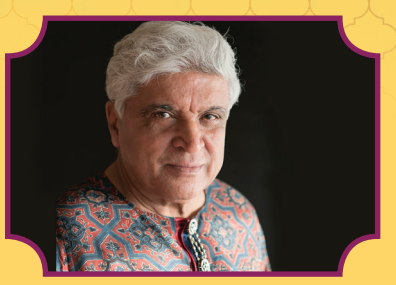
GBA CULTUREHK

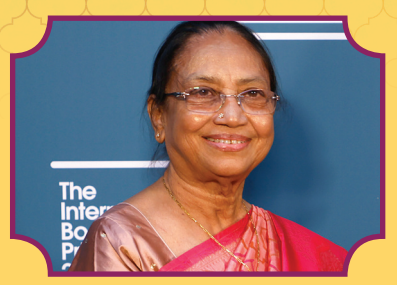
Collaboration between artists from India and Hong Kong has been key to the programming of India by the Bay. The annual festival of Indian culture in Hong Kong celebrates its 10th edition this week. Faye Bradley reports.



Right: Presented by the dance collective Nrityagram, *Khankhana: the Sound of Dancing Feet*, is a highlight of India by the Bay 2025. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY









From left: India by the Bay Director Lakshmi Mahey Laroia and participating Indian cultural icons — poet and lyricist Javed Akhtar, 2025 International Booker-winning novelist Banu Mushtaq, and sarod maestro Amjad Ali Khan. Laroia — say, "These artists have dedicated their lives to the service of the arts, united by the belief that art matters."

A decade of dialogues

This year marks the 10th anniversary of India by the Bay (IBB), an annual weeklong celebration of Indian arts, culture, and heritage in Hong Kong. This milestone edition, which kicked off on Thursday, features music, dance, and conversations with authors; a gala dinner; a family day; and much else.

Over the past decade, the festival has grown into a vibrant platform for artistic exchanges — bridging India and Hong Kong through live shows, artistic collaborations, and shared cultural experiences.

"Each year marks a new milestone, as the festival continues to evolve and reinvent itself in subtle yet meaningful ways," says IBB Director Lakshmi Mahey Laroia. "Guided by an annual theme, the programming offers both creative flexibility and a cohesive framework."

To mark its first decade in Hong Kong, this year, IBB is hosting some of India's most celebrated cultural icons — lyricist, poet, and screenwriter Javed Akhtar; 2025 International Booker Prize-winning novelist Banu Mushtaq; and former diplomat and author Shashi Tharoor. The lineup also includes legendary sarod maestro Amjad Ali Khan.

"These artists have dedicated their lives to the service of the arts, united by the belief that art matters — that it plays a vital role in shaping and evolving society," says Laroia.

The Asia Society Hong Kong Center has partnered Teamwork Arts, the event production company behind the festival since its first edition in 2015. Over time, the festival's audience has become more diverse, with growing participation from outside the Indian community in Hong Kong.

Laroia contends that IBB's "longstanding focus on collaborations with local organizations and artists" might have something to do with its rising popularity. "Each year, including this one, we've curated events that bring Indian and Hong Kong-based creative people together, sparking a meaningful cultural exchange. This has led to a growing curiosity about and appreciation for Indian culture," she says.

IBB also hosts workshops in educational institutions and fosters collaborations with local community groups. Some of the shows on its program are free and open to the public, "bringing India," as Laroia puts it, "to Hong Kong's doorstep".

Matching steps

In 2024, IBB's focus was on collaboration, bringing together artists from Hong Kong and India to co-create new works. Acclaimed Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer Rukmini Vijayakumar joined forces with Cantonese Opera performer Eliza Li Pui-yan to stage *Kadal Kadal: Endless Love*. Sunaad Anoor, a fifth-generation musician trained in Carnatic music, served as the percussionist on the show. In 2019, filmmaker and performing artist Shilpika Bordoloi collaborated with the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) to present a dance-meets-theater show.

"The Academy has collaborated with IBB on various community projects over the years," says HKAPA Director Anna CY Chan. "Dance has a unique ability to unite people from diverse cultures and backgrounds, transcending barriers."

She goes on to explain that the "collective experience" of watching a dance performance rooted in a different culture can "foster a deep understanding of inclusion, empathy, and kindness".

This year, all eyes are on *Khankhana: The Sound of Dancing Feet*, an evening of Odissi — a classical Indian dance form originating in the second century BC in the Indian state of Odisha — choreographed by Surupa Sen, an internationally acclaimed Odissi exponent and the artistic director of the arts collective Nrityagram. The show promises to treat its audience to "a living dialogue between ancient tradition and contemporary expression".

Harmony in diversity

This year's cross-cultural highlights include *Raga & Resonance*, an evening of Indian, Chinese, and Western classical music. Bassist Simon Hui and *guzheng*-player Grammy Yeung Ching-ho from the Hong Kong New Music Ensemble (HKNME), and *suona*- and *guan*-player Ma Wai-him from Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra join a formidable ensemble of Indian musicians, led by Hindustani classical vocalist Ustad Ghulam Siraj Niazi. The concert also features HKNME artistic director and violist William Lane.

Yeung says she is particularly excited about getting "the chance to weave the *guzheng*'s delicate, flowing tones with the intricate ragas of Indian music and the harmonic depth of Western classical traditions". "It's like a conversation where each instrument speaks its own language, yet together we create something universal and new.

"Such concerts highlight the city's openness to blending traditions, fostering inclusivity, and pushing creative boundaries," she says.

Hui shares that he has long been fascinated by Indian classical music — ever since he watched the Indian maestros, sitarist Ravi Shankar and tabla-player Alla Rakha, perform on TV. "As a young student of Western classical music with a rebellious penchant for rock and jazz, I was attracted to the freedom of imagination offered by the improvisatory nature of Indian music," he says. He hopes that the *Raga & Resonance* concert on Wednesday will encourage at least a few people in the audience to ditch popular listening options in favor of an "adventurous approach to discovering new areas of experience".

The multicultural ensemble will perform *Dragon in India*, a brand-new piece by violinist and composer Luk Wai-chun, the same evening. Luk has followed the conventions of Hindustani classical music while setting his piece to the pentatonic scale of Chinese music.

"The project feels deeply personal, bringing back memories of my undergraduate years when I arranged Bollywood music using Indian and Western instruments and recorded the music in an Indian temple in Hong Kong," says the composer. "This concert builds strong connections between people from different cultures, making Hong Kong a special place for mixing of cultures."

Ustad Niazi sounds equally excited at the prospect of engaging with students from varied musical backgrounds. "Embracing the artist's belief that dialogue between instruments serves as a meditative exploration of the nature of sonic divinity, I hope to inspire the next generation to embrace music — not just as an art form, but also as a means to finding harmony within themselves and with the world around them," he says.

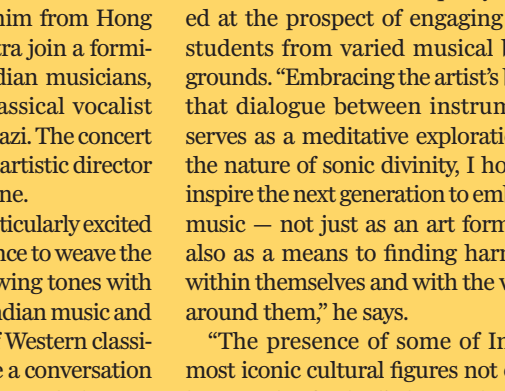
"The presence of some of India's most iconic cultural figures not only honors the festival's legacy but also reinforces our belief in the transformative power of the arts," says Laroia. "It's a moment to look back with pride and forward with renewed purpose."



Hindustani classical vocalist Ustad Ghulam Siraj Niazi (right) is leading the concert *Raga & Resonance*, which will see participation by a number of Hong Kong-based musicians, including violist William Lane (above).







Clockwise from left: Hong Kong musicians who include *guzheng*-player Grammy Yeung Ching-ho, composer Luk Wai-chun, and *suona*- and *guan*-player Ma Wai-him will be part of IBB's *Raga & Resonance* concert on Wednesday. The evening will also see the premiere of Luk's new work, *Dragon in India*, performed by a multicultural ensemble.

IF YOU GO

India by the Bay
Dates: Through Wednesday.
Venue: Asia Society Hong Kong Center, 9 Justice Drive, Admiralty
https://indiabythebay.com/

Film Review

Girl

★★½

Written and directed by Shu Qi. Starring Bai Xiao-ying and 9m88. Taiwan, China, 125 minutes, IIB. Opened Thursday.





Kokuho

★★★½

Directed by Lee Sang-il, written by Satoko Okudera, based on the book by Shuichi Yoshida. Starring Ryo Yoshizawa and Ryusei Yokohama. Japan, 174 minutes, IIA. Opens Nov 13.

Fighting the odds

By AMY MULLINS

Their films may be wildly divergent in terms of subject matter, but directors Lee Sang-il and Shu Qi seem to have started from similar places when they set out to make *Kokuho* and *Girl* respectively. As a Japanese-born filmmaker of Zainichi Korean ancestry, Lee has been an outsider for his entire career, despite winning the Kurosawa Akira Award at the Tokyo International Film Festival this week. His marginalized position has made Lee one of Japanese cinema's most astute critics, while Shu — despite the recognition for her performances in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Millennium Mambo* (2001), *Three Times* (2005), and Bi Gan's upcoming *Resurrection* — continues to be associated with her early work in Hong Kong Category III films and her relationships with the city's showbiz heavyweights, actor-director-singer Leon Lai and director Stephen Fung. Hou was Shu's mentor, and yet there's surprise at her foray into direction.

But then surprise is what cinema is all about, ideally, and so Lee's *Kokuho* fits right in. Japan's second-highest-grossing film this year and also its candidate for an international Oscar nomination, the Kabuki epic spans 50 years, tracing the complex love-hate relationship between actors Kikuo (Ryo Yoshizawa) and Shunsuke (Ryusei Yokohama) as they work toward *ningen kokuho*, i.e., living national-treasure status. The two meet as 15-year-olds when Kikuo is orphaned following the murder of his mafia-leader father and subsequently adopted by Shunsuke's Kabuki superstar father Hanjiro Hanai (Ken Watanabe). He dedicates himself to mastering the craft of *onnagata* (women's roles), knowing full well that only talent will get him noticed. As heir to the Hanai dynasty, Shunsuke doesn't need to make an effort, so when Hanjiro names Kikuo as his heir, the friendly rivalry between the two young artists becomes a rift.

In the semi-autobiographical *Girl*, Shu taps her memories of late '80s Taiwan region for a coming-of-age drama. Young Hsiao-lee (Bai Xiao-ying) grows up in a joyless home with an abusive, alcoholic father, Chiang (Roy Chiu), and resentful mother, Chuan (jazz singer 9m88, aka Joanne Tang Yu-chi). The sound of her father's motorbike in the distance sends Hsiao-lee into a tailspin, frantically looking for a space where she and her younger sister can hide. Through it all, Chuan blames Hsiao-lee whenever something goes wrong while doting on her younger child. Withdrawn and solitary at school, Hsiao-lee's life takes a turn when Chinese American Li-li (Audrey Lin) joins her class in midterm and inspires Hsiao-lee with her bluster, forcing an inevitable reckoning of sorts with Chuan.

Kokuho is Lee (*Villain*, *Rage*) in peak form. Shuichi Yoshida's novel has tremendous potential for mawkish melodrama — there are dark secrets, children born out of wedlock, humiliating professional nadirs — but Lee stays focused on the themes of adherence to lineage, as well as the uneasy connection to patronage that is still vital to Kabuki theater. He and cinematographer Sofian El Fani luxuriate in the minutiae of the performances, preparation, training, and Kabuki's role in Japanese culture with elegant, palpable imagery. The film is engrossing for fans and enlightening for the uninitiated, particularly when it comes to Kikuo's closing performance set to Marihiko Hara's pulsing score.

Conversely, *Girl* bears the hallmarks of a first-time filmmaker. Shu has a solid grasp on visuals, but no matter how personal and authentic it is, the script suffers from underwriting or reliance on archetypes. One can see her point — violence moves in cycles, and breaking them is difficult. However, by not adding anything to the conversation, *Girl* is rendered almost a cliche because of its one-note father and sketchy depiction of the bond between Hsiao-lee and Li-li. But that doesn't mean Shu hasn't picked up a few tips on directing from Hou. Intimately photographed by Yu Jing-pin and impeccably composed, *Girl* demonstrates Shu's burgeoning flair for visual storytelling in immersive long shots and subjective impressionism. And that's a good enough reason to look forward to her sophomore effort.