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Bangkok's movie world is positively quivering. A couple of Thai films have made a fantastic impact at film festivals and movie theatres abroad: Satee Lex (The Iron Ladies) stormed the box offices of Taiwan, Korea and Singapore; and Bangkok Dangerous grabbed the limelight at the Toronto Film Festival, with more than 10 countries buying the film. This year some 24 Thai movies will hit the screens.

All these steps have been heartening, and have led to much discussion on how to expand the Thai movie industry and provide a better network of support for Thai film-makers wanting to express their talents.

Producing around 200 movies a year _ the highest production rate in Europe _ and co-producing films with 60 other countries, France is perhaps well-positioned to offer suggestions on how the Thai movie industry can improve. Those who took part in the recent open discussion entitled ``Cultural Diversity and Identity: The Example of the French Cinema" at the Siam United Artists Emporium tended to agree.

The debate was organised as part of the 4th French Film Festival and was attended by Stephane Brize, director of Hometown Blue, Florence Vignon, a French movie star, Marie-Claude Arbaudie, editor of Le Film Francais, Guy de la Chevalerie, cooperation and cultural counsellor of the French Embassy, and Patrick Renault, the audiovisual attache for Southeast Asia.

The Thai part was less copiously represented _ in terms of speakers_ with only Acharn Kittiasak Suwannabhokin, film critic and special lecturer at Chulalongkorn University, on the Thai side.

Both sides seemed to agree that the Thai movie industry was lacking government support, and that, sadly, without this support and political will, not much of anything in the industry would change.

``The movie industry in Thailand doesn't benefit from any government support whatsoever. Movies are viewed as mere entertainment, without regard to their cultural or educational value. Thus film production companies, just like other companies, have to stand on their own two feet," Acharn Kittisak explained, also deploring the fact that so far no co-production projects with foreign countries had been undertaken.

``The Film Institute of Thailand has set aside a good budget for the annual award-giving ceremony _ but that's its only commitment," Acharn Kittisak added, saying a proposal had been put forward to grant one percent of the income made from movies to a fund for film-makers, but that so far no action had been taken.

Marie-Claude Arbaudie painted a broad picture of the situation in France, detailing how, as the years went by, a network was put in place to ensure the ``whole industry remained in existence".

``The fierce resistance to American movies [in France] is not a recent move. There used to be no American movies shown in France, before World War Two. But after the war in 1946, American authorities came to France to discuss their share of the market," explained Marie-Claude.

``So French film-makers got together to promulgate a law in 1948 imposing a tax on movie tickets, so that even the showing of foreign films would contribute financially to French cinema."

The system was soon improved further thanks to France's first-ever Minister of Culture, Andre Malraux. In 1959, he established the very helpful grant for film-makers called Advance Against Takings.

Later on, when private and public television channels exploded in the early 1980s, action was taken to ensure that small screens at home would not lead to the death of movie theatres. Thus it was made compulsory for channels to devote three percent of their profits to the production of French films.

The whole system evolved little by little into a complex machinery supporting most French film production efforts and providing film producers with numerous open doors both through state and private funds: unconditional or selective aids in film production from the National Centre of Cinematography (CNC)_ that can also be obtained for French/foreign co-productions _ and other aids such as the Social Action Funding or awards, the Sofica (Companies for the financing of cinema and audiovisual), Eurimage (European Council Fund for co-productions), and others, and not to mention the powerful trade unions behind the whole industry.

``But this whole network can only exist if it is sustained by a political will, to keep the local industry alive, whatever the colour of government opinion," Marie-Claude Arbaudie said.

To prove the system's efficiency, the organisers flew in one of France's latest success stories: Stephane Brize's first full-length feature film called Hometown Blue with rising star and co-writer Florence Vignon. Produced through two of the CNC aids both repayable, and thanks to regional funding, the middle to low budget film received its world premiere in the Director's Fortnight of the 1999 Cannes Festival. It also won the best screenplay prize at the 1999 Deauville festival.

``When one has little or no money to make a film, one uses a lot of thinking, while with a lot of money, one only makes use of money," the young film director said.

``This whole network is great but it seems there is little chance of applying it here as there is no will behind it. It is now mostly up to the producers," said Acharn Kittisak.

Judging from the proliferation of film festivals in the Thai capital, it seems local audiences will be ready for more diversity in movie theatres.