

How Shanghai festival invests in the film industry's future

There was a moment during one of the many and varied panels hosted on the sidelines of this year's 28th edition of the Shanghai International Film Festival that seemed to capture the event's mood as much as the purpose.

Rising Chinese filmmaker Xu Lei had taken to the stage after being named among the SIFF YOUNG filmmakers for the year 2026 and she had looked out into a crowd that included contemporary industry peers as well as established stars

"I now know exactly how Neymar felt when he made the World Cup squad at the very last minute," he said. "This selection is both supportive and encouraging. I will take this opportunity to keep focusing on filmmaking and creative work."

When the curtain falls on the 28th edition of SIFF on Saturday, June 21 there will have been more than 420 films showcased during more than 1,600 screenings across this vast Chinese metropolis and its sister cities around the Yangtze River Delta.

The event began as it planned to play out. There were tributes on opening night to screen legends in actress Lisa Lu (*The Last Emperor*) and director Zhang Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern*) but attention soon turned more to the future of Chinese-language cinema than its illustrious past.

The opening film was the thriller *Afterpiece* and it was made by a first-time director in Keane T.K. Wong, with the veteran producer Derek Yee on hand as a mentor, and it set the tone for what has followed across a festival that has turned the spotlight squarely on discovering – and supporting - emerging talent.

This year's edition of SIFF saw the rollout of a stream of talent-focused initiatives, including the SIFF ING Young Filmmakers Programme, the SIFF NEXT Film Project Training Camp and the SIFF YOUNG × Shanghai Young Filmmakers Support Programme.

"Many people will ask what the Shanghai International Film Festival hopes to leave behind each year," SIFF head Chen Guo said on the sidelines of the festival. "What we hope to leave behind is a sense of presence that is neither lonely nor desolate - it is an industry ecosystem that is willing to provide a platform for young people and is willing to support new works, allowing more and more young creators to believe that there is fertile ground for film dreams in Shanghai, and that young creativity can resonate without being dismissed or overlooked."

SIFF called on the experience of a number of international film industry heavyweights this year to offer their advice and support for young filmmakers, among them the likes of Hollywood star

Joan Chen, while a special panel called on international film festival heads including Tricia Tuttle (Berlin), Cameron Baily (Toronto) and Albert Lee (Hong Kong) to offer inspiration.

“All these visions cannot be realized without the support of core partners at all levels of the industry,” said Guo. “Therefore, I also call on everyone in the future to join hands to explore more opportunities for global memory creators, create more platforms, and together we can walk towards a broader future.”

So far SIFF can point to 78 of its projects going on to find cinema releases as proof that its policies are working, and Tuttle showcased the tale of the acclaimed director Diao Yinan as a point in case. Diao’s early works first appeared at SIFF, and then the people in Berlin got wind of his talents – and his *Black Coal, Thin Ice* won the Berlinale’s top Golden Bear award in 2014.

“[Festivals] want to be touched, we want to discover something obvious, a voice of the plot,” said Tuttle. “I think the most exciting thing is when we see something new, when a creator gives us a new perspective.”

Chen worked with actress Ma Yili and director Sam Quah on the SIFF Project committee and together they handed out 14 awards to help support and encourage rising talent from across China, and from around the region – and the panel wasn’t shy of sharing the pros and cons of the work they were judging.

The star said she hoped the experience was just the “start of the journey” for those winners, and for those who were recognised by selection in the various SIFF programmes, and that she had been touched by the stories of struggle many young filmmakers had shared.

“Hopefully you will all succeed and your films will be made,” said Chen.

There were examples of China’s next generation of filmmakers across the main competitions, from *the atmospheric, engaging debut from Zhong Kaifeng, Atlantic Rhapsody*, in the main Golden Goblet competition, to Zhang Hanyi’s meditation on family and loss, *Cassowary*, in the Asian New Talent section.

Filmmaker Anthony Chen was on-hand this year to head the Asian New Talent jury and the Singaporean knows first-hand how much impact a festival can have, given his international career was launched when his debut *Ilo Ilo* won acclaim at Cannes.

“What I really value is whether a creator is truly sincere and willing to adopt new lenses and ideas to break conventions,” he explained. “New talents often demonstrate a vigorous and passionate creative attitude.”

As that curtain came down on the event, Guo confirmed the festival’s commitment to the future.

“SIFF has established a distinctive global identity through its longstanding mission of promoting mutual learning among civilizations, maintaining an Asian perspective, supporting Chinese-language cinema, and nurturing emerging talent,” said Guo. “Among these priorities, talent development has become one of our defining strengths. Through a comprehensive support system encompassing industry programmes, professional awards, and overseas screening opportunities, SIFF has helped cultivate a significant number of outstanding Chinese-language filmmakers and films.

“This year, we remained committed to balancing continuity with innovation by building a more sustainable, resilient, and dynamic ecosystem for emerging film talent, helping the next generation grow into the future backbone of the industry.”