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Feature intv w Heather and Overview w image

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film

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When the young lovers meet after the opening credits in *Lover's Discourse*, the background could easily be Yonge-Dundas Square. The fact that the film takes place in Hong Kong is almost immaterial.

Never has the cultural difference between Asia and North America seemed more moot than in the selection of films playing at the 15th Reel Asian film festival, starting Tuesday and running to Nov. 19. The distinction lies in the stories, not in their Asian settings.

The couple, one of many in *Lover's Discourse*, are on their cellphones, trying to find each other. The evening Hong Kong crowd easily resembles those in Toronto. Co-

director Derek Tsang (the son of actor-director Eric Tsang), in fact, went to school in Toronto.

Once the couple meet under bright neon, the woman (played by the Vancouver-born Hong Kong star Karena Lam) talks about her new job creating window displays at an Adidas store. You half expect them to stroll into the Eaton Centre.

From *Lover's Discourse* to Vietnamese break-dancing flick *Saigon Electric* to *Buddha Mountain*, a film about youth displaced by the 2008 earthquake in China, the selection in Reel Asian requires no great feat of cultural relativism to appreciate. Many of the films revolve around globalized youth.

"We are a festival that attracts a young audience. So you can see why that would make a lot of sense for us, in terms of the types of films and the types of stories we're presenting," says Heather Keung, the festival's artistic director and head programmer.

"It's what we're looking for, and it's what a lot of filmmakers are telling in their stories." Yet she adds that "even though you see these consistent trends, the stories become more complicated, and the ideas become more unravelled." Corruption, youth violence, the intricacies of everyday life for Tibetan nomads or aged Chinese opera singers – these are all explored in this year's films.

Although most of the festival will screen in downtown cinemas, primarily at The Royal, Reel Asian is also heading prominently to Richmond Hill, with two days of screenings at the Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts. The festival has co-ordinated screenings in the past in this densely Asian segment of the Greater Toronto Area, showing films such as the documentaries *Up The Yangtze* and *Last Train Home*.

However, this year, Reel Asian is going for more mass appeal, particularly with *Overheard 2*, the sequel to the Hong Kong suspense blockbuster about ruthlessness and violence among high-powered stockbroker types. Among the other films being shown in Richmond Hill is an added screening of the South Korean *Bleak Night*, one of the most unusual films of the festival, depicting friendships between teenage schoolboys descending into violence. This isn't a Korean *Lord of the Flies*. The classroom and apartment-tower settings are far more real and therefore far more threatening.

In a city overrun with film festivals, Reel Asian's Toronto marketing plan is geared toward targeting audiences through social media and blogs. (As Ms. Keung noted, the marketing team is at least triple the size of its large programming team.)

Various associations and businesses are also partnered to different films. The Silver Snail comic-book store, for instance, is one of the commercial partners helping to draw audiences to *Piercing 1*. It's an obvious fit, given *Piercing 1*'s rough-drawn, graphic-novel-esque story of corruption in China. The director is conceptual artist and photographer Liu Jian, who is prominent in China's satirical and at times cynical "gaudy art" movement.

Meanwhile, Toronto's avant-garde Images Festival is a partner in the screening of the Thai film *Eternity*. That film is a case in which Reel Asian could well be introducing to Canada a director who could become a leading artist in world cinema.

Sivaroj Kongsakul created a methodically slow mood in *Eternity*, which feels almost like a hour-and-a-half walk through the Thai countryside. More or less telling the story of a ghost of a man walking back through portions of his life, the film is a meditation on the small moments which make up one's life. Mr. Kongsakul's style partly resembles that of internationally acclaimed Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, to whom Reel Asian introduced Toronto audiences a decade ago.

However, possibly the biggest draw for fans of the latest in Asian cinema is *Buddha Mountain*. The director, Li Yu, has had ongoing problems with censors for her films addressing living conditions, lesbian sexuality and underground culture.

After experiencing heavy censorship with her last film, 2007's *Lost in Beijing*, 2010's *Buddha Mountain* has marked the director's return to international screens. "She is kind of testing the boundaries still," Ms. Keung says of Ms. Yu, who, like a lot of Chinese filmmakers, is trying to navigate her way around censorship restrictions.

It's a comment which could apply in different ways to all of Reel Asian's selection this year.

Reel Asian Film Festival, Nov. 8-15, \$12 per screening, various venues. 416-703-9986, reelasian.com