

# New king of the box office

The director of China's box-office record breaker switched from high-brow fare to mass entertainment in one fell swoop, taking the industry by surprise, **Raymond Zhou** writes.

It is surprising to know that the new record holder of China's box office for a domestic release is a cosseted fan of experimental film. Wuershan grew up on a heavy dose of Alan Resnais and Andrei Tarkovsky, European auteurs whose works are known for being inaccessible.

"Whenever they presented Hollywood fare," says Wuershan, referring to his college exposure to foreign cinema, "I'd get up and leave the theater."

*Painted Skin: The Resurrection* has just edged over the 700 million yuan (\$109.8 million) landmark, becoming the highest-grossing Chinese-language movie of all time — for the time being. But the director who made it, is not light-hearted or basking in the glow of success.

The runaway hit is the target of an avalanche of criticisms — some have been brushed aside or responded to by Wuershan in a lengthy video interview with China Daily.

The snow mountain, which detractors say resembles the Paramount logo, was a matte painting based on a photograph of a real peak in Tibet. "All snow mountaintops look a bit similar," says the 40-year-old director.

The wizard of the kingdom of Tianlang, played by Chinese-American singer Kris Phillips, is disparaged as looking uncomfortably like Lord Voldemort. The image, clarifies the director, is actually a mishmash of nomadic witches and rituals. The language spoken by the character is Sanskrit. The kingdom is not Han, but a mix of Hun and other races.

Asked whether the portrayal of this fictional tribe vis-a-vis the upright Han is a "politically incorrect" choice justified only by his own ethnicity (Wuershan is ethnic Mongolian), the director replied that he did not see the tribe as "villains," but just as "rivals of the Han."

He went on to elucidate that in the mythical era, around 2,000 years ago — the time when the story was set — Hun and the nomadic tribes in Northern China "were the stronger races and the Han could appease their wrath by sending over beautiful girls as brides."

Wuershan is his first name. "Mongolians do not use surnames. Some would take on their tribal name as the surname, and I had to put down Wuershan in the category of last name in my passport and leave XXX as my first name," he explains. "XXX is meant to denote 'not applicable,' but some have taken it as some sort of stage name for a hip-hop singer."

A few years ago when Wuershan made a trip to a local movie theater, he found scarcely any domestic films in the lineup. He swore that he would make movies big enough to compete with Hollywood.

He did not give up his fascination with art-house offerings, but he would use the cinematic language he learned from this somewhat "elitist" fare to tell stories with mass appeal, "movies full of spectacles."

Of the new film "masters," Wuershan has set his eyes on Christopher Nolan, David Fincher, Darren Aronofsky and the Wachowskis as his role models — filmmakers who turn out blockbusters yet retain their strong personal touch.

Wuershan has an analogy for his approach: "My relationship with the audience, as I see it, is that of the chef and the customer, not of the physician and the patient. I prepare a feast, with a rich variety of dishes, and people come for the taste, the fragrance, whatever, and they end up finding it has nutrients as well. Likewise, I have to place the entertainment value of a film as top priority, and then its aesthetic value and its probe into humanity."

During the interview, Wuershan displays a vast knowledge for mythologies and religions. He identifies the sources for the images of many of *Star Wars*'s characters, including Queen Amidala, "one of whose headgear is obviously Mongolian in its inspiration". He marvels at the way Hollywood absorbs from cultures the world over. And he attempts to draw on the treasure trove of Asian sources in his own creations.

In *The Butcher, the Chef and the Swordsman*, his 2010 breakout film that won him the Best Newcomer Award at Taiwan's Golden Horse, he stirs up a vortex of styles that make many viewers dizzy with questions. "Isn't the plump woman dressed in Japanese garb?" Some asked. "No, that was inspired by the famous tri-colored glazed pottery from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907)," he replied.

The *Painted Skin* sequel, however, indeed has Japanese elements. Wuershan hired a Japanese concept artist to come up with storyboards that more or less determined the visual style of the film. From the beginning, he intended to create an "oriental fantasy" rather than a strictly Chinese one.

"Fantasy is a genre that fits us. Asians have rich imagination and an abundant source of materials. With new technologies, some of these stories can be visualized on the big screen," he says.

Wuershan approaches stories in this kind of film as allegories. "That'll set you free in understanding the film," he says. That may also explain the stylized dialogue and action that some in the audience are uncomfortable with — in a domestic film, that is, as a foreign fantasy benefits from the distance already existing between the story and the viewer.

While young, Wuershan was an avid reader of philosophy, especially Friedrich Nietzsche. It seems natural that he would want to embark on projects about heroes and superheroes. "It'll take time. We have lagged behind in every genre. I want to push the romance fantasy to the extreme and then tackle the superhero type."

There is one bigger-than-life hero Wuershan, being an ethnic Mongolian, is destined to dream of bringing to screen.

"I started to research Genghis Khan when I was in high school," he recalls. "He grew from an orphan to become the conqueror of the world."

But the new king of Chinese box-office record would not take up such a biopic right now as it'll take time for him to "deepen my knowledge of the subject."

The *Painted Skin* sequel took Wuershan two years to prepare and shoot. "If I work 30 more years, I can turn out a dozen of these. By retirement age, I may wind down and make smaller movies that are more personal and even experimental in nature."

With the increased competition from Hollywood, Wuershan has just one strategy: "Empty talk won't change anything. You'll have to take action and make good movies."



PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Director Wuershan believes fantasy is a genre that fits Chinese filmmakers as the country has an abundant source of inspiration.

## RE-IMAGINED FANTASY ABOUT LOVE

*Painted Skin: The Resurrection* is the sequel to the 2008 hit, which was adapted from a classic tale of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) literature. But the thread that binds the two is slim at best as the fox demon is the only character that is carried over. While the original is a family drama disguised as a thriller, the sequel is a fantasy on a much larger scale.

The movie is anchored by the same trio of stars who shine brightly in their prime. Zhou Xun reprises her role as the fox imp, having finished her 500 years of imprisonment in ice. Zhao Wei is now a princess whose face is partially scarred by a bear. Chen Kun is her childhood bodyguard who is now assigned to a frontier post as a general. Their affection for each other is hindered by her physical imperfection, so to speak.

Now, the fox fairy needs a regular diet of human hearts unless someone volunteers to give his or hers in exchange for a life as a non-human. Seeing her loved one's attraction to the beautiful fairy, the princess makes the offer, after a short-term trial that convinces her the man she longs for cannot overcome the surface of physical defect.

To complicate matters, their fates are intertwined with politics because a menacing neighbor insists on their offer of the princess as a bride in return for peace. In the end, all three make a huge personal sacrifice for the sake of love.

RAYMOND ZHOU

Scenes from *Painted Skin: The Resurrection*

## EDITOR'S PICKS

### Chinese art treats at London Olympics

Fans watching the London 2012 Olympic Games can take a break from sports to have a taste of culture.

One of the fringe activities is a Chinese art exhibition unveiled at the Royal Academy of Arts in London on Monday.

Named *China Arts Exhibition, London 2012, Chinese Elegant Transcending Culture*, the exhibition displays 160 Chinese brush paintings, oil paintings and sculpture works of 35 modern Chinese arts masters.

"The exhibition is a showcase of contemporary Chinese arts," Liu Xiaoming, China's ambassador in the United Kingdom, says in his speech.

The seven-day exhibition is jointly hosted by the China National Academy of Arts and the China Arts Foundation, with support from the Chinese Ministry of Culture, the Chinese Embassy in Britain and the British Embassy in China.

"Coinciding with the London Olympic Games, this exhibition is a perfect integration of arts and sports," says Tian Liming, deputy president of the Chinese National Academy of Arts.

He Jiaying, a famous fine brushwork figure painter, brought his painting *Victory Goddess* to the exhibition to extend his best wishes to London. The painting was done to mark the holding of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

After London, the arts exhibition will tour China to showcase the achievements of Chinese artists, who have followed world art trends closely.

— ZHANG CHUNYAN



### Tony Leung takes on new challenge

Tony Leung, star of *In the Mood for Love* and *A City of Sadness*, will play He Bing in *The Silent War*.

Leung plays the hooligan-turned-spy who is super sensitive to sound, though visually impaired.

Leung is famous for being expressive with his eyes, but this time will wear glasses. Veteran actress Zhou Xun plays his boss and love interest.

Directors Alan Mak and Felix Chong have made a number of smash hits in the espionage genre, such as *Infernal Affairs* and *Overheard*.

The film will premiere on Aug 7.

— LIU WEI



### Absence brings out the best in Gardot's voice

Melody Gardot's voice wanders between vulnerability and seductiveness, though she never really takes side. In her third studio album, *The Absence*, which will be released in China soon, the Grammy-nominated American jazz singer makes the best use of her voice and immersed in the cultures of Portugal, Argentina and Brazil, where she visited in a protracted journey of musical discovery.

The 27-year-old also lends her voice to Edith Piaf's iconic *La Vie en Rose*, a song that holds a special place in her mind and imagination. It's an inspiring song, just like her connection with her guitar, when Gardot, a fashion student in Philadelphia then, turned to music as therapy as she recovered from a traffic accident that damaged her brain and fractured her pelvis and spine.

— CHEN NAN

### Mid-summer music festival in the outdoors

Beijing music fans will be able to enjoy an outdoor music festival without driving hours to the outskirts or to another city. Come Aug 18 and 19, Max Star Music Festival, will be held at Ditan Park, downtown Beijing.

Young pioneering music powers, such as Milk & Coffee and folk singer-songwriters Cao Fang and Hao Yun, as well as rock singer-songwriter Ma Tiao, will share the stage in the two-day event.

After visiting the music festival, guests can go to nearby Wudaoying hutong, which has a collection of shops, restaurants and cafes.

Aug 18 and 19, Ditan Park, North Second Ring Road, Yonghegong subway station, Beijing. 400-818-3333.

— CHEN NAN