

# The Genealogy of a Marginalized Art Movement - The Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival

Zekai Zhao, The Department of Arts, Culture and Media, University of Toronto Scarborough, supervised by Elisha Lim



## Background

- The 1980s brought forward movements such as advocacy for racial representation which led to the creation of numerous ethnic film festivals (Chang, 2004).
- The Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival is a pioneer for the exhibition of Asian-created media art in Canada, providing an outlet for people of Asian descent to connect their heritage with North American culture and to shatter prejudices.
- Asian-North American artists have gained greater visibility in the Eurocentric Canadian arts industry through this festival.

## Introduction

- This research explores the history, key players, and visibility of Asian ethnicities at the Reel Asian Film Festival.
- The background and motivations are drawn from news articles and local media scholars.
- Using a quantitative research method by examining the festival's program guides from 1997 to 2021, it was determined that there was an unequal distribution of Asian ethnicities in its formative years but set corrective measures towards a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive event.

## Context: Motivations and Creations

- The social problems faced by different cultures under the narrative of pluralism are deliberately ignored by the ruling class, where suffering and hardships are brought about by oneself (Bannerji, 2000).
- The stereotyping of Asian culture breeds sexism and racial discrimination against Asian communities in Canada (Chang, 2004).
- The Canadian Multiculturalism Act was passed in 1988, which "recognizes minorities' right to enjoy their culture" (Heritage Community Foundation, 2010) and encouraged social activism for racial representation through visual media.
- The history of Asian media art in North America can be traced back to the 1916 film "The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East Mingles with the West" by the Chinese-American director Marion Wong (Shih, 2004).
- Inspired by the Asian American Film Festival, Anita Lee wanted to create a film festival that would unite Asian diaspora artists in Canada, provide a more linguistic framework for Asian culture in North America, end the culture wars, and create a truly inclusive environment.

**"Asian' in Reel Asian is not essentially about being Asian. It has an identity of its own. And maybe it should last as long as it can change and evolve." - Anita Lee**

## Key Leaders/Artists

- Anita Lee**, Founder of the Reel Asian Film Festival
- Andrew Sun**, Co-founder of the Reel Asian Film Festival
- Deanna Wong**, Executive Director at Reel Asian Film Festival
- Mina Shum**, "Double Happiness"
- Richard Fung**, focus on queer, AIDS, racism, and homophobia among Asian North Americans  
"Sea In The Blood", "Orientation", "Re: Orientation"
- Rea Tajiri**, focus on the exploration of Japanese Americans  
"Strawberry Fields", "Obits"

**"When I look at mainstream Western movies and at television... I see (a few) gay men and lesbians and (a few) Asians but I don't see gay or lesbian Asians."  
- Richard Fung**

- Jane Kim**, focus on Korean-Canadian women and families  
"Crickets", "Wide-Eyed", "Paper, Scissors, Rock"
- Ann Marine Fleming**, focus on Asians who came to Canada in the 19th century  
"Automatic Writing", "The Magic Life of Long Tack Sam"
- Greg Pak**, focus on Korean-American families and Asian sexuality  
"Fighting Grandpa", "All Amateur Ecstasy", "The Basement Girl"
- Midi Onodera**, focus on Asian lesbians  
"The Basement Girl"
- Ho Tam**, focus on discrimination against Asian North Americans  
"Confessions of A Salesman"

**"The Asian arts community in Toronto was quite vibrant and exciting, with lots of people doing interesting things in different disciplines. But there wasn't an Asian film festival." - Andrew Sun**

## Opinion: "Asian-ness"

- In Figure 1, the festival focused more on telling the story of East Asian culture (Bailey & Lee, 2004).
- In Figure 2, East Asian directors (or moderators) accounted for 69.4% of the festival from 1997 to 2021, Southeast Asians for 18.7%, South Asians for 7.6%, West Asians for 1.0% and Central Asians for 0.1%.
- The festival's selection of programmes emphasizes that **Asia is a circle**, with East Asians at the centre of the circle, Southeast Asians standing at the second level, South Asians at the edge, and West Asians and Central Asians squeezed into a blank area that is neither Asian nor European (Sooritikumaran, 2020).
- The visibility of Asian ethnicity at the festival depended on "political and economic influence" and took into account the distribution of Asian communities in North America (Sooritikumaran, 2020).
- The reason behind the popularity of the Reel Asian Film Festival seems to be because it emphasizes itself as an East Asian film festival which fits into the North American audience's narrative that East Asia is Asia.
- "Roughly 7 million identify as Chinese (including Taiwanese), Japanese, or Korean. An equal proportion of Asian Americans claims Indian, Filipino, or Vietnamese origin. Yet according to David, these latter groups are often disassociated from popular perceptions of Asian Americans" (Schiavenza, 2016).
- From 2011 onwards, the organizers have made improvements by inviting more Southeast, South, Central, and West Asian artists.
- The festival needs to include management staff of non-East Asian descent to plan the festival, which will lead to greater diversity in film selection.

## Conclusion

- The festival's definition of Asian culture is subjective, with a predominantly East Asian focus and a smaller selection of artworks of other Asian descent.
- The festival is a platform for Asian-North American artists to gain greater exposure to Asian culture and to gain recognition from the mainstream film industry.
- It helps Asian-North American artists to break the stereotype of the North-American art industry being dominated by Eurocentric-North American artists, and to gain more sponsorship for the festival's development.
- The festival also provides a home for the Asian diaspora to feel a sense of belonging, where they can discover their cultural identity and build bridges between the festival and the Asian community.



Anita Lee

Anita Lee is the founder of the Reel Asian Film Festival and also the Executive Producer of the Ontario Centre of the National Film Board of Canada (NFBONF, 2019). From 2000 to 2020, she has worked on and directed 52 films, including short films, documentaries and television series (IMDb, 2021). Lee's dedication to filmmaking over the past two decades has helped her gain more support among Asian-North American filmmakers.



Richard Fung

As a member of the Reel Asian Film Festival Advisory Board, Richard Fung is involved in and supports the organization and has been featured as a media artist in nine festivals (ReelAsian, 2016). His iconic works include "Sea In The Blood", "Orientation" and "Re: Orientation". With a central theme of Asian gender identity, Fung uses a variety of expressions to present the Asian-Canadian LGBTQ scene and attempt to break down stereotypes of Asian male asexuality (Museum of Toronto, 2021).



Rea Tajiri

Rea Tajiri's films focus on the lives of Japanese Americans. "Strawberry Fields" was the first movie shown at the first Reel Asian Film Festival (ReelAsian, 1997). The use of young Japanese Americans' forgetfulness of history highlights the contempt mainstream history has for the rights of Japanese Americans. Her early work offers a different narrative and performance model for telling the stories of Asian North Americans.

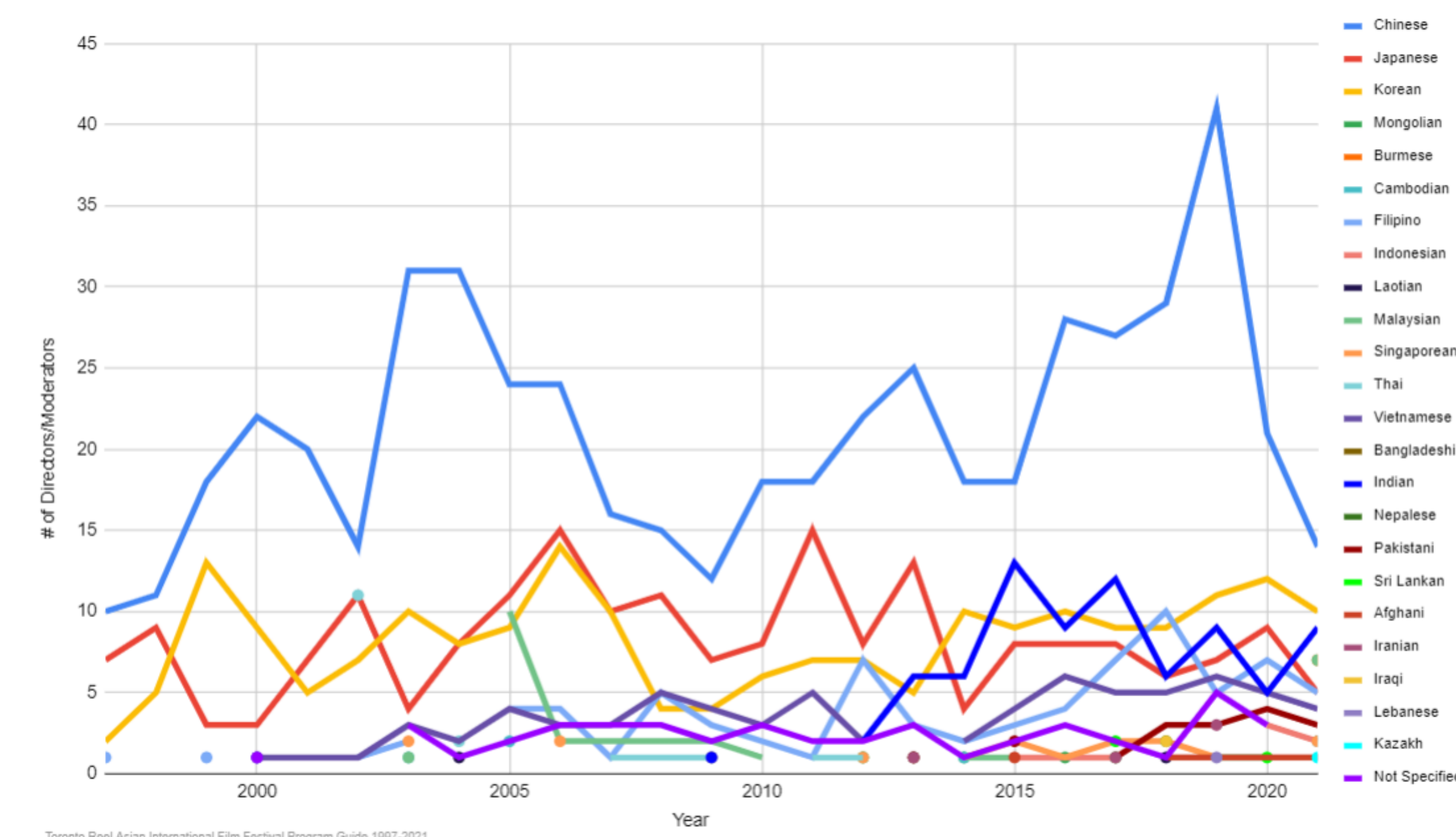


Figure 1: Director/Moderator at the Reel Asian Film Festival, 1997-2021

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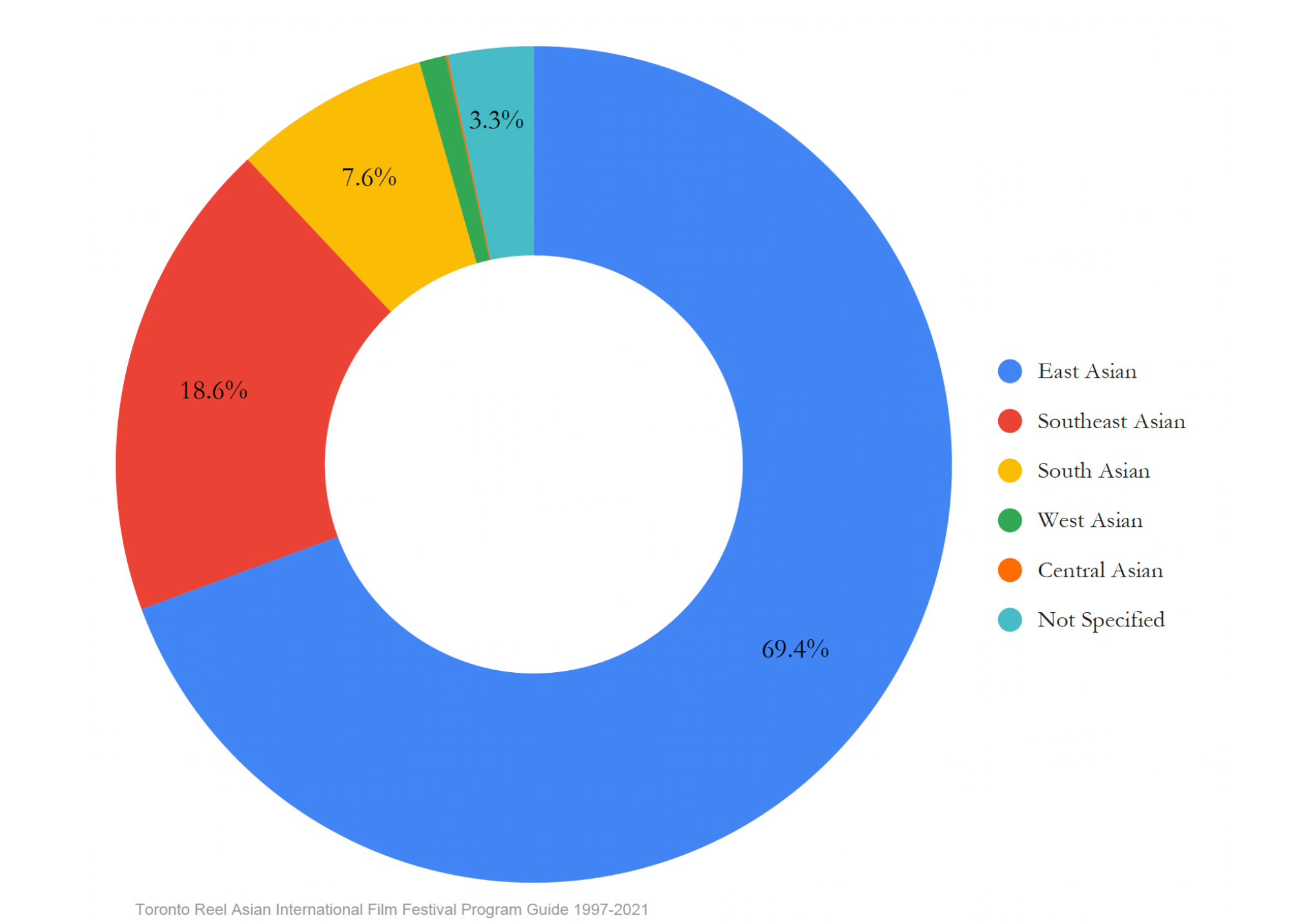


Figure 2: % of Director/Moderator Ethnicities Based on Region, 1997-2021

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