

Finding the right balance

Co-productions with China are of great interest to Hollywood, thanks to the country's booming film market. But in reality, not everything goes according to the script. **Liu Wei** reports.

An alliance between a robot and a food chain famous for duck necks might not seem like the most likely combination. But in Hollywood, nothing is impossible. Zhouheiya, a Chinese fast food chain known for their signature spicy duck necks, is teaming up with *Transformers 4*, the highly anticipated Hollywood summer blockbuster, for a comprehensive promotion campaign.

"Snacks and films are a perfect fit, much like beer and football," says Annie Li, president of Reach Glory Communications, a leading entertainment marketing company in China.

"Zhouheiya will benefit immensely from the association with a movie franchise that has grossed over \$2.7 billion across the world."

Reach Glory, which handles the collaboration between Zhouheiya and *Transformers 4*, also undertook the successful product placement campaign of Chinese television maker TCL in the popular movie *Iron Man 3*.

According to Li, the alliance between Zhouheiya and *Transformers 4* includes cinema advertisements and viral videos, and the decoration of some Zhouheiya stores with a *Transformer* theme.

"Zhouheiya has 400 stores in communities, airports, train stations and other major locations across China, which will work as easy promotion plat-

forms for the film," she says. "This is one of the reasons why Paramount Pictures, the production company of the *Transformer* movies, was keen on firming up the alliance."

The studio has also incorporated some Chinese elements in *Transformers 4*, with an eye on the growing audience in China. Some of the fight scenes between the Autobots and the Decepticons (main characters in the movie) were filmed in Wulong, Chongqing. Popular Chinese actress Li Bingbing plays a prominent role in the movie with Mark Wahlberg and four rising Chinese actors selected from a national TV reality show.

China Movie Channel, a TV channel affiliated to the State-run China Film Group, has helped Paramount with production-related work and will also distribute the film in China. However, the film is still not an official co-production.

Protecting the market

China prudently protects its film market. Every year, only 34 foreign films can be imported on revenue-sharing basis for theatrical release. Foreign studios get no more than 25 percent of the box office receipts.

However, a co-produced film acknowledged by the top regulator, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and TV, is treated as a domestic film and thus exempt from the quota system.

Foreign studios, as a result, can share the revenue as per

their agreements with Chinese partners.

Co-productions used to be perceived as an effective way to tap the Chinese market, where box-office receipts rose to 20 billion yuan (\$3.2 billion) in 2013. This year, the revenue has so far reached 10 billion yuan, a 30 percent increase over the same period last year.

But it is not easy to be officially licensed as a co-production.

Since late 2010, SAPPFT has tightened its control on the licensing of co-productions.

"A completely US story, some Chinese money, a few Chinese faces and some Chinese elements — these kind of films are not real co-productions," Zhang Pimin, the former deputy chief of the SAPPFT, said in 2012.

Zhang had reiterated that in an officially acknowledged co-production, at least one-third of the lead cast should be Chinese, the story should have Chinese elements and there should be Chinese investors.

According to Chinese film producer Qiu Yan, in the absence of a proper rating system in China, filmmakers have to make sure that an audience aged from 4 to 80 can see the content they produce.

"On top of that, co-productions have to have organically integrated Chinese elements in the story. It takes a long time to get a script approved. Very often, investors are not that patient."

Ben Ji, a veteran film pro-



Mark Wahlberg plays Cade Yeager and Nicola Peltz plays Tessa in Paramount Pictures' *Transformer 4*.

PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ducer and managing director of Reach Glory says that very few films that adhere to the guidelines for co-productions are appreciated by Chinese or international audiences.

"Most of the usual prototypes are about foreign missionaries going to China or pilots in World War II — I know at least three projects on that, or stories about Pearl S. Buck, the American writer who lived in China," he says.

"People expect that a co-production is an easy subject that embodies Chinese stories and universal values. Putting these elements together does not necessarily mean it is a successful film."

Hunting for a hit

Most official co-productions

flop, and very few actually are hits. It is difficult to cite successful instances of a co-production that has captivated both audiences, experts say.

But Hollywood studios certainly do not want to ignore the great potential in the Chinese film industry, while Chinese filmmakers are eager and creative enough to find diversified alternative methods to realize collaborations with Hollywood.

"Today co-production is not a legal term," says Chinese film producer Wang Fan, who is making a film with an international cast and crew.

"For me it could be in various forms. The teamwork of the cast and crew, the co-development of stories, product placement or the co-invest-

ment in a project can also be effective co-productions."

Product placement is a more popular approach.

In Sony's latest *Spider-Man* film, Chinese white spirits brand Jiannanchun's bottle and logo are displayed prominently on a billboard in New York City's Times Square. Chinese milk brand Yili and clothing brand Meters/Bonwe were featured in the earlier *Transformers* film. The milk's name was even mentioned in a conversation.

"To have your product appear in the film for seconds, that's the simplest co-operation now," says Wang Yifei,

president of Herun Media, a leading branded content creative platform. "Clients are looking for more complicated

projects now."

The company helped TCL appear in *The Avengers* in 2011 and *Blue Moon*, the domestic liquid soap, in *The Smurfs 2*.

But its most recent case, the co-promotion of milk brand Mengniu and *Rio 2*, is a multi-layer cooperation that involves games on mobile phones and tablets, and on-site campaigns to win film tickets.

"It has been widely acknowledged that China will soon replace the US as the biggest film market in the world," Wang says.

"Chinese people are sensitive to any Chinese element in a Hollywood blockbuster."

Contact the writer at liuw@chinadaily.com.cn

chengdureport

Pandas, hotpot and more in Chengdu

By LI YU AND YANG CHENG

Chengdu's rich culture and abundant history makes it a tourism magnet in Southwest China.

A trip to the city allows foreign visitors to learn about Chinese culture, history and philosophy through its many cultural resources.

Since the start of the 72-hour visa-free policy last year Chengdu has attracted even more visitors and investors.

The city is best known for the panda as it is home to the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding.



72-HOUR VISA-FREE

Many pandas born and raised at the base are sent to foreign countries as national gifts so the city is also known for its hospitality and diplomatic culture.

The city's food is an attraction in itself and was praised by UNESCO as "a city of gastronomy".

Sichuan cuisine is a must-taste for any food lover and the China Cuisine Cultural Museum is a hotspot in the city.

Pandas and food are just some of the highlights that attract visitors to Chengdu.

Ancient city

Chengdu's history goes back 2,300 years and the city was approved as one of the 24 historical and ancient cultural cities in the early 1980s.

The city's prevailing culture for hard work and visionary strategies make several ancient areas of the city must-sees.

Dujiang Weir in Dujiangyan is the oldest functioning water-control project in the world and is about 59 kilometers west of Chengdu.

The weir has stood for nearly 2,300 years and diverts water to irrigate nearly 70,000 hectares of farmland, which contributes almost one-third of the province's total grain output.

The weir survived the Wenchuan Earthquake unscathed in 2008.

The old dam's longevity can mainly be attributed to a schedule of annual repairs, which date back to the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), and tell the story of the hard work and foresight of local people.

Another popular place to explore the area's history is the Temple of Marquis Wu Museum, also known as the Wuhou Shrine.

The landmark honors Zhuge Liang (AD181-234), who is recognized as the greatest and most accomplished strategist of his era — the Three Kingdoms period (AD220-280).

Zhuge has become synonymous with intelligence and strategy in Chinese culture and visitors can get a better understanding of Chinese culture and values by visiting the shrine, said a museum official.

Chengdu citizens created the world's first paper currency — the *Jiaozi* in AD1023, in the western city's Jianguo Temple, also known as the Thousands of Buddha's Temple.

The world's earliest natural gas was first discovered in the city too. During the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD24), Chengdu's citizens discovered natural gas and used it to make salt. During the Tang Dynasty (AD618-907) Chengdu people had some of the best paper printing technologies.

The world's first wooden calendar, which is preserved in the Museum of London, was made in Chengdu during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (AD907-960).

Lacquerware relics from the Mawa-

ngdui Tombs of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), in the eastern suburbs of Changsha, are believed to have been made in Chengdu.

The city is also known as the hometown of Shu embroidery and the birthplace of China's embroidery culture.

Chinese people view tea drinking not just as a daily habit but as an interest and art.

Tea culture in China is believed to have started in Sichuan and several ancient Chinese poems make reference to drinking tea in Chengdu. Xinjin, an area in Chengdu was said to have the earliest trade of tea in the province.

Throughout history a number of Chinese great poets have lived in Chengdu, including Li Bai, Du Fu, Cen Sen, Wei Zhuang, Lu You and Fan Chengda.

Shu state is an ancient region around Chengdu and an old saying goes — "All poets under heaven have come to Shu land."

Relaxed lifestyle

The Fortune Global Forum was held in Chengdu last year, partly due to the city's fast economic growth and ample development potential.

During the event foreign economists and entrepreneurs noted that Chengdu had managed to maintain a balance between fast growth and a relaxed life and attitude, unlike many cities that develop quickly.

Sichuan is known for its relaxed lifestyle and happy people and the area's Taoism culture could be part of the reason why locals lead relaxed lives.

To explore this further many people visit Qingcheng Mountain, which has long been recognized as the birthplace of Taoism.

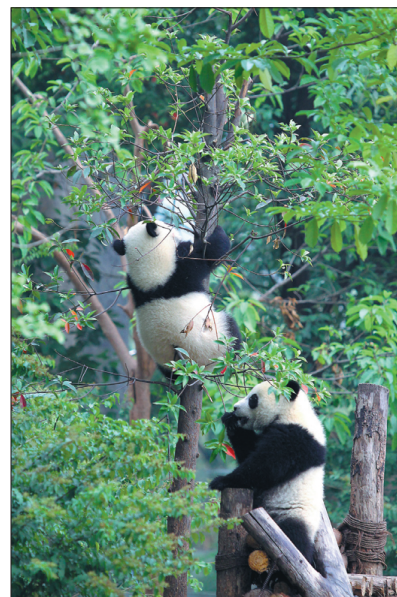
The area was awarded World Cultural Heritage status by the UNESCO.

Contact the writers at liyu@chinadaily.com.cn and yangcheng@chinadaily.com.cn



A glance at the Dujiangyan scenery area. Dujiangyan is world's oldest water control project.

PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Left: Cute pandas at the panda breeding and research base in Chengdu. Above: A worker is making pepper, which is a major ingredient in many dishes from Sichuan cuisine.

ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY