

The diminishment of MP&GI's film production department contributed to Shaw Brothers' domination in the region.

65. Law Kar and Frank Bren, *Hong Kong Cinema: A Cross Cultural View* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press), 167.
66. Kinna Yau Shuk-ting, "Shaws' Japanese Collaboration and Competition as Seen through the Asian Film Festival Evolution," in Wong Ain-ling (ed.), *The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003), 279.
67. *Third Meeting of the ASEAN Sub-Committee on Film: Official Report*, Jakarta, Indonesia, November 1974.

## CHAPTER 12

# YAMAGATA - ASIA - EUROPE: THE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL SHORT CIRCUIT

ABÉ MARK NORNES

The "discovery" of Japanese cinema is a hallowed story in film history. A programmer for the Venice International Film Festival saw *Rashomon* (1950), was stunned, selected it against the wishes of studio head Nagata Masaichi, and screened it unbeknownst to the director; the film won the Golden Lion, and suddenly every festival desired a Japanese film in its lineup. This initiated a steady exploration of the riches on offer from a century of Japanese cinema, a journey that—as evidenced by this book—is surely ongoing. Film scholars would like to take credit for much of this work, but in point of fact kudos must first go to programmers like the one from Venice. Film festivals have been the main interface between Japanese cinema and its world audience, an alternative distribution network devoted to enriching film culture that is relatively sheltered from market pressures.<sup>1</sup>

This global response has built careers and shaped the canon. However, beyond this local/global interchange, festivals occasionally operate in something akin to a regional feedback loop, which can be remarkably productive. This chapter explores this dynamic with the example of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (1989–), and we begin with a deceptively simple question:

Which festivals *matter*? What constitutes a so-called A-festival? What qualities prevent an aspiring B, C, or Z festival from rising up the ranks? Perhaps someone, somewhere is maintaining a neatly ordered list, but in any case there is something so automatic about it all.<sup>2</sup> *Naturally*, sites like Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Sundance, and Toronto are the most important venues. Or if one is interested in the documentary form, the list must add a few more: Amsterdam, Nyon, Margaret Mead, and the venerable

Flaherty. These are the toughest festivals to enter. They feature the most premières. Their competitions are where careers are made, and their markets are where deals are made. *Of course*, they are the most important festivals in the world. The ones that *matter*.

At the same time, from a certain perspective on that same world, there is something glaringly obvious about the geography of that list. Does this mean that festivals in other parts of the world don't matter as much, or in the same way? As someone who frequents Asian film festivals, and has even worked on one called Yamagata, I have always been struck by the indifference to—not to mention ignorance of—Asian venues among European and North American filmmakers and critics. (Programmers are another matter altogether, as it is their job to know more about what is going on in the film world than anyone.) Even amid the cosmopolitan glitter of the international film festival, these citizens of the film world can, from a certain perspective, appear quite provincial.

This should hardly be surprising, because the international film festival world is embedded in geopolitical structures and epistemologies that grant Europe the status of subject. It is true that at one very material level, this is about money. Prestige in this arena is deeply linked to a festival's market. However, the marketplaces in regions like Asia are woefully undeveloped and typically hobbled by governmental restriction, in contrast to the private and public subsidies that many European film cultures enjoy. At the same time, decades of critique from orthodox Marxism teaches us that the order and make-up of that A-list cannot be adequately accounted for by the market alone. In fact, we must look to Enlightenment thought itself, with its "first Europe, then elsewhere" structuring that discounts the relevance of non-Western film cultures—not non-Western "festival films," which are highly valued, but rather popular cinema, star systems, local criticism, and film theories, not to mention exhibition sites like festivals.

This is related to the fundamental dynamic underlying the historiographic problem film studies enduringly exhibits, a problematic we might reframe as "first Hollywood, then elsewhere." However, in a discussion of the international film festival circuit, we cannot help noticing that Los Angeles has never managed to stage a festival for the A-grade. The tempering of Hollywood's considerable power is clearly one of the film festival's deep attractions; festivals and their audiences may love visits by glamorous stars, but no festival is complete without a panoply of films from across the world. One reason is that, starting from the art cinema of the 1950s era, film festivals were conceptualized as sites of discovery and rejuvenation. In an eloquent, compact, yet magisterial essay describing the sweep of world cinema history, Dudley Andrew writes about this dynamic:

Cinematic modernity thus moved forward as a series of waves in a wide ocean of activity, but progress or development was measured in and by the West.... A tired Europe would soon depend on the energy of ideas coming from or involving its former colonies. But how could European intellectuals credit the "peripheral" without rehearsing the centrism that produces colonial thinking in the first place? [European festivals invited] nations from beyond the West's periphery to submit films that might have something essential to contribute, something unavailable to those in the center.... And yet value could properly be assessed only at Western

festivals, and only by Western, specifically Parisian critics. European festivals thus served as a stock market where producers and critics bought and sold ideas of cinema sometimes investing in futures and trading on the margin, with the quotations registered at *Cahiers du Cinéma*.<sup>3</sup>

Asian filmmakers may make great films, but they must ultimately linger in their own national cinemas until the programmers of Europe "discover" them. Make no mistake, the programmers of North American and European film festivals have done an astounding job of selecting and promoting Asian films, especially since the 1980s; however, my point is that a given film or filmmaker achieves an international profile only through the good work of these programmers from Europe and their festivals. And as for festivals outside of Europe, their fate is, to borrow a phrase from Dipesh Chakrabarty, to sit in the waiting room of history. This reality invites us to think about the nature of the ground upon which they operate, the (film) world in which film programmers travel.

Even if festivals outside of Europe adopt all the traditional trappings of the A-list—stars, premières, markets—they will never quite measure up. A cringe-worthy example is the Tokyo International Film Festival. Despite a flush bankroll and an abundance of stars on carpets (promoting films that are already slated for release in subsequent months), Tokyo's festival was never taken seriously. It left the embarrassing spectacle of an ambitious Asian film festival with the means to compete, desperately seeking recognition from our imaginary Europe. One may want to fault anything from the management to the sky-high price of local hotels, but even the patently successful festival in Busan feels regional in the face of Berlin's global prestige. It is as if "A" means something different in countries that don't write with Roman letters.

More fascinating are the subtle inflections of Europe's dominance—and by extension indifference—on the ground. Consider a typical party at a festival in the heart of Europe. Amid the flux of networking filmmakers, distributors, critics, and programmers, it is hard not to notice the Asian visitors forming isolated groups. Language difference is one issue here, but it is also symptomatic of the indifference they meet in Europe. Even at Asian festivals with competitions—spaces the programmers explore with abandon—the competition filmmakers tend to stick together, warily eyeing each other's work, and rarely stray too far into other programs. They tend to learn little to nothing about their host festival, the local filmmakers and their scene.

It is actually this last dynamic that I wish to focus on in the remainder of this chapter—the energies, the *fireworks*, often occurring in the international film festival circuit's "peripheries" (those places relegated to the status of marginality by Europe). The dilemma of Asian film cultures—desiring recognition from the European other and being greeted by indifference—is an old and enduring dynamic that goes back to the silent era. It has even driven film movements in the region as early as the 1910s.<sup>4</sup> It is the reaction of Asian film cultures to this indifference that can be remarkably productive. And in the case of the international film festival circuit, one ends up with a local or regional *short circuit* that transforms an event of even modest scale into a festival that matters.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ASIA-EUROPE CONDUIT

In the remainder of this chapter I wish to focus on a single example to explore this dynamic. This would be the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, which I worked on, or collaborated with, in a variety of capacities since 1990. However, before examining this particular regional short circuit, where Yamagata came to serve as one of many regional nodes, I want to briefly consider how the international circuit has historically measured the quality of Asian film festivals. This is because the festival in Yamagata appeared just as the mechanics of the Asia-Europe relationship began transforming.

Typically, value has been determined by a harsh utilitarian measure: a festival mattered to the degree that it serves the programmers of Europe in the process Andrew described above.<sup>5</sup> The very first international festival in Asia was an attempt to foster regional synergies, distribution routes, and technology exchanges in the face of European indifference. This was the Southeast Asian Film Festival, which was established in 1954. It continues to the present day as the Asian Film Festival, making it one of the oldest festivals in the world; it is certainly the oldest festival no one has ever heard

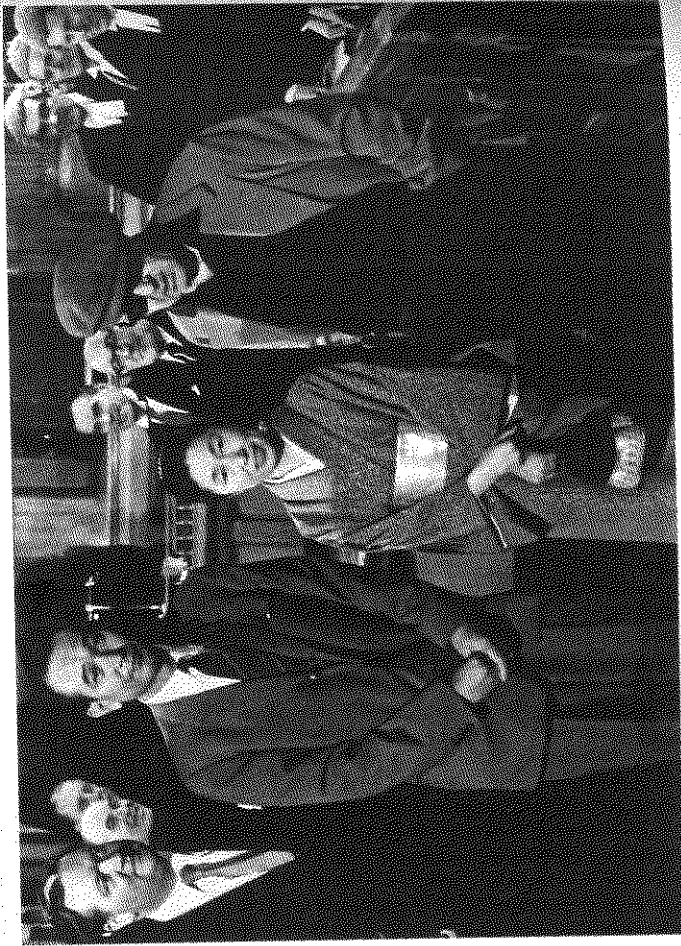


FIGURE 12.1 Kawakita Kashiko played an enormous role in mediating Japanese and Euro-American filmmaking. Here she stands between Kurosawa Akira and John Ford on the set of *Gideon's Day* (1958). Photograph courtesy of the Kawakita Memorial Film Institute.

of.<sup>6</sup> This has always been a rather clubby affair, run mainly by government film offices and major studios, and is a failure if its reality is judged against its lofty goals. It was probably hobbled by being the pet project of too few people. At the same time, throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, it was one of the few international film events in the Asia-Pacific region.

It would have had a very different stature if European programmers had had a use for it. However, back then festivals were content to rely on the suggestions of government agencies and key local informants on the ground. After all, they only needed a few films from a handful of (usually Indian or Japanese) auteurs. Programmers had no need for the mediation of an Asian film festival. Their modest slates could be satisfied through the recommendations of a select few intermediaries. In the case of Japanese film, the two most important figures would certainly be Kawakita Kashiko and Donald Richie. Kawakita began her career in the 1930s as the spouse of producer Kawakita Nagamasa. Together they forged ties with China and Germany in the wartime era, and after her husband's death she founded the Kawakita Memorial Film Institute. Throughout the postwar era, she was a fixture on the European and North American film festival circuit, buying films for domestic distribution and advising festivals on the latest developments in Japanese cinema. And her institute was (and still is) the most important stop for any foreign programmer, as it not only offers advice but also secure prints for private screenings. Richie was equally visible at the film festivals, and was also a mandatory stop for any visiting programmers; however, instead of a personal institute and screening room, he wielded the powerful platform of his critical and academic writings. Between these two powerful figures, the circuit's modest appetite for Japanese film was suitably satiated.

The situation changed in the 1980s when Western festivals felt compelled to strive for better coverage of Asian cinema. This corresponds to an epochal transition Andrew describes as a shift from the "federated phase" to the "world cinema phase." Programmers from the exhausted modernist cinemas of Europe began to look far beyond Japan and India to discover vibrant film cultures in the most unexpected places, from Korea to the New Taiwan Cinema to the Fifth Generation in the PRC. For the first time, programmers of the West began to value non-Western film festivals because it was there that they could find a more heterogeneous selection than they received from previous informants. It should come as no surprise that this process began on an American outpost halfway to Asia, where the local language was English and no intermediaries were necessary.

By the mid-1980s, the Hawai'i International Film Festival became an important conduit for information about the situation across the breadth of Asia. It was perfectly suited to the role. The festival was established in 1981 by the East-West Center, a research and teaching facility of the American government (the half joke among its students and researchers was that it was essentially a training facility for the CIA). Under the indefatigable leadership of Jeannette Paulson, the festival swiftly grew and took to specializing in Asian cinema. What's more, it enjoyed the expertise of scholars in the East-West Center, such as Paul Clark and Wimal Dissanayake. The Hawai'i programmers traveled

to Asian film centers to create a network of informants and learn the situations on the ground. They also published unusually thick catalogs, gray with informative essays about individual filmmakers, movements, and national cinemas that had rarely been addressed in English-language print. The festival brought together a fair representation of Asia's annual output every December. Many of the festival's key informants were regular visitors to the festival, such as Donald Richie (Japan), Kawakita Kashiko (Japan), Chiao Hsiung-ping (Taiwan), Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong), Tony Rayns (UK), and Aruna Vasudev (India), and they brought many directors in to talk about their films and meet foreign programmers. The East-West Center even held an academic conference in conjunction with the festival, promoting research into Asian cinema while giving scholars access to the latest crop of films. By the late 1980s, when I served on the festival as an intern, the Hawai'i International Film Festival was an important site for the programmers of Europe to see the best of new Asian cinema, network, and select films for their own festivals.

Yet "waxing and waning" is another structure of the international film festival circuit, and it wasn't long before Hawai'i was displaced by Hong Kong. This process probably began with the sensational splash made by *Yellow Earth* (Huang tu di, 1984) at the 1985 Hong Kong International Film Festival (1977- ). Word spread swiftly that an amazing new generation of filmmakers had emerged in the PRC. The epicenter for the Fifth Generation's discovery was Hong Kong, but it was still a "discovery" by Western critics and festivals that put them on the map. At Hong Kong, programmers found a much larger selection of Chinese-language films on top of a smart selection of Asian cinema, thanks to programmers like Roger Garcia, Wang Ain-ling, Li Cheuk-to, Stephen Teo, and others. Hong Kong also published a running series of thick, meaty catalogs for their retrospectives on local cinema; it is no exaggeration to say they were, through programming and publication, writing the history of Hong Kong film. It is also largely through Hong Kong that New Taiwan Cinema and then the Hong Kong popular cinema found its global audience.

In the first years of the new century, however, most of the foreign programmers fled Hong Kong for the well-endowed Busan (Pusan) International Film Festival.<sup>7</sup> This remains the most prestigious festival in Asia. At the same time, the film festival world has radically changed, so Busan's place in the system is substantially different in kind from that of its predecessors. Its importance is arguably established by its sheer scale and the success of its market, but not necessarily on its usefulness as a site for European programmers to see as many Asian films as possible in as short a time as possible—a space to network and study. This is to say that the film festival circuit underwent a fundamental transformation at the turn of the century. Before this, Hawai'i and Hong Kong served as *conduits* for Asian films on their way to Europe, because virtually none of the programmers of Europe could speak Asian languages, and few could actually invest in extended trips to the region. Most were dependent on the festivals specializing in Asian fare. Today, however, there are far more programmers with Asian-language skills that can access information and meet people without intermediaries. There are also major festivals like Rotterdam and Udine that built reputations for sophisticated programming

of Asian films. Furthermore, in the age of the Internet, it can be easy to forget how the Hawai'i and Hong Kong catalogs were treasure troves of information one could find nowhere else; now the catalogs of every festival in the world are a click away. Thanks to all these factors, once "important" festivals like Hawai'i, Hong Kong, and Busan—festivals that mattered—appear more like regional or even local affairs.

## SPARKS FLY: THE CASE OF YAMAGATA

While the organizers of Hong Kong and Busan festivals may bristle at the idea that they are, from a certain perspective, more regional than international festivals, I assert this is precisely why they matter. Europe will always set the terms for any purported universals, such as the "international" in "international film festival circuit." Ambitious festivals in Asia, Africa, and Latin America place themselves in the circuit, but they will never *matter* in the same way. A screening at Busan, currently the most prestigious of Asian festivals, pales in significance to being selected by any number of events in North America or Europe. At the same time, these Asian festivals' regional and local prominence is probably amplified by European indifference. This is to say, the international film festival circuit is filled with *short circuits*—one of the most thrilling and hopeful aspects of film history.

Consider the case of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, which came out of nowhere in 1989, and is held in what would generally be considered the middle of nowhere. Despite its dangling of serious prize money for the competition, it remains largely unknown among the filmmakers and programmers of Europe. In Asia, however, it has been vastly influential. A close look at Yamagata can teach us much about the film festival short circuit.

Yamagata held its first outing in 1989. It is often attributed to the vision of Ogawa Shinusuke, an important documentary director who moved his collective to the prefecture in the mid-1970s. Actually, it was spearheaded by a local media magnate, Tanaka Satoshi, who persuaded the mayor's office to commit to a ten-year budget as a celebration of the city's one hundredth anniversary (the festival has since gone independent). Tanaka brought Ogawa in to advise the staff and volunteers, all nonprofessionals, holding classes to actually school them in documentary film and its history. They needed those lessons. Yamagata was deep in the northern mountains of Japan, a city of 250,000 sitting at the base of a 6,000-foot volcano. No one had ever seen anything other than television documentary.

Back in the major cities, everyone was surprised to hear about this plan to create an international film festival so far from the cultural capital of Tokyo. They were just as surprised at the results. Foreign guests at the first outing included Jon Jost (United States), Robert Kramer (France/US), Marceline Loidan (France), Nestor Almendros (Cuba/US), Johan van der Keuken (Netherlands), Monica Flaherty (US), and many others. Louis Ivens was to come, but he passed away several months before the festival.



FIGURE 12.2 The 1989 Asia Symposium at Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. From left to right: Kidlat Tahimik (Philippines), Zarul Albakri (Malaysia), Teddie Co (Philippines), Nick Deocampo (Philippines), Stephen Teo (Malaysia / Hong Kong), Ogawa Shinsuke (Japan), Manop Udomdej (Thailand), Kong Su-Chang (South Korea), "Peggy" Chiao Hsiung-ping (Taiwan), and Tsuchimoto Noriaki (Japan). Photo courtesy of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival Network.

In addition to the main competition, the festival held an "Asia Symposium," which was moderated by Ogawa. It was essentially a panel discussion but ended up being the talk of the festival. Panelists included Tsuchimoto Noriaki (Japan), Stephen Teo (Malaysia / Hong Kong), Nick Deocampo (Philippines), Teddie Co (Philippines), Zarul Albakri (Malaysia), "Peggy" Chiao Hsiung-ping (Taiwan), Kong Su-Chang (South Korea), Manop Udomdej (Thailand), and Kidlat Tahimik (Philippines)—with Hong Ki-Seong (South Korea) and Tian Zhuangzhuang (PRC) unable to attend for political reasons. From today's perspective, this fascinating symposium marks a turning point in Asian documentary film. Participants described the conditions they worked under back home, but this was mere background for the main theme, posted as an angry question by Ogawa: Why are there no Asian films in the competition of this, the first documentary film festival in Asia? The symposium left the participants charged up, and discussions about the Asian situation continued throughout the festival. Kidlat Tahimik, who started his film career in Germany, told people about the Oberhausen Manifesto and suggested that the time was ripe for a manifesto of their own. He drafted one, and the symposium participants signed it in an impromptu ceremony / press conference. Here is the text:

We, the Asian Filmmakers present here, at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival '89, call attention to the sad absence of any Asia film in the competition. . . . We ask then in earnest. . . why are the documentaries "of quality and of interest" that enter the international exchange of information mainly

in the hands of those countries who have the material resources to realize these films? We note, with regret, that there exist many obstacles to the opportunities for our film visions to be produced and disseminated in the real world dominated by political and market motivations. We acknowledge, with sadness, that these institutional roadblocks originate from a complex mix of third-world realities as well as international imbalances. We accept, with concern, that these cannot be eradicated overnight. But we believe that these obstacles can be overcome only with concerted efforts by ourselves, the Asian filmmakers, for a start. . . with support from the energies generated at international gatherings like YIDFF, committed to the believe that independent social and personal documentaries are invaluable to present and future generations. Therefore, We The Asian Filmmakers present here, declare our commitment to maintain a network of Asian Filmmakers sharing of our visions, as well as our problems and solutions. We dramatize here, our desire to plant the seeds for the renaissance of independent documentary filmmaking in our region. We affirm here with optimism, our determination to seek, develop and implement approaches to deal with the obstacles, so that future international events like YIDFF will not be short of good Asian films. We declare here, the SPIRIT of the independent Asian documentary filmmakers is alive! And will one day, soar with the wind!

The challenges confronting these filmmakers were hardly resolved at the 1989 symposium, but some of the problems were obvious and widely shared. Asian documentary filmmakers enjoyed neither grant opportunities, government support, nor the rudimentary of distribution networks. Most lived in impoverished economies, where 16mm film was far beyond the reach of anyone working outside television or government propaganda. Some could use video, at least the affordable formats like Betamax, VHS-C, and 8mm. Sony had introduced the Handycam only four years before, and Hi8 was brand new; however, most festivals wouldn't accept documentaries with such poor image and sound quality. To make matters worse, most of the filmmakers suffered under intense censorship apparatuses, and some key countries were under martial law and/or strict dictatorships hostile to topics typical of the independent documentary (in fact, Tian Zhuangzhuang was prevented from leaving China in the wake of that year's Tiananmen Square massacre).

The Asian filmmakers that did attend left excited and determined to return. The manifesto they signed proclaimed they would leave Yamagata and do their all to nurture a documentary film scene in their home countries. Nick Deocampo led the way. He stopped in Yamagata on his way home after several years pursuing a graduate film degree at NYU. He had essentially concluded that the situation in the Philippines was hopeless and he would shift from his Super-8 documentary practice to university teaching. However, he was shocked by the unexpected variety of films in the Yamagata competition, and the broad definition of nonfiction it implied. He left inspired by Ogawa and the symposium. Deocampo was determined to shoot a film for the next festival, and did just that. He returned two years later with the 16mm *Ynang Bayan: To Be a Woman is to Live in a Time of War* (1991), along with Kidlat Tahimik and the 1991 version of his *I Am Furious Yellow*. . . .

I joined the festival in 1990 when it was transitioning to the larger format it uses to this day. The putative center of the festival was, not surprisingly, the international competition. It was (and remains) a small, and thus intense, competition, because the festival purchased and subtitled 16mm prints. The jurors also lend the competition a measure of prestige; in 1991, for example, they included Jean Douchet, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Morisaki Azuma, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Eduardo Coutinho, and Edward Yang. The competition section may have been small, but it was invariably eclectic. Directors as diverse as Yvonne Rainer and Barbara Kopple found themselves in the same program.

There was even more diversity in Yamagata's retrospectives. Heretofore, most retrospective screenings in Japan were mere collections of films, organized by theme, studio, genre, or director. However, Yamagata demonstrated the powerful effects of curation. The pattern was set in 1991 with a sidebar dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor. The topic was sensitive, but the festival secured the collaboration of the national film archives of both Japan and the United States. Programs organized by themes (e.g., race, representations of violence), events (Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima/Nagasaki), and place (Manchuria) showed Japanese and American films back to back. The films worked against each other, in a dialogical fashion, to reveal the competing ideologies underlying the "film war." The program was accompanied by panels featuring major historians and scholars, along with a book-length catalog. Most of these films had not been screened since the war.

Similarly, Yasui Yoshio, an archivist from Osaka, organized a decade-long series of retrospectives covering the history of Japanese documentary. Unlike the rest of Asia, Japan has had a vigorous documentary scene since the talkies era. Yasui unearthed most of the important films of the century. Each festival concentrated on a decade or more of history, many of the prints being pulled from the dark corners of filmmakers' closets. Many films had not been screened since their initial release. In a manner similar to the Hong Kong International Film Festival, Yasui also edited detailed catalogs featuring eclectic reminiscences by directors and analytical pieces by well-known critics.

Other Yamagata programs centered on directors like Joris Ivens, Kamei Fumio, and Robert Kramer. One program showed films on Okinawa under the rubric of "island films." Another featured First Nations filmmaking, inverting the center-periphery structure of film festivals (i.e., competition-sidebars) with the spectacle of a temporary theater built and then dismantled in a parking lot, as well as the infiltration of First Nations works and filmmakers into every section of the festival. Another program screened dozens of canonical and obscure films for the cinema centenary.

These sidebars were *curated*. The films were carefully organized into complex structures, and contextualized by hefty catalogs, panels, and guest speakers. This hadn't really been seen in Japan to that point, and critics took to comparing Yamagata's thoughtfulness with Tokyo International Film Festival's crass market orientation. They could hardly help themselves, since both festivals took place in October. Tokyo had started roughly the same time (biennially from 1985, and annually from 1992). Both had deep connections to their respective city halls, and the irony of pitting rural Yamagata against the capital was evident to everyone. Tokyo was an agglomeration of the Tokyo

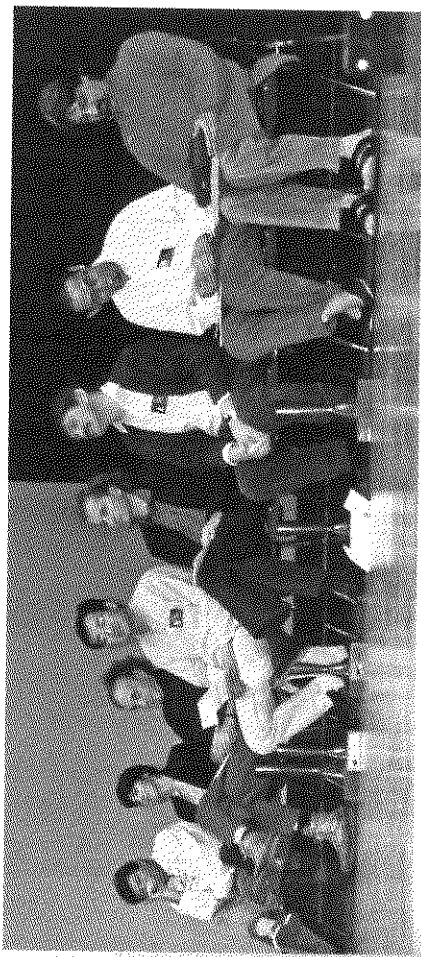


FIGURE 12.3 Award winners onstage at the 1993 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. From left to right: Bob Connelly, Robin Anderson, Frederick Wiseman, Sato Makoto, Ulrich Seidl, Aleksandr Sokurov, Wu Wenguang, and Anand Patwardhan. Wu's personal encounter with Wiseman and his cinema changed the course of Chinese documentary. Photo courtesy of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival Network.

Metropolitan Government, the Japanese Association for International Promotion of the Moving Image (UNIJAPAN), the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, and the Agency for Cultural Affairs. It always showed major art films, but the energy put into red carpet affairs and exclusive parties drew attention to the preponderance of Hollywood films weeks or months away from their Japanese bows. It did have retrospectives, but was notorious for failing to provide translation—causing critics to call for scare quotes around the "international" in its name.

Indeed, the Tokyo International Film Festival left the impression of a major government subsidy to the Hollywood industry and its domestic distributors. In contrast, Yamagata ran on a shoestring budget and smart programming, and its orientation was distinctly regional at a moment when transnational energies were shifting from the US-Japan bilateral relationship to something far more pan-Asian. This brings me to the event that set Yamagata apart from its counterparts and was a direct result of the 1989 Asia Symposium and its manifesto: New Asia Currents.

This running sidebar competed with the competition for attention and prestige, and was the site of what I will call the Asian short circuit. After the 1989 Asia Symposium, Yamagata decided to devote one venue to new work from Asian producers, striving both for coverage and quality, putting aside their prejudice for 16mm to allow a space for amateur video, and hoping to nurture new talent. It was initially programmed by a series of young film scholars—Darrrel Davis, Aaron Gerow, and Stephen Teo—before the program really came into its own under the leadership of Fujioka Asako. It is now renamed New Asia Currents and is organized by Wakai Makiko now that Fujioka is the festival director.<sup>8</sup> These programmers traveled across Asia, building a deep network of filmmakers and critics that grew year by year.

Looking back, it is strikingly obvious that Yamagata enjoyed the most perfect of timing. In the course of the 1990s, VHS and Super-8 video were displaced by Hi8, which finally gave way to DV's beautiful sound and image. The festival displayed an Avid system in 1991, but it was far beyond the reach of the Asia Program directors. However, it wasn't long before PC prices dropped dramatically and the cheaper Adobe Premiere (1992) and Final Cut Pro (1999) appeared. By the end of the decade, all the Asian filmmakers were using nonlinear software to edit their DV projects on home computers—even Kidlat Tahimik, who regularly reappeared at Yamagata to show the latest version of his homage to "16mm spaghetti," *I Am Furious Yellow*... At this very same time, oppressive regimes fell or martial law ended in countries like Taiwan (1989), the Philippines (1986), and South Korea (1987), and the PRC steadily relaxed its grip on filmmakers; independent documentarists could increasingly make films on subjects that were previously taboo. All of them aspired to screen at Yamagata, where they were greeted with a hearty embrace—anything but indifference.

The Asia Program grew in size and quality with every edition. There was even a noticeable difference between 1989 and 1991, which featured twenty-one films including Kim Dong-won's *Sanggye-dong Olympics* (South Korea, 1988), Wu Yii-feng's *Moon Children* (Taiwan, 1991), and Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing—the Last Dreamers* (China, 1990). By 2011, there were 705 entries from sixty-three countries or areas for only twenty-four slots. To ensure participation by as many of the producers as possible, the festival arranged special accommodations for Asian visitors, establishing "Asia House"; this was essentially a flophouse where large numbers of poor Asian filmmakers could stay for next to nothing, although their famous all-night drinking and discussion sessions made sleep difficult. The Asia Program filmmakers networked, learned from each other, shared their work with each other, and at the festival retrospectives they saw canonical documentaries they read about in Erik Barnouw's book, but could not access in the days before DVD and Internet piracy. They left inspired and often came back with new work.

An excellent example of this phenomenon comes from the 1993 festival, as related by scholar Akiyama Tamako—a regular Chinese interpreter for the festival. In 1993, Akiyama interpreted for Chinese filmmakers Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan, and Hao Zhiqiang, who were showing work in the Asia Program. Akiyama vividly recalls accompanying the three to Frederick Wiseman's *Zoo* (1993), which was in the competition. None of them had any idea who Wiseman was, but they were soaking up every film they could. *Zoo* delivered quite a shock. Akiyama recalls their reaction:

No sooner had the lights gone up than someone behind me suddenly began shaking my shoulder. "Oi! Tamako! Did you see that?" Wu, speaking faster than ever, raised his voice in excitement. Slightly taken aback, I mustered my best Chinese and said, "Um, well, it was a strange film. It's a zoo, with nothing out of the ordinary. Yet both the people and the animals feel like they are part of a single system. . . ." This drew a winking smile from Wu. "Oh, you were watching closely, weren't you? I wondered if you were sleeping," he said with an air of satisfaction, and then stood up. When we

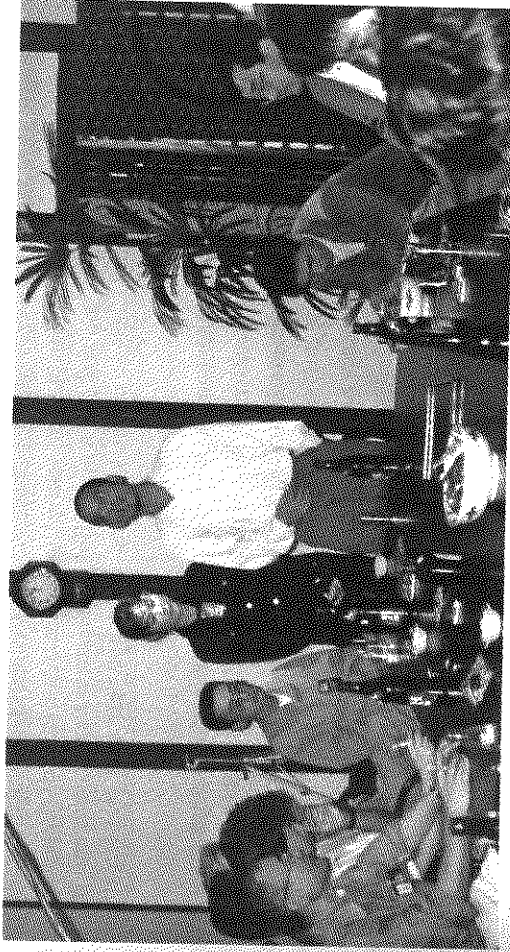


FIGURE 12.4 Akiyama Tamako interprets a late-evening toast by Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan sits next to her on the left; Japanese documentary filmmaker Sato Makoto watches from the far right. Photo courtesy of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival Network.

left the confusion of spectators in the theater, it was dark out. Rejoining each other on the street outside the theater, the three Chinese directors were itching to talk about the film they had just seen. The evening air of Yamagata had started to feel chilly, but their faces were flush and slightly sweaty. Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan and Hao Zhiqiang stepped on each other's sentences in excitement, striding through the evening darkness like a herd of buffalo—I'm chasing behind them, trying to keep up. After that screening, Chinese documentary filmmakers came to line up Frederick Wiseman next to Ogawa Shinsuke when they spoke of the directors they particularly admired.<sup>9</sup>

This is because Wu went home with an armful of tapes of documentaries by Wiseman and others. He held court in his apartment, showing the films to small groups of friends. Two years later, Duan returned to Yamagata with the direct-cinema style *The Square* (co-directed with Zhang Yuan, who also attended Wu's informal screenings, *Guangchang*, 1994) and took home the competition's FIPRESCI Prize. From this moment on, the primary style of Chinese documentary was direct cinema, a perfect counterpoint to the government's loud propaganda. And as the independent scene grew, so did the Chinese contingent at Yamagata. Western festivals took notice and began issuing invitations, but the Chinese filmmakers all aspired to go to Yamagata. Wu Wenguang explains the difference:

My first experience at Yamagata was eye-opening. When I arrived I knew nothing about documentary, but I watched thirty or forty films. Every day I sat in the theater watching films. It gave me courage. I left thinking this is something I could do for

my entire life. But it's been very good for Chinese documentary in general. If you are invited to a European or American film festival, your film is just kind of strange for the audiences. Basically, you feel like a guest. But Yamagata is totally different. It's like a home for me, and Chinese filmmakers who are invited year after year feel the same way.<sup>10</sup>

In similar fashion, government officials and programmers from other parts of Asia visited Yamagata to study its chemistry. They too returned to their countries and cooked up new documentary film festivals, from Taiwan to Korea to India. Programmers from Nyon, Amsterdam, and other documentary film festivals regularly came to Yamagata for the New Asian Currents, searching for Asian documentaries for their own slates. However, this felt different from the scenes at Hawai'i or Hong Kong. Ultimately, the Asia Program was more for the filmmakers than programmers or even audiences. This was the heady scene of an emergent and very exciting regional film culture. Every year, many of the same faces would appear with new films. New documentarists in Japan, such as Kawase Naomi, made some of their first public appearances at Yamagata. The ones that taught filmmaking regularly showed up at Yamagata with a gaggle of students—all aspiring filmmakers—trailing them to the theaters. The work in the New Asian Currents became noticeably better with each outing, and soon the competition invariably featured works from Asia. When Wang Bing captured the Robert and Frances Flaherty Grand Prize for *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (Tiexi Qu, 2003) we could only look back in wonder at the distance covered since 1989.

Not surprisingly, the competition filmmakers from Europe mistakenly thought they were the center of attention this entire time, oblivious of the sparks flying in the New Asian Currents theater.

## THE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL SHORT CIRCUIT

The metaphor of sparks in that last sentence brings me to the original image that generated this chapter: the short circuit. The international film festival "circuit"—a phrase that came into parlance in the late 1950s<sup>11</sup>—always struck me as misleading. Its root implies a kind of free circulation, an open system of film prints moving effortlessly around the earth. They alight at one node or another for projection and enjoyment, before returning on their circuitous path home. Indeed, festival organizers are privy to a palpable sense for this circulation because they must manage the shipping in and out of every print—often prints hop from one festival to another without returning to their distributor.

At the same time, the circuit metaphor is deeply wrong. As I asserted at the beginning of this chapter, the international film festival system is anything but open and free. It is more like a playing field on an incline. Programmers at the top of the hill, the A-festivals

of Europe and North America, work hard to spread out across the world and push up heavy prints of great film art to their prestigious festivals—events with elaborate systems of passes that restrict access to the inner sanctums to a select few. After they are over, the films are launched down the hill, hitting other lesser festivals as they roll their way back home.

This image of the incline is also dissatisfying, even if it foregrounds the power raking this global system of film festivals. For one thing, it does not leave room for the intense pleasures that film festivals offer up, particularly the opportunity to see films with their makers present in the theater. Or the productive contributions they can make to the promotion of and access to great films that would otherwise never leave their domestic markets, a remarkably important role before the age of home video. The trope of the incline is also increasingly inadequate, thanks to the proliferation of film festivals. The smaller festivals may not compete with the A-list for prestige, but they can spectacularly excel in programming niches. In the case of Asian film, one thinks of the undeniable importance of post-2000 events like International Film Festival Rotterdam, Frankfurt's Nippon Connection, or Udine's Far East Film Festival. In fact, Venice and Cannes show far fewer Asian films, so if we extract PR value from the equation, it becomes impossible to place all these festivals on an incline representing the world of international film festivals.

No, I think "circuit" works quite well, providing it is playfully finessed with some other tropes. I have already done this above by suggesting that the routes of the film festival circuit run through a *conduit*. There is no such thing as free, nondirectional circulation. This may not apply for a festival's home base, where information circulates so effortlessly thanks to media saturation in a single language. However, when geographical distance and linguistic difference come into play, programmers inevitably find themselves dependent on informants. In the case of Asian cinema, figures like Kawakita Kashiko, Donald Richie, and Tony Rayns wielded enormous power over what Asian films were inserted into the festival circuit before year 2000. They were the conduits through which films left Asia and moved to Europe and beyond. Thankfully, in the case of Asian cinema, those informants had wonderfully eclectic taste.

The trope of conduit can still accommodate the present situation, where figures like Rayns or festivals like Hawai'i have become diminutive with the proliferation of information sources. Before the turn of the century, the schematic of the circuit's conduit was clear and simple: filmmakers→informant→programmer→festival (→distributor→audience). Today, the situation is exceedingly complex. Filmmakers can apply to festivals with a one-dollar DVD-R instead of a heavy, expensive film print (thus swamping festivals with entries). When I worked on the Hawai'i International Film Festival in the late 1980s, the festival's catalogs were treasure troves of information, and we marveled at the speed of communication made possible by fax machines. However, I glimpsed the future there as well. As a federal institution, the East-West Center enjoyed access to the ARPANET, the precursor to the Internet. I used it to write to my scientist father across the Pacific, wishing all the while I could use it to communicate with filmmakers and distributors. It was clearly the future tool of film festivals, I thought, though could hardly imagine the astounding resources enjoyed by today's programmers,



including e-mail, web sites, blogs, online-zines, IMDb, Film Business Asia, digital press kits, YouTube, Vimeo, bit-torrents, and Dropbox, not to mention the online catalogs of every film festival on the planet.

Thanks to this, the conduits of the international film festival circuit have elaborated themselves into a bewildering capillary-like system. Berlin may feature two or three major films from a place like Japan, but the singularity of those works looks different from the days of *Rashomon* at Venice. Today, a few months later and only three hundred miles away, Frankfurt's Nippon Connection shows those films plus 150 others. In contrast to the art cinema of the 1950s, every kind of Japanese moving image circulates through the capillaries of the global distribution system.

This brings me to the last crucial tweak of the circuit trope, the phenomenon of the *short*. We typically think of a short circuit as an abnormality or a malfunction. Strictly speaking, it merely refers to an unintended connection between two nodes of an electrical circuit, usually with differing voltages; it is a pathway that current follows swiftly and unimpeded. A simple example of this kind of high circuit with no resistance would be a wire connecting the positive and negative terminals on a car battery. Anyone who has jumped a dead car knows what happens when the black clip accidentally touches the red: sparks fly. This is the by-product of the short circuit: heat, sparks, and sometimes fire. I ran this playful trope past Fujioka Asako, the force behind Yamagata's New Asian Currents and now the festival director. She responded,

The metaphor is beautiful. I do like to think of Yamagata as being the source of leaping flames and flying sparks jumping to other locations. After all, the Taiwan documentary festival modeled themselves after us, and Yunfest's first catalogs and programs were modeled after ours, too. And, of course, we've watched the filmmakers go back to their respective countries with renewed vigor and courage. This short-circuiting is unpredictable, and that's its beauty—I suspect it is something the official conduits don't allow.<sup>12</sup>

The festival circuit was built by Europe, and, on the face of it, the circuit serves the select roll of festivals enjoying the status of the Roman letter A. Yet, since the elaboration of the film festival circuit in the 1960s, there have always been short circuits in the system. For some early, spectacular examples, recall that an Italian Film Week in Spain led directly to the proclamations "Spanish cinema is dead; long live Spanish cinema" at the 1955 Salamanca Congress, which in turn inspired an efflorescence of great Spanish neorealist films. Or think of the chant "Papa's cinema is dead" and the delivery of the Oberhausen Manifesto ("The old cinema is dead. We believe in the new cinema") at the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen in 1962, an important forerunner to the New German Cinema. We may also think of the continental short circuiting between Les Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage and Panafrican du cinéma et de la Télévision de Ougadougou, which take place in alternating years. In these instances, some of the current in the festival circuit forms a short, disregarding the pathways between the prestige festivals and the rest of the world. Sometimes these shorts burn out fast; other times they heat up, spark, and start durable fires.

This is precisely what happened in Yamagata. It appeared—out of nowhere, in the middle of nowhere—in 1989, and over two decades later it remains relatively unknown in many regions of the international circuit. However, thanks to the propitious convergence of the toppling of dictatorships, burgeoning middle classes, the invention of digital video, and the ubiquity of the PC, a short occurred in the system. Asian documentary filmmakers circulated unimpeded between Yamagata and home. Things got hot. Sparks flew. And now there are documentary filmmakers—and festivals—in every part of Asia.

## NOTES

1. A number of people have written about the festival as alternative distribution route, most notably Kenneth Turan, *Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festivals and the World They Made* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Thomas Elsaesser, "Film Festival Networks: The New Topographies of Cinema in Europe," in *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 82–107; and Julian Stringer, "Neither One Thing nor the Other: Blockbusters at Film Festivals," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (New York: Routledge, 2006), 202–213.
2. For the purposes of this chapter I am referring to the more informal sense that most people invoke when they call an event an "A-festival." Actually, there is a formal list: Berlin, Madrid Plata, Locarno, Karlovy Vary, Cannes, Shanghai, Moscow, Tokyo, Cairo, San Sebastian, Montreal, and Venice. It is administered by an organization called the International Federation of Film Producers Association, or FIAPE. Joining this select list requires fourteen world premières per festival and a bankroll to pay for the hefty accreditation fee. And because the world premières don't have to be difficult-to-acquire "A" films, this means the accreditation is essentially for sale. This explains why festivals like Cairo and Tokyo are listed as "A," but not Rotterdam, Sundance, or Toronto. For a short but splendid critique of the A-festival system, see Mark Cousins, "Widescreen on Film Festivals," in *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit*, ed. Dina Jordanova with Ragan Rhyne (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2009), 155–158.
3. Dudley Andrew, "Time Zones and Jet Lag—the Flows and Phases of World Cinema," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen E. Newman (New York: Routledge, 2009), 74.
4. For a prototypical and complex example, see the elegant discussion of Japan's silent-era pure film movement in Aaron A. Gerow, *Visions of Modernity: Articulations of Cinema, Nation, and Spectatorship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
5. A caveat: in this chapter I am primarily concerned with those festivals Mark Peranson has called "audience festivals," in contrast to "business festivals," which serve first and foremost as nodes where producers and distributors make contact and contracts. See Mark Peranson, "First You Get the Power, Then You Get the Money: Two Models for Film Festivals," *Cineaste* 33, no. 3 (June 2008): 37–43.
6. Information about the festival is hard to come by, although this has been remedied by a newly published dissertation: Sangjoon Lee, "The Transnational Asian Studio System: Cinema, Nation-State, and Globalization in Cold War Asia" (PhD diss., New York University, 2011).
7. This was about the time that the Hong Kong International Film Festival lost most of its public support and underwent a process of corporatization. It is unclear if the dislodging

of the festival from its perch is connected to this privatization. For a strong description of this situation, see Ruby Cheung, "Corporatising a Film Festival: Hong Kong," in Iordanova, with Rhyme, *Film Festival Yearbook 1*, 99–115; and Ruby Cheung, "We Believe in Film as Art: An Interview with Li Cheuk-to, Artistic Director of the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF)," in *Film Festival Yearbook 3: Film Festivals and East Asia*, ed. Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2011), 196–207.

8. To be specific, Fujoka is the director of the Tokyo office. Yamagata's organization is bifurcated, with Tokyo and Yamagata offices splitting the work. Yamagata has usually managed the competition selection and all the local venue preparation. Tokyo has taken primary responsibility for programming. It is a collaborative effort made necessary by the overwhelming centrality of Tokyo when it comes to any cultural programming.

9. Correspondence with Akiyama Tamako, May 15, 2011.

10. Author interview with Wu Wenguang, May 8, 2012.

11. It begins popping up in Google Book and other database searches in 1959.

12. Correspondence with Fujoka Asako, May 5, 2011. Yunfest is the documentary film festival in Yunnan, China.

### PART III

## WHAT JAPANESE

## CINEMA IS!:

## JAPANESE

## CINEMA AND THE

## INTERMEDIAL

## PRACTICES