

ZHANG'S WORLD AND WELCOME TO IT

ZHANG JIZHONG

THE RENOWNED FILMMAKER TALKS AMBITIONS AND REALIZATIONS

BY JUDY SECKLER

Modern life is filled with technological conveniences that make it harder for men to find the contemporary equivalent of slaying the dragon.

Yet renowned Chinese producer, director, and actor Jizhong Zhang has set such a course for himself. His desire involves creating an entertainment trifecta of such immense proportions that if he makes it happen, his industry will be talking about it for years to come.

Zhang, a prolific creative spirit, has reached deep down into his culture and picked a beloved, well-known novel *The Journey to the West* as the starting point for his series of projects. Written by Chinese novelist and poet Wu Cheng'en hundreds of years ago, *The Journey* follows Buddhist monk Xuanzang's path to India over centuries to collect sutras or religious texts. During his travels, he relies on the protection of Sun Wukong, the comical and memorable Monkey King, Zhu Bajie, Sha Wujing, and a dragon prince who transforms into the monk's white horse. Despite roadblocks and failure, they soldier on because the journey offers

redemption, a way for them to atone for past sins.

The first leg of his quest, 66 live-action TV episodes aired in China in August 2011. With lavish historical costumes, other worldly characters, atmospheric locations and kinetic combat sequences, the story resonates with all ages.

"It's a rich story," he says, one that tickles the emotions and is jam-packed with adventure, tragedy, joy and life lessons that every Chinese girl and boy learn growing up. "The story teaches people to be strong and overcome obstacles," says Zhang, describing its universal appeal.

The sweeping story, comprised of 100 chapters, shows the four characters confronted every step of the way by money, power, greed, jealousy and hate. The novel is a series of twists and turns with Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist themes woven throughout. The story's appeal reaches across generations; young, old, male and female minds return to its compelling, multidimensional adventures again and again.

It's a story "every single Chinese person inherits from their parents

and grandparents," says Zhang. "It's in their blood and genes. And it has influenced how they grow up, how their imagination develops." Secondary plots introduce "monsters, demons, evildoers battling under the sea and in the heavens."

Besides *The Journey to the West*, Zhang is already in the pre-production phase for his latest TV series, *The Yan and Huang Emperors*, which focuses on the origins of Chinese culture over 5,000 years ago. The epic historical TV series will be 40 episodes long and also enjoy similar high production values like *Journey to the West* did.

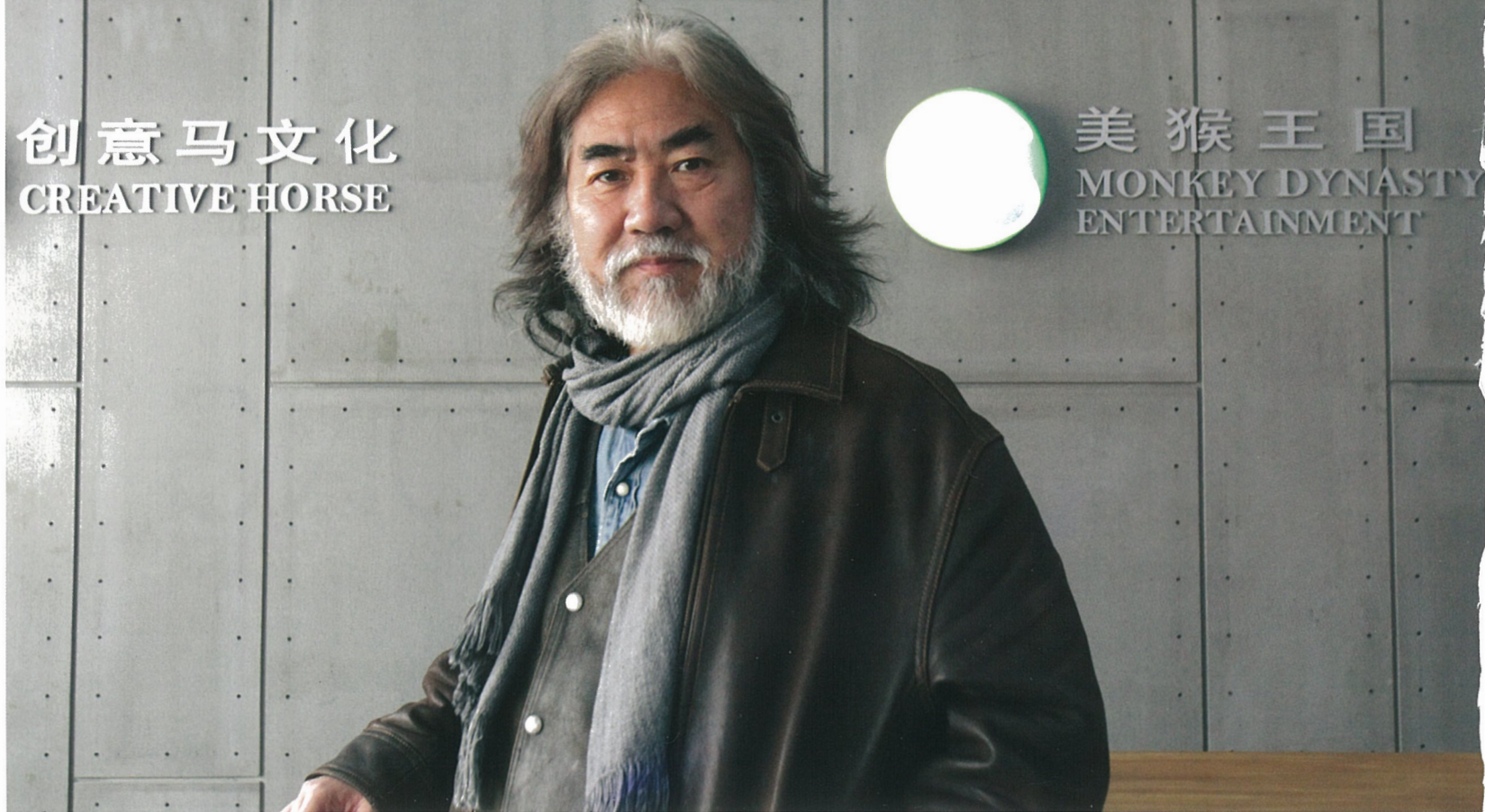
Undoubtedly one of the most influential TV and film personalities in China, Zhang is China's most well-known TV producer and a recognizable entertainment celebrity. Over the past two decades, he has produced over 500 episodes of commercially successful, critically acclaimed TV series, which have grossed over ¥1 billion worldwide and been watched tens of billions of times. With his unique understanding of Chinese culture, works produced by Zhang stand out for epic story-telling structure,

large-scale battle scenes, martial arts, romance, and artistic elements. His trademark production formula represents both cultural transmission and strong financial returns. This formula's success has made Zhang Jizhong one of the most sought after producers in China.

Zhang's first two major productions, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*, both adaptations of the Four Classical Novels of China, combined for over 140 episodes and were both very successful financially and recipient of critical acclaim. From 2000 to 2006, Zhang produced several adaptations of famed wuxia writer Louis Cha's novels, which have sold well in Asian markets, including China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. His ability to create historical programming with huge sets and thousands of extras with great production values are responsible for his great commercial success. He's built 11 movie cities in China with support from the local governments that have become popular tourist attractions and stimulated the economy. For example, Zhang's *Jiangsu province* based *Romance of the Three*

创意马文化
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Kingdoms and Water Margin movie city went public in 2002, bringing back high returns for investors. Zhejiang province's Peach Flower Island, which was developed to shoot Zhang's Laughing in the Wind and Legend of Condor Hero TV series, has been a huge success for the local investors, which has seen its amount of annual tourists grow from 2,500 in 2001 to 900,000 in 2008. Zhang's productions are also known for launching the careers of several top Chinese film stars, including Li Yapeng, Liu Yifei, Huang Xiaoming, and Hu Jun

Zhang's rivals may be content to produce creative content in their native country, but he's looking for the next mountain to climb. He calls the career of Walt Disney "his greatest influence." The Disney name is synonymous with the best American culture and entertainment. So like Disney, Zhang has set his sights on building a complete Chinese cultural industry using *The Journey* as a springboard to

develop many creative platforms — such as feature film, a theme park and video games — to give audiences a rich, cultural and entertaining experience.

It's one thing to have an impossible dream. Zhang has found an important collaborator to make it possible: Wing T. Chao, former chief architect and master planner for Disney. Chao spent 37 years at Disney working with talented imagineers and the best architects in the world. When Zhang decided it was time to pursue his grand dream to build The Monkey Kingdom Resort in China, his search for the right talent led him straight to Chao.

Well, almost. It took less than six degrees of separation for Zhang to meet former Disney Imagineer Kenton Low when they were both in Vancouver, Canada. As Zhang described his ambitious theme park project, it was clear to Low that Chao was the best man to assist him. It took Zhang three visits to Los Angeles to persuade Chao to

join him. "I was impressed by his passion and commitment," says Chao.

"It will take a lot of time and effort," Chao told Zhang during their discussions. However, it was apparent nothing would deter Zhang from his dream because he had done his research, visiting every theme park in the U.S., Japan, Korea, France, Australia, Thailand and Hong Kong, where he noticed that most of the parks sprang from Western themes. However, no one had built a park based on Asian cultural themes. The Journey would supply the great material for a theme park's attractions and surroundings, reasoned Zhang.

Each of Zhang's careers has prepared him for this moment of creation. As a director, he's adept at being versatile and imaginative. As a producer, he's been called upon to raise money and formulate budgets, and his acting skills have taught him how to present a

story on a stage.

For now Zhang and Chao have completed Monkey Kingdom's conceptual design phase.

The proposed master plan would also include hotels, retail, dining, entertainment, theaters and a network of lakes and waterways.

As Zhang envisions it, a trilogy is the best way to introduce *The Journey* to the world. He's signed famed fantasy novelist Neil Gaiman to condense the major themes of the book into a narrative thread cohesive enough to be turned into three two-hour movies. In March, Zhang took Gaiman on a 10-day trip around various scenic and historical locations in China while discussing the story and script. Gaiman was very moved and inspired by the trip and Zhang believes Neil's deep understanding of the novel and Chinese history should provide a great script. The lesson to be learned is patience, Zhang says, calling to mind the example of James Cameron, who spent years developing the special effects technology and

the screenplay before *Avatar* could be filmed.

Zhang is in the middle of raising over \$100 million to bankroll the first of three films. "People with vision see the great business opportunity. The success will be in the first film," he says. China is second only to the U.S. in box office receipts, and *Avatar* grossed more than \$200 million in China. With the classic novel's popularity in China, the *Monkey King* trilogy should embrace an even larger audience base than *Avatar*. Currently, there are 1,700 3D movie screens in China, and the number grows 20% each year, Zhang adds.

The biggest challenge he sees is attracting a significant global audience to material with Asian characters told from an Asian perspective. The more audiences outside of China that respond to the *Monkey King* and other characters from the classical yarn, the more energy he can put into the development of video games that further expand some of the other story lines not explored in the films.

Understanding the ups and downs of Walt Disney's career is key for Zhang in realizing his vision and drawing the inspiration to move forward. Disney's career was littered with naysayers but, out of his great instincts, he enjoyed many successes. Case in point: Disneyland in Anaheim, California recently celebrated its 55th anniversary with great fanfare. So why is creating a 66-episode TV series, a feature film trilogy, an enormous theme park and video games all based on a classical epic Chinese novel so far-fetched? Only time will tell.

Zhang would predict only one thing when all the pieces of his creative plan are in place and done. "I would consider taking a vacation," he says, smiling. Call him a visionary or risk taker. Either way, Zhang's eyes are on the finish line. "Building a park and producing a film based on a Chinese story like the *Monkey King* is quite challenging. It's been kind of inspiring trying to make these dreams come true." □

(Picture): Opposite: Zhang Jizhong
Above: Zhang Jizhong and Wing T. Chao.
Photo by Mark Lawson Shepard. Assistant
Wilfredo Esperanza

