

Angelababy and Mark Chao in First Time.

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FILM

Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival

Nov. 6–11, Toronto. Nov. 16–17, Richmond Hill.

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Though the world's cinematic output comes in innumerable guises, most examples can be slotted into one of two categories. There's the commercial-minded fare that is designed to play well to the home crowds and may find an audience abroad should it strike the right balance of universal appeal and local colour. Then there's the rarified arthouse variety, which has become increasingly pitched at a stateless cognoscenti of cinephiles wary of anything that smacks of populist ambitions.

Rarely do these two kinds of movies share the same screens, even at festivals that pride themselves on their diversity. Yet Reel Asian has long been distinguished by its ability to pick wisely from both categories, thereby creating an annual primer on some of the planet's most venerable and prolific film scenes.

The festival's 16th edition—which runs Nov. 6 to 11 in downtown venues and then Nov. 16 to 17 at the Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts—opens with a movie that's nothing if not pan-Asian in sensibility. Though it's actually a Chinese remake of a 2003 Korean hit, *First Time* (Nov. 6, 7 p.m., Isabel Bader Theatre) most closely resembles the kind of whimsical, *Amélie*-style youth-romance movie that's become a specialty of Taiwan's film industry. As if there weren't enough regions represented already, it's also a screen vehicle for one of Hong Kong's fastest rising stars. A model and actress last seen in *Tai Chi Zero*, Angelababy plays Song Shiqiao, a frail and dreamy college student who falls for Gong Ning (Taiwanese-Canadian heartthrob Mark Chao), a former classmate turned bad-boy rocker. Just at the point when the movie's overweening sweetness threatens to induce sugar shock in skeptical viewers, a series of twists allow Han Yan's film to deepen in unexpected ways.

Another example from the commercial side of the divide, *Cold Steel* (Nov. 10, 10:45 p.m., the Royal) is a thriller directed by David Wu, a Hong Kong native now based in Vancouver who served as editor on several of John Woo's greatest efforts. Though a romantic subplot becomes a serious drag on the momentum that might've been otherwise achieved by this story of a young sniper fighting Japanese occupiers in 1930s China, *Cold Steel* offers convincing evidence of Wu's own mastery as an action director. (Wu also gives a free master class on Nov. 9 at 1 p.m. at No One Writes to the Colonel, on College Street.)

Reel Asian's roster of eager crowdpleasers also includes *Architecture 101* (Nov. 11, 8:15 p.m., the Royal), a wistful campus-set romantic drama that did big business in South Korea last spring, and *The Fruit Hunters* (Nov. 17, 7 p.m., Richmond Hill), a new foodie doc directed by Montreal's Yung Chang and narrated by bona-fide fruit obsessive Bill Pullman.

But Reel Asian also makes room for the sterner likes of *Egg and Stone* (Nov. 8, 7:40 p.m., Innis Town Hall), a low-key family saga by China's Huang Ji that won the Tiger Award at the Rotterdam film festival, and *Tatsumi* (Nov. 9, 11 p.m., the Royal), director Eric Khoo's animated tribute to the gritty life and art of Japanese manga author Yoshihiro Tatsumi.

Equally unconventional is *People's Park* (Nov. 9, 7 p.m., AGO Jackman Hall). Another fascinating product of Harvard University's Sensory Ethnography Lab—a cross-disciplinary program that's already yielded such cinematic marvels as *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*—*People's Park* consists of a single 78-minute-long uninterrupted shot that sends viewers through a bustling park in the Chinese city of Chengdu. Alternately serene and surreal, this conceptual stunt yields a powerful celebration of the ephemeral human communities that form in countless corners of the world on sunny Saturday afternoons.

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