

A love letter to Shanghai



Chinese-American filmmaker Janet Yang has worked on a few cross-cultural movies over the past few decades.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

One of Hollywood's most famous Chinese faces works behind the screen, and she has stirred a cocktail of expatriate-in-Shanghai material into a comedy of cultural errors, writes **Raymond Zhou**.

If *Midnight in Paris* is Woody Allen's love letter to the French capital, *Shanghai Calling* can be seen as Janet Yang's love letter to the "Oriental Pearl on the Huangpu River".

The romantic comedy, opening on Aug 10, nationwide, presents Shanghai as a series of postcard-pretty scenes full of landmark buildings. Take away the non-stop laughfest, it can still function as a pleasant travel piece.

The first film Janet Yang was involved in was also set in Shanghai. *Empire of the Sun* is about a bunch of British citizens living in the Chinese city and imprisoned by Japanese invaders during WWII. That was a Shanghai torn and scarred by the fires of war. The massive crowd scene as refugees fled Japanese soldiers is a picture of horror and suffering.

Yang was working at Universal Studios selling American movies to China when Spielberg's team approached her. She considers that experience of working with the master an "incredible privilege".

Yang's involvement with China went back further. Before she entered Hollywood, she had worked a year at Beijing's Foreign Language Press, and then ran a company in San Francisco to distribute Chinese films.

From 1989 to 1996, Yang formed a company with Oliver Stone and produced *The People vs. Larry Flynt* and executive-produced *The Joy Luck Club*, adapted from Amy Tan's bestselling novel and starring an all-Asian cast. The latter experience taught her that "you can provide an authentic glimpse into a different culture, and if the characters and situations are fundamentally relatable, you can also achieve universal appeal".

However, *The Joy Luck Club* is quintessentially Chinese-American,



We kept going back and forth to imagine how it would play to both Chinese and Western audiences, and we wondered all along if the film would be better received in one country or another."

JANET YANG
PRODUCER OF SHANGHAI CALLING

not purely Chinese. As such, it did not get much initial attention in China "as it did not seem to shed any new light for Chinese", but its Stateside success eventually spilled over to China.

Another cross-cultural film Yang produced was *Dark Matter*, starring Meryl Streep and Liu Ye, which tells the sad story of a Chinese student whose failure to adapt to American college life resulted in a rampage of violence and death.

When the accomplished Chinese-American producer was hired to spin off Disney's highly coveted *High School Musical* franchise into a Chinese remake, it sounded like a great idea.

However, this made-in-China-and-for-China version bombed spectacularly. Some who saw it even thought it was an unauthorized knockoff.

Signs of a dud appeared even before the film opened, as Huayi Brothers "handed the film back to Disney to market". The musical has the glossy look of a svelte mannequin but lacks the chemistry so crucial for this genre to click with its target audience.

"Perhaps the film would not have

done well in any case. We'll never know," Yang reminisces. "I personally really like the songs, both the melodies and lyrics."

Shanghai Calling is definitely harder to pull off. It is a comedy that straddles two cultures. After Yang signed on as producer, she sat down with Daniel Hsia, the writer-director, to fine-tune the script.

"We kept going back and forth to imagine how it would play to both Chinese and Western audiences, and we wondered all along if the film would be better received in one country or another," she says in an interview with China Daily.

Yang's acute bicultural sensibility helped ensure that China in the movie be not seen from an outsider's point of view. Cheap shots such as Sam encountering a squat toilet in his posh apartment were removed because "we would lose significant credibility with the Chinese audience".

If pre-screenings like the one at the Shanghai International Film Festival are any indication, Yang and her team have much to laugh about.

"We've found audiences on both sides of the Pacific laugh uproariously, albeit sometimes at different parts." The fundamental reason is, "the characters are uniformly likable" and the story "is extremely refreshing and unique".

While waiting for *Shanghai Calling* to premiere around the world, Yang reveals her ultimate dream for her filmmaking career: a movie that is "incredibly smart, entertaining, and that can change people's view of China and Asians in general through deeply resonant portrayals", a movie that would "wow" people.

"It doesn't matter what the genre is," she adds.

Contact the writer at raymondzhou@chinadaily.com.cn.



Daniel Henney and Eliza Coupe play the lead roles in *Shanghai Calling*.

A COMEDY ABOUT EXPATS

If there is such a genre as expatriate movies, *Shanghai Calling* fits the bill perfectly. It is about a Chinese-American attorney finding himself "airlifted" to Shanghai. Contrary to popular belief, Sam Chao is not eager to embrace his Chinese roots.

Humor erupts with cultural clashes. But much of it is not derived from Chao's contact with local Shanghaiese, but rather from his exposure to the local expat community, whose members display a knowledge of — and an affinity for — Chinese language and culture that repeatedly makes his — and the audience's — jaw drop.

That twist helps dispel the clouds that surround many movies with cross-cultural setups. Period drama such as *The Painted Veil* also focuses on expats in China, but the innate inequality between local Chinese and Western residents seeps through despite high-minded efforts to hide the stance of condescension.

Then, there are those like *Lara*

Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life, which flaunt like a badge of honor their inaccuracies in their portrayal of China so that anyone with a modicum of China exposure would laugh it off as ridiculous.

Daniel Hsia, who wrote and directed *Shanghai Calling*, spent months in Shanghai to do research and talk to people. The cumulative expertise can be felt through details and nuances that are possible usually from long stays in China. There are exaggerations of course, as this is a comedy, but overall he has nailed it. What's more wonderful is the love story that gradually unravels as Chao learns to not only face the new environment, but himself.

China's expat community may not care about the latest Chinese blockbuster, which is usually a costume drama or fantasy, but *Shanghai Calling* is like a mirror that reflects their little joys and frustrations in this land of constant change.

RAYMOND ZHOU

EDITOR'S PICKS

Classic story of romance returns

Rhinoceros in Love, the only China contemporary drama that has run 1,000 times, returns to town.

Zoo keeper Ma Lu falls crazily in love with his neighbor Ming Ming, but the latter loves someone else. Ma does all he can for her but Ming sacrifices everything for the other guy. Sounds like a cliched love triangle story? Find out why it has been called a "love bible" since its debut in June 1999 and what has attracted some 368,000 people in 36 cities including in Australia to line up for tickets.

For those who are in love or were once in love, this is a play not to be missed. It is also considered the best work by director Meng Jinghui and his playwright wife Liao Yimei. The couple did it when they were not so famous. Now Meng is known as China's best avant-garde theater director and has thousands of fans. His every new play is sold out. Still, *Rhinoceros in Love* is his best work.

7:30 pm, until Aug 12. Poly Theater, 14 Dongzhimen Nandajie, Dongcheng district, Beijing. 010-6506-5343.

— CHEN JIE



Cutting-edge artists present unique show

If you are tired of the commercially driven paintings, prints and sculptures at the galleries and auctions, check out the sub-phenomena exhibition at Cafa Art Museum.

The exhibition encompasses about 200 artworks from 93 cutting-edge Chinese artists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Chinese mainland and other parts of the world.

An 80-member jury, comprising museum directors, art critics, curators, veteran artists and art professors from the world over, selected the artists from among some 300 candidates.

The artworks include oil paintings, experimental ink pieces, watercolors, pencil drawings, videos, lithographs, multimedia, sculptures and installations.

Unlike previous exhibitions about works by young artists, mostly students from art academies, this exhibition comprises young artists from different education backgrounds, who portray their lives and their inner feelings in a fast-changing society.

Expected to be held once every two years, the exhibition particularly examines the impact of sub-cultures on the younger generation of Chinese artists.

Viewers may find that many of the works on show are inspired by new trends on the Internet such as micro blog, parody clips on video sharing sites, hot topics discussed in social networking and gaming websites.

9 am-5 pm, until Sept 6. Cafa Art Museum, 8 Huajiudi Nanjie, Chaoyang district, Beijing. 010-6477-1637.

— ZHU LINYONG



Veteran actor in play about death

Culled from three Chekhov pieces, the play *Requiem* delves into the topic of death with stories of a couple of old peasants, a young mother and a wagoner.

While dealing with the philosophical topic, the play creates a poetic frame of mind by frequently using symbolic and expressive images, such as trees in the desert, falling snowflakes and death dressed in a black robe while carrying a lantern. In the solemn mood, the play has also blended in an admirable brand of humor.

The play was written and directed by Hanoeh Levin after the master director was afflicted with cancer and knew that his life was coming to an end. Thus, the play is seen as the director's personal introspection into life.

Renowned actor Yosef Karmon in his 80s will again lead the show since his participation in the play's debut in 1999. The actor's rich life experiences are expected to add to the depth of show.

7:30 pm, Aug 13-15. National Center for the Performing Arts, 2 Xichang'an Jie, Xicheng district, Beijing. 010-6655-0000.

— HAN BINGBIN

Q & A | JANET YANG

Creating crossover appeal and adopting the yin-yang approach

Why did you pick a romantic comedy with a cross-cultural angle?

Given how popular romantic comedies are in both China and the US, and how Chinese audiences embrace American-style movies, it seemed really worth challenging ourselves to make a movie with "crossover" appeal.

Both you and Daniel Hsia are Chinese-American. Do the investors fear that your background may restrict the movie to a certain minority?

We've had fantastic support from both our individual American inves-

tors as well as our Chinese partners, China Film Group.

I believe they saw something in the script that made them feel this was a project that had potential for a broad audience. Especially since we have not seen any international movies authentically set in contemporary China, while at the same time there is now immense and intense curiosity about China from all corners of the world.

When China appears in Hollywood movies, authenticity is always a problem. How did you strive to be both authentic and sincere?

Having grown up as an Asian minority in the States, and then experiencing some discrimination in China in the 80s as someone who was mistaken as a local, I have always been hypersensitive to stereotyping and prejudice.

Do you think there is a formula that Chinese filmmakers can use to push Chinese films into the global market?

It starts with the script. Here in Hollywood, some people — and I have been one of them — lament how formulaic many movies have become. In

China, however, a little more attention to genre filmmaking and disciplined story structure would go a long way to helping the film industry.

What is the part of traditional Chinese culture that you like the most?

I feel I have distinct elements of Taoism and Buddhism, and maybe even some Confucianism in me. I think the resilience of Chinese people is largely the result of the wisdom of these traditions, whether conscious or not.

I like that Chinese seem to be very secure in their identity as Chinese. The complexities of Chinese society seem

more embedded in the system rather than in the individual.

What is the one trait that you feel you have successfully connected the two parts of you, culturally speaking?

Ironically the philosophical tenet that has most helped me integrate my dual background is the Chinese concept of yin-yang, the notion that opposites in fact are inexorably linked and can co-exist peacefully as part of a greater whole.

— RAYMOND ZHOU