

SPECIAL EFFECTS

Not quite yet Hollywood dazzling

From movements that look rigid and fake to tiny budgets, the mainland's filmmakers have to raise their game. **Xu Fan** reports.

Last Thursday, hundreds of fans were anxiously waiting to get into a media event of *L.O.R.D.: Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* in Beijing. But their enthusiasm seemed to wane after the upcoming fantasy film's latest trailer was screened at the Wanda CBD cinema.

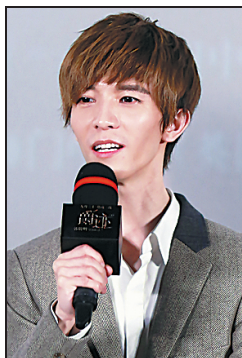
There was scattered applause at first. But the screams came only when the star-studded cast appeared onstage.

Its makers say the film, which depicts a fictional wonderland, is an unprecedented Chinese-language title when it comes to computer-generated imagery, as all the sets and characters are the result of digital technology.

Guo Jingming, director and writer of the namesake novel on which the film is based, says the big-budget movie has used motion-capture technology to record facial expressions and moves, which are then converted into virtual images on screen.

When the movie's first trailer was released more than two months ago, it caused a controversy: It was criticized for looking like a videogame or an animated film.

The second trailer, which was screened at the event, however, seems better, with



Guo Jingming, director and writer of the namesake novel on which the film is based.

the moves looking a lot less rigid and fake.

In China's booming movie market, the number of such ambitious fantasy productions that stumble in the visual-effects game is not insignificant.

Recent duds have included the TV series *Ice Fantasy*, starring Feng Shaofeng, and the Jet Li film *League of Gods*.

The productions were slammed for their visual effects and their over-reliance on colored contact lenses.

In most of the scenes in these

films and TV series, the fictional beasts or creatures were criticized for looking like stuffed toys because of their unnatural eyes and expressions.

Up to nine of this year's 10 highest-grossing films feature heavy effects, and most of the top-rated television series are fantasy tales with lots of digital effects.

So, despite a huge potential market, why does the country's special effects industry fail to meet viewers' expectations?

Industry sources say that small budgets and less time are major problems, but these issues are typically underestimated by producers.

Dwelling on these issues, Xu Fei, the founder of Illumina, a Beijing-based special-effects studio, says: "The maker of a top Hollywood sci-fi film will spend nearly half his budget on visual effects, but in China the amount is 20 percent or less."

Typically, for visual effects, the process starts with the designing of sets in pre-production, moves on to shooting the live action and ends with doing the digital effects in the post-production process.

Xu recalls that, in his early years, most of the visual-effects creators would be hired only after most of the filming



L.O.R.D.: Legend of Ravaging Dynasties' cast members (from left to right) Chen Xuedong, Lin Yun and Wang Duo attend a Beijing media event. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

had ended. But, he says, that is not how things are done today.

"Now, without choreography in advance, it is difficult to insert digitally produced imagery into the real sets.

"The best special effects are when the audience does not realize whatever occurs on screen — whether it is an explosion or a disaster — is not produced using a computer."

Another reason the special-effects sector is not yet on par with its global rivals is domestic directors, cameramen and actors often have limited knowledge and experience when it

comes to special effects.

While diehard sci-fi movie fans may be familiar with the idea of actors wearing electronic-sensing suits when they jump, run and scream to outrun some alien creature — despite the fact they're in an empty room covered in green cloth, which can be replaced by virtual sets in the post-production process — surprisingly, many in film industry are not familiar with this.

Yang Yuejuan, a veteran producer who has done some visual-effects blockbusters, says Chinese stars often feel

embarrassed to perform in such an environment. "They'll complain it's hard for them to imagine things when there is actually nothing in front of them," says Yang.

Another problem faced by visual-effects professionals is that many producers do not realize the significance of getting them involved in the process right from the script-writing.

Explaining why this is needed, Xu says: "We need to figure out what we can do or cannot do while turning words into a visible world."

Xu also says that you need a coordinator to guarantee all the visual-effects creators — in a big-budget blockbuster the number may run to hundreds of people — connect their parts seamlessly.

"Sometimes the creatures are produced by one team and the sets are done by others. So, when combining the two parts, a lot of elements need to be adjusted, such as the shadows, the movements of the creatures and so on," says Xu.

But despite the problems, positive changes are evident in China's booming film industry.

For *The Mystic Nine*, a television series prequel of the hit tomb-raider serial *The Lost Tomb*, the visual effects took up 40 percent of its budget.

In *Novoland: The Castle in the Sky*, which depicts human beings and mutants born with wings, the virtual sets were created during the pre-production process.

Separately, domestic viewers, whose expectations have been raised thanks to Hollywood, also agree that locally made fantasy productions are upping their game when it comes to special effects.

"Hollywood has worked for decades to reach where it is. We have a long way to go," says Zhan Taifeng, an industry professional.

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Ningxia special

Ningxia goes all out in all-region tourism development bid

By **SONG MENGXING**
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The Ningxia Hui autonomous region aims to become a model for the concept of "all-region tourism", in which an entire region is developed as a tourist destination.

The region issued an action plan in July for the development of all-region tourism for the 2016 to 2018 period.

It hopes that some areas in Ningxia will develop into national all-region tourism models by the end of 2018, including the cities of Zhongwei and Qingtongxia.

Li Jinzao, head of the China National Tourism Administration, proposed the shift from "scenic spot tourism" to all-region tourism at a national tourism conference held early this year.

Instead of developing an entire region as a tourist destination, traditional scenic site-centered tourism focuses specifically on developing scenic spots.

Xu Xiaoping, director of Ningxia Tourism Development Commission, said, "The region's tourism industry has been focusing on the development of tourist attractions, restaurants and hotels for many years and this is 'scenic spot tourism'."

Xu said Ningxia will need to adjust its tourism development strategy in order to promote and develop all-region tourism. "This will require the provision of tourism-related infrastructure and services in the whole region instead of only at scenic spots," he said.

Ningxia also plans to integrate tourism with other industries such as agriculture, finance, culture and sports.

The integration of agriculture with tourism in the region will allow visitors to pick and sample local fruits and vegetables, transforming the countryside from a place inhabited



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Xu Xiaoping, director of Ningxia Tourism Development Commission

16.1

billion yuan
tourism revenue in Ningxia in 2015

mainly by farmers to one where both tourists and urban dwellers can spend their leisure time.

Administration bureaus responsible for public security, industry, commerce and transportation in Ningxia will work with tourism authorities to manage and monitor the tourism market, Xu said.

The region in Northwest China abounds in both natural and cultural tourism resources. It has mountains, rivers, deserts, forests, gorges and grasslands; its attractions include its Islamic history, the Yellow River, the ancient Silk Road and the Western



Tourists ride camels in the Sand Lake scenic spot, one of the most unique destinations in Northwest China. WANG PENG / XINHUA

Xia Dynasty (1038-1227). The region, which has a large Muslim population, is an important window that offers people from Arab countries and Muslim regions the opportunity to discover China.

It aims to strengthen tourism cooperation with those countries and regions and will continue to organize the biennial China-Arab States Tour Operators Conference, Xu said.

International events are necessary for Ningxia to promote its tourism sector and tourist attractions and draw more overseas visitors, he added. An international driving tour organized by the Ningxia government will begin on Sept 24. It will start in Yinchuan, capital of the autonomous region, and pass through more than 20 cities in China, Pakistan, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

Li Shihong, deputy head of the China National Tourism Administration, said Ningxia's tourism industry has blossomed in recent years, adding that both Ningxia desert and Yellow River tourism have become important national tourism brands.

According to Li, Ningxia helps drive tourism development in the country's western regions and plays a special role in China's tourism industry.

Ningxia's tourism industry took off in 1986 and became a pillar industry of the local economy in 2014. The sector's revenue increased from 6.78 billion yuan (\$1.02 billion) in 2010 to 16.13 billion yuan in 2015, with an average yearly growth rate of 18.92 percent.

The region received some 10.19 million visitors in 2010 and 18.4 million visitors in 2015, marking a 12.47 per-

cent average annual rate of increase.

It received roughly 8 million domestic and foreign tourists in the first half of this year, a year-on-year increase of 16.7 percent; its tourism revenue from January to June amounted to 7.23 billion yuan, a rise of 19.35 percent compared with the same period in 2015.

It has opened 12 international air routes connecting Yinchuan to cities including Dubai, Singapore and Osaka. In 2013, Yinchuan became the third city in northwestern China to issue visas on arrival, following Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province, and Urumqi in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

Ningxia was among 46 Places to Go recommended by the New York Times in 2013.

Its Shahu Lake scenic spot was chosen as one of China's top 10 attractive wetlands at

an event organized by China Central Television in the same year.

Despite these achievements, Xu said Ningxia's tourism sector is still plagued by certain weaknesses that require urgent attention, including the lack of both an internationally recognized tourist destination and a world-class travel agency, according to Xu.

Xu added that the region also needs professionals specializing in evaluation for its tourism resources, travel planning and development, and experienced travel guides. According to a document released by the region's government in January, the area aims to develop 10 leading tourist destinations, support several tourism stores, agencies and restaurants, and train more than 10,000 employees in the tourism sector over the course of the next three years.

Wine industry

Wine industry in Ningxia is not only known as a local economic contributor, but also is becoming a key to promote the construction of the autonomous region's all-region tourism.

The wine grapes are mainly planted in the foothills of the Helan Mountains, which is part of the world's grape planting golden belt and also one of the most famous tourist attractions in Ningxia.

In 2012, Ningxia became the first autonomous region in China to be accepted as an official observer at the International Organization of Vine and Wine. It now has 38,000 hectares of vineyards, with combined annual output of 200,000 metric tons, and 98 wineries.

To better develop the all-region tourism, Ningxia has in recent years fought for the right to host different kinds of domestic and international events, in a bid to provide visitors with diverse tourism projects at all seasons.

The autonomous region, for example, held its first automobile and motorcycle self-drive festival in Yinchuan on Aug 6. More than 2,000 self-drive fans from across the world gathered in the city for the event, during which participants could drive from Yinchuan along the Silk Road routes to foreign countries.

The event also attracted some 600,000 visitors. They could also enjoy the unique natural landscape in Ningxia, such as the Yellow River, prairies, deserts, wetlands, cliff paintings and karst landforms.

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