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For Chinese filmmakers, success can sting

By David Barboza

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BEIJING: Homegrown blockbusters were supposed to be China's answer to Hollywood. And, to some extent, the extravagant budgets and eye-popping special effects of "Curse of the Golden Flower," "The Promise" and "The Banquet" did their job. For the past two years Chinese films have shattered box-office records here, while outperforming Hollywood imports.

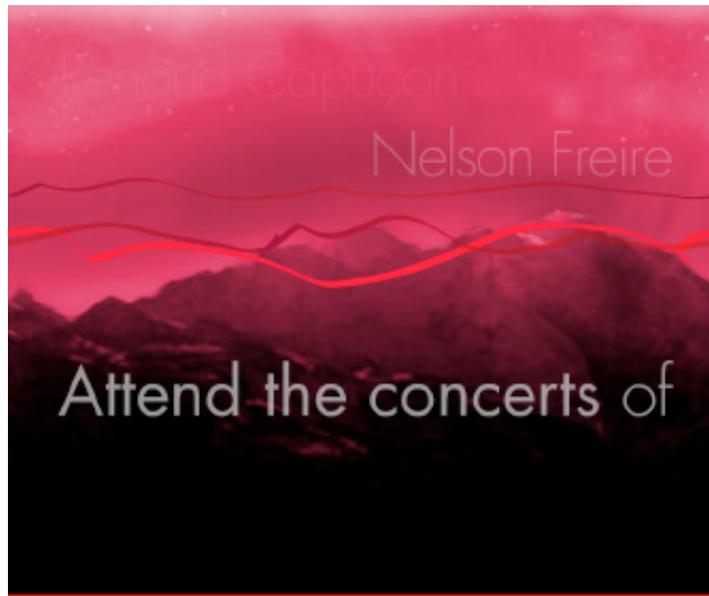
Yet far from inspiring national pride, these films, from the well-known directors Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Feng Xiaogang, have sparked a heated, sometimes vituperative domestic debate about the future of Chinese cinema and whether the country's leading filmmakers are true artists or merely politically savvy hacks.

In recent months critics and younger directors have accused some members of the venerable so-called fifth generation of filmmakers - a group that came of age in the 1980s and early 1990s with award-winning dramas like "Raise the Red Lantern" and "Farewell My Concubine" - of forsaking their socially conscious past and selling out to the government. Perhaps worse, their films are not just being called commercial, they are also "boring and hollow," according to Cui Weiping, a professor at the Beijing Film Academy, the country's leading film school. "Big-budget films can certainly exist, but they don't have to be so ugly," he said.

Even some elements of the Chinese government, which has largely supported the emergence of big-budget films, have taken a stab at playing movie critic, labeling the films obscene and morally bankrupt.

Despite the vitriol the filmmakers remain unrepentant. "China's movie market is facing severe problems, as most of it has been occupied by foreign movies: Hollywood movies," said Zhang, one of those fifth generation directors, whose films range from the low-budget "Red Sorghum" to the special effects-laden "House of Flying Daggers." "If no one in China makes commercial movies, the entire market will be taken by foreigners, and then no one will care about Chinese culture and tradition."

The blockbuster mentality is a great leap for the country and its cinema. Until recently China was better known for its low-budget art-house films. Lavished with critical praise and Oscar



nominations, such films made little money, either in China or abroad. Some, like Zhang's "To Live" and "Ju Dou," were even banned at home.

"Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" changed all that. Released in the United States in late 2000, the film, a martial-arts and adventure story set in western China and directed by the Taiwan-born Ang Lee, went on to become the highest-grossing foreign-language film in American history, making \$128 million there. It tacked on another \$85 million in the rest of the world.

The film industry, and the government, took notice. No longer content to cede the nation's biggest box office to films from Hong Kong and Hollywood, the most powerful directors also hoped to make films that could be successfully exported to the rest of the world during a time of growing interest in all things Chinese.

Zhang dropped his small-town social dramas to make "Hero," another elaborate martial-arts epic, which featured the Chinese star of "Crouching Tiger," Zhang Ziyi. "House of Flying Daggers," also starring Zhang Ziyi, soon followed. And last December came "Curse of the Golden Flower," the most expensive film ever made in China. For the \$45 million "Curse," produced in a country where a big-budget film used to cost closer to \$7 million, Zhang created a gargantuan set, including a mesmerizing gold-laced imperial palace that took five months to build. He hired more than 20,000 extras for battle scenes and brought in three million chrysanthemums to create a spectacular backdrop to the film.

Chen Kaige, Zhang's fifth-generation confrere and the director of "Farewell My Concubine," has also supersized his ambitions and productions. In 2005 he released "The Promise," a \$35 million fantasy epic that was promoted as a Chinese "Lord of the Rings." And a third Chinese director, Feng, who had often ruled the domestic box office with popular urban comedies like "Cellphone" and "Be There or Be Square," decided he wanted to traffic in these more serious, Oscar-seeking films. He teamed up with his longtime partners, the Huayi brothers, for a \$20 million Chinese version of "Hamlet" called "The Banquet."

That film's formula mirrored that of "Curse" and "The Promise": a tragedy set in old China replete with martial arts, beautiful actors, gorgeous sets and costumes, and a dash of Shakespearean tragedy - all to celebrate traditional Chinese culture.

Each film had an expensive premiere in China. There were elaborate television marketing campaigns and licensing and cross-promotional deals with Nissan, Toyota, Audi and Lenovo, the computer maker. Theater owners did their part, signing deals with the filmmakers that blocked other Chinese films from being shown during the blockbusters' runs. And the Chinese government, which had once blacklisted Zhang and Chen, added its considerable support by limiting competition from Hollywood films.

The result of all this marketing and political muscle was a record Chinese box office last year. "Curse of the Golden Flower" earned more than \$37 million in China, making it the highest-grossing Chinese-language film in the country's history. That total was second only to the record of \$44 million set by "Titanic" in 1998.

But the box-office bonanza yielded few benefits. All three movies were savaged by critics and ridiculed by the Chinese news media. (China Daily, the state-run English-language newspaper, dismissed "The Promise" as "another disappointing, lame movie," and the Communist Party School's newspaper published an article criticizing "Curse" as immoral and bloodthirsty.) The anticipated Oscar victories never arrived. Overseas box-office returns were lackluster. And while receipts were robust in China, the films' production and marketing expenses were so great that none made much of a profit.

The directors have even been attacked by their fellow filmmakers, including Jia Zhangke, a rising star of the Chinese film industry whose "Still Life" won the Golden Lion for best film at the 2006 Venice Film Festival. "Now filmmaking is more about money," said Jia, 37, a member of the so-called sixth generation, which specializes in gritty portrayals of China's urban life. "This just shows how sad our industry has become. Some filmmakers think that if they do something similar to Hollywood, people here will like it."

The government's nomination of "The Promise" and "Curse" to carry China's banner in the foreign-language Oscar category the past two years has not helped the reputations of Zhang and Chen. Already viewed as cozying up to the authorities with their more palatable films, the two directors now confront suspicions that the nominations were payback of some sort, as was their selection for important roles during the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Olympic Games.

Zhang comes in for much of the invective. His earlier films were lauded not just for their beauty but also for their (veiled) political criticisms. He is now being criticized for ignoring the struggles of the common people in favor of meaningless films about the follies of Chinese nobles.

"His latest movies, though visually beautiful and commercially successful, no longer have the same deep meanings," Chen Xihe, a professor of film at Shanghai University, said of Zhang. "He has changed from an extremely intelligent person who challenges the traditional system to a modest filmmaker who puts an emphasis more on market success." Zhang scoffs at accusations that he is using his films to curry favor with the government. And just because his last few films have been laden with special effects, he says, does not mean he has rejected deeper themes forever.

"Maybe the next movie I make will have very deep social and political meanings. It is hard to say," he said. "You cannot really design the periods of your life or artistic creation. Artistic creation is a result of interest and impulse."

China has no shortage of low-budget movies tackling social issues, as a younger crop of talented directors has emerged, including Jia, Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai, Xu Jinglei and Wang Quan'an. But they have not been able to muster much box-office power.

And despite the mixed results of China's big-budget push, no pullback appears imminent. The state-owned China Film Group is backing the next film from John Woo ("Face/Off," "Mission: Impossible II"), the \$80 million action movie "The War of the Red Cliff."

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