

Long way for a Taiwanese Oscar

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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As Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* made Oscars history as the first foreign-language film to win the Best Picture award, some may start asking, what about Taiwan? With South Korea opening a new door for Asian cinema on the Western stage, will Taiwanese films ever have a chance to enjoy the same top honor?

Actually, that is getting way ahead of ourselves. Taiwanese need to first ask if they are even proud of their own film industry. The vast majority of moviegoers prefer Western, South Korean and Japanese productions, as evidenced by the scant showtimes allotted to Taiwanese films at local theaters and the empty seats during the screenings. It is quite common to speak to a Taiwanese who has not seen a single Taiwanese film all year.

Taiwan's arthouse films have enjoyed success on the festival circuit for years, including at the Cannes Film Festival. While the creative merits of those films are indisputable, they are not very accessible to mass audiences. What Taiwan needs is a solid cinematic "superstar" on the level of pop diva Chang Hui-mei (張慧嫻), better known as A-mei, that the nation can get behind.

While Taiwanese have been justly proud of director Ang Lee (李安), whose 2000 film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* swept the 2001 award ceremonies, including an Oscar for Best Foreign Film, one of four Oscars it won, his works in recent years have been more Hollywood, less Taiwanese. He had to leave Taiwan to find success.

Look at the situation in China. While its popular productions are primarily directed at domestic audiences and will probably not be winning any Oscars any time soon, its people at least adore them. Big budget Chinese productions that are virtually unknown outside the nation regularly compete with and at times surpass Hollywood productions in Chinese theaters.

This goes without saying in South Korea, as local hit *Extreme Job* beat out *Avengers: Endgame* to top last year's box office sales. Taiwan's highest grossing domestic film last year, *Detention* (監獄), did not even make it to the top 10.

However, do not blame the industry. The talent seems to be there.

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Taiwan has had a slower start than South Korea when it comes to entertainment, and while Koreans have been proud of their distinct culture for centuries, this notion of promoting “Taiwanese-ness” has only emerged in the past three decades or so.

Things are looking up. The quality of Taiwanese productions has improved significantly in the past few years and the government has been pouring more resources into supporting filmmakers.

The appreciation and interest in Taiwanese culture continues to surge and that is evident in all forms of entertainment, from games to comic books to television series. Perhaps it is just a matter of time before it becomes fashionable to go watch a local film.

However, here is the thing that needs balancing — making local films appeal to locals and stand out to foreigners by incorporating distinctly Taiwanese elements, while keeping the themes and the nuances, such as humor, universally appealing, so the films do not seem overly provincial.

There are so many local films that are still chock full of tired and crass Taiwan-specific gags (a good start would be to stop putting gangsters in every mainstream movie unless it relates to the story) that even locals are sick of them.

There is a reason people still prefer Hollywood, and Taiwanese cinema needs to find the right mix of both sides to be successful at home. Then we can talk about the Oscars.

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