Asian actors lack Oscar recognition

During February's Academy Awards broadcast, the focus returned again and again to the performers from “Slumdog Millionaire.” From the attractive young budding-star leads Dev Patel and Freida Pinto to the storied veterans Irrfan Khan and Anil Kapoor and non-pro child actors flown in straight from Mumbai, the assembled cast was seen giving repeated standing ovations throughout the night as the film won eight Oscars out of 10 nominations in every conceivable category.

Every category, that is, except for the acting ones. And “Slumdog” is hardly unique in this respect. Over the past few years, cross-cultural prestige pics like “Letters From Iwo Jima,” “The Visitor,” “Lost in Translation,” “Munich,” “Babel,” “City of God” and “Memoirs of a Geisha” have all attracted significant awards attention, though Oscar nominations for the non-American thesp thereon have been almost entirely absent (with “Babel” as the exception that highlights the rule). And nowhere is that disparity more obvious than with regard to East Asian and Indian actors. This lack of recognition for ethnic actors is especially notable in light of Hollywood’s growing interest in non-Western narratives, as well as the kudos breakthrough that African-American thesp have experienced this decade. Considering Hollywood’s often embarrassing past with regard to roles for African-Americans, the joint acting wins for Halle Berry and Denzel Washington in 2001 were seen as providing something of an exorcism. Since then, African-American thesp Forest Whitaker, Morgan Freeman, Jamie Foxx and Jennifer Hudson have all won statuettes (with nominations for nine others), and one could argue that race, at least for black actors, has become a nonissue. But while Hollywood may have largely esoned for Mammy and Stepin Fetchit, the legacy of Long Duk Dong and Mr. Yunioshi has yet to be counterbalanced. “Pioneers like Miyoshi Umeki, Mako and Sessue Hayakawa were like Hattie McDaniel and Sidney Poitier (for Asian Oscar nominees), except we haven’t had the breakthrough actors like Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman,” says Stephen Gong, executive director of the Center for Asian American Media. Excepting supporting noms for Ken Watanabe and Rinko Kikuchi this decade, one has to go back to the mid-’80s and Haing S. Ngor to find a nominated Asian thesp. (Ngor is one of only two Asians to actually win an acting award.) Chinese thesp experienced a situation similar to that of “Slumdog” in 2000, when “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” culled Oscar noms for nearly every category save the acting ones. The theoretical solutions are many — with more quality, high-profile roles for non-Western actors being paramount. But some will also note that a greater understanding of the Hollywood system by international filmmakers and producers would go a long way toward raising Eastern thesp’s profiles in the Oscar bazaar. To that end, Gong notes that several upcoming Chinese pics, such as Ziyi Zhang starrer “Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,” are seemingly “designed to appeal to the U.S. and its emerging Chinese consumer market, perhaps replicating the U.S./European international films of the 1960s that brought dozens of European actors, actresses and filmmakers to Hollywood and ‘Americanized’ them.” For Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles president Christina Marouda, the saga of “Slumdog” could provide something of a teachable moment. “There is still a disconnect between India and Hollywood,” she notes. “Yes, Irrfan is a superb actor and has received critical acclaim, but where was he during the publicity campaign? He was completely ignored. He did not have an agent or a publicist in town to hustle for him. Anil Kapoor came here also without any representation and realized early on that he needed to hire a publicist.” Considering this year’s lists of top Oscar acting contenders — essentially all Caucasians, plus the cast of “Precious” — the situation seems unlikely to change anytime soon.