town in Sarawak, Malaysia, where I was born. Watching these old films year after year for a period of about ten years was a reformative process. The retrospective programmes instilled in me a sense of self-awareness about my past and about my love for the cinema, prompting me towards a greater critical reassessment of films that were supposedly disposable as you watched them over the years but which were, in the Freudian sense of the term, screen memories forever embedded in my unconsciousness that could be reawakened at any time of one’s adult life and reinvigorate the ego.

In real life, the effect of these screen memories was to reorient my cinematic direction and worldview. I became fixated on re-evaluating the relevance and significance of old Cantonese films, which were commonly termed by the Hong Kong public tsaan pin – meaning damaged or deficient films. Along with the notions of historical, sociological and anthropological value in reassessing the old Hong Kong cinema, I began to reappraise them in terms of their cinematic value. This was the theoretical gist of the change in my critical direction, which came as a sort of epiphany in that I realised I had wiped out a part of my memory (the old Hong Kong cinema) in my development as a critic. Just as HKIFF found an identity through its focus on Asian cinemas, I too found an identity through the images of the new generations of directors in Hong Kong, China, Taiwan and other East Asian and Southeast Asian countries. Names like King Hu, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Ann Hui, Tsui Hark, Johnnie To, Wong Kar-wai, Tsai Ming-liang, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Jia Zhangke, Kim Ki-duk, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and many others, have imprinted themselves into my mind.
and have certainly fostered and sustained my identity as an Asian critic and writer. Hence, the festival was a source of personal growth as well as an indispensable venue for the enjoyment of films from all over the world, but particularly from Asia. For me, it was a base of handy research into the Hong Kong cinema (both the old Hong Kong cinema and the cinemas of the New Wave and Second Wave), which prepared the groundwork for the writing of my first book, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*, published by the British Film Institute in 1997.

HKIFF was also an inspiration for other film festivals in Asia, primarily the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) and South Korea’s Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF), setting the standards for these festivals to adopt and build upon. Both Singapore and South Korea share with Hong Kong similar developmental histories from manufacturing into newly-industrialised status. Both countries have strong film cultures, with South Korea possessing a film industry that became highly competitive from the mid-1990s onwards. Singapore, with no film industry to speak of for most of the 1970s and 1980s, began to develop its own industry in the 1990s. SIFF (its first edition in 1987) and PIFF, established in 1996, both imitated the ‘Asian showcase’ model of HKIFF as well as the principle of promoting one’s own domestic films and independent filmmakers. SIFF, when it came along, was a timely forum for a group of young filmmakers who made short films and later went on to make features, bringing international recognition to Singapore and driving the impulses in governing circles to support the creation of a local film industry. Similarly, PIFF has been a constructive platform for South Korean directors of all shades to exhibit their wares. At the same time, both festivals have primed their objectives toward promoting Asian cinemas, with PIFF being the most ambitious of the three festivals. All three share not only the same objectives but also largely the same programming structures; all look fairly alike such that they may be triplets born of the same love of film, which is not to imply that there is any strong brotherly love between the three.

In point of fact, all three festivals are rivals to a certain extent. SIFF and PIFF have tried to displace Hong Kong as the most attractive, most prestigious venue for Asian cinemas. PIFF, with its institutional and governmental support, is by far the most successful in this endeavour. SIFF, with its shrink-
ing audience base and cutbacks in government funding, has floundered after successful runs in the 1990s as the Southeast Asian hub of Asian films, but has continued to emphasise its focus on Southeast Asian films. Meanwhile, the original model, HKIFF, has unfortunately become a model of another kind in the era following Hong Kong’s handover to China in 1997 – the sort of model where film festivals try bravely to maintain their reputations against fierce competition from other film festivals in the region and from shifting trends and habits in cinema viewing and film culture which are cutting into the effectiveness of film festivals and their reason for being.

In the immediate post-1997 era, HKIFF had sought to break away from the government and become an independent-run festival. Independence was a catch-cry in the countdown period to the 1997 handover. The Chinese government had come up with a policy in the early 1990s to pressurise film festivals around the world to cancel controversial films banned on the mainland, failing which they would withdraw officially-approved films selected
for the festival. The crunch point came in 1994 when China’s Film Industry Administration (FIA) protested HKIFF’s selection of banned films, including Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *The Blue Kite* and Zhang Yuan’s *Beijing Bastards*, by withdrawing nine films from the festival, sparking off a robust debate in the Hong Kong press over the Mainland’s censorship policy and its tactic of withdrawing films. The resulting standoff between programming staff who naturally insisted on the right of programming independence and Chinese film officials who insisted on their right to censor became something of a deadly exercise over the remaining years of the 1990s. The Hong Kong Government found itself embarrassingly caught in the middle. Thus, when the momentum for HKIFF to become independent became stronger in the post-1997 years, the Government, always keen to placate China, was more than willing to let go of the film festival.

Since 2004, HKIFF has been fully ‘privatised’, as the jargon at the time put it. It exists now as a ‘non-profit, non-government organisation’, running year-round programmes on top of the film festival proper held annually over the Easter holiday period. One major change to the festival is that it now stages several competition events as a tactic to stay competitive with Pusan. To some critics, this has changed the nature of HKIFF in that it is no longer a purely cinephilic festival but one where competitions have become a routine part of its organisation. The competition events, entailing cash prizes and the need to invite international jurors, have raised the financial burden on the festival. As a non-profit society, HKIFF must depend on commercial sponsors to shore up its operating budget, supplemented by aid from government-funded agencies such as the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. The post-1997 years have, however, not been good financially for Hong Kong with the territory falling into a state of recession due to the slump in property prices which occurred well before the handover. But almost from the start of the handover, Hong Kong had experienced a run of crises, from the Asian financial meltdown (which precipitated a crash in the Hong Kong stock market in October 1997) to the outbreak of bird flu to the outbreak of SARS – all of which produced economic consequences (a fall in tourism, contracting retail sales, deteriorating trade and unemployment) which have contributed to the overall sense of doom in Hong Kong (famously portrayed in the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy) from which it is only now slowly recovering.
In addition, the Hong Kong film industry itself has gone further into the doldrums since 1997, a decline exacerbated by the increasing dominance of Hollywood blockbusters at the local box-office and the rise of other Asian competitors, notably the South Korean film industry, which have encroached on Hong Kong’s traditional markets in Southeast Asia. In fact, an unprecedented ‘Korean wave’ of films, TV drama, culinary culture, fashion and pop music, has swept through East Asia. Over this period, the Pusan International Film Festival has grown in status by becoming Asia’s premier film festival. For most international critics, PIFF has replaced Hong Kong as the ‘best place to watch Asian films’, not to mention new Korean films. HKIFF’s status has suffered in comparison, and one could ask whether it can recover its former glory if it was a question of going back to the past. The point here may be that it does not matter terribly that HKIFF is no longer the premier Asian festival or the ‘best place to watch Asian films’. It is perhaps sufficient that HKIFF maintain itself and satisfy the first requirement of any festival – to bring and provide the best works of international film culture to its local citizens?

Like the Singapore International Film Festival, HKIFF is suffering from a lack of institutional and governmental support. A major institutional sponsor, the airline Cathay-Pacific, dropped out of supporting the festival in 2004. But unlike SIFF, HKIFF appears to be doing a better job in staging glitzy events which have the effect of concealing any sense of crisis or financial hardship from the public. It also managed not to cut back on its programmes, such that the 31st edition in 2007, held from 20 March to 11 April is the longest run in HKIFF history, and indeed, the longest run of any festival anywhere. As if that wasn’t enough, it also began a month-long ‘Summer IFF’ from July to August. All this suggests that HKIFF is putting on a brave, confident face to demonstrate that the festival continues to have strong support from the public and from international critics, though this image has been dented somewhat with the revelation of the director Peter Tsi’s resignation in September 2008 and the report that his departure had followed ‘a period of mounting tension’ within the organisation, because Tsi ‘had long been outspoken on the need for more financial and promotional support for the festival from government sources’.4

The Hong Kong Government, keen to support the film industry if not so much the film festival, has continued to show at least spiritual support for
HKIFF by staging its Hong Kong International Film and Television Market (Filmart), organised by the government’s Trade and Development Council, around the festival period. In addition to Filmart, there are co-presentations of the Hong Kong-Asia Film Financing Forum (HAF) and the Hong Kong Film Awards (the ‘Hong Kong Oscars’) presentation ceremony. The pomp and glitter of all these events no doubt camouflage any sense of crisis or desperation. In contrast with HKIFF, SIFF’s 20th-anniversary edition in 2007 was a much-reduced festival, a sad shadow of itself in its halcyon days in the mid-1990s when the Singapore Government was fully committed not only to supporting art and culture but a burgeoning film industry. Perhaps SIFF could draw a lesson from HKIFF, which is that in order to maintain a façade of normalcy amidst uncertain times, it needs to stage its own array of glittering events, all sponsored and government-funded (suggestions of a Southeast Asia Film Fund and a Southeast Asia film market, for example, have been mooted). In this way, it might surmount its current crisis and go on to better things. This is of course easier said than done, and it may well be that the time for SIFF to stage pomp and glitter has passed and it needs now to concentrate on the substance of its programmes and revivify itself this way.

Yet while both SIFF and HKIFF may be caught in a funding pitfall, they need at the same time to justify themselves in times of shifting paradigms in the watching and the experiencing of films. Younger generations of audiences are growing up with instant programmes available through different media and sources (YouTube, downloadable films, DVDs, and so forth). The medium and apparatus of film are undergoing a digital metamorphosis. The downside of this is the tendency for shorter attention spans and the lack of contexts, with little or no perspectives of history. Alongside these seismic shifts, there are internal questions over festival management and direction that need to be addressed for both SIFF and HKIFF, with lessons perhaps to be heeded by PIFF and other newcomer Asian festivals, such as that of Bangkok and Shanghai.

The concern here is that of change and renewal as the idea of cinema itself is changing before our eyes. In many ways, this might threaten the continuing viability of film festivals such as the three in focus, which all came into existence through a love of film culture in its traditional form. For Hong Kong, the stakes may be higher in that the film festival’s future is
essentially tied up with larger concerns over Hong Kong’s integration with China and the long-term survival of the domestic film industry. Against such a background, the thought that the film festival might not survive seems unwarranted. However, as in the case of SIFF, there is real concern over whether the festival can be attractive and relevant to newer, younger audiences and their environment of new digital technology and inter-digital media (IDM). At the same time, how does a festival keep its old guard happy by emphasising the need to show films in their classic celluloid form as well as the necessity to revive old films even if restored and possibly refashioned into digital form? How does it then educate the young to appreciate older films? The Generations X and Y almost certainly would not experience the same kind of epiphany as I did in watching older Asian films. What would be their film-watching epiphany, as they look back, say, on the films of the Hong Kong New Wave, the Fifth Generation and the New Taiwan Cinema (films made either before they were born or were just children)?

Such questions have arisen in part because the management, including directors and programmers, that runs both SIFF and HKIFF have been in place for a long time. The same people who ran SIFF at its inception twenty years ago are still running it today – a sign that the organisation is sorely in need of generational change. Similarly, certain key programming personnel in HKIFF have been in place for many years. The continuity provided by this permanent staff presence is perhaps all for the good, but it could also be another source of anxiety as times change and newer blood is called for. A group of permanently-installed programmers might inspire nothing more than rigidity and a business-as-usual mentality when the business itself is undergoing change and paradigms are shifting. The objective of promoting Asian cinemas, for example, is not an unchanging aim.

There are as many different Asian cinemas as there are many Asian film festivals which have adopted ‘Asian cinema’ as their flagship (in fact, all Asian film festivals worth their salt cannot but proclaim the promotion of Asian cinema as their mission). Apart from SIFF, PIFF and HKIFF, there are other smaller festivals in Asia championing the Asian film cause, not to mention festivals in Europe and elsewhere. New trends and the rise of new Asian cinemas need new visions, which probably entail a new generation of programmers. SIFF has become an urgent case model for new direction
and generational change in that its focus on Asian films tends to appear tired and stale. While the films themselves might have reflected genuinely new trends and exciting new work, their promotion is often lacklustre as if the programmers themselves don’t quite believe that the public will buy a hard sell. At HKIFF, selling new Asian films from relatively unknown cinemas (such as the new Malaysian cinema, for example) to a notoriously chauvinistic public where Asian films are concerned is always a tough call and the programming of these films tends to look de rigueur.

It goes without saying that Asian film festivals need a new vision of Asian cinema. People who have been in the business of programming Asian films for a long time may just take the vision thing for granted, assuming that their subjective tastes and views will always be that of the public they serve. HKIFF and SIFF are both caught in this quagmire, carrying on year after year without articulating anything amounting to a vision and taking for granted that the public knows what their vision of Asian cinema is. Only PIFF has come up with something close to a vision, for example in pushing the idea of ‘Pan-Asian’ cooperation and film funding in its successful implementation of the ‘Pusan Promotion Plan’ (PPP), which HKIFF has tried to imitate with HAF, and the Asian Film Market (launched in 2006) which will take over the PPP and expand into newer areas of the Asian continent and beyond. A new initiative, the ‘Asian Cinema Fund’ (ACF), has zeroed in on the aim to ‘promote Asian cinema and discover new talents in young Asian filmmakers’. In this way, PIFF has succeeded in becoming a region-wide forum where HKIFF and SIFF have failed, but it is far from clear that it has secured a victory in the vision battle over hearts and minds of Asian cinephiles. Its success with PPP, instituted in 1998, one year after the Asian financial crisis, is merely a reflection of the strength and determination of institutional and governmental support and funding. PIFF is not infallible, and over time if it hasn’t already, it might falter due to the same problems of paradigm shift, generational change and internal renewal.

PIFF is the youngest of the three festivals and if we go by the truism of Asian families that the youngest son is always treated better than the oldest and the middle sons, time and circumstance have been kinder to PIFF. It has learned from the experiences of HKIFF and SIFF and its leadership has the political will and means to back up the objectives of the festival for as long
as needed. PIFF is therefore on a roll insofar as its Asian vision is guaranteed thus far by government support, helped along by the immense goodwill generated by the soft power of the ‘Korean wave’ sweeping through the region. But soft power by virtue of its nature is highly malleable and unpredictable. There could be a backlash, and a rollback of the Korean wave is not out of the question in the foreseeable future. PIFF has to prepare for such a contingency, but for the moment it is safe to say that just in staying the course, it is way ahead of HKIFF and SIFF.

PIFF’s success so far is also due to its utilisation of foreign critics, primarily European critics, to promote itself and the South Korean cinema in international circles by word of mouth and through publications. Both HKIFF and SIFF have in the past relied on these same foreign critics to sell their festivals and cinemas, but since the status of HKIFF and SIFF have each fallen relative to that of PIFF, the role of the foreign critics must be viewed skeptically. Clearly, such critics have their own self-interest in mind, but on the positive side, it must be acknowledged that there are many foreign critics who are genuine scholars drawn to Asian film festivals by the love of film, driven by the desire to learn and understand, and engage in real and constructive dialogues with Asian filmmakers and critics, giving sustenance to the concept of exchange and communication between Asia and the rest of the world. In the final analysis, how film festivals can function on this level of cinephilia and pedagogy is the key question. Too often, film festivals end up like markets where one is forced to haggle over goods and prices and to avoid powerful transnational interests seeking to control and dominate sections of the market if not the whole thing.

Because all the three major Asian film festivals analysed in this article are basically similar, their fates and fortunes appear intertwined. They are similar in that they are the three most important festivals in Asia because of their locations – all strategic hubs on the East Asian mainland stretching from the northeast to southeast – and because of their stated aim of promoting Asian cinema. They mirror each other in terms of failure and success. They are not equal, to be sure, but they tread the same path, and if it can be said that one is in decline, the others might follow. The thesis of this article is that all three festivals have the same concerns about failure because of structural reasons while the success of one cannot be repeated on the same level by the others.
In other words, success can never be equitably distributed which means that each must diverge from the path they follow, by finding their own road to success. In this way, success can only be defined by how each festival from now on surmounts its crises and anxieties and faces the challenges ahead.

But perhaps the festivals will just go on regardless. The glitter dome of the cinema will continue to shine and sparkle irrespective of shifting paradigms and changing apparatus. No evidence exists to suggest that cinema is dying or even that it is in terminal old age. The cinema has survived the coming of sound, colour, TV and video, and it will survive the entry of new digital media into its glittering dome – in effect to add to the glitter. Film festivals are only as good as the films, and on this principle, Asian film festivals have even more reason to continue indefinitely because Asian cinemas will become more not less dynamic and newer cinemas and generations will rise. The sense that HKIFF and SIFF are drifting downwards may be only temporary, due to the conditions of the film industries (one in decline while the other is just small). When conditions change for the better, the festivals may rediscover their sense of purpose. Film festivals have the capacity to never fade away even as the glitter domes diminish, which is after all why every major city in Asia wants its own film festival – and smaller cities too get in on the act.

Notes

1 In the 1950s film industries in the region created the ‘Asian Film Festival’, launched in 1954 and overseen by a federation of motion picture producers. The festival travelled from country to country as an industry-sponsored competitive event, emphasising the glamour of movies and showcasing the best-produced films by the major film studios in the region. Hong Kong’s Shaw Brothers Studio was a major player in the Asian Film Festival in the 1950s and 1960s. See the link to the Asian Film Festival page at the Shaw Brothers website http://shaw.sg/sw_about.aspx. Accessed: 24 August, 2008. Cindy Hing-yuk Wong has described the Asian Film Festival as ‘primarily a public relations event for the industries’ which is a fair description of the event, and as such, the Asian Film Festival cannot be considered a film festival in the modern sense of the term indicating a festival presenting hundreds of films.
from all over the world, independently chosen and free from the influence of the studios, film companies and their vested interests. See Cindy Hing-yuk Wong (2007) ‘Distant screens: Film festivals and the global projection of Hong Kong cinema’, in Gina Marchetti and Tan See-kam (eds) Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and the New Global Cinema: No Film is an Island. London and New York: Routledge, 177–92. The Asian Film Festival was reconstituted in 1982 as the ‘Asia-Pacific Film Festival’, which continues to run to the present day without attracting much attention. I was a member of the jury, which also included Jonathan Rosenbaum, in the 1991 Asia-Pacific Film Festival held in Taipei, and we awarded the Best Picture prize to Edward Yang’s A Brighter Summer Day.

2 Although the HKFA has taken over the programming of the retrospective programme, it continues to be associated with the HKIFF in that the programme is always scheduled to take place during the run of the HKIFF and it is printed in the Festival’s programme brochure, but it is separately administered and the films are shown in the HKFA’s own theatre venue, so technically, it is not a part of HKIFF. The HKFA has year-round programmes of its own.

3 See Chan Wai-fong and Daniel Kwan (1994), ‘Censors’ shadow cast over screens’, South China Morning Post, 21 March, 17. The Chinese side put their case in Hong Kong’s Chinese press, arguing that HKIFF had ‘agreed’ to their request for not showing banned films. See ‘Beijing zuo fuhan benbao, zhi gangfang ceng zuo chengnuo’ (‘Beijing’s reply, Hong Kong had agreed’), Xinbao (Hong Kong Economic Journal), 19 March 2004, 23.


6 HAF was first launched in 2000 as a film industry initiative. It was then discontinued only to be reinstated in 2003 but was cancelled due to the outbreak of SARS. It became operative again the following year. For more on the original HAF, see the HKIFF booklet The Age of Independents: New Asian Film and Video, published by the 24th HKIFF, 2000, 42–3. See also Lily Kong (2005), ‘The Sociality of Cultural Industries: Hong Kong’s Cultural Policy and Film Industry’, International Journal of Cultural Policy, 11, 1, 61–76.

7 Quoted from the FIPRESCI Circular 4/2007 (July 19 2007), 1.