

By WANG KAIHAO

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Many critics agree that *Operation Red Sea* has some of the highest production values seen in any Chinese film. As of March 7, three weeks after its debut on the mainland, the film had earned 3.1 billion yuan (\$490 million) at the China box office, making it the fourth highest-grossing film screened in the country.

According to Maoyan, China's key big data website on the film industry, the total revenue could reach 3.5 billion yuan, taking it to second place on the all-time list.

This film based on a true story — the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Yemen in 2015 during which no shots were fired — has received a rating of 8.5 points out of 10 on Douban, China's leading film rating website — and 7.7 points on IMDb, its US counterpart.

In the movie, fierce street battle scenes are reminiscent of the classic Hollywood blockbuster *Black Hawk Down* (2001). Coincidentally, *Black Hawk Down* had the same ratings as *Operation Red Sea* on both Douban and IMDb.

Another sequence showing the elite force heading into the conflict zone in search of the last Chinese citizen resembles Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

Dante Lam, 53, the film's director, a veteran from Hong Kong who is known for his action films, said that he was "perturbed" when asked to make the war-related film.

Speaking of how he prepared for the assignment, he said: "I watched previous productions. And, it was then that I could figure out how to show the Chinese Navy. I wanted to do something real, not a film shot in a studio."

Lam, however, is no stranger to turning true stories into cinematic spectacles.

In 2016, Lam made *Operation Mekong*, also based on a Chinese cross-border manhunt to bring a drug gang leader to justice.

One criticism about *Operation Red Sea* is that it is filled with battle scenes, giving the audience no respite.

Explaining the bloody scenes, Lam said he did this to focus on the cruelty of war.

"I wanted to provoke viewers' anti-war thinking," he said. "Under the surface of the action scenes, there are people's genuine emotions."

As for the resources that went into the project, Lam received around \$60 million from the Bona Film Group. But the entire budget crossed \$100 million if the financial support from the Chinese Navy is included.

When it came to the manpower and locations, a 500-plus crew was stationed in Morocco for four months, and the navy offered its military base in Zhanjiang, in South China's Guangdong province, for the movie. Linyi, the frigate which took part in the evacuation of the Chinese citizens from Yemen, also features in the film under its real name.



Operation Red Sea is filled with many fierce, even bloody battle scenes which are designed to provoke an anti-war stance in the audience.

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BANG ON TARGET

Success of action film based on real naval rescue mission reflects new mind-set among China directors, moviegoers



Dante Lam (second from right), the film's director, and the crew during the filming in Morocco.

Speaking about the film and the lengths to which the director went, Zhang Dexiang, deputy director of the China Literature and Art Critics Association, said: "We have had many military-themed productions in China before, but filmmakers never went to such an extent to make the portrayal realistic. They were much too restrained."

He said filmmakers in the past often worried whether the story would be accepted by foreign audiences, and that influenced the production. "However, this time, the story is told with an open mind. This marks a change of attitude in the Chinese film industry," he said.

Some industry analysts say a film like *Operation Red Sea* is pos-

sible now because of technology, a changed mind-set among filmmakers, and a change in public perception.

Liu Yang, a film commentator with the *People's Daily*, said that when *Saving Private Ryan* was screened in China in the late 1990s, there was a discussion in the country on whether it was worth making so much of an effort to save just one life.

"Some Chinese found it difficult to understand the rationale at that time," she said. "But, a similar mind-set in *Operation Red Sea* is now widely accepted."

Last year, *Wolf Warrior 2*, another Chinese film based on the evacuation from Yemen, earned 5.67 billion yuan at the box office, becoming

the highest-grossing Chinese film in history. Though the film was widely hailed for its patriotism, many also criticized its belligerence and unrealistic portrayals of a Rambo-like solo hero.

In contrast, Yin Hong, a media professor at Tsinghua University, said that *Operation Red Sea* emphasizes cooperation. "And it (*Operation Red Sea*) gives us new perspectives about how patriotism can be expressed. It also focuses on the significance of a group rather than individual heroism."

"In the film, a balance between a commercial approach and mainstream ideology is also struck."

Nevertheless, he said that the spotlight on the group comes at the cost of an in-depth portrayal of each character, which was done in *Wolf Warrior 2*.

Still, he said, *Operation Red Sea* represents a growing global perspective for the Chinese because in the film Chinese soldiers stop terrorists from getting hold of material which could be used to make nuclear weapons.

"The fight against terrorism is a global one," Yin explained. "So, the adversaries in the film are not only enemies of China, but of humanity and world peace. This is a higher level."

The popularity of the film during the Spring Festival season also

marks a change in the tastes of Chinese moviegoers.

On the film's opening day, Feb 16, only 11 percent of the country's screens showed the film, leaving more room for comedies. But, praise for the action film made cinema managers change their plans. And 32.5 percent of screens were allocated for the film on March 1, according to Maoyan.

Commenting on the changing trend, Gao Xiaoli, who writes for *Wenyi Bao*, a national literature and arts newspaper, said: "Watching films is common for people living in metropolises, but it is not usual in small cities."

But she said a new clientele can be developed in small towns when these big-city residents return to their hometowns during Spring Festival.

However, to do this, the film industry must change its mind-set.

"So, if our big screens continue to be filled with poor productions only looking to make money during Spring Festival, as we often saw in the past, these new filmgoers will not be drawn to Chinese movies. And they may not return to cinemas for domestic productions."

So, Gao said, if more high-quality films like *Operation Red Sea* hit cinemas during the Spring Festival season, more viewers — especially from small towns — will flock to see Chinese films in the future.