

Research Article

Transfiguring “Asia”: Curatorial Discourse in the 20th Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival

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Submission: 27-07-2026 | Accepted: 13-08-2026

Abstract

This article examines how the Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival curates ‘Asia’. It is about the production of recognition for some histories and the marginalization of others through films, programs and institutional narratives. The study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis based on postcolonial theory. The results indicate three interlinked levels of hierarchy: the West-Asia relationship; the unequal representation of Asian sub-regions; and the difference between Indonesia's curatorial center and its grassroots film communities. Together, these create uneven hierarchies of recognition across the festival's programming. Central Asian cinema and community-based Indonesian filmmaking are less institutionally framed than other forms of Asian cinema, and these absences may be read as political forgetting, as a reflection of a moral hierarchy in which some histories are given a place in regional memory, while others are not. JAFF also allows space for decolonial practices using Asian symbolic references and curatorial independence. The authors argue that cultural institutions such as film festivals can be sites for the reproduction of global hierarchies beyond formal political institutions.

Keywords: Asian Cinema, Curatorial Discourse, Exclusion, Hierarchies of Recognition, Moral Hierarchy

INTRODUCTION

While film is often considered a type of entertainment, its social and political importance goes far beyond amusement. The stories, visual language, dialogue and characterization of films shape the way in which viewers understand identity, nationhood, race and region. It also assists in the construction of boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and the shaping of perceptions of the social and political relationships that tie or separate these groups. Film can be seen as part of the Ideological State Apparatus, according to Althusser (2001), as it is a cultural institution through which ideology is disseminated in everyday life. This reading aligns with Shapiro's (2008) conception of film as a geopolitical medium which creates and reflects imaginaries of the political world, including representations of subjects, territories, violence, states and relations among communities.

Culture is not only a marker of identity, but also a tool of influence. According to Nye (2004), culture is a key source of soft power, as cultural attraction can influence images, values and perceptions of a particular actor. Cinema has a strategic place in this mechanism, as it carries identity, narrative and political

imagination across borders and sustains its effects beyond the moment of screening. Museums and exhibitions perform comparable work, Riyanto, Dortant, Christianauli, and Larasaty (2025) demonstrate how museum diplomacy in the Revolusi! exhibition negotiates postcolonial memory, situating curatorial practice more broadly within the politics of political memory in International Relations. From this point, Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival can be read as a curatorial space that presents, negotiates, and reinforces the position of Asian cinematic identity.

Curatorial choices—the films chosen, the programs emphasized in the festival narrative, and the awards presented—are not solely aesthetic decisions, but political acts that determine which voices are seen as legitimate representations of "Asia." Film festivals are sites of cultural mediation and symbolic power, gatekeepers in the global circulation of cinema (de Valck, 2007). Such gatekeeping practices produce hierarchies of recognition and exclusion, in which some voices are afforded institutional visibility and legitimacy, while others are marginalized, silenced, or made less representable within dominant curatorial frameworks (Maggio, 2007). In this respect, the politics of representation cannot be separated from the politics of exclusion: to decide which films count as legitimately "Asian" is also to exert epistemic authority, as it positions some actors as subjects who can define the region while placing others as passive objects of that definition. In a postcolonial context, these exclusions are not incidental but reflect and reproduce larger asymmetries of power between and within regions. Such dynamics are performed through the language and categories of classification by which cultural institutions define what is authentic, valuable, or "Asian."

Yogyakarta plays host to hundreds of "Asian" films at a festival that bills itself as a home for Asian cinema. This claim is supported by the statement that the Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (JAFF) fights for the identity of Asian cinema and believes that Asian cinema deserves to be celebrated, preserved and passed on (Isfansyah, 2025). However, this claim reveals a paradox that is yet to be explored: who determines which films are sufficiently "Asian," and from where does that definition come?

This question cannot be answered on geographical grounds alone. Acharya (2010b) argues that "Asia" is a contested construction, not a pre-given geographical entity; it is formed by colonial legacies but also internally reimagined by Asian actors with a range of often conflicting agendas. Acharya (2010a) identifies at least five competing notions of Asia, from exceptionalist to imperialist, and shows how each definition of "Asia" carries specific ideological implications. Nationalist leaders, such as Sun Yat-sen and Nehru, were actively engaged in reclaiming and rebuilding "Asian" identity as a form of anti-colonial solidarity. The question of who defines "Asia" is therefore inseparable from its political dimensions.

If "Asia" is a contested construction, then we need to look at the arenas in which that definition is produced. In the global cinema context, international film festivals such as Cannes, Venice, and Berlin are not only spaces of appreciation but also authorities that establish standards of representation. Such a position can produce specific representational standards that are at risk of reproducing asymmetries of

power between the West and non-West. Zhao (2022) demonstrates how festivals that are supposed to stand for all of Asia have, in fact, privileged certain sub-regions of Asia and the hierarchical construction of who is "Asian" that accompanies it. This dynamic of cinema as a vehicle for authority and influence is not confined to festival curation in the West: Menechelli (2025) shows how China deploys film co-productions, festivals, and cultural-institute initiatives in Brazil to project strategic narratives, offering a non-Western comparator to the Cannes-Venice-Berlin festival hierarchy discussed above.

Within this context, JAFF appears as a festival based in Asia, curated by Asian filmmakers, for Asian audiences as a product of a grassroots movement rooted in a young film community (Irawanto, 2025). It is frequently positioned as an alternative to this dominant order. Yet this positioning does not in itself guarantee a different construction of "Asia". The status of home for Asian cinema must be critically examined to trace how JAFF constructs an image of Asia from within, and to what extent that construction moves beyond or remains entangled with older patterns of representation.

The scholarship on film festivals and identity is both hugely useful and somewhat limited. Sendra and Petty (2025) and Johnson (2025) argue that festivals with decolonial intentions are trapped in structural contradictions, especially in unequal relations of funding and curatorial practices. Elsewhere, Sendra's (2024) own practitioner reflection on festival-higher education collaborations around decolonizing African film festivals illustrates what decolonial curatorial practice can look like in action, even as the structural constraints identified with Petty persist. Zhao (2022) agrees by analyzing the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival that promotes itself to be representative of all of Asia but focuses on East Asian cinema, producing a hierarchical construction of regional identity. Yet, all three operate within African, Western, and Canadian diasporic contexts, and none address how discourse about "Asia" is produced through the curatorial language of a festival based in Asia itself, such as JAFF. In the Indonesian context, Saragih et al. (2025) analyzes JAFF as an instrument of cultural diplomacy within a nation branding context. While Saragih acknowledges JAFF as a cultural actor with representational functions, the unit of analysis remains Indonesia as a national entity, leaving open the question of how JAFF constructs the category of "Asia" as a discourse.

Taken together, existing literature, whether situated in Western and diasporic contexts or examining JAFF as a diplomatic instrument, tends to approach film festivals as media of representation rather than as arenas of regional discourse production. As a result, the category of "Asia" is frequently treated as pre-given rather than as something continuously constructed through discursive practice. The curatorial discourse of JAFF is an understudied area to comprehend how Asia imagines and defines itself from the inside out, which is a significant gap if festivals are locations where regional identity is not only reflected but also constructed. Methodologically, this gap is compounded by the fact that Sendra and Petty (2025), Johnson (2025), Zhao (2022), and Saragih et al. (2025) each treat festivals as objects to be described within a given institutional or diplomatic setting, whereas this study

treats JAFF's institutional texts themselves as a discourse-producing corpus, subjecting them to systematic critical discourse analysis to trace how "Asia" is actively constructed rather than simply represented. International relations have a direct stake in closing this gap. If the categories through which a region understands itself are produced in cultural arenas, then film festivals become sites where global and regional hierarchies of recognition are reproduced and contested outside the formal arenas of diplomacy and the state that the discipline traditionally prefers.

In this way, the curatorial architecture of JAFF functions as a mechanism of political memory, choosing and legitimizing some Asian cinematic histories for regional recognition, silencing or depoliticizing others, and not as a neutral representation of the past but as a political intervention in the distribution of memory and recognition across the Asian cinematic landscape. These acts of curatorial forgetting are not merely structural, they carry affective weight, as the grief, trauma, and political anger embedded in silenced films are denied the institutional space through which they might be collectively felt and recognized. It is from this intersection of curatorial practice, postcolonial hierarchy, and political memory that this study departs. This study therefore asks two related questions. First, how does JAFF's curatorial discourse construct the identity of "Asia" through practices of recognition and exclusion? Second, to what extent do these practices reproduce postcolonial hierarchies of political memory while simultaneously opening possibilities for decolonial inter-referencing?

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative interpretive approach to examine the discursive construction of the identity of "Asia" through the curatorial practices of the Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (JAFF). The interpretive tradition is chosen because the central concern of this research is not to test hypotheses or to measure causal variables, but to understand and trace the ways in which meanings of regional identity are created, negotiated and legitimized through discursive practice (Kurowska & Bliesemann de Guevara, 2020). In this tradition, "Asia" is not seen as an objective pre-given fact, but as a social fabrication that is constantly changed by language, institutional practice and relations of power. The researcher is thus placed less as an impartial observer but rather as a critical reader of the layers of meaning, power relations and ideological assumptions implicit in JAFF's curatorial discourse. To guard against confirmation bias in this interpretive process, the analysis involved independent re-reading of the corpus at different stages of coding and a deliberate search for negative cases — instances where the curatorial discourse appeared to complicate or resist the emerging hierarchy argument — a safeguard modeled explicitly later in the analysis of the Layar Komunitas silence.

The approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was applied to analyze the texts, using the discourse analysis framework in International Relations published by Dunn and Neumann (2016). In this perspective, language serves as a social practice that actively constructs the meanings of things, identities, and subjects, and demarcates the boundaries of what is considered meaningful. CDA is especially

pertinent to this study as it permits the analysis to go beyond the surface content of festival texts to the underlying assumptions, power positions and representational hierarchies that shape how "Asia" is represented and expressed. This methodological choice is a natural consequence of the postcolonial and constructivist theoretical approach of the study, where identity is not conceived to be fixed but to be formed through discursive contestation.

The data corpus consists only of institutional texts created by JAFF for its 20th edition. These include the festival's official theme statement, curatorial statements, program descriptions, festival catalogue, advertising materials, awards categories, and official communications to the public. These texts were collected exhaustively from all institutional materials published by JAFF20, accessed between May and June 2026, the sole exception was the Festival Guidebook, which was excluded as it consists primarily of practical information—screening schedules, venue maps—rather than discursive material bearing on the festival's construction of "Asia". The 20th edition is chosen as the research site because it is an important curatorial moment, namely the festival's two-decade anniversary, in which JAFF explicitly contemplates its identity, trajectory and goal under the topic Transfiguration. This self-reflexive period makes the 20th edition a particularly fertile venue for exploring how JAFF forms and articulates its vision of "Asia". As the corpus consists solely of publicly available institutional texts, this study did not involve human subjects and therefore did not require ethical approval.

The study follows a series of interpretive movements, guided by Dunn and Neumann (2016). First, the study points out discursive representations of "Asia" that repeat across the corpus. More specifically, it explores how "Asia" is imagined as a cultural area, a solidarity network, an industrial environment, or a shifting identity. Second, it reads predication, the features and characteristics ascribed to Asia, Asian filmmakers, and Asian cinema in the curatorial language. Third, it traces presuppositions—the assumptions taken for granted in festival narratives, such as the notion that Asian cinema is undergoing revolution or that JAFF serves as a home for Asian voices. Fourth, it studies subject positioning by determining whose voices are authorized to talk about Asia and whose are silenced. Finally, absences and silences are examined by identifying which places, traditions, traumatic pasts, or cinematic experiences are absent or marginalized in the prevailing narrative of JAFF. Drawing on Olick (2013), this step reads such absences not as curatorial oversights but as politically consequential acts of forgetting—revealing how JAFF operates as a site of political memory that determines which Asian histories are activated for regional recognition and which are silenced. Together, these moves enable the study to trace not just what JAFF says about Asia, but also how it develops, naturalizes, and legitimizes a certain kind of Asian regional identity through its curatorial discourse.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on postcolonial IR theory as a critical lens to understanding West-non-West relations created through colonial legacies, knowledge production,

and representational practice. In the words of Hobson (2012) and Seth (2013), postcolonialism in IR is not just an investigation of the legacy of colonialism, but a project to deconstruct the Eurocentric epistemological foundations on which the discipline has historically positioned the West as the center of knowledge and historical experience. In this framework, postcolonialism is relevant for exposing Western cultural biases and reading the unequal relations between the West and non-West (Rosyidin, 2020). Consequently, "Asia" is understood not as a neutral geographic referent, but as an idea constructed by history, representation, and power relations (Acharya, 2010b).

The main theoretical framework is Edward Said's idea of Orientalism (1979). "The East" or "Asia", as Said describes, is not a neutral category but one that is constructed by the West through the creation of knowledge that constructs the East as the Other (Said, 1979). Orientalism works as a discourse that allows the West to rule, reorder and control the East through representation and the production of knowledge. Within the practice of film festival curating, Orientalism offers a way of reading how curatorial selection might perpetuate categories of the exotic, the authentic and the marginal as criteria for the intelligibility of Asian cinema within global festival circuits.

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) builds on Said's paradigm, but moves the focus from outward construction to inward internalization. Two Fanonian terms are used, based on Rosyidin (2020): lactification, the urge to emulate the colonizer as a sign of superiority, and emotional erethism, the identity crisis of the postcolonial subject that devalues itself against the Western ideal. This study employs these concepts to investigate whether the curatorial discourse of JAFF constructs Western festival validation as the norm for cinematic value, and whether the craving for "international recognition" reproduces a hierarchy where Western aesthetic standards remain the implicit standard.

The question of whose voice is heard within this representational field is addressed through Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) and Maggio's (2007) extension, *Can the Subaltern Be Heard?* Spivak's critique locates the postcolonial problem not merely in representation but in the authority to speak, name, and assign meaning. Maggio's reformulation shifts attention from the presence of subaltern voice toward the conditions under which that voice is received and recognized. In this sense, audibility is not merely a communicative condition but a political one—determined by institutional structures that grant or withhold recognition from particular voices within dominant discursive frameworks. Applied to JAFF, these frameworks direct the analysis toward which Asian voices are granted curatorial space, which are framed by institutional categories, and which remain at the margins of the festival's dominant narrative.

The decolonial counterpoint is given in Chen Kuan-Hsing's *Asia as Method* (2010) which offers a shift in the epistemological point of reference from West to Asia through the practice of inter-referencing reading Asian historical, social and cultural experiences through mutual reference among Asian societies rather than through Western standards. This methodology is employed to analyze whether the curatorial

discourse of JAFF operates within a genuinely Asia-centered epistemology, or if it reproduces Western paradigms beneath an Asian institutional guise. Chen's framework is read together with Acharya's (2010a) warning against the homogenization or unification of Asia as an identity. Acharya recognizes no less than five conflicting conceptions of Asia: imperialist, nationalist, universalist, regionalist and exceptionalist, each with its own ideological stakes. This study employs Acharya's framework to be sensitive to internal hierarchies within JAFF's construction of Asia, especially the potential that inter-referencing may unwittingly center some Asian sub-regions while marginalizing others.

These theoretical frameworks can be brought together as a multi-layered analytical construct. Spivak and Maggio focus on voice and audibility; Chen opens a decolonial alternative; Acharya guards against the homogenization of Asian difference; Said provides a way to read external representational power; and Fanon turns inward to examine internalized hierarchies. Taken together, they allow the study to examine not only how JAFF articulates "Asia," but also how the festival positions itself within broader struggles over regional representation, including moments of alignment and resistance. These perspectives converge in what this study calls hierarchies of recognition: the structures through which curatorial institutions such as JAFF determine which subjects, histories, and cultural expressions become visible, legitimate, and part of collective memory, and which remain at the margins. The moral weight of this structure lies in its consequences. Exclusion from recognition is not neutral; it is shaped whose pain, memory, and past are considered worthy of collective attention. This study uses the term moral hierarchy to refer to the normative dimension of that process, namely the implicit ranking of whose pain counts, while hierarchy of recognition refers to the institutional mechanism through which that ranking is produced and maintained.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The results are organized into five subsections, each addressing a different facet of JAFF's curatorial architecture: the festival theme, the awards, co-production, sub-regional representation within the festival's "Asia" programs, and the Indonesia-level programs. Together, these subsections map onto the three-level hierarchy introduced above. The festival theme and the awards speak most directly to the global level, tracing how JAFF's curatorial language positions "Asia" in relation to established Western festival hierarchies. Co-production and the "Asia in the Festival" analysis of sub-regional representation address the regional level, examining how recognition is distributed unevenly among Asian sub-regions themselves. Finally, the Indonesia programs speak to the national level, revealing a further hierarchy between Indonesia's curatorial center and its grassroots film communities. Reading these five subsections through this three-level structure clarifies how JAFF's curatorial discourse operates simultaneously across global, regional, and national registers of recognition and exclusion.

Transfiguration and the Presupposition of Asia as Becoming

The "Transfiguration" theme at JAFF's 20th edition carries several meanings about the direction of Asian cinema's development. These meanings appear through presupposition, metaphor, and predication. For instance, Festival Director Budi Irawanto described the theme as a "continuous transformation of past practices into a festival even closer to its ideals" (Irawanto, 2025). The word "ideals" suggests an end not yet reached. That means JAFF and by extension, Asian cinema, is still on the way to a better place. Irawanto employs a similar idea when he describes Asian cinema as "something that has to be cultivated and nurtured, like a garden in a nursery" (Irawanto, 2025). The phrase "garden in a nursery" works as a metaphor for development under care. It presents Asian cinema as something that still requires institutional support, in this case from JAFF, in order to grow. The metaphor moves away from the Orientalist image of Asia as static and ancient (Said, 1979), but it may also introduce another hierarchy by suggesting that Asian cinema is not yet fully mature and must still be prepared before entering the wider landscape of global cinema.

A further layer of meaning appears in the foreword to the JAFF20 catalogue written by Minister of Culture Fadli Zon. He describes the festival's growth as "a sign of the increasing trust of the international community in the curatorial quality and cultural environment of Indonesia" (JAFF, 2025a). In this statement, international trust becomes one measure of JAFF's achievement. The standard of success therefore comes not only from within Asia, but also from recognition beyond it. In the global film festival circuit, such recognition has historically been influenced by institutions and evaluative standards centred in Europe and North America (de Valck, 2007; Elsaesser, 2005). Fanon's (1952) concept of lactification offers one way of reading this language. It refers to the tendency of postcolonial subjects to assess themselves through external standards regarded as more prestigious or superior. From this perspective, JAFF's language of growth may remain partly tied to outside approval.

This interpretation, however, should not be overstated. The term "international community" does not refer exclusively to the West. It may simply reflect the conventional language through which film festivals communicate prestige and institutional success. It may also indicate institutional isomorphism, since festivals in different regions often adopt similar terms to describe recognition and growth. The Fanonian reading becomes more relevant only when this statement is considered alongside other JAFF texts that repeatedly connect cinematic quality with forms of international validation. At the same time, the idea of becoming in the Transfiguration theme is not entirely dependent on external recognition. JAFF's commitment to independent cinema, its community-based history, and its strong roots in Southeast Asia indicate that the festival does not simply reproduce the curatorial models of Cannes or Berlin. The discourse also contains elements of inter-referencing (Chen, 2010). The main finding here is therefore one of ambivalence: JAFF gives Asia room to define itself, while still suggesting that the value of Asian cinema must be demonstrated through standards that remain partly connected to a Western-centred system of global recognition.

The Language of Awards and Aesthetic Legitimation

In the JAFF Main Competition, the winning film gets the Golden Hanoman, and the runner-up is given the Silver Hanoman (JAFF, 2025a). The combination of "Golden" and "Silver" with the figure of Hanoman echoes the prestige language of major international film festivals like the Golden Bear in Berlin, the Golden Lion in Venice and the Palme d'Or in Cannes. These awards function as a kind of symbolic legitimation within the global festival network (de Valck, 2007; Elsaesser, 2005). From a Fanonian perspective, this similarity may hint at lactification, used here to denote the inclination of postcolonial subjects to take on Western forms of recognition as signs of prestige and value. Meanwhile, the combination of rankings of precious metals with a local cultural symbol creates a hybrid form of legitimation. It does not simply replicate a Western model, although it may still bear the marks of Eurocentric standards in the organization of cinematic value and prestige (Hobson, 2012; Seth, 2013).

But reading Hanoman cannot end with a critique of the imitation of Western festivals. Hanoman is not only a Javanese or Indonesian symbol but also a cross-Asian figure that comes from the Indian Ramayana tradition and is locally adapted in different contexts, such as Indonesia and Thailand (Hidajat et al., 2021). In the framework of Asia as Method (Chen, 2010), the choice of Hanoman as JAFF's highest trophy can be interpreted as a form of inter-referencing, in the sense that the festival refers to Asia as a symbolic point of reference without the need for Western mediation. A similar dynamic appears in the use of the Blencong Award. Blencong is a lamp in shadow puppet (wayang kulit) performances that functions to illuminate the screen (kelir) and project the shadows of the puppets into a visual narrative (Sari, 2022). Thus, the name Blencong is not merely used as an exotic symbol within an Orientalist gaze (Said, 1979) but can also be understood as JAFF's strategy to activate an Asian visual epistemology that has long integrated light, shadow, and narrative in pre-modern cinematic traditions.

To test whether JAFF's discursive practices truly form an authentic Asian inter-referencing or merely present locality at a surface level, this section analyzes the text of the official jury statements (jury citations) at the 20th edition of JAFF (2025). The data, in the form of jury citations, were taken from the official JAFF20 winner announcements published in the JAFF20 activity report (JAFF, 2025b). Using Dunn and Neumann's (2016) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), jury citations are understood as important sites because through them the festival assigns value, establishes criteria of excellence, and legitimizes certain forms of Asian cinema. From this reading, a tension becomes evident between the recognition of Asian political content and the use of an aesthetic vocabulary that has long been the dominant language in the international film festival circuit.

Film festival studies can help explain the importance of jury citations as an object of analysis. International film festivals are networks that organize the selection, presentation, awarding and circulation of films (Elsaesser, 2005). These processes endow both films and their makers with symbolic value and cultural capital. Elsaesser also points out that festivals create a relatively stable vocabulary

of evaluation. This vocabulary appears in catalogs, film synopses, and award speeches, where certain terms are used to classify films and explain their value. The language used in JAFF's jury citations can therefore be read as part of the festival's process of legitimation, rather than as aesthetic praise alone.

This vocabulary also echoes the tradition of auteur criticism. In this tradition, a director is elevated to auteur status when his films show a consistent style, themes and personal vision. The auteur tradition, which originated from French film criticism in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s (Hillier, 1985), highlights visual style, *mise-en-scène*, *mise-en-shot* and the director's capacity to visualize the script as the primary markers of a film's artistic merit. Thus, when JAFF jury citations use language that emphasizes personal vision, visual strength and narrative innovation, such language can be read as part of the evaluative vocabulary that has long been institutionalized in film criticism and the international festival circuit (de Valck, 2007).

Cambodian film *Becoming Human* won the Golden Hanoman in the Main Competition. In the jury citation, the film was described through phrases such as "puisi visual yang liris" (lyrical visual poetry) and "keanggunan visual" (visual elegance) (JAFF, 2025b). The Silver Hanoman went to the Thai film *A Useful Ghost*, which was praised for its "humor absurd" (absurd humor), "kisah cinta surreal" (surreal love story), and "kecerdasan datar" (deadpan wit) (JAFF, 2025b). These expressions show that the jury valued narrative forms combining absurdity, emotion, and irony. They are not neutral descriptions. As part of the vocabulary commonly used in international festival criticism, they draw attention to formal refinement, visual strength, narrative ambiguity, and aesthetic experience. From the point of view of CDA, these expressions can be viewed as predication, as they ascribe certain qualities to the winning films, thus contributing to an explanation of why they deserve to be recognized by the festival.

Read through Fanon (1952), this pattern suggests that the value of Asian cinema is still partly expressed through a language of aesthetic recognition inherited from major festival centers. This argument should not be taken to mean that terms such as "visual elegance," "surreal," or "*mise-en-scène*" are colonial by themselves. The issue lies in the wider system of evaluation in which these terms are used, a system historically shaped by European institutions and traditions of film criticism. Asian films gain legitimacy through their political and historical content, but also through forms that international criticism can recognize as "poetic," "elegant," "surreal," or "witty."

However, this reading does not mean that the films lose their political force. Looking at the films that received the awards, strong articulations of Asian experience remain clearly visible. *Becoming Human* was praised through references to "memori, kehilangan, dan ruang-ruang rapuh yang menyimpan sejarah bersama" (memory, loss, and the fragile spaces that hold our shared histories), while *A Useful Ghost* was valued for giving a voice to "mereka yang terlalu mudah dilupakan oleh masyarakat" (those too easily forgotten by society) through the metaphor of ghosts (JAFF, 2025b). In this context, Asia is not only present as a geographical category,

but as a space of experience shaped by memory, loss, marginalization, and social trauma. In recognizing these specific narratives of trauma and collective loss, JAFF functions as a mechanism of political memory (Olick, 2013), curating not only aesthetic forms but also historical experience, and determining which Asian pasts are activated, legitimized, and granted regional audibility within the festival space.

This recognition operates not only at a cognitive level but at an affective one. By naming "memory, loss, and the fragile spaces that hold our shared histories" as the very grounds of a film's worth, the jury determines which experiences of grief are granted a collective frame through which they can be mourned, and which are left to be carried privately. This affective dimension of recognition becomes consequential later in the analysis, when the same curatorial logic withholds such a collective frame from the community films of *Layar Komunitas*.

A similar pattern of ambiguity is evident in the Blencong Award category. The Philippine short film *Water Sports* was praised through phrases such as "visi unik," "visual yang mencolok," and "penceritaan yang inovatif," as well as an atmosphere that is "bersemangat, jenaka, dan surreal" in depicting a nightmare about "hidup di tengah kiamat" (apocalyptic condition) (JAFF, 2025b). Once again, the jury's language of assessment operates within the vocabulary of festival formalism, such as unique vision, visual strength, narrative innovation, and surreal sensibilities. The phrase "visi unik" (unique vision) recalls the auteurist tradition, which values a film through the filmmaker's personal vision and distinctive style (Sarris, 1963). From this perspective, a film is read in relation to patterns that appear across the director's body of work, so aesthetic judgment becomes closely tied to the individuality of its creator. Even so, the film's aesthetic form is not separate from its political meaning. It also becomes a way of expressing local and regional anxieties about violence, destruction, and uncertainty over the social future (Jameson, 2009).

In the Jury Special Mention category, *Hyena*, a China–United States co-production (JAFF, 2025a), was praised for its "sinematografi, mise-en-scene, musik, dan penampilan luar biasa" (cinematography, mise-en-scène, music, and outstanding performances), as well as for portraying "kekacauan maskulinitas toksik yang sering kali menciptakan siklus kekerasan" (the chaos of toxic masculinity that often creates cycles of violence) (JAFF, 2025b). The reference to cinematography and mise-en-scène shows that the jury still relies on a familiar language of film criticism, especially one concerned with visual control, composition, and performance. At the same time, the award gives recognition to a critique of toxic masculinity and recurring violence. In Maggio's (2007) terms, the citation can be read as a form of audibility, although that recognition is still shaped by the festival's institutional language and by the aesthetic categories used by the jury.

The JAFF award system in 2025 shows a clear ambivalence. The jury still uses an aesthetic vocabulary familiar in the international festival circuit, so Asian films are partly valued through a language of global recognition. At the same time, the awarded films deal with political issues such as historical memory, loss, social marginalization, ecological destruction, and gender-based violence. JAFF therefore does not simply reproduce Western standards, but it is not fully separated from them

either. The same pattern appears across the Golden Hanoman, Silver Hanoman, Blencong Award, and Jury Special Mention. In each category, auteurist language is used alongside themes rooted in Asian social and historical experience. Through this combination, JAFF makes Asian wounds and political concerns visible within a wider festival language.

Co-production and External Validation

The Main Competition serves as a stage for works that combine artistic excellence, narrative strength, and bold vision, making it the highest representation of contemporary cinema in the festival. It is from this program that the festival's top awards are given: the Silver Hanoman and the Golden Hanoman. Because the Main Competition is the most prestigious space in JAFF, the films that enter this category are relevant to read as indicators of the kind of cinema that gains high legitimacy in the festival (de Valck, 2007; Elsaesser, 2005). For this reason, this section does not focus on the narrative content of each film, but rather on its production and co-production structure, which country the film comes from, what institutional networks support it, and whether its visibility in the main competition is related to access to global production networks. As a note, the category of "Western Involvement" in this mapping is determined based on the presence of at least one co-producing country from Western Europe or North America, regardless of the number or proportion of other co-producing countries.

Table 1. Production and Co-Production Country Comparison Table

Film	Asian Country/Region	Co-production Country	Western Involvement (Yes/No)
Becoming Human	Cambodia	-	No
A Useful Ghost	Thailand	Singapore, France, and Germany	Yes
Amoeba	Singapore	Netherlands, France, Spain, and South Korea	Yes
Lost Land	Japan	France, Malaysia, and Germany	Yes
On Your Lap	Indonesia	Saudi Arabia	No
Summer's Camera	South Korea	-	No
Flames	India	-	No
Girl	Taiwan	China	No
The World of Love	South Korea	-	No
Hair, Paper, and Water...	Vietnam	Belgium and France	Yes

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on the JAFF20 Catalogue (JAFF, 2025a)

The mapping of the data serves as the foundation for this analysis. Of the ten films in the JAFF20 Main Competition, four involved European co-producers: A Useful Ghost (Thailand, with Singapore, France and Germany), Amoeba (Singapore, with the Netherlands, France, Spain, and South Korea), Lost Land (Japan, with France, Malaysia, and Germany), Hair, Paper, and Water... (Vietnam, with Belgium and France). The remaining six films, namely Becoming Human, The World of Love, Flames, Summer's Camera, On Your Lap, and Girl, showed no direct Western involvement, appearing either as Asian national productions or as intra-Asian co-productions. It is worth noting that some films classified under "Western

Involvement" also involve intra-Asian co-production partners — for instance, *Amoeba* (Singapore) was co-produced with South Korea alongside its European partners. The binary classification used here prioritizes the mere presence of Western capital/infrastructure access over its proportional weight, in line with this study's focus on whether Western validation infrastructure is present at all, not how dominant it is.

This data can then be read through a technique of subject-positioning that contrasts the two groups. The four-to-six division reveals a genuine arena of discursive contestation. On one side, the visibility of the four films supported by European networks can be understood through the lens of Fanon (1952) as a form of postcolonial ambivalence: Asian cinema appears as subject, yet for its voice to achieve a degree of audibility (Maggio, 2007) within a prestigious competitive space, it is still frequently negotiated through the infrastructure of Western validation. On the other hand, however, the predominance of six films without Western intervention points to an actual practice of inter-referencing (Chen, 2010). These six films indicate that JAFF's Main Competition can confer legitimacy on Asian cinema without requiring direct Western production involvement.

The claim of Western validation's dominance nevertheless collapses when tested against the festival's highest point of legitimacy. The top award, the Golden Hanoman, was in fact given to *Becoming Human* (Cambodia), a film with no European or American co-production at all (JAFF, 2025b). If lactification (Fanon, 1952), or the desire to imitate colonial standards of validation, operated absolutely within the architecture of JAFF, then a film backed by Western networks should have won. The victory of *Becoming Human* suggests that the logic of Asia as Method operates, at least partially, at the highest level of JAFF's curatorial recognition. This finding allows us to distinguish JAFF's ambivalence more precisely. The shadow of the West (lactification) may still linger in the aesthetic vocabulary of the jury's assessments (as discussed in the Jury Citations section), but it no longer dictates the structure of material recognition. Asian cinema proves capable of achieving the highest legitimacy in its own home without needing the stamp of approval from Western production.

A final layer of complexity complicates the West–Asia binary. The category of "without Western involvement" does not automatically mean that the region is free from relations of power. The case of *On Your Lap* (Indonesia–Saudi Arabia) illustrates a cross-regional co-production linking Southeast Asia and West Asia, the latter of which has historically appeared only rarely in JAFF's curatorial landscape. This can also be read as part of a broader state-level push for Indonesia-Saudi film cooperation, with Indonesia's Ministry of Culture pushing for cooperation between the Red Sea International Film Festival and Indonesian platforms such as JAFF (ANTARA News, 2026). The case of *Girl*, a Taiwan–China co-production, adds another layer to the discussion. Intra-Asian collaboration is not politically neutral, especially when it involves two sides whose relationship is shaped by disputes over status and sovereignty. These cases support Acharya's (2010a; 2010b) warning against treating Asia as a single and unified entity. Even when Asia is defined without reference to the West, internal divisions and unequal power relations remain. Asia should therefore be seen as a contested space, constantly being made through negotiation, competition and disagreement among its subregions.

Asia in the Festival

The earlier discussion of co-production showed that the visibility of Asian cinema in the Main Competition is connected to national, intra-Asian, and global production networks. This section turns to JAFF's wider program structure. In its 20th edition, JAFF screened 227 films through two channels: offline screenings at Empire XXI and online screenings through KlikFilm. A total of 182 films were screened offline across 24 programs, while 99 films were available online across 17 programs (JAFF, 2025b). These figures should not be added together because some films appeared on both channels. Instead, they demonstrate how JAFF merges physical and digital circulation.

The "Asia Programs" cluster includes categories that explicitly use the word "Asia," such as "Light of Asia" and "Asian Perspective Short." This naming suggests that "Asia" is treated as a recognizable category whose meaning is already assumed. JAFF describes "Light of Asia" as its main and most prestigious short-film competition, with films selected from hundreds of submissions (JAFF, 2025a). In this program, short films are not presented as unfinished works or as a step toward feature filmmaking. They are treated as a form capable of expressing major ideas with intensity and precision. The Blencong Award, which is decided by the jury, is also presented as an indication of where short-form cinema may be heading.

The phrase "not seen merely as sketches" (JAFF, 2025a) carries a presupposition that short films are often treated as a minor or incomplete form of cinema, or simply as a step toward feature filmmaking. Other phrases, such as "powerful medium," "big ideas," "precision of form," and "artistic boldness" (JAFF, 2025a), work as predication because they attach qualities that present short films as serious and artistically valuable. JAFF is therefore not only describing short films but also giving them legitimacy through the authority of the festival. In Maggio's (2007) terms, this can be read as a form of audibility: short films are given a place in the program and are also presented as worthy of attention within Asian cinema. The phrases "carefully curated from hundreds of submissions" and "chosen directly by the jury" (JAFF, 2025a) also show subject positioning, since JAFF and the jury are placed in the role of deciding which films deserve recognition. The phrase "guiding light for the future of short-form cinema" (JAFF, 2025a) strengthens this position by presenting the Blencong Award winner not only as the best film in the category, but also as a sign of where Asian short cinema may be heading.

The names "Asian Perspective Features" and "Asian Perspective Shorts" present Asia not only as the geographical origin of the films, but also as a particular point of view. The word "perspective" works as an epistemic claim: Asia is positioned as a subject that has its own way of seeing, interpreting, and narrating the world. Within the framework of *Asia as Method* (Chen, 2010), this naming opens the possibility that JAFF is attempting to make Asia an epistemological reference point, not merely an object of representation. However, this claim needs to be tested through Acharya's (2010b) question: which Asian perspective is given space, and which remains at the margins?

To answer this, the films in both programs are mapped according to Asian sub-region. The grouping is based on the lead production country as recorded in the JAFF20 Catalogue (JAFF, 2025a); films with more than one production country across sub-regions are counted in each relevant sub-region, so the total number of representations (51) exceeds the actual number of films (49).

Table 2. Recapitulation of Films Based on Asian Sub-Region

Sub-Region	Asian Perspective Features	Asian Perspective Shorts	Combined Total
East Asia	9	9	18
Southeast Asia	6	13	19
South Asia	5	4	9
West Asia	1	2	3
Central Asia	0	0	0
Non-Asian	2	0	2
Total Representation	23	28	51
Actual Total Films	22	27	49

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on the JAFF20 Catalogue (JAFF, 2025a)

The mapping of 49 films shows an uneven distribution across Asian sub-regions: Southeast Asia (19 representations), East Asia (18), South Asia (9), West Asia (3, namely two films from Iran and one from Lebanon), and Central Asia (0). The two films in the "Non-Asian" category indicate that the category of "Asia" in this program is not entirely closed but rather has a porous boundary. This distribution answers Acharya's question directly: in practice, the naming of "Asian Perspective" makes Southeast Asia and East Asia the center of gravity for representation, places South Asia in a secondary position, and pushes West Asia and Central Asia to a periphery that is almost invisible.

This dominance reproduces a core-periphery model within the Asian continent itself: countries with established capitalist film industry infrastructure, such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, together with Southeast Asia as the regional host, dominate the discursive stage, while the post-Soviet region is left behind in a representational blind spot. Read through Maggio's (2007) lens of audibility, this finding affirms that not all Asian subjects have the same privilege to be heard in their own "home."

The limits of generalizing this finding need to be stated clearly. The mapping is based on two specific programs out of a total of 41 programs at JAFF20; the absence of Central Asian representation in these two programs cannot be generalized as a total absence within the festival, as evidenced by the screening of the Kazakh film *What Have You Done, Zarina?* in the Light of Asia program (JAFF, 2025a). However, precisely because Asian Perspective textually claims to represent the "Asian perspective" in general, this absence remains significant: it marks the boundary of the "Asia" constructed within a space that discursively claims universal Asian representation. The celebrated claim of an "Asian Perspective" is therefore highly selective in nature and confirms that every construction of regional identity always leaves behind subjects excluded beyond the boundaries of its discourse. Discursively, JAFF marginalizes part of its own continent's historical identity; this need not be read as a deliberate intention, but rather as a structural effect of the

curatorial categories employed. This reasoning follows the same interpretive caution applied below to the *Layar Komunitas* silence: a non-political explanation is considered first, before the pattern's discursive significance is argued on textual grounds.

The Indonesia Programs and the Center–Grassroots Divide

The Indonesian program cluster consists of four sub-programs with differing selection bases and varying degrees of curatorial text.

Table 3. Indonesia Programs

Program	Number of Films	Official Curatorial Description	Selection Basis
Indonesian Film Showcase	9	Present	Contemporary Indonesian cinema
Jogja Showcase	6	Present	Yogyakarta local film ecosystem
Layar Komunitas	12	Absent	Grassroots cinema, regional communities
Layar Indonesiana	10	Absent	Projects supported by state funding (Dana Indonesiana)

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on the JAFF20 Catalogue (JAFF, 2025a)

Of the four sub-programs, only two are accompanied by an introductory curatorial text at the program level, namely Indonesian Film Showcase and Jogja Showcase. The other two programs, *Layar Komunitas* (12 films) and *Layar Indonesiana* (10 films), have no collective curatorial text at the program level, although individual descriptions for each film remain available (JAFF, 2025a).

Before jumping to a political reading, a simpler explanation needs to be considered honestly: the absence of program-level curatorial text in non-competitive programs is commonly found at many film festivals, regardless of any particular geopolitical context, because flagship programs usually receive a larger allocation of promotional writing resources than regular or grassroots programs. If this explanation holds, the absence of text for *Layar Komunitas* is no more than a matter of resource allocation, not a politically meaningful silence.

However, two textual indications make the political reading worth maintaining, while acknowledging its limitations. The first indication concerns the appropriate unit of comparison. The relevant comparison is not between competitive programs, which by their genre indeed require jury justification, and non-competitive programs, but rather within the category of non-competitive programs itself. The absence of text is selective rather than uniform: it does not apply to Indonesian Film Showcase and Jogja Showcase, the two showcase programs that are in fact given the most elaborate curatorial text in the entire Indonesian cluster. In Indonesian Film Showcase, for example, the predication "exploring diverse perspectives, modes of storytelling, and visual languages crafted by Indonesian filmmakers" (JAFF, 2025a) positions these films through aesthetic and technical expertise, rather than through the representational burden of poverty or social issues, a burden that within the framework of Orientalism (Said, 1979) often

becomes a prerequisite for Asian cinema to be regarded as "authentic" in the global festival circuit. In Jogja Showcase, Yogyakarta is predicated as "fertile ground for cinematic ideas and creation" that gives a "distinctive voice" to the Indonesian cinematic landscape (JAFF, 2025a).

The second indication lies in the themes addressed by the films in *Layar Komunitas*, many of which carry considerable historical and political weight. Titles such as *[Revisi: 3 Februari 1965] Gugatan-Gugatan dari dalam Tudung Saji* and *Torosiaje: The Bajau, The Sea*, and *The Future* carry narratives of historical trauma from the 1965 political violence and of marginalized communities, namely the displacement of the Bajau community (JAFF, 2025a). These themes are not unique to *Layar Komunitas*; they belong to the same thematic register of memory, loss, and marginality that defines the festival's most celebrated winners. Yet when comparable themes appear in the Hanoman Awards, as in *Becoming Human* and *A Useful Ghost*, they are given elaborate and poetic language of recognition.

It is this contrast that gives weight to reading through Olick (2013) and Maggio (2007), rather than a mere resource-allocation explanation. If the absence of curatorial text were purely a matter of limited resources, there should be no systematic pattern distinguishing which themes are given full elaboration (trauma in the Hanoman Awards) and which are left without a collective frame (the very same trauma in *Layar Komunitas*). This pattern shows that the absence of a frame for *Layar Komunitas* is not an absence of data, since its films are still displayed individually, but rather an absence of the collective linguistic authority that could legitimize its discursive position as a recognized whole. Read through Olick (2013), films carrying the memory of the 1965 political violence require institutional activation in order to enter collective memory; without such a frame, the political grief and anger embedded in these works remain present in the festival space but are not granted the legitimacy to be heard as part of a shared Asian historical consciousness.

The difference in logic between *Layar Komunitas* and *Layar Indonesiana* further underscores that silence within JAFF's curatorial architecture is not singular but operates asymmetrically. *Layar Indonesiana* with support from *Dana Indonesiana* is presented without a curatorial narrative at the program level. One interpretation is that state funding already offers a form of material legitimacy, thereby lessening the significance of further verbal framing. *Layar Komunitas* occupies a different position. As a grassroots program without the same centralized state support, its films remain visible as individual works but are not brought together through a shared curatorial narrative. The silence surrounding the two programs therefore does not operate in the same way. It reflects their different positions within Indonesia's domestic networks of institutional power.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that JAFF20 constructs "Asia" unevenly across three connected levels: the relationship between the West and Asia, the unequal representation of Asian sub-regions, and the difference between Indonesia's

curatorial center and its grassroots film communities. "Transfiguration" and Asia-based symbols such as Hanoman and Blencong open space for self-referential recognition, even as evaluative language still echoes Western-centered festival standards; European co-production remains present though not decisive, while "Asian Perspective" privileges Southeast and East Asian cinema over Central Asia; and Indonesia's host status grants curatorial exceptionalism unevenly distributed between Layar Indonesiana and the less institutionally legitimated Layar Komunitas.

These findings do not point in only one direction. JAFF opens space for decolonial practice through Asia-based symbols, inter-referencing, and curatorial autonomy, marking a real move away from direct dependence on Western institutions. At the same time, Orientalist logic and postcolonial hierarchies persist across all three levels. Decolonial tendencies are most visible in symbolic choices and institutional autonomy, while deeper structures of recognition, tied to funding networks, aesthetic standards, and geographic distribution, remain harder to alter. Symbolic change is important but does not, on its own, dismantle these structural hierarchies.

This study reads JAFF not merely as an object of representation or a tool of cultural diplomacy, but as a site of regional discourse production, filling a gap in literature that has largely approached Asian film festivals from Western, diasporic, or nation-branding perspectives. It contributes to International Relations by showing that film festivals can reproduce global hierarchies outside formal political institutions. Some limitations must be acknowledged. The analysis is limited to a single festival edition (JAFF20), offering a portrait of one curatorial moment rather than a longitudinal pattern. The corpus is confined to institutional texts, leaving curators' subjective intentions and audience reception outside its scope, and the absence of certain program-level curatorial texts is read as structurally significant, though the possibility of undocumented material cannot be entirely ruled out.

Future research could pursue a longitudinal comparison across JAFF editions to test whether this pattern persists across changes in leadership and theme; a comparative study of other Asia-based festivals, such as Busan or Singapore, to test whether Southeast-East Asian centrality and host exceptionalism are JAFF-specific or circuit-wide; and interviews with curators and jury members to triangulate these discursive findings and probe how reflectively this hierarchy is recognized by those who produce it. Ultimately, these cross-scale hierarchies illuminate a broader dynamic in which politics of exclusion and recognition are reproduced through cultural practice, not only formal political institutions. The moral hierarchies embedded in JAFF's curatorial architecture are affective as well as structural: they determine which forms of Asian suffering are granted institutional recognition, and which circulate without the weight of regional memory behind them. Reading JAFF as a site of regional discourse production, rather than simply an exhibition space, draws IR's attention to the role cultural institutions play in reproducing and challenging global hierarchies of recognition.

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