

FILM

Inside China's celluloid kingdom

Sino-Hollywood's most expensive co-production of all time seeks to break down barriers between East and West, but the film once again shows that lofty goal may be easier said than done



The Great Wall is China's attempt to prove it can win over audiences around the globe with technical capacity and storytelling savvy.



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The studios who backed *The Great Wall* leaned on all the Hollywood trappings: a giant budget, tightly choreographed fight scenes, big-name stars, Oscar-winning designers and computer-generated monsters.

But in making the most expensive Sino-Hollywood co-production of all time, they also brought in one of China's best-known directors, experts in ancient imperial weaponry, local set designers and a small army of interpreters.

The Great Wall, which opens this weekend in theatres across Canada, stars Matt Damon as a mercenary who gets caught up in a fight on the Great Wall against attacking giant lizard monsters.

Filmed entirely in China, the film is a \$150-million (U.S.) attempt to prove that with enough money and talent, some of the brightest entertainment minds on both sides of the Pacific can assemble a film that audiences in both China and the West want to watch.

It is also perhaps the most visible flagpost in a sweeping attempt to build China into an even greater entertainment power, one with the technical capacity and storytelling savvy to win over audiences far and wide.

In recent years, Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly called for his country – whose polluted landscapes and repressive tactics have done little to endear it to the Western world – to cement itself as a soft power. And as Hollywood has shown, few things rival the power of film to cast a nation in a heroic light.



The Great Wall, which stars Matt Damon, is the most expensive Sino-Hollywood co-production of all time.

But as *The Great Wall* has again shown, that may be easier said than done.

The film opened to mediocre ratings in China in December – and an ensuing spat with state media, which for a short while threatened to censor "vicious and irresponsible" bad reviews – although with a domestic box-office take of \$170-million, it need not worry about losing money.

Outside China, too, reviewers have been less than enthusiastic. The trade paper *Hollywood Reporter* called it "nothing more than a formulaic monster movie" that suffers from a "sheer lack of logic." *Variety* praised its "highly watchable war and monster spectacles" but found fault with Chinese characters "portrayed as flawless paragons."

Friday marks its most serious test yet: Will North American audiences warm to a film that injects fantasy into ancient China, set on the country's single most recognizable landmark?

A series of movies designed to appeal to a Chinese audience – *Warcraft* most prominent among them – have raked in yuan but struggled elsewhere, and the industry is watching to see whether *The Great Wall* has found a formula to break that pattern.

It is the first English-language film for acclaimed Chinese director Zhang Yimou, and a strong North American performance will further cement China's role in the entertainment industry, where its companies already own Legendary Entertainment and AMC Entertainment, and have been on the hunt for even bigger prey.



Inside and outside China, reviews of the film have been lukewarm.

The Great Wall "tries to incorporate the best of China and the best of Hollywood. But is that really a good formula? The right formula? Nobody knows," said Raymond Zhou, film critic for China Daily.

He is skeptical. Co-productions may look good on paper. "In reality, it often does not work," he said. "If you have 50-per-cent input from China and 50-per-cent from Hollywood, you usually don't get a movie that appeals to both markets. Usually, you end up with a movie that does not appeal to either market."

The man perhaps most interested in the outcome is China's richest tycoon, Wang Jianlin, the chairman of property and entertainment conglomerate Wanda Group, who has vowed to "change the world where rules are set by foreigners." Wanda bought California-based Legendary Entertainment, whose offshoot Legendary East is the production house that championed *The Great Wall*, in January, 2016, for \$3.5-billion, and the movie is Wang's biggest attempt yet to tilt the entertainment globe.

"This is the first time that a director from mainland China can have his work play on 2,000 to 3,000 North American screens. This has never happened before," said Chen Changye, who writes on the film industry in China. "It is a milestone for China."

Even if it flops, few expect it to be the last attempt. Western studios are subject to quotas that keep most of their films out of China – 34 a year under current guidelines, although local authorities are considering a slightly higher number for coming years.

Co-productions, which must typically feature at least 30-per-cent Chinese content, face no such restriction. With China the second-largest film market in the world – and, although growth is slowing, still expected to one day surpass the United States – there is great incentive for studios to skirt quotas and get more movies into Chinese theatres.



The film's debut in North America marks a serious test: Will audiences warm to a film that injects fantasy into ancient China?

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"We are just at the very, very early stages," said Vincent Fischer, an agent with Eastward Entertainment who is also on the board of the China Europe Film Fund, which develops and finances China-Europe co-productions. "The room for expansion is times 10 – at least."

The Great Wall was partially filmed at the Oriental Movie Metropolis, an \$8.6-billion moviemaking colossus in the port city of Qingdao, with dozens of sound stages built next to hotels, a school, hospital and yacht club. In fact, shooting began before

construction had finished on the complex, and the film set was built on land that was still settling.

The Great Wall served as "marketing for the Qingdao facility," said Jonathan Garrison, senior vice-president at CastleHill Partners, which invests in media projects, and a former general manager in the investment-management department for Wanda, where he concentrated on entertainment.

"Wanda really wanted that kind of association with a major production ahead of the ultimate opening of their studio, to kind of show they're capable of pulling it off."

It's also the biggest entry in a new era of experimentation by Chinese film investors eager to learn and appropriate Hollywood's secrets.



Director Zhang Yimou, left, speaks with Matt Damon on the set of *The Great Wall*. The film hit translation snags, with the mere act of speaking on set becoming so difficult that extra interpreters were brought in.

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"There are several projects on hold where the big studios are waiting to see how the Western audience reacts to this movie," said Sherrie Dai, an art director with *The Great Wall*. "They are definitely looking at it very carefully."

Disney has prompted local hand-wringing by bringing global audiences to Chinese tales, such as in *Mulan*. But in Chinese film, storytelling is "not done well," said Huang Guofeng, an analyst with Beijing-based Analysys International. The local industry has set out to fix its shortcomings "by working together with the masters," he said.

"In the current phase, they are driven not mainly by profit, but to learn."

Support for that goal comes from the highest levels of Chinese leadership. "The stories of China should be well-told," Xi, the President, has commanded.

At the same time, the fast-changing character of China's youth has fostered hope that a highly connected generation that guzzles Western pop culture, studies abroad and travels extensively outside China will simplify the task of making movies with appeal in both English and Chinese.

For producer Peter Loehr, the growing size of the Chinese film market and interest by local investors meant the timing felt ripe for *The Great Wall*. "We thought, 'Maybe we can make a real Chinese story and maybe the world is ready for this in a way they weren't before,'" he told *The New York Times*. Loehr declined an interview request.

Still, the very act of making *The Great Wall* underscored the difficulty of pulling that off.

The film's hierarchy blended cultures and languages, with a Chinese director, primarily foreign heads of departments and lower-ranking crew largely made up of Chinese workers. Complicating matters was the installation of a Chinese supporting head of department in many areas – there were, for example, two supervising art directors and set decorators – which was done to ensure a senior Chinese figure whose orders would be followed.



Even if the film flops, few expect it to be China's last attempt to become an entertainment behemoth.

The mere act of speaking on set became so difficult that the filmmakers flew in extra interpreters, eventually accumulating more than 100 people dedicated to ensuring the director could speak with actors, and costume designers with one another, according to two people involved with the movie.

Even the fluently bilingual, however, struggled to translate the names of centuries-old weaponry and siege machinery, their names unfamiliar even to most modern-day Chinese. Eventually, translators developed an on-set linguistic bible to standardize English words for different types of Chinese fabric, horse harnesses, daggers and the like.

In some areas, the meeting of cultural minds created complementarities: Foreign fastidiousness lent itself to a more authentic replication of the stonework in the wall itself, while Western design gave creative wings to science-fiction elements of the film, like the crane rig platforms used by female soldiers to rain down destruction.

"That's a very interesting element no one has seen before in Chinese films," said Dai, the art director.

Elsewhere, different approaches bred conflict. On Hollywood sets, a strict schedule determines what happens and when. In China, crews tend to work according to the unwritten dictates of superiors – and the two work styles often clashed. Even the normal act of defusing tension often fell flat: Crew members telling a joke in English often found their Chinese counterparts scratching their heads, unable to see the humour.

One translator likened the production to a cross-cultural marriage.

"It's two different languages and two completely different cultures and two completely different ways of thinking," said the translator, who asked not to be named because the studio had not authorized a media interview. "But it's a big step – a good try. If you're not trying, then it will never work."

With a report by Yu Mei