

The Genealogy of a Marginalized Art Movement - The Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival

Zekai Zhao

University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract

The 1980s brought forward movements such as advocacy for racial representation which led to the creation of numerous ethnic film festivals, one being the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival. This festival is a pioneer for the exhibition of Asian-created media art in Canada, providing an outlet for people of Asian descent to connect their heritage with North American culture and to shatter prejudices. At the same time, it allows Asian North American artists to gain visibility in the Eurocentric Canadian arts industry. This research explores the genealogy of the Reel Asian Film Festival by drawing from local media scholars and mainstream media outlets to highlight the history and motivation behind the festival, as well as its current and future direction. In addition, through a quantitative review of over 20 years of festival program guides and director ethnic data, the results demonstrated that while the early Reel Asian Film Festival mainly focused on exhibiting film and television works by East Asian artists, starting from 2010, media art by non-East Asian artists was also given more opportunities to be displayed at the festival. As Toronto's premier arts festival, the advancement of the Reel Asian Film Festival will enable Asian artists to gain prestige in the Canadian arts community and disrupt the long-standing dominance of Eurocentric Canadian art.

Keywords: film festivals; representation; race; Diasporas; marginalization

Introduction

The Reel Asian Film Festival provides a platform for marginalized, diasporic Asian artists to present their cultural identities within a dominant Canadian culture. By exhibiting the work of diverse Asian artists, the festival breaks down social stereotypes of Asian North Americans and enhances the visibility of Asian culture in mainstream society. This research draws on news articles, local media scholars, and film sector archives to demonstrate the evolution of the Reel Asian Film Festival in a Eurocentric-Canadian-driven society. It examines how Asian North American artists have promoted Asian culture in the Eurocentric Canadian arts industry, the

motivations behind the Reel Asian Film Festival from a cultural and historical perspective, what the film festival has contributed to the Asian community and artists in North America, as well as what existing problems the film festival has and what changes it needs to make in the future.

Context: Motivations and Creations

The establishment of Canada as a nation was due to early European colonization, resulting in European colonizers becoming “the agent of Canadian nationalism”, while later arrivals of colour were treated as “others” (Bannerji, 2000, p. 42-46). As a nation of immigrants, the discourse of diversity as a tool of the ruling class sought to create “a sphere which claims to be outside of hegemony” in order to create impartial social institutions (Bannerji, 2000, p. 51). To consolidate their authority, the ruling class uses pluralism as a political umbrella to shield themselves from their colonial past and slavery. The discourse of pluralism provides a homogenous socio-ideological framework and maintains the continued domination of the core power (Bannerji, 2000, p. 50). The social problems faced by different cultures under the narrative of pluralism are deliberately ignored by the ruling class, where “people can be blamed for bringing on their own misfortunes” (Bannerji, 2000, p. 50). The dominant society was unable to confront the history and culture of underrepresented groups, which were referred to as “visible minorities” by the colonizers (Bannerji, 2000, p. 41). Despite their contributions to economic and social development, their efforts were rarely recognized.

Such systemic discrimination can be traced to past anti-Asian laws implemented in Canada. In 1902, Chairman Roger Conger Clute of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration Into British Columbia submitted an inquiry to raise the existing \$100 head tax on

Chinese immigrants to \$500. Clute stated that it is not possible for the Chinese to assimilate to “western ideas” due to their habits and traditions, as well as their immediate need to group together to form a community within the greater Eurocentric community. This law does not recognize the status and identity of ethnic Chinese in Canada since they are considered “a foreign substance within”. The Chinese community is portrayed as being an inferior and “servile class” compared to the dominant European culture, and they are deemed as having a negative impact on mainstream society (Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration Into British Columbia, 1902, p. 278). In the following half-century, further discriminatory laws were established, including the Chinese Exclusion Act and the internment of Japanese Canadians. It was not until the 1970s that social movements gained momentum and a cultural shift took place.

The late 1980s specifically were a period of activism for the Canadian Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) community against discrimination. This led to the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988, which “recognizes minorities’ right to enjoy their culture”

(Heritage Community Foundation, 2010). In turn, the BIPOC community realized that it can participate in public spaces to resist the systemic racial discrimination brought about by the Eurocentric-Canadian society. The change in identity politics offered the BIPOC community a way to present and reinvent themselves through visual media (Fernandez, 2006, p. 22). This transformation resulted in the creation of various festivals that are “often organized around a specific ethnicity, orientation or artistic practice” (Bailey & Lee, 2004, p. 304). It was in this context that the Reel Asian Film Festival was born in 1997, focusing on Asian diasporic narratives.

The festival subliminally conveys to its audience the definition of Asian-ness. In a Eurocentric-Canadian society, the misplaced Asian image has made Asian culture a medium of ridicule. The stereotyping of Asian culture breeds sexism and racial discrimination against Asian communities in Canada (Chang, 2004, p. 4-5). For example, Asians may be more likely to be mistreated and seen as an alien if they do not have a standard English accent due to perceptions that a lower proficiency signifies resistance to assimilation (Kim, Wang, Deng, Alvarez & Li, 2011, p. 290). When looking at Asian culture in Canada, the terms ‘Asian’ and ‘Canadian’ are often combined. This combination affirms the distinction between Asians and Canadians and emphasizes the absolute discourse of White Canadians in mainstream society. They explain the presence of Asians in Canada, yet the labelling of Asian Canadians makes them a marginalized group. This misinterpretation of Asians is addressed in the Reel Asian Film Festival.

A film festival focusing on Asian themes is not an idea that just appears on a whim. The history of Asian media art in North America can be traced back to the 1916 film “The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East Mingles with the West” by the Chinese American director Marion Wong (Shih, 2004, p. 39). Over the next 50 years, Asian American media artists produced many works with an Asian cultural background. Keith Lock was one of the first Asian Canadian directors in Canada, with his well-received 1975 film “Everything Everywhere Again Alive” (Shih, 2004, p. 41). Asian culture was emerging in the media in the 1970s, but it did not become part of mainstream media. In the 1980s, many Asian artists became involved in documentary and animation production in Canada. Wayne Wang’s work “Chan is Missing” in 1982 began to combine new identity politics and media through storytelling, highlighting more values of the Asian community in North America and enhancing the cultural confidence of Asians (Shih, 2004, p. 42-43).

Anita Lee, one of the founders of the Reel Asian Film Festival, made her first short film in 1994, for which she was also invited to Asian film festivals in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. These Asian American filmmakers inspired and showed her that Asian media art was developing in North America. At these festivals, she felt a strong “sense of community” (Bailey & Lee, 2004, p. 304). Desh Pardesh, an arts festival celebrating the queer and South Asian community in Toronto, allowed the South Asian diasporic groups involved in the event to also

gain a sense of identity.

Desh Pardesh made them feel that “they have a home here” (Fernandez, 2006, p. 18). Inspired by the Asian American Film Festival, Lee wanted to create a film festival that would unite Asian diaspora artists in Canada, provide a more linguistic framework for Asian culture in North America, end the culture wars, and create a truly inclusive environment. The festival would make more Canadians aware of the diversity of Asian cultures in North America and create a home where more Asian communities could be included. The festival’s original intent was to have the artists at the heart of the festival rather than catering to the audience.

Summary of Major Key Leaders/Artists in the Movement

The Reel Asian Film Festival, also known as the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival, is the representative film festival in Canada for the Asian community. According to the Reel

Asian Film Festival’s website, the Reel Asian Film Festival’s objective is to provide a platform for Asian artists from around the world to display their works, to allow for greater Asian representation in the media art industry, and to increase the interest in Asian-created media arts in Canada (Reel Asian, 2022). From an artistic standpoint, the festival programming offers a diverse selection of featured videos ranging from commercial Asian films to video productions about the Asian diaspora. The organization also states that they offer competitive fees to their artists as well as offer educational opportunities for young filmmakers to share their stories and develop their media arts skills (Reel Asian, 2022). However, at the forefront of its vision is the festival’s social objective to bring attention to Asian representation on the big screen. The festival empowers Asian-identifying artists to control their own narratives and dispel stereotypes shown in mainstream media. The Asian audience can also feel seen and heard when they participate in the Reel Asian Film Festival, while non-Asians have the chance to learn more about their neighbours.

The genesis of this event started when a group of young East Asians working in the North American film industry organized the first four-day Reel Asian Film Festival, with team leaders and founders Anita Lee, Andrew Sun, and Ann Chiu. The contributions from both the organizers and the artists were central to the success of the film festival, pushing the boundaries to explore diverse and real Asian topics (Reel Asian, 1997). Anita Lee was not only the founder of the Reel Asian Film Festival but also the Executive Producer of the Ontario Centre of the National Film Board of Canada and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (NFBONE, 2019). From 2000 to 2020, she worked on and directed 52 films, including short films, documentaries and television series (IMDb, 2021). Lee’s dedication to filmmaking over the past two decades has helped her gain more support among Asian North American filmmakers. Andrew Sun was an Associate Director of the Reel Asian Film Festival (Reel

Asian, 1997). When Lee decided to create the event, Sun mentioned that “Anita approached me with this gem of an idea” (CBC Arts, 2016). Sun was excited about her idea and was willing to support the development of Asian cinema in North America. He was further motivated when they “met and hung out with (and got drunk with) a lot of cool Asian American filmmakers and saw the passionate work they did, and that really sparked us into action” (CBC Arts, 2016).

Mina Shum, a Chinese Canadian filmmaker, had her work “Double Happiness” screened as part of the film retrospective exhibition at the 2016 film festival (Reel Asian, 2016). Shum is a Hong Kong immigrant who grew up in Canada (CFMDC, 2021). “Double Happiness” is the story of Jade Li, a Chinese woman living in Canada who is forced to live a double life (Reel Asian, 2016). Her parents do not approve of her choice of partner and career because it goes against traditional cultural perceptions. She has to balance her own needs while also trying to conform to her parents’ expectations. The movie also shadows the North American film industry for its unfair treatment of the Asian community. The film shows the conflict between the young neoliberal-influenced generation of Chinese Canadian families and the traditional Chinese culture. It conveys to a Western-educated audience the difference between Confucian-influenced values and Western values. Critics described “Double Happiness” as a revolutionary movie that “helped pave the way for the appreciation of Asian diaspora films” in the Canadian film industry (Reel Asian, 2016).

As a member of the Reel Asian Film Festival Advisory Board, Richard Fung is involved in and supports the organization of events and has been featured as a media artist in nine festivals (Reel Asian, 2016). His media work focuses on queer, AIDS, racist and homophobic issues among Asian North Americans. “Sea In The Blood” told audiences about his experience with thalassemia and his journey to meet his partner, Tim, in his fight against AIDS (Reel Asian, 2000). His 1984 documentary, “Orientations”, follows the lives of 14 gay Asians in Toronto. At the 2016 festival, “Re:Orientations” used the documentary format to present the changes in their lives over the past 30 years (Reel Asian, 2016). At the 1999 festival, the video art curated by Fung, “This Queen’s Cantonese”, presented the lifestyle of a gay Asian male living on the west coast of Canada. The film’s style is confessional and autobiographical, visually striking through canto-pop and sexuality (Reel Asian, 1999). With a central theme of Asian gender identity, Fung uses a variety of expressions to present the Asian Canadian LGBTQ scene and attempt to break down stereotypes of Asian male asexuality.

Rea Tajiri is a Japanese American filmmaker and producer and is currently an associate professor at the School of Theatre, Film and Media Arts at Temple University (Temple University, 2021). Her work was presented at the 1997 and 1998 film festivals, and the focus was on the exploration of Japanese Americans. “Strawberry Fields” was the first work shown at the first festival (Reel Asian, 1997). The historical significance of this movie cannot be overlooked as it has been instrumental in the continued success of the festival. The film tells

the story of two young Japanese American women on a road trip who sees photographs of their unknown grandfather's experience of the Internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The use of young Japanese Americans' forgetfulness of history highlights the contempt mainstream history has for the rights of Japanese Americans. At the 1998 festival, "Obits" is a groundbreaking musical comedy of death and redemption (IMDb, 2021). Her work offers a different narrative and performance model for telling the stories of Asian North Americans.

Jane Kim was actively involved and served as Artistic Director of the Reel Asian Film Festival in 2002 and 2003. Her Korean Canadian heritage provides much of the cultural context for her work. At the 1998 festival, the 12-minute film, "Crickets", shows a single mother's negligence of her 10-year-old daughter, Sue, who is exposed to the adult world through electronic devices and must deal with the consequences of seeing it (Reel Asian, 1998). Kim's debut short film has led to more exhibitions of similar experimental shorts for the festival to follow. At the 2000 festival, "Wide-Eyed" addressed the confusion faced by Korean Canadians who are unable to gain recognition in mainstream society. She tells the story of a 16-year-old Korean Canadian girl who fears that her appearance does not live up to Western aesthetic ideals (Reel Asian, 2000). Her film conveys to the audience the collapse of cultural values resulting from the Korean community's inability to be recognized in White society. At the 2006 festival, the film, "Paper, Scissors, Rock", showed the audience the independent and confident side of Korean women.

Many other media artists also play an important role in the Reel Asian Film Festival. Ann Marie Fleming, a Japanese filmmaker, has participated in several festivals including 1997, 1999 and 2003. Her work "Automatic Writing" and "The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam" revolves around the lives of Chinese people who came to North America in the 19th century (Reel Asian, 1997-2003). Greg Pak, who is Korean American, participated in several film festivals in 1997, 1998 and 2000. His early work revolved around Korean American families and Asian sexuality such as with "Fighting Grandpa" and "All Amateur Ecstasy" (Reel Asian, 1997-1998). Miki Onodera is a Japanese Canadian filmmaker who has participated in several festivals including 2000, 2001 and 2016 where her work focuses on Asian lesbians. "The Basement Girl" is about a young Asian woman's problems with her lesbian relationships (Reel Asian, 2001). Ho Tam is a Chinese Canadian media artist who has participated in several film festivals including 2003, 2006 and 2008. His work "Confessions of A Salesman" explores the discrimination against Asian North Americans and their desire for a successful future (Reel Asian, 2008).

The festival from 1997 to 2003 mostly showed films that were more experimental and artistic. It can be seen that in the post-2010 period, the choice of films is half experimental media and the other half more successful Asian commercial films, such as "Soul Mate" (Reel Asian, 2016). When they choose to show Asian commercial films, they would present the movies in the suburbs of the Greater Toronto Area, such as Richmond Hill (Reel Asian, 1998-2020).

When they show experimental films, they choose to present them in downtown Toronto. The festival's commercial sponsorship has also been increasing year by year. At the time of the first festival in 1997, they did not receive major sponsorship. From 1998 to 2020, Canadian corporations and media were more willing to sponsor the festival, with the number of sponsors increasing by approximately 470% (Reel Asian, 1998-2020). The commercial appeal of the Reel Asian Film Festival is a testament to the success of the festival over its 24 years. Its success recognizes the efforts of Asian North American artists and exposes a wider Canadian audience to the Asian North American culture.

Opinion: "Asian-ness"

However, what is considered Asian? The term "Oriental" was first invented by Europeans and it included only the Middle East and India. Later on, the concept of Asia was created when Europeans explored more of the region (Sooritakumaran, 2020, p. 221). For example, some of the conceptions of Asia, such as the name "The Silk Road", were popularised by Sven Hedin's 1938 publication "The Silk Road" (Ball, 2016, p. 156). The Asian continent contains two-thirds of the world's population, and its sheer scope has led Western societies to view certain parts of Asia as the primary representatives of Asia. That led to the Reel Asian Film Festival's one-sided idea about Asian communities in its early years.

In Figure 1, the Reel Asian Film Festival from 1997 to 2000 included directors (or moderators) of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Korean ethnicity. All but one of these directors are of East Asian descent. From 2000 to 2010, the festival featured directors of predominantly East Asian ethnicity but also included Filipino, Indian, Malaysian, Thai, and Vietnamese directors. Southeast Asians made up 20.9% of the total directors during this time, less than East Asian directors. From this graph, South Asian directors are not included in the 1997 to 2010 festival list, except for one Indian director. This is because the main founders of the Reel Asian Film Festival are of East Asian descent, and the festival did not want to conflict with the interests of Desh Pardesh in Toronto. This leads to the festival focusing more on telling the story of East Asian culture (Bailey & Lee, 2004, p. 306). From 2011 to 2021, non-East Asian directors participating in the festival included Afghani, Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Filipino, Indian, Indonesian, Iranian, Iraqi, Kazakh, Laotian, Lebanese, Malaysian, Nepalese, Pakistani, Singaporean, Sri Lankan, Thai, and Vietnamese. Their presence expands the festival's Asian profile and adds directors from Southeast, South, Central, and West Asia. However, non-East Asian directors make up 36.1% of the total, an increase of 15.2% from 2000 to 2010.

In Figure 2, East Asian directors (or moderators) accounted for 69.4% of the festival from 1997 to 2021, Southeast Asians for 18.7%, South Asians for 7.6%, West Asians for 1.0% and Central Asians for 0.1%. This shows the importance of East Asians in the festival, while other regions are not the backbone of the event. However, when analyzing Figure 1, it can be seen that directors of Indian origin have become more willing to participate in the Reel Asian Film

Festival since 2012 due to the closure of Desh Pardesh in 2001 (South Asian Visual Arts Centre, 2017). This resulted in directors of Indian heritage offering their work to the Reel Asian Film Festival which proved popular with the South Asian Canadian community. In recent years, the producers have felt the need to present a more “complete” Asia (CBC Arts, 2016), and have therefore included directors of Central and West Asian origin, such as Afghani, Iranian, Iraqi, Kazakh, and Lebanese. Although there are not many works by Central Asian film directors, the festival is closer to its goal of demonstrating a “complete” Asia.

In the festival, audiences are forced to accept that East Asians are the main body of Asia. This is solely because of the wealth divide between Asian countries. The festival’s selection of programmes emphasizes that Asia is a circle, with East Asians at the centre of the circle, Southeast Asians standing at the second level, South Asians at the edge, and West Asians and Central Asians squeezed into a blank area that is neither Asian nor European (Sooritakumaran, 2020, p. 223). The organizers argued that the visibility of Asian ethnicity at the festival depended on their “political and economic influence” and took into account the distribution of Asian communities in North America. For the Asian American population, “roughly 7 million identify as Chinese (including Taiwanese), Japanese, or Korean” (Schiavenza, 2016). Asian Americans identifying as having Indian, Filipino, and Vietnamese backgrounds account for an equal amount but are not perceived as Asian in mainstream society. Many Americans, after seeing the political and economical strength of East Asia, subconsciously believe that East Asia is representative of Asia while other non-East Asian countries are not. Therefore, the reason behind the popularity of The Reel Asian Film Festival seems to be that it emphasizes itself as an East Asian film festival which fits into the North American audience’s narrative that East Asia is Asia.

Film festivals have led to a lack of recognition for non-East Asian artists, resulting in the increased marginalization of communities such as West and Central Asians in North America. For the 2020 and 2021 festivals, the organizers have made improvements by inviting more Southeast, South, Central, and West Asian artists. The film festival is attempting to break down the perception that East Asia is representative of Asia. Through the Reel Asian Film Festival’s 2021 Impact Report, it can be seen that this change has affected the cultural identity of the audience demographic (Reel Asian, 2021, p.11). From 2020 to 2021, the percentage of Southeast Asians who attended went up from 16.0% to 19.0% and South Asians also saw an increase of 6.1% to 10.6%. The percentage of East Asians decreased from 24.8% to 14.1%. This demonstrates the distribution of cultural identities evening out for the audience. However, the proportion of East Asian artists is still much higher than that of artists from other Asian regions. In the future, the festival’s management needs to be more diverse than just having predominantly East Asian management to plan the festival. These organizers with diverse Asian backgrounds would minimize the preferentialism and invite more talented and representative artists who are not only of East Asian descent. The Reel Asian Film Festival is

representative of the Asian community as a whole, not just the East Asian community. The festival is an influential and well-known Asian film festival in North America and the management has changed its strategy since 2010 to attract a diverse Asian group to come and feel a sense of belonging. This is the key to the sustainability and future success of the Reel Asian Film Festival.

Conclusion

The Reel Asian Film Festival, as a marginalized event, is representative and historically significant in terms of its influence on the Eurocentric-Canadian culture. Through the years, the festival has seen many developments from its conception to the present day. The festival's definition of Asian culture is subjective, with a predominantly East Asian focus and a smaller selection of media art of other Asian descent. However, with time, the festival has recognized the uneven distribution of the cultural identity of participating directors and the stories that were being told. This is reflected in the increase of non-East Asian directors and a more even distribution of the audience demographics.

The festival is generally a platform for Asian North American artists to gain greater exposure to Asian culture and gain recognition from the mainstream film industry. It helps Asian North American artists to break the stereotype of Canadian culture being dominated by White European artists, and to obtain more sponsorship for the festival. Each of the participating artists has interpreted Asian culture in different dimensions, and they have contributed to a greater understanding of Asians in Canada on political, social, and economic levels. The festival also provides a home for Asian North Americans to feel a sense of belonging, where they can discover their cultural identity and build bridges between the Reel Asian Film Festival and the Asian community.

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Appendix

Figure 1:

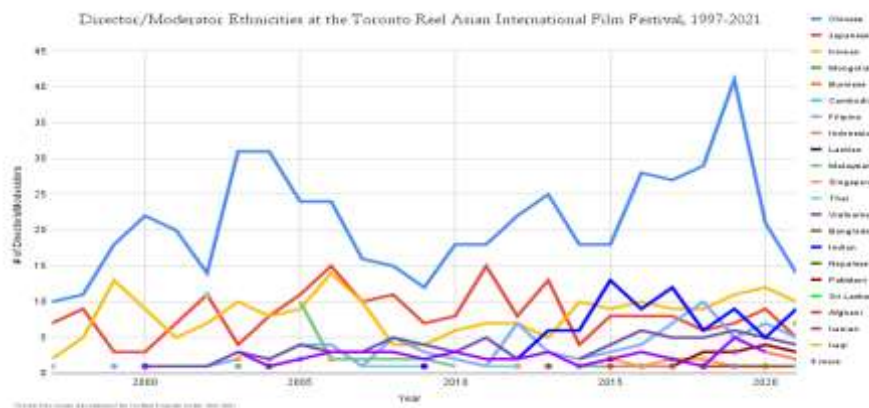


Figure 2:

Percentage of Number of Director/Moderator Ethnicities Based on Region, 1997-2021

