

Cover story: Two views

Eastern lightning, Western skies

FILMMAKERS MUST LEARN TO COMMUNICATE CREATIVELY, CONSTANTLY AND EFFECTIVELY

By BEY LOGAN

As a British writer/director/producer based in Hong Kong for over 20 years, I consider myself lucky to be a witness to the extraordinary transformation that has occurred in the Chinese film industry.

When I first arrived in the city, Hong Kong films still dominated East Asia. Cantonese-language films were hugely popular across the region, though the biggest potential market (the mainland) still remained untapped.

In the intervening years, the Hong Kong film industry has undergone a steep decline, while the mainland, as a market for both production and distribution, has grown in a manner and scale that no one could have anticipated.

Today, the mainland makes

more films than ever before, and the Hollywood films that are allowed distribution in the mainland can make almost as much money there as they do in the US. The movie that best illustrates this point is James Cameron's *Avatar*.

The last decade has seen American studios and independent filmmakers more eager than ever to cooperate with their Chinese counterparts to make movies that will succeed in both markets. But to date, the results have been mixed.

The much-anticipated *Forbidden Kingdom*, starring Jackie Chan and Jet Li, performed better in China than in the US. In contrast, *The Karate Kid* (also starring Chan) did more business in America. Highly awaited co-production projects including a live-action version of *Mulan* (starring Zhang Ziyi) and *Snow White and The Seven Shaolin* (to be directed by

Yuen Woo-ping) have (so far) failed to get off the ground.

Evidently there is a desire on the part of filmmakers from both the East and West to cooperate, and it's to the benefit of both that they do so. Besides the potential financial rewards, these crossover projects allow for a cultural exchange that can increase understanding between the different cultures.

The biggest problem that often afflicts these co-productions is a basic failure to communicate, and a very different approach to the art and science of filmmaking.

In China, a filmmaker like Feng Xiaogang is viewed rather like an artist in Renaissance Italy. He paints what he likes, and, as Michelangelo told the Pope, it'll be ready when it's ready. Directors, and particularly those with a proven record, are financed by their version of Florentine patrons, one or more of the affluent film production entities, and they deliver as they "art" a film that matches their personal vision.

In Hollywood, movies are the result of "development", a process that involves a lot of people other than the director. In fact, many American movies are developed long before a director is even signed. On a big-budget Hollywood blockbuster, even a high-profile director is compelled to deliver his or her film on time, and to deliver a film deemed acceptable by the studio concerned.

Hollywood studios or independents that cooperate with Chinese filmmakers are dismayed when the director decides to change the script on a whim. "This isn't the film we paid for", they complain. From a Chinese point of view, all that matters is that this was the film that the director decided he or she wanted to make.

Conversely, successful Chinese directors, such as John Woo, have gone to Hollywood and found themselves forced to endure endless rounds of meetings with anonymous studio executives as they "develop" their projects.

I would suggest that neither method is perfect. As with many things, the truth lies in a "middle way" between two extremes. Hollywood filmmakers need more flexibility in terms of creative control while Chinese directors need to be more willing to actively collaborate with American partners, especially when the latter have financed or pre-bought their works.

China's growth as a world cinema superpower is unstoppable. Mandarin-language films will continue to play to the country's massive movie-going population. The degree to which China can use that power to enhance its international image, and the potential of this great nation as a distribution and co-production partner for Hollywood filmmakers, depends on the degree to which East and West are prepared to communicate creatively, constantly and effectively.

The author is an expert on East Asian films, particularly Hong Kong action films.

Bring down the cultural barriers

FOREIGN INVESTORS SHOULD ADD MORE CHINESE ELEMENTS FOR BOX-OFFICE SUCCESS

By MA ZHENGQI

Filmmaking is a modern communication technique that is reliant on a host of factors such as capital, competition and collaboration. While it is evident that foreign investment does boost filmmaking, its actual impact is difficult to gauge.

China's film market comprises more than 6,000 screens and had box-office receipts of over 10 billion yuan (\$1.57 billion, 1.13 billion euros) in 2010. The sheer size of the market and the fact that appetite for foreign capital is growing steadily make China an irresistible magnet for foreign investors and movie companies.

But there are still several issues that need to be tackled, as was evident during an industry forum at the 14th Shanghai International

Film Festival earlier this year.

Some of the issues that remained unanswered included questions like: Is the current content mix suitable for generating adequate profits under the screens and revenue sharing model? Yet another question that arose was to what extent capital and cinema should influence the film story.

All worries have reasons. With more and more investors keen on cinema investment, there is no doubt that confidence in the industry is growing. Evidence of this is visible in the growing number of films that vie for box-office collections in cinemas every year.

Though the growth has been explosive, only 130 of the 465 films produced in China during 2009 managed to have a screen presence.

As for the production market, it is clear that there is still a low concentration. China Film Group

Corp and Huayi Brothers, the top two producers, had just 10 and 9 percent market share in 2009. The top four film producers in China accounted for just 26 percent of the total box office, less than that of the three US producers in China, who accounted for over 27 percent. Such trends clearly indicate the direction in which foreign investment should go.

The story behind the scenes is well explained by Greg Frazier, the executive vice-president of the Motion Picture Association of America, who terms China as a "big and exciting market" and says "American movie companies are already making films that Chinese audiences want to see". Frazier is right. The box office for US movies in China more than doubled in 2009 and has continued to grow.

The Hollywood movie *2012* was among the top three blockbusters

of 2009 in China with takings of over 420 million yuan. There were a lot of China elements in *2012* that were incorporated deliberately to cater for Chinese audiences, thereby reinforcing the adage, "making movies is to make money".

It is for these very same reasons that we see more foreign investors entering the Chinese film production market.

Current trends indicate that co-production of films is a better investment option for foreign investors as it helps them get direct access to the domestic market. But there is also often the gray area of how to tackle cultural differences in such ventures.

Co-producers should always reach a consensus about the broad idea and the actual story before they begin the production process. There are not too many examples of successful co-productions as it is

difficult for a co-produced work to merge cultural gaps and gain recognition both at home and abroad.

Columbia Pictures' *The Karate Kid* was a good try. "It had tremendous heart, humor and depth," says Rory Bruer, president of worldwide distribution at the Sony Corp unit. He says the film's underdog plotline and exotic locales, most in China, worked in its favor.

The film industry in China welcomes foreign investment, especially in the co-production market, as it benefits all the industry players. Apart from expanding and activating the capital market, it also generates ideas and experiences about stories, production techniques and business expertise.

Cooperation provides the best chance to learn and it is always good to be working and learning from the best. As for Chinese culture, there should be no undue haste to promote it. The more China elements are involved, the better will China be depicted.

The author is a professor at Communication University of China.