



BEIJING

CHINA'S FILM INDUSTRY IS GROWING FAST, BUT MANY PROBLEMS REMAIN

It began as a barely audible flicker, a tremble in a Jurassic Park water cup rising slowly to a marching crescendo... crunch, crunch, crunch. It's the sound of millions of newly affluent, popcorn-munching Chinese cinema goers. Multiplexes are set to triple in China between 2010 and 2015, which is music to Hollywood's ears. To China, it's the increasingly vital heartbeat of an industry it hopes will one day wield on a global scale the sort of soft power the US has exerted so effectively over the decades. But put the brakes on for a second. What was the last Chinese film you saw that didn't involve high kicks and colourful costumes? How many Chinese movie stars are on the tip of your tongue? The dragon might have awoken, but it's barely rubbed the sleep from its eyes. So what is on the cards for Chinese cinema? The market on the mainland remains regulated and inward looking. In 2011, no less than 28 big-budget epics were promoted by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television to mark the 90th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. It began with the *Great Revival*, a lavish, star-studded epic, that reportedly banked \$67

million, but netizens were a-chatter about the fudging of box office figures, and frankly, there was nothing much else to watch. *Harry Potter* was delayed, the Hogwarts Express idling at Kings Cross for two weeks longer than scheduled. *Transformers 3*, was similarly held back. It went on to rack up \$170 million. Gun-toting CGI robots versus speechifying and political dogma – hardly a fair fight. Which is why, the Chinese claim, they need their quota system – only 20 foreign films are permitted into cinemas each year. But whilst this may afford some protection against the Hollywood juggernaut, it contributes to lazy film-making, according to Simon Fowler, author of *101 Essential Chinese Movies*. "If all Hollywood blockbusters are swept aside before the release of a major Chinese film then it doesn't put much pressure on commercial filmmakers to compete." But one way Chinese films are looking to shine is foreign star power. *Flowers Of War*, the epic tale of the Nanjing massacre directed by China's greatest living director, Zhang Yimou, stars Christian Bale, with the dialogue split between Chinese and English. Meanwhile, Keanu Reeves arrived in Beijing

recently to work on his directorial debut, martial arts flick *Man Of Tai Chi*. A genuine collaboration between Chinese and US production companies, this film has star pull, and it leapfrogs the quota system, meaning that if all goes well, this collaborative model may become a regular fixture. But if the Chinese film industry is to start showing genuine creative clout internationally, where is this going to come from? "There needs to be a middle ground," insists Fowler. "China gives us mainstream, kung-fu steeped period epics that do well domestically, whilst the underground film makers are shooting stuff that only gets shown in European film festivals." A young generation of auteur film-makers is emerging – directors like Lu Sheng and Lixin Fan, make beautiful films that record in detail the shifting realities of life in China. But this talent needs to be nurtured and afforded the freedom to create the unexpected and the new. South Korea is proof that an Asian country can do away with quotas and make movies that garner international acclaim. China needs foreign expertise, reinvention, and fewer restrictions. Whether this can happen any time soon remains to be seen. ■

Tom O'Malley is a writer based in Beijing. You can follow him here: http://twitter.com/beijing_gourmet