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## Korea's 'The Handmaiden' wows the world at Cannes

BY [GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN](#) on MAY 25, 2016 in [ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES](#), [KOREAS](#)

This year, while the largest movie producing country, India, was a no-show at the just-concluded Cannes Film Festival, South Korea had as many as three entries in the official sections. An impressive count, to say the least. However, the competition entry, The Handmaiden (Agassi), did not clinch the Palm d'Or, the Festival's highest honor that any movie maker would die for. In fact, Korea has never won the Palm in any of the Festival's 69 editions.

However, observers of the Korean cinema scene feel that vying for the Palm is as good as being shortlisted for the Oscars. Such is the prestige of Cannes, the queen of all film festivals, and there is no shred of doubt about this.

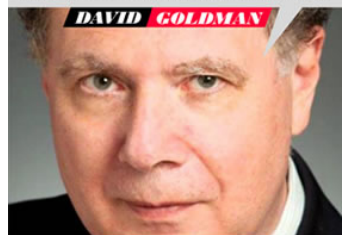
The rise of Korean cinema in the international arena — and Cannes is a very good indicator of this — is not surprising given the dramatic improvement in production values. "The overall level of production values and movie-making know-how is extremely high in Korea, and that may help to push some films into competition," says Darcy Paquet, a former Variety correspondent.

"Korean directors are trying to appeal simultaneously to a very robust local market and also the international festival circuit and art house market, which may handicap them somewhat when it comes to actually winning the Palme d'Or. It will happen someday, but the local market is both a help and a hindrance in this regard."

Of the three Korean titles — including Na Hong-jin's supernatural police drama The Wailing, and the zombie-virus drama by Yeon Sang-Ho Train to Busan — The Handmaiden caused the loudest buzz at Cannes.

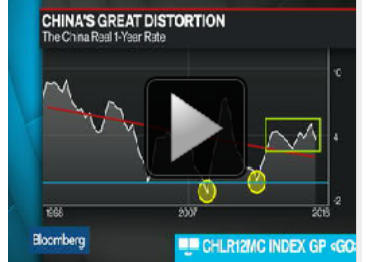
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The Handmaiden, a lesbian thriller by Park Chan-wook, has been sold to 175 countries, beating Bong Joon-ho's science-fiction feature, Snowpiercer (167 territories), to become the most widely distributed Korean movie in history. Even before The Handmaiden premiered at Cannes, it had been pre-sold to about 120 countries, the deals having been inked at the American Film Market, Berlin's European Film Market and Hong Kong's Filmart.

"We've had an explosive amount of inquiries from foreign buyers following the official screening of The Handmaiden at Cannes," said Kini Kim of C.J. "We can attribute the success of the sales to director Park Chan-wook's international reputation as well as the artistry of the movie"



The Handmaiden — which will hit the Korean screens on June 1 and those in France in mid-October, with Amazon holding the title rights in the US — has been adapted from Sarah Waters' Victorian era lesbian novel called Fingersmith. The story has been translocated to Japan, and marks the return of the director to Korean language production after his English debut, Stoker.

The Handmaiden is a thriller of sorts that tells us the story of a Korean woman in the 1930s in a criminal pact with an aristocratic swindler, who is trying to fool a rich Japanese heiress into marrying him.

Park, who won the Grand Prix for Old Boy at Cannes in 2003 and the Jury Prize for his Thirst in 2009, said in an interview that he had read the novel some years ago and had found the "plot twist" fascinating. "We needed an era with a caste system employing handmaidens, but also with the modern institution of insane asylums. My producer suggested bringing the story to Korea, during the era under Japanese imperialist rule. I thought I could do something that looked at the period from a different angle," Park averred.

The Handmaiden is beautifully crafted, is playful despite its grim subject and has highly photogenic sex that is graphic but never coarse or vulgar. The lesbian theme has been handled

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with artistic sensibility.



The story is mercifully kept simple. Sook-hee (played by Kim Tae-ri), the orphaned Korean daughter of a thief and an accomplished pickpocket herself, is leaving the thieves' den to become a maid for Hideko (Kim Min-hee), an innocent young Japanese woman who lives in isolation with an uncle who hopes to marry her and inherit her huge wealth. Sook-hee is part of a plot hatched by a young man, called The Count (Ha Jung-woo), who also wants to marry Hideko for her money that he hopes to achieve by shutting her up in a mental asylum. But a sexual attraction between the heiress and the maid turns the scheming Count's plan upside down.

The Handmaiden phenomena at Cannes and the world over, and the rise of Korean cinema in the late 1990s may be seen as a belated reaction to the end of the military rule in that country. In 1996, the Busan Film Festival came into being, and a few years later, South Korea had its first multiplexes. Busan — which has of late been embroiled in a censorship storm — was actually established to fight such a restriction, and it soon became a platform for Korean productions — keenly watched by international producers, sales agents and festival programmers.

Today, Korean cinema is very different from the early stock (of Kim Ki-duk and Lee Chang-dong among others) that found its ways into the Western world. The genre was often shock, and it was quite brutal. This has given way to diversity with the production of big commercials and arthouse fare. The nation has some of the finest writers and cinematographers, and footfalls into theaters have been multiplying with an audience that is knowledgeable and demanding. In fact, Korea's gross box office ranks fifth in the world — ahead of France, the birthplace of cinema and home of Cannes, and ahead of bigger cinema producers such as Germany and Russia.

*Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and Seoul Times*

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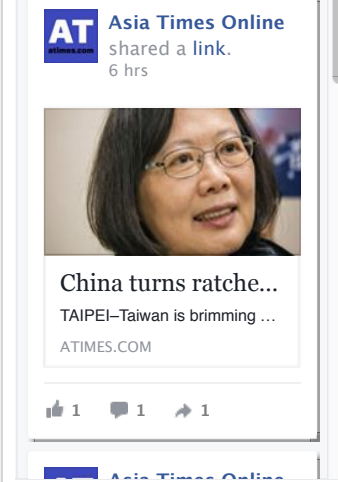
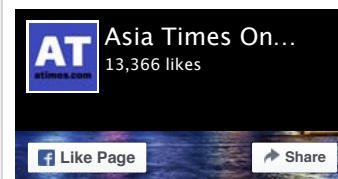
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