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Edgy, dark and tolerated: 'China noir' seeks Cannes breakthrough

Tales from the shadowy edges of modern Chinese society aim to turn heads at the Cannes film festival, showing the growing scope and sophistication of the world's second-

Both films are part of a growing "mainland noir" film movement that is expanding the boundaries of a Chinese film industry strictly controlled by government censorship over topics such as violence, corruption and sex. Shot and situated far from the gleaming lights of modern China's metropolises, these films feature haunted anti-heroes dwelling on the edges of society. The box office success of 2017's critically lauded "Looming Storm"—about one man's hunt for a serial killer stalking a small town—showed that previously taboo subjects are increasingly tolerated by China's National Film Administration.

Diao's last crime thriller "Black Coal, Thin Ice" picked up the Golden Bear top prize at the Berlin Film Festival in 2014 with its gripping tale of a wronged policeman looking for redemption. It was also a global box office ground-breaker for low-budget Chinese films, collecting around \$17 million after successful domestic and limited international runs. "These are exciting times," said Alexandre Mallet-Guy, producer of "The Wild Goose Lake". "Our film is noir, with a very complex plot and it is very stylish."

Crime and corruption

Diao is currently locked away in an editing suite in Beijing working on a final cut of his new production, made with the support of companies in both China and France.

"It's even more stylish than 'Black Coal Thin Ice,'" said its Paris-based producer Mallet-Guy. "He is very influenced by noir. Most of the films from China that go international are genre films, actioners and those with big budgets. But hope-

fully we are seeing a new generation and a new style of film."

Over the past two decades the Chinese film market has gone from being very humble beginnings to one that produces around 600 movies a year with box office receipts now topping \$8.5 billion—second only to the North American market's \$11.4 billion. Chinese audiences have previously flocked to a string of locally produced blockbusters such as the bombastic military-themed "Wolf Warrior 2" (2017), which became China's biggest-grossing locally made film with takings of an estimated \$870 million.

But tastes appear to be changing. Last year saw the surprise phenomenal success of the Wen Muye-directed "Dying to Survive", which focused on the illicit trade for cancer drugs, and made an estimated \$450 million for its investors. At the same time, China's arthouse scene has been hotting up.

International festival heavyweight Marco Muller was among the first to introduce Chinese cinema to the world through his work with the Venice and Rotterdam festivals. Since 2017 the Italian has hooked up with leading Chinese director Jia Zhangke to put together the annual Pingyao Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon International Film Festival. Jia's last film "Ash is Purest White", which featured his long-time partner Zhao Tao, was in competition at Cannes last year, and also played with themes of crime and corruption.

Zhang film pulled

"Those are the films that sell well internationally," said Muller. "They are edgy, dark and

exciting. They still have to be approved by the various departments of government but it seems that more and more filmmakers are looking into noir." Like American "film noir", which first emerged in the 1920s and enjoyed its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s when movies' moral fiber was strictly controlled by the notorious Production Code, its Chinese variant centers on stories around crime set mostly in the shadowy fringes of society.

China recently introduced regulations that require filmmakers to be handed a "dragon seal" of approval before films are permitted to screen at festivals. But the production team behind "The Wild Goose Lake" say they have been given the all clear. Less is known about Zu's production, although the film has reportedly been officially passed to screen. However, Chinese officials are capable of last-minute interventions—and fame is no protection.

Zhang Yimou, the maker of "Raise the Red Lantern", and one of the country's best known auteurs, had to pull his latest movie, "One Second", from Berlin in February on government orders on the eve of the festival. Another Chinese movie "Better Days" that had been scheduled for a screening, did not get shown because it failed to get the go-ahead in time from Beijing's censors.—AFP



In this file photo Chinese director Diao Yinan poses with the Golden Bear for Best Film and the Silver Bear for Best Actor trophies during a press conference following the awarding ceremony of the 64th Berlinale Film Festival in Berlin. — AFP

largest movie market. The Diao Yinan-directed crime thriller "The Wild Goose Lake" is going head-to-head with the likes of Quentin Tarantino's highly anticipated "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood" for the festival's top prize, the Palme d'Or. Similar gritty themes are expected to be explored in director Zu Fen's "Summer of Changsha", which is competing in the more edgy Un Certain Regard section.



Palm trees are seen seeping through a palm, similar to the Palme d'Or, on the opening day of the 72nd Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southeastern France. — AFP

Cannes ups the glamour with \$1 billion facelift

After years of living off their glamorous reputation, Cannes's five-star hotels are getting a \$1-billion makeover to make them fit to host Hollywood's A-listers. With eye-watering room rates during the film festival—which starts Tuesday—the French Riviera town's ageing grand behemoths are spending a fortune to get back their glitz.

Its seafront strip, La Croisette, has become a long line of luxury boutiques in recent years, with top-end French and Italian brands like Chanel, Dior and Gucci vying for the jet set's petty cash. But over the years, some of the town's historic hotels have been caught resting on their laurels—a fact not lost on clients. "We went to sleep a bit," admitted Michel Chevillon, head of the Cannes hoteliers union, which counts 133 establishments among its members.

"Bookings didn't fall but there was a drop in customer satisfaction levels. And then the big international chains arrived. "So to keep our share of the market, we had to get it just right," he added. Huge sums are now being invested in the town's luxury hotels, Chevillon said, none more so than by the Qatari owners of the Belle Epoque Carlton hotel, whose domed turrets elegantly dominate the seafront strip. Their spending on the facelift is likely to reach 300 million euros (\$337 million), he said.

34,000 euros a night

But such an outlay was crucial, Chevillon argued, admitting that the sector had "got into a bit of a rut". He reeled off a string of hotels that have undergone major work or expansion in recent years—the Radisson Blu and the Marriott in 2009, then the Majestic in 2010 with a new wing. The Martinez, Cannes biggest hotel with 409 rooms, reopened last year after an "unprecedented" 150-million-euro upgrade in which everything was redone. Today, its swankiest suite costs 34,000 euros a night during the summer—a rate that soars to an undisclosed amount during the film festival.

"And if you look at all the smaller independent hotels, which account for half of the 5,500 rooms in town, and which have been investing all year round... you're not far from a billion euros over the decade," he calculated. "For a town of 70,000 residents, that's rare." The myth of the French Riviera began in the late 19th-century when

the European aristocracy began wintering there, with Cannes quickly becoming a destination to rival Paris, Barcelona, Vienna and Budapest.

Today its palatial villas are owned by Russian oligarchs and wealthy Gulf potentates, with Cannes a key destination on the luxury yacht circuit with Rolex, Louis Vuitton and Chopard just a few of the 70 top brands jostling for space along La Croisette. It is also one of Europe's top conference destinations drawing thousands for MIPCOM, the world's biggest television and streaming market, and dozens of other prestigious events.

Buffing up 'the Bunker'

This week some 40,000 people from the world of cinema will descend on the town, among them 5,000 media professionals, with hotels facing increasing competition from the explosion of private lets organized by the likes of Airbnb. Roughly 6,000 homes will be let out this year. In such a competitive market, hoteliers need to stay ahead of the curve in terms of design, using fabrics and materials that are bang on-trend and technology that is cutting edge, Chevillon said.

"After five years, decor is no longer fashionable. After seven, it's not considered chic and after 10 it's somewhat obsolete," he added. The Martinez has bet on an unusual mix of pastel tones to complement its Art Deco heritage, which no hotelier would have dared in the past. The Palais des Festivals—where the films in competition are shown—has also undergone a major makeover.

Known as the Bunker, this white concrete colossus with tinted windows brings in an annual \$65 million euros from more than 50 events per year, of which 190 million euros is generated by the film festival. Hastily built in 1982, it has recently undergone 100 million euros of renovation work, with a further investment of 62 million euros due by 2024, to add another cinema on the sixth floor and revamp areas around the red carpet. "It will never be the Louvre but it's definitely more attractive than it was," admitted Cannes mayor David Lisnard.—AFP

Five rising stars to watch for at Cannes film festival

With the Cannes film festival's main competition bursting with big-name stars and directors like Quentin Tarantino and Terrence Malick, we pick five rising talents to watch out for at this year's festival:

Camila Morrone

Up to now she may be best known as Leonardo DiCaprio's impossibly glamorous girlfriend, but the Argentinian model is about to make a name for herself as an actress to be reckoned with. Her stand-out performance as a daughter of an opioid-addicted Iraq veteran in "Mickey and the Bear" brings real depth to the US indie film, which is showing in the festival's ACID section. Morrone, 21, has not picked her acting talent—nor her looks—up off the ground.

Both her parents were models and her mother Lucila Sola is a television star in Buenos Aires, although the 43-year-old is probably best known as Al Pacino's erstwhile partner. The pair are no longer together—the 75-year-old Pacino having taken up with a younger actress last year. Morrone had regarded him as her "stepfather" during their nine years her mother and Pacino were together. The two will be reunited on the Cannes red carpet with Pacino starring in Quentin Tarantino's "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood"

Mati Diop

The first black African woman to compete for Cannes' top prize, actress-turned-director Diop comes from Senegalese film royalty. She is the niece of Djibril Diop Mambety, the pioneering maker of "Touki Bouki", a 1973 film premiered at Cannes which went on to inspire Beyonce and Jay-Z. The pop power couple referenced the movie, in the form of the bull-horn handlebars of its heroes' motorbike, in the poster for their 2014 tour "On The Run II".

French-born Diop, 36, the daughter of musician Wasis Diop, has already made a documentary about her uncle's ground-breaking story about a couple who try to ride their bike all the way to France. Now she is making history herself, she told the Hollywood Reporter she feels a "mixture of apprehension and joy... What I represent exceeds me and doesn't belong to me." Her film, "Atlantics", is also about a group of construction workers who decide to leave Senegal for a better life in Europe.



Argentinean model Camila Morrone

Robert Eggers

His debut film "The Witch" is regarded as a modern horror classic, and the famously obsessive young US director seems to have made no compromises for his second, "The Lighthouse", which is premiering in the Directors' Fortnight. Conditions on the set were so harsh, according to Robert Pattinson, who heads the cast alongside Willem Dafoe, that it was the "closest I've come to punching a director", the actor admitted. An exhausted Pattinson described how he remonstrated with Eggers after he had to do one take five times on a freezing Nova Scotia beach.

"I feel like you're just spraying a fire hose in my face," he told the director. "And he was like, 'I was spraying a fire hose in your face.' It was like some kind of torture," said Pattinson. The pair are still firm friends, however, with the star sworn to silence on the plot of the historical black-and-white horror film "set in the world of old sea-faring myths".

Waad al-Kateab

The Syrian documentary maker faced an uphill struggle bringing her film to Cannes. "For Sama" records five years of al-Kateab's own life as an aspiring journalist in her besieged hometown of Aleppo, marrying one of the last doctors in the city and giving birth to her daughter, to whom the film is dedicated. The documentary is a kind of letter to the little girl, explaining how she was born into the conflict and what happened to her home.

Al-Kateab, who now lives in London, won an Emmy award in 2017 for her films from inside Aleppo for Britain's Channel 4 News, which are believed to be the most watched of any reports from the war. Her shocking footage of the struggle to save babies and children in the city's final hospital—in which she ended up living—brought home the horror inflicted on civilians.

Jessica Hausner

The Austrian director who began as a script assistant on Michael Haneke's "Funny Games" is the running for the Palme d'Or with her first film in English, "Little Joe". This science-based chiller with Ben Whishaw, Emily Beecham and Kerry Fox about a genetically engineered plant which affects every living creature it comes into contact with could well be her break-out film. After making her Cannes debut with "Lovely Rita" way back in 2001, Hausner, now 46, has slowly built a glowing reputation with a handful of films such as "Hotel", "Amour Fou" and "Lourdes", which picked up four prizes at Venice in 2009.—AFP



Austrian director and producer and member of the Un Certain Regard Jury Jessica Hausner



Actress Mati Diop