



China is a huge market, with a very hungry audience

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You legend you!

One of only a handful of UK-China co-productions over the past 20 years, *Legendary: Tomb of the Dragon* is an unabashed B-movie romp. **Simon Zhou** talks to director Eric Styles about how it came to be

Despite their long cinematic histories, over the past two decades Britain and China have only co-produced 40-odd films. But with Chinese box-office receipts exceeding 1.7 billion RMB last year, the PRC—and its money—is becoming increasingly seductive to the West, and Britain is no exception.

It is against this burgeoning backdrop of change that *Legendary: Tomb of the Dragon* was conceived. Made on a modest budget of 12 million USD (by Hollywood standards, less than 40 million USD would be 'low budget'), the family action-adventure tale follows a dashing cryptozoologist (think Indiana Jones without the hat) who finds himself in a remote village in pursuit of a Predator-like creature from Chinese folklore. Time is ticking, as the evil schemes of a nefarious rival spell doom for both our handsome hero and the not-so-handsome creature.

But can the Chinese co-production bring back the B-movie and topple the monopoly of samey Hollywood blockbusters? We talk to Eric Styles (pictured above, in blue shirt), the British helmer of *Legendary*.

Legendary is a co-production; how did that come about?

We had originally planned to shoot in the USA, but when that didn't work

out, the producers decided to look at China as a key component of the film. The setting was changed to a lake in China, and we then worked with SARFT [the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television] and the Chinese producers to make sure the new script reflected a plausible experience in China. This included writing new Chinese characters, and changing some story points. As a director I've very often been drawn to material that will expose me to different types of stories and genres. When it looked like things would work out in China, I became very excited as this would be my first visit to the country and it felt like an enormous opportunity and privilege. I think the film works better in China than it would have in the USA.

Why's that?

I think in essence, the message of the film is culturally relevant [to China]. It's about man's attitude towards nature and its fellow creatures. You can choose to live alongside all creatures in harmony and respect, or you can choose to exploit man's apparent superiority and treat other living things as commodities. I think this main theme of the benefits of conservation and respect will resonate with a Chinese audience.

What was the biggest challenge of shooting in China?

Coming from the tiny country of Wales, which only has a population of three million people, getting used to the scale of China was the most profound thing. [China] is huge, so diverse and magical, it almost becomes overwhelming.

I suppose one of the biggest challenges for me was working with our Chinese cast, who spoke varying amounts of English. You want to have a very direct relationship with your actors and directing through a translator can be hard. But they all did a wonderful job, especially Huang Yi [who plays Dr Zheng Lan, an ethically conflicted scientist], Nathan Lee [a Chinese-American member of the party sent to find the creature] and Gung Le [a local school teacher who first sees the monster]. I really enjoyed working with our Chinese crew. [Cinematographer] Yang Shu had a very thorough and meticulous approach to his craft, and constantly supported me in achieving the vision I had for the film. I was also very lucky to have a wonderful assistant, Wei Wu, who guided me through my whole Chinese experience. We finished very comfortably on schedule, which I gather doesn't happen on every film in China.

In today's day and age, how does a more modestly budgeted film like *Legendary* compete with the blockbusters churned out by Hollywood?

The US studios are very interested in making big summer tent-pole movies, because when they work they generate an enormous amount of money. Unfortunately, the studios can't really predict what will work and what won't—for example, *John Carter* [a sci-fi film that cost Disney 250 USD million to make, but only grossed 70 million USD at the US box office]. *Legendary* is a much more modest film in terms of resources, but we've worked hard to make an exciting, enjoyable film that will appeal to a younger audience that likes fantasy adventure films. I have two young sons aged six and ten who have seen the film with their friends, and they all really loved it, so if our film finds the right audience I'm sure it will perform well.

Do you think that in the future we'll see a greater number of China-UK co-productions?

Most producers I speak to are very interested in China as a co-producing partner. China is a huge market, with a very hungry audience. However it's important to find stories that are culturally relevant to both parties and respect the desires and expectations of the audiences both in China and worldwide. I'd actually love to watch our film with a Chinese audience, just to gauge their reaction. Who knows, perhaps I'll be sitting in the back row of the cinema, when it gets released in January?

Legendary: Tomb of the Dragon is in cinemas now. See listings.