

Introduction

The Big Feast and the Hunger Afterward

Most cinephiles will tell you they're well versed in the cinema of Asia—after all, they're familiar with the work of Juzo Itami and Zhang Yimou. But ask them about Lau Kar-Leung or Ishiro Honda and you're likely to get blank stares. (I may be getting a blank stare from you right now, but hold on, please.) They've heard of Bruce Lee, of course, but weren't all of his films made in America?

The art-house community has served a certain level of Asian film very well for the last 50 years or so. But what about movies that might not have a pedigree, a scrapbook full of glowing reviews from high-class critics, or a few international film festival awards? Akira Kurosawa's films may have gotten onto the North American continent through festivals and art houses, but it was their subsequent wider releases in dubbed and edited form that placed them firmly in the public consciousness. Asian action and cult flicks—"genre" films to academia, "psychotronic movies" to the hipsters—have been sneaking into America through the back door for years, peddled by lower-level distributors and seedy exhibitors until the films acquired an unwholesome reputation. *Gamera the Invincible* lured innocent children into a matinee double bill just to shock their senses when the second feature, Mario Bava's bloody *Knives of the Avenger*, flashed across the screen. Teenagers tramped into unsanitary downtown fleapit theatres to see *four* back-to-back kung fu features, only to emerge and find themselves in a dangerous neighborhood after dark. And who was safe with *King Kong vs. Godzilla* thundering across their area drive-in screen? Asian cinema came from a culture as far away from our own as it could be without being extraterrestrial. While *The Makioka Sisters* were making diplomatic inroads uptown, we were getting our minds blown in the back row as the *Five Deadly Venoms* tore each other apart.

To be fair, art-film bastions like the Film Center of the Art Institute of Chicago (now the Gene Siskel Film Center) did their part to push the door open a little wider. Jackie Chan tried to crack the American market twice and failed, but when festivals of Hong Kong films started to play in art houses in

the late 1980s, word of mouth about stars like Chan, Sammo Hung, Brigitte Lin, and Chow Yun-fat began to spread.

But what really made the cult of Asian action cinema spread like wild-fire is home video. Converts began haunting the darker aisles of video stores searching out whatever titles they could find. Those lucky enough to live in a large city made frequent trips into Chinatown to plunder the imported tapes in video stores where no one spoke English, and when that failed to satisfy their appetites, turned to mail-order companies.

And now the cult has gone mainstream. Every time a Jackie Chan (or Sonny Chiba, or Chow Yun-fat, or Jet Li) film plays somewhere, somebody sees him for the first time and wants to see more. This process has been repeated so many times that we are now a nation that's very hungry for Asian movies, and every time we see one, the hunger returns.

It's an old cliché, if not an outright slur, that you're hungry again an hour after eating Chinese food. This belief is probably based more on the Americanized version of Chinese food than the real thing, but with Asian movies it's just the opposite. When you get the uncut stuff straight from the source, you want another fix as soon as you can get it. This is a book for everybody who went to see a film like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and came out with their heads spinning, wondering just what it was they'd just experienced. And how they can make it happen again.

What do you mean by “Asian Action & Cult Flicks”?

One of the most frequent requests from readers of VideoHound's best-selling guide *Cult Flicks & Trash Pics* has been that we include more Asian movies in future editions. Not every film from Asia is a cult flick or a trash pic, but a vampire movie is just a bit more exotic when it comes from Hong Kong. Don't think so? Then check out some of the vampire movies in this book.

When Visible Ink Press first proposed I write this book, it was to be just about Hong Kong action films. But the more I thought about it, the more sure I was that we'd need to expand the scope. Not that there isn't enough material—there are more titles from Hong Kong represented here than any other country, with more being released on video every week. But too many titles were co-produced with Japan or filmed in Thailand but financed by Korea—it just became too restrictive. And so, movies from all Asian countries have been accepted. The “action & cult flicks” label is a bit harder to explain—perhaps you'll have a better idea after you read the book. (You ARE going to read it, aren't you? You didn't buy it just to read this intro, did you?) We've also included selected reviews of films made by American studios with Asian stars, just so you know what they're up to when they come to visit.

Why is X included but Y is not?

Well the short and snarky answer is that there is a movie named X (look for it under, um, X) but there isn't one named Y.

The more complex answer is that certain criteria were enforced for inclusion in this volume. One was that the film had to be made in an Asian country (see list in the “Anatomy of an Entry” on p. xxviii). The film also had to be available on home video to viewers in the U.S. and Canada, either in English dubbed form or with English subtitles, in a format compatible with typical U.S. equipment (VHS tape or Region 1/0 DVD). Initially, it was thought that this only meant films available from U.S. video distributors, but the world is getting much more accessible to each of us every day. Region-free DVDs from Asian countries are easily available via the Internet from a variety of sources, and are sometimes much cheaper and more complete than the U.S. releases. We even found that while some Asian DVDs are marked Region 3 on the packaging, they don’t bother adding the region codes to the actual disc.

There are also some exceptions in the book I call “crystal ball entries”—movies not yet available according to the above categories, but likely to be soon. When the reviews of the three Gamera movies made in the 1990s were written, they were unavailable, but sure enough, as I write this they’ve been announced and will likely be for sale before the book goes on sale. There are also titles that will be available the day after I write this that I would’ve liked to include, but didn’t know about them.

Another reason is that the reviews were written based on the availability of the films. We don’t believe in reviewing movies we haven’t seen, and neither should you. Certain titles that likely should be here either were not provided by their video label, or we couldn’t find them in time. Some titles that you’d think you could find anywhere just happened to be absent while the book was being written, and we had to stop writing and publish the darn thing at some point!

The Name Game: Your review of *Challenge of Death* says it stars Wang Tao, but elsewhere the credits say Don Wong—what gives?

One of the biggest editorial challenges of this project has been Asian names. Jackie Chan has been known by at least 10 names in his life, and has been credited onscreen under several of them. I’ve seen names of Korean actors presented differently in ads, on screen, on video box copy, in reviews, and in subtitles—all for the same film! I made a list of these and showed them to a Korean restaurant manager I know to find out which is “correct.” She seemed confused, too, not knowing whether to give me the surname at the end, as she thought we wanted it in the U.S., or whether it should be in the middle, as presented in Korean. I ended up keeping them close to the surname-then-hyphenated-given-name style we’ve used for most Chinese names—at least the *Chinese* Chinese names.

Our “rule of them” has been to decide which name is most familiar to the American audience and stick with it throughout the text, listing every alternative name we find in the Cast Index. In most cases, for Chinese

names this means the English version of the name—most modern Chinese in Hong Kong choose an English given name when they reach their teens—but not always. I found many more films crediting Chan Lung than Peter Chan. Since most Japanese are known by their “reversed” (surname last) Western-style names, we’ve stuck with those.

One of my favorite old kung fu movies is *When Taekwondo Strikes*, but you don’t have a review for it!

Yes, we do—under the title *Sting of the Dragon Masters*. Asian films, like Asian actors, are usually known by more than one name, too. In some cases, we’ve used the title found in the most current and well-known video release, so *Drunken Master 2* is reviewed under its U.S. release title, *Legend of the Drunken Master*, and *Fong Sai-yuk* is listed as *The Legend*. However, I refused to use the title *Legend of the Red Dragon* for a film that’s been known and available in the U.S. as *New Legend of Shaolin* for years. I’ve also decided to list most Toho Studios monster movies under their official international titles, even though *Ebirah, Horror of the Deep* is much better known here as *Godzilla vs. the Sea Monster*. Personally, I’ve loved the title *Monster Zero* ever since I saw it in a theatre on a twin bill with *War of the Gargantuas*, but if Toho wants people to call the movie *Invasion of Astro Monster*, well, I bow to their efforts to simplify. Hopefully, they’ll make it worthwhile some day by setting up a U.S. video label and releasing all these movies in deluxe edition DVDs (or authorizing someone else to do the job).

Why aren’t there any Russian/Soviet movies included?

Russia is historically as much a part of Europe as Asia, and Russian film is more oriented toward European culture. We hope to include Russian films in a follow-up VideoHound guide to European cult flicks.

What’s this I see where some entries are marked “Asians in the USA”?

Just as it was difficult to confine our subject to just one country, it’s been tough to keep it contained to just Asia. When people read a book that reviews almost every Jackie Chan movie, they don’t want you to ignore *The Protector*. If we got too picky, we’d have to leave out *Enter the Dragon* because it was produced by Warner Bros. We didn’t go so far as to hunt down every American film with a Asian actor, and there are a few we missed that we should have included, but I think we got a nice representation of the career continuity we were looking for.

Hey, you got any cartoons in here?

Another big request we got after the first edition of *Cult Flicks* was that we include some anime titles. By definition, Japanese animation is even more important to this book. Hopefully, we’ll be bringing you a whole VideoHound title dedicated to animation soon, but in the meantime we wanted to make sure anime was represented here.

Heh. Heh. How about some porn?

Okay, so there a lot of very weird Japanese “pink” films out there in which people are having sex with robots and space monsters and stuff. We’re aware of it, and we’ve even included some of the more interesting titles. But, geez, we want this to be a family publication, and even if you’re family is less repressed than mine, we want our moms to be able to read the book, y’know?

Hey, you screwed up! I found a mistake in...

What? A “mistake”? In tihs book?

The cinema of Asia is more difficult to research than that of any other region. That’s not an excuse—just a fact. Even in Hong Kong, where the film business has been healthy for over 50 years, studios did not make a practice of keeping full records on all their films. And even if they had some data, it’s unlikely to have been translated into English. However, our knowledge of Asian cinema increases daily, especially with the Internet. Our best hope is that this book has collected together knowledge from many different sources, while minimizing whatever misinformation is passed on. It’s hoped that an expanded and updated edition of *VideoHound’s Dragon* will be available every few years, and that you’ll let us know if there’s a mistake we should fix or a title we should make sure we include. If you’d like to write me, I can be reached in care of the Visible Ink Press offices, or at this e-mail address: dragon@visibleink.com.

It’s our sincere hope that this book causes you many sleepless nights. You know—the good kind. The kind that makes you want more.

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