

Film festivals: How Japan is viewed from afar

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<< CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Certainly, critics and audiences who interpreted "Battle Royale" as a portrait of Japan's disaffected millennial generation might have been better off looking to Furumaya's understated drama of teenage angst, which, though set in the '80s, speaks volumes about the pressures faced now by nonconformist children in an education system where the nail that sticks out gets hammered down.

The image of Japan that festivals are calling into question by making these films available to international audiences is one that has been built up through the films selected for export for more than half a century. Since the 1950s, festivals in Europe and North America have been instrumental in winning an international audience for Japanese cinema. The Golden Lion awarded to Kurosawa's "Rashomon" at



Directors Ryuichi Hiroki and Tatsushi Omori (second and third from left) field questions at the Dejima festival.

the Venice Film Festival in 1951 opened the door to wider distribution for a national cinema hitherto almost unknown in the West. The success "Rashomon" enjoyed at Venice eventually earned it commercial distribution in Western art-house cinemas; it was followed by other films by Kurosawa and his older contemporaries Kenji Mizoguchi ("Ugetsu Monogatari," 1953) and Teinosuke Kinugasa ("Jigokumon [Gate of Hell]," 1953). Most of these early releases did appeal to Western audiences by addressing universal themes such as love and death. But their main selling point was their exoticism. Western audiences prized the period atmosphere of Kurosawa's samurai films and the painterly compositions of Mizoguchi's historical sagas, often patterned on *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. The films those directors set in the present won far less attention; Mizoguchi's last work, "Akasen Chitai (Street of Shame)" (1956) played in Britain as a second feature to a nudist travelogue. Ozu's subdued domestic dramas won praise through their occasional festival screenings and commercial releases, but their distribution was relatively limited. Besides, although they dealt with the fairly universal concern of relationships within families, their austere understated style was so different from the traditions of Western cinema that Ozu became typecast in the eyes of many as "the most Japanese of Japanese directors." Masterpieces though films such as "Ugetsu Monogatari" and "Tokyo Monogatari (Tokyo Story)" (1953) were, they helped to sustain an image of Japanese culture as irreducibly different from that of the West.

But there are signs that official priorities are beginning to shift toward promoting the kind of low-key realism prevalent in the films of Furumaya and Yamashita. In the past, government-funded cultural institutions within Japan assumed that Western audiences would only respond to the visibly alien imagery of Kurosawa and Mizoguchi. Ozu's films were originally held back because Japanese commentators feared that Westerners would not understand the everyday details of Japanese life. They found greater fame when critics began to interpret them as expressions of the exotic philosophy of Zen Buddhism.

Capturing the real Japan

But today, this mentality is changing. Mami Mizutori, culture minister at the Japanese Embassy in London, claims that her mission is to promote films that offer a realistic image of Japan.

"We would like to find films that may not be sensational but that have a good story," she explains. "If a film depicts the lives of ordinary Japanese in a sensitive and interesting way, I think it is worth exposing it to the British people."



Modern films such as "Dear Pyongyang" are calling into question the images of Japan projected by such classics as Akira Kurosawa's "Rashomon." © 2005 YONGHI YANG/CHEON, INC.

It might be argued that the festival circuit remains a niche outlet. Japanese films screened at festivals reach audiences of hundreds, compared with the tens of thousands that might see a commercial cinema or DVD release. There are fans who chafe when critics praise filmmakers such as Masahiro Kobayashi, who for nearly a decade won favorable reviews for isolated European festival screenings while failing to garner either commercial

releases abroad or commercial hits at home. Some ask whether films that receive such marginal releases can really be considered important representatives of a national film culture. But in truth, commercial success is often arbitrary, dependent on successful promotion or the vagaries of fashion. Films that don't fit into the obvious categories can still speak to an audience, if they find the right one.

Indeed, just as the festival triumph of "Rashomon" first won Japanese cinema an audience in the West, so today successful festival screenings can be a passport to commercial distribution. Zahlten points to "Hanai Sachiko no Kareina Shogai (The Glamorous Life of Sachiko Hanai)" (2003) a stylistically innovative "pink" (softcore) film spiced with barbed political commentary. Subtitled specifically for its international premiere at Nippon Connection, it went on to receive further festival screenings worldwide, followed by theatrical and DVD releases in Europe and North America. Thus, a film that at first glance might have seemed impossibly esoteric found its audience in the West.

Certainly, the chance to see such films is invigorating, given that images of Japan abroad are often wide of the mark. When many Westerners talk about "the real Japan," they mean such rarefied traditions as kabuki and *ikebana* (flower arrangement), the Zen garden and the tea ceremony. Like these, the films of Kurosawa, Mizoguchi and Ozu are beautiful and profound, but lack a direct connection with the lives of most Japanese people today. Yet one can say the same of the images promoted by gangster movies and J-horror: How much relevance do they really have to a country where one is more likely to be injured by an earthquake than by a mugger, and where the most frightening thing that most people encounter is a rightwing teenager with a loudspeaker and a black van?

Indeed, that disjunction makes the festival circuit relevant even to foreign residents of Japan hoping to gain a fresh insight into their adopted country. Residents who are less than fluent in Japanese bemoan the fact that most new releases are unavailable in subtitled prints, and that commercial DVDs only occasionally boast English subtitles. But events such as the Tokyo International Film Festival and Tokyo Filmex, both of which take place annually in the fall, show Japanese films with English subtitles, opening to resident foreigners images of Japan that might both reflect and challenge their own experiences and perceptions of the country.

Certainly, people who genuinely want to explore the real Japan, its complexities and contradictions, could do worse than observe it through the screens of the festival circuit.

Nippon Connection in Frankfurt (www.nipponconnection.com) runs till April 6. The Dejima Japanese Film Festival (www.dejimafilmfestival.nl/en/) screens on irregular dates in Amsterdam and other Dutch cities, while Raindance (www.raindance.co.uk) screens Japanese and other films each fall in London.