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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Welcome to Chollywood

David Cameron has signed a deal with Beijing bringing the two countries' film industries together. Oliver Thring reveals the western actors joining the pantheon of Chinese stars

Oliver Thring Published: 8 December 2013



A flawed diamond, runs the Chinese proverb, is worth more than a flawless pebble. David Cameron made a cap-in-hand mission to the world's most populous country last week, joined by everyone from the former footballer Graeme Le Saux to the Apprentice star and small-business ambassador Karren Brady. It ended in a triumphant and little-noticed agreement, eight years in the

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planning: the British and Chinese film industries have agreed to make movies together.

All terms have been agreed and a full sign-off is expected within a few weeks. Despite some potential pitfalls, including concerns about censorship, political interference, cultural differences and audience expectations, the deal could stand as a shining example of Britain's power to make international allies.

"People have started calling it Chollywood, but really it's Chinewood: British films linking up with Chinese partners to access the second-highest box office audience in the world," Cameron said, referring to

Pinewood, the British film studio.

China already has a remarkable appetite for British television, and that hunger is helping to shape the country's cultural understanding of the UK. Online streaming services and pirate digital versions of British dramas such as *Downton Abbey* and *Sherlock* have made the stars of those programmes household names in China.

One student at a leading Shanghai university said: "A funny thing is that the UK is nicknamed 'Fu Guo' in China, which means Gay Country. I reckon this is because, in the BBC version, *Sherlock* and *Watson* seem to have a hidden homosexual relationship."

Another said *Downton Abbey* "brings the audience back 100 years and unfolds grand spectacles of the last glory of English aristocracy". *James Bond*, *Harry Potter* and *Doctor Who* have been similarly popular.

The Chinese spend almost \$3bn (£1.8bn) a year at the cinema, about a third of the amount that America does. Some industry observers predict that China's box-office takings will overtake America's within 10 years, but Amanda Nevill, chief executive of the British Film Institute, who accompanied Cameron in the trade delegation to China, said: "I think it will be a lot quicker. I bet it will happen within two years."

In the past decade the number of cinemas in China has jumped from fewer than 2,000 to about 15,000, and 7-10 new ones open every day. The most famous Chollywood stars are every bit as well known in the domestic market as Hollywood's actors are in America — probably more so, given the relative size of the market.

Sluggish western economies might find it hard to imagine a more tempting space in which to invest. But making money from Chinese cinema audiences has historically been difficult.

China's government allows just 34 foreign films to be imported every year on a revenue-sharing basis — when studios take a smaller portion of box-office receipts than they do for co-productions with Chinese studios. A further 76 international movies can be shown in Chinese cinemas, for which the country pays a flat fee of perhaps a few hundred thousand dollars each.

To put that into context, *Iron Man 3*, which was screened in China on a revenue-sharing basis, raised about \$120m in Chinese cinemas and \$1.2bn worldwide.

The new co-production deal means that British and Chinese production companies can work together to make a theoretically unlimited number of films. These will be shown in Chinese cinemas and offer huge potential returns for the British film industry. "I don't know exactly what it's going to be worth," said Nevill, "but if we get it right it could be billions."

However, certain subjects and political issues may be quietly dropped from scripts to appease China's enthusiastic censors. It has been difficult for any film to be shown in China that criticises the Chinese or any other government; that portrays Chinese people in a negative light; that shows anything beyond the tamest nudity or the briefest, most cartoonish violence.



Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman have found fame in China through Sherlock (Robert Viglasky)

The most recent Bond film, Skyfall, a co-production that featured a number of glamorous scenes set in China, was significantly adapted for local audiences. One scene, in which a French hitman murders a Chinese security guard, was dropped, as were all references to the torture by Chinese authorities of the villain, Raoul Silva.

shot as a co-production featuring extra Chinese scenes and an amended ethnicity for the villain, failed to pass the necessary hurdles and was therefore shown as a foreign import, with a smaller percentage of box-office takings going to the studio.

Iron Man 3, which had been

The British film industry argues the co-production deal may affect Chinese censorship for the better. “If you want to build a really strong relationship with an enormously influential and growing trading power,” said Nevill, “you need to get to understand each other’s culture and work in partnership to produce films that are attractive to both audiences. I would hope that in the spirit of co-production — just as we are rightly more liberal in our censorship regime — both sides will have to give a little.”

Eventually, with patience and time, some diamonds’ flaws can be polished away.

Additional reporting: Ruth Hardy

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