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Through the eyes of the animator

Few non-native animators have found international success in America quite like Raman Hui. We speak with the Hong Kong creative about his work in Hollywood and his new-found fame in China

Raman Hui's name occupies a unique space in the international filmmaking landscape. At a time when Asian-American representation in Hollywood is a hot-button topic, the native Hongkonger has made huge strides as both an animator and a filmmaker. He first made a name for himself as an animator, creating characters that we know and love in movies like *Shrek*, before finding his feet as a hugely popular fully fledged director. And he only made this transition from pure animator to feature film director in 2007 when he co-directed *Shrek The Third* but, since then, he's really made his name as a standalone director, with a portfolio that includes last year's monster hit in China, *Monster Hunt*. In short, Hui is a unique talent who was homegrown right here in Hong Kong.

Hui's work needs little introduction. He is the mastermind behind some of the most adored animated characters of our time, thanks to his creative work on the internationally acclaimed *Shrek* films. The appeal of his characters is, quite literally, global. He first cut his teeth at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where he was introduced to animation through a class and later he honed his skills at the famous DreamWorks studios in California. There, he started out as a celluloid animator for commercials and short films, but it wasn't long before he eventually worked on feature length movies. His career has been on the rise ever since, and, due to his contributions to the *Shrek* films, Forbes listed him in 2010 among 25 notable Chinese-Americans in the business field.

As Hui's currently in the early stages of working on a sequel to *Monster Hunt*, we sit down with someone we can only refer to as a 'massive international success' to talk about how he's navigated the different cultures that he's



Hui with his *Monster Hunt* character

worked in, as well as to discuss both the motivations and the inspirations behind the works he's created that have resonated with audiences around the world.

Let's start by talking about your roots. How does your education as a graphic designer translate into your work as an animator?

So I got into animation because one of our classes was on animation. It was more like a class for us to get to know the subject, rather than for us to actually become an animator, but once I got in touch with animation I fell in love with it. And all the fundamentals I learned when I studied graphic design, like design principles

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Clockwise from top: *Antz* movie scene; A scene from *Shrek the Third*; *Monster Hunt* movie poster

A scene from the Chinese hit *Monster Hunt*

or how to draw perspectives and all that, really helped me to become an animator. When I was animating, I did hand-drawn animation at first and then, being able to draw and being able to get the structure right, really helped me to become an animator. Even today, I still remember some of the classes I had that I can apply to my work. I had this graphic design class where the lecturer asked us to come up with at least 10 ideas for a solution. And that's something I keep reminding myself of, to have enough alternatives when I'm trying to design something.

Your passion for drawing and animation started out as doodles when you were a child. What were your first subjects?

Well, the funny thing about me doodling as a kid was that I did it mostly because we didn't have toys. My mum didn't have money to buy us toys to play with. All she could do was give us paper and pencils, so with paper and pencils and no toys, the only thing I could do was to draw. I loved it. It eventually became a great way to express myself. Maybe not so much expression as a kid but, in a way, it was more like a video game to me. We didn't have video games either, so I would instead draw a lot of what I would see on TV like *Ultraman* and the monsters he fought. It was really fun.

Where does your inspiration come from?

I would say my mother is my inspiration because I saw how hard she worked and how, in tough situations, she kept a good mood and a positive attitude. Even though she's getting old, she's still taking classes and learning. She's pushing herself to do better and better. I keep in mind that whatever I'm doing, I'm learning all the time. When I was younger I tended to think I was good enough but the more you know, the less you're able to think that. You have to keep pushing yourself, advancing yourself and educating yourself. My mother is doing that all the time.

You have said previously that you love to paint. Who are your favourite painters?

I still hope to be a painter one day because I enjoy that process, where I'm focused on what's in front of me on the canvas. It's therapeutic and it takes me to places. The painters I like are Van Gogh, Picasso, Dali and Monet. Actually I like a lot of painters! Also Edgar Degas. I also like a lot of contemporary illustrators doing great work right now. David Soren, for example. Also illustrators that are doing cartoony stuff. All kinds of art...

When you go about designing and animating a film, what's your process?

The most important thing is the character. What kind of characters are we creating? I would like to get to know them and understand them more. For example, when I worked on *Antz* in 1998, I drew a lot of designs. Different designs, different types of ants in all kinds of styles. It was like auditioning. I would draw all these designs to audition for the part. The important thing is that they have to be appealing, to make them someone you would want to get to know. Someone you would want to spend more time with and someone you would befriend. It's the same approach I used in *Shrek* and in *Monster Hunt*.

What's the most important thing to remember about animation?

The most important thing is to tell a story that people can relate to. It doesn't matter as much if your technique isn't the best because you can still tell a charming and engaging story with a lower budget. The most important thing is that you have to have a solid story. I'm not saying that all the stories I've worked on are solid but I've definitely tried to come up with a good story and good characters for the audience to enjoy and connect to.

What difficulties did you encounter in learning skills while in a foreign environment?

The difficulty of learning skills in a totally different country mostly centres around communication. I grew up in Hong

Kong and we learned a lot of English, but we never used it on a daily basis. We were just mostly writing and reading. So, for me to be able to communicate by speaking English was very hard at the beginning. For example, it was really tough for me to understand the American jokes. When I had lunch with co-workers, when they were talking about jokes or anything, really, it was hard for me to understand and to get what they were talking about. But, after a few years, I started to understand and began to become a part of it. It's not something you can force. It happens naturally.

people that I worked with when I arrived were very helpful to me. They would have fun giving me driving lessons. They would have fun teaching me to eat different kinds of American food, like Mexican food, which was totally new to me when I got there. Just have a good time when you go to the US and try to represent Hong Kong in your own friendly way, so people can understand where you're from. Make friends and be open. America is really a very diverse country. You would be surprised how accepting they are to different cultures and different races, as well as people from different backgrounds. Be yourself and get to know the place.

You've done a variety of different big-name works, including franchised short films, mini TV series and big movies. Do you have a favourite format?

Personally I prefer working on movies because it's rewarding when you watch the movie with a big audience. You don't really get that with TV shows or with short films as much but I am actually fine with any format as long as it's fun and creative. Another big part is the team. I'm lucky that I've been able to work with a lot of great people and I've learned so much from all of them.

For *Monster Hunt*, you had to make the jump from pure animation to

blending animation with live action. What was that transition like?

I learned a lot from our cinematographer on *Monster Hunt*, Anthony Poon. He was so patient and he was kind of like a teacher to me. I also learned a lot from working with actors like Bai Baihe, Jing Boran, Eric Tsang, Sandra Ng, Tang Wei, Wallace Chung and the lovely Elaine Jin. They're all amazing. They taught me a lot about what they do. I didn't know how to direct actors before, so they showed me ways to do it with them that was fun and spontaneous. The big difference between live action and animation is that you'll be touched by the actors and how they act. How they become the characters and live in the movie. It's a very special feeling. It's nothing like animation, in a way, because animation takes a long time, but acting happens right in front of you. I'm lucky to have worked on *Monster Hunt*, which was a blend of animation and live action. It gave me the real performances of the actors but also allowed me to create a fantasy world of monsters in animation.

What's the biggest difference between working on a film in China and working on a film in California?

The big difference is the language because in China I get to use Mandarin and Cantonese, whereas in California I use English all the time. Other than that, the people are similar. They're creative. They might have different cultures but the way they act is very similar. I'm truly lucky that I've been able to work with creative talent from both worlds.

A scene from *Shrek The Third*

So the 'internationalising' process was difficult in the USA. Have you found the same to be true on entering the Chinese market, despite originally coming from Hong Kong?

Actually, at first, when I imagined coming back to China, I thought it would be a homecoming experience for me. But it wasn't what I expected. When I came back, I realised I had been in the USA for too long. I had become more of an American in the way that I think and react to things. It's a reverse cultural shock to me when I'm in China. I had to go through the same process of adapting to the culture here. I would be listening to conversations in Mandarin and I didn't understand why something was funny, if they were telling a joke. It also took me a long time to get to know the culture in China and, being with folks from Hong Kong, it became about me updating what the new slang was. It would be very easy for me to talk about stuff from the old days, 10 or 20 years ago, but I would be like an old guy. I had to get up to date and understand what was current.

There are many Asian, especially Chinese, professionals who are walking the same path. That is, they've grown up in Hong Kong and learned to culturally survive in America. What kind of advice would you give these people?

I think, for people who are going to the United States from Hong Kong and starting a career there, the most important thing is to not be shy. Don't look down on yourself. Just be brave and speak your mind. I was very lucky because the