

Story by: **Cameron Stewart**

Photograph by: **Aaron Francis**

And ... ACTION!

It's only a matter of time before China's box office surpasses North America's to become the world's largest single market for cinema

It was misfortune that opened the door to China for Melbourne film producer and businessman Greg Bassler. In the years after the global financial crisis of 2007-08, Bassler, then the CEO of Australian entertainment company Village Roadshow Entertainment Group, observed how China had withstood the economic downturn better than much of the world. "When the global crisis came along the one area of the world where there were still quite strong economies was Asia and China," he says.

So he took a closer look at the Chinese film market and was stunned by what he saw. "In about 2009 there were about 3000 cinema screens in China and there were roughly 600 million people living in urban centres compared to North America at that time when there were around 43,000 screens servicing 250 million people in urban centres," he says.

The Chinese government had recently loosened controls over the Chinese film industry so more movies were being made and audiences were growing fast. A quick calculation was all Bassler needed to tell him that this was a market worth investing in for an Australian film business. "There were so many more people with a smaller number of screens (in China). You could see it coming. We saw an enormous opportunity: there is a marketplace that was growing."

So in 2011 Bassler set up an Asian arm of the business, Village Roadshow Pictures Asia, and dived into the Chinese market, investing in and co-producing Chinese films, including in Australia. "We were probably among the first foreign film companies from anywhere to become active in China," he says.

A decade on, Bassler has watched the flowering of China's film industry while ensuring Australia has remained a player in that growth through his tenure as Village Roadshow CEO until last year and now with his own film production company, Gentle Giant Media.

While Bassler was at Village he says the company co-produced 25 Chinese films. He is now the Australian co-producer of the largest Australian-Chinese movie yet, a \$50 million film called *The Whistleblower*, which was shot in Australia last year and is co-produced by legendary Hong Kong producer Bill Kong, who made *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

"Bill is the most successful producer of Chinese films for many years and has a great understanding of what Chinese audiences want to see," Bassler tells *The Deal* in an interview from Los Angeles, which has been his home since 2006.

"He approached us in late 2017 saying 'I've got this film *The Whistleblower*, it's set in Australia and I'm thinking of filming mainly in Australia, and would you be interested in partnering?'"

"It's a white-collar crime movie, the protagonist is an Australian company and the whistleblower is an expat Chinese executive working in Melbourne. It is the largest Chinese co-production ever made in Australia and it is set up as an official

co-production (under the two countries' 2006 co-production treaty) which was great for the Australia-China relationship."

Bassler loved going to movies with his family while growing up in the Melbourne suburb of Brighton, but he hardly envisaged a career in film.

His grandfather was gassed in the trenches during World War I and could never work again, plunging the family into poverty. His father and his uncles rescued themselves through education, becoming dentists and doctors and sending a lesson to Bassler that education was everything.

Bassler also tried dentistry but didn't like it and swapped over to law, kicking off his career as a commercial lawyer with Herbert Geer. One of his earliest clients was Village Roadshow and he was soon helping the company create its chain of multi-screen cinemas, an innovation that greatly increased cinema attendance in Australia. As a lawyer he also helped set up Village Roadshow Pictures to independently produce and finance major Hollywood productions.

By 1999, having worked with Village for 13 years in a client relationship, he decided to join the company. One year later, he was appointed CEO of Village Roadshow Entertainment Group, a role he kept for the next 18 years.

During his tenure as CEO, Village Roadshow Pictures released more than 100 Hollywood films which garnered more than \$US18 billion in global box office earnings. Thirteen of these were Australian-produced, including *Mad Max Fury Road*, the Matrix trilogy, *Happy Feet* and *Happy Feet 2*, *Legend of the Guardians*, *The Great Gatsby* and *San Andreas*.

But as this collaboration between Village Roadshow Pictures and Hollywood continued to grow, Bassler also kept a close eye on the growth occurring in China.

In 2011, when he set up Village Roadshow Pictures Asia, the total box office in China was \$US1.8 billion compared with \$US10.17 billion in North America. By last year, China's total box office had grown five-fold to \$US8.9 billion with almost 10,000 new screens opening each year, while North America's total box office was just under \$US12 billion. In China, Chinese-language films accounted for 62 per cent of box office last year.

With such growth, it seems only a matter of time before China's box office surpasses North America's to become the world's largest single market for cinema.

Bassler says when he first started to work with the Chinese film industry it was still experiencing growing pains, with a lack of expertise and experience which led to clunky story-telling and shoddy special effects. Now the industry is flourishing and producing films far superior to those of only a few years ago.

It was clear to Bassler early on that Chinese-language movies had the most potential for growth because Chinese audiences naturally gravitated towards their own language. They also provide better returns on investment because Chinese-language

movies are subject to fewer rules and regulations than foreign films in China.

"We thought if this market is going to grow like we think it is then the Chinese-language share of that market is going to be very significant and \$100 of box office in a Chinese movie is worth significantly more to the producers of that film than \$100 of foreign box office (in China)," says Bassler. "There was an ideal opportunity because there weren't many foreigners operating in China to make Chinese films with Chinese partners."

When he turned 60 last year Bassler left Village to set up his own film production house, Gentle Giant Media, to make global films in Australia utilising Australian talent. He has also sought to give back to the industry through philanthropic endeavours including a fellowship for Australian graduates to attend the American Film Institute's AFI Conservatory in Los Angeles.

Although Gentle Giant will target opportunities in Hollywood, Bassler will continue to pursue opportunities in China and is already working with producer Kong to develop new projects.

The official co-production treaty between China and Australia has seen nine feature films developed as co-productions with more likely as the Chinese industry continues to grow. An increasing number of these are likely to be filmed in Australia as more Chinese film-makers look to shoot movies here, even if those movies are Chinese-language and will never be released in this country.

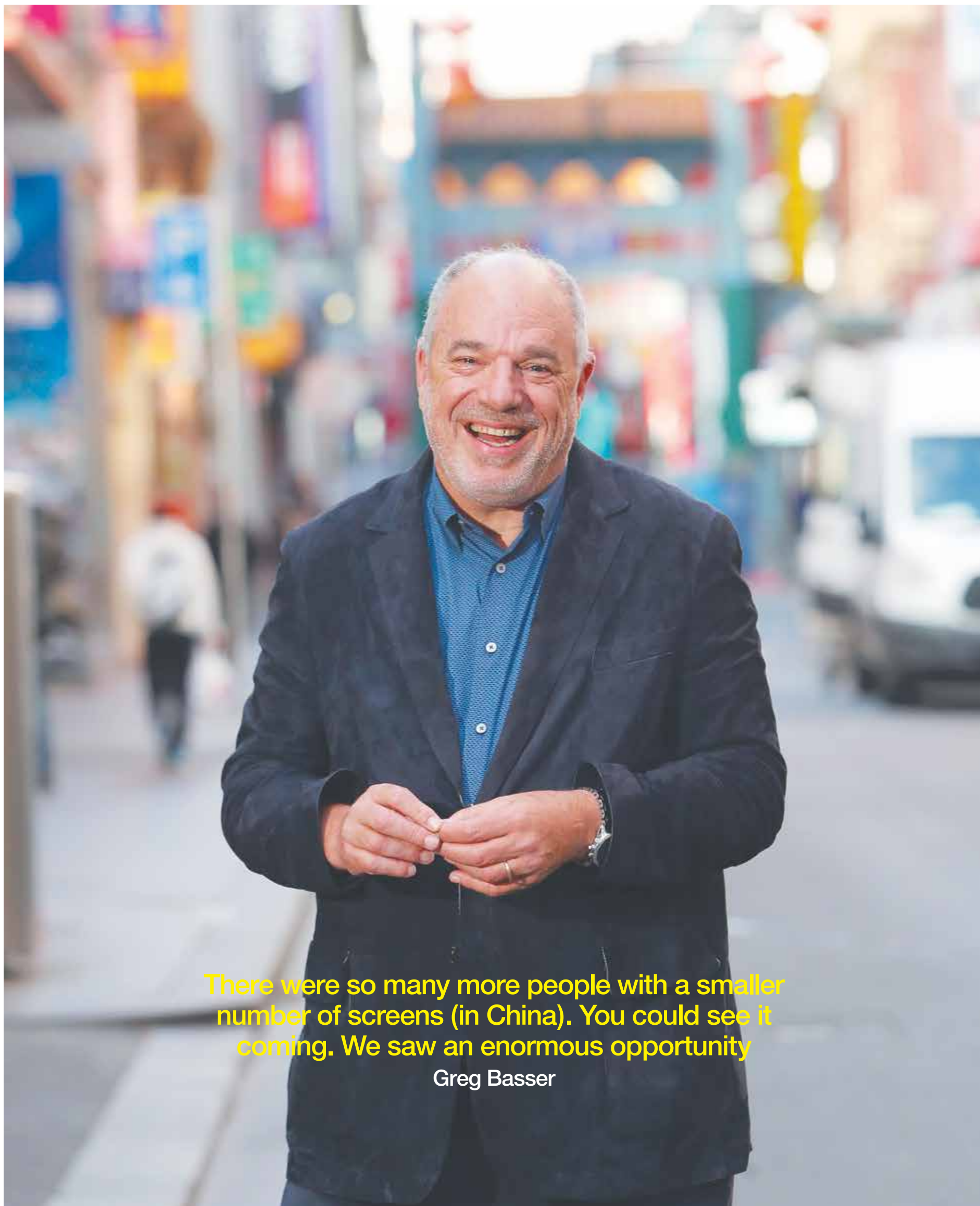
"We want to make more Chinese-Australian films under the co-production treaty, and they may be totally in Chinese and will only be shown to Chinese audiences, but we as Australians bring fantastic skills to the table," says Bassler.

"We have the resources, the locations and the talent to be able to make top quality films for China as we do for Hollywood in Australia. With *The Whistleblower*, a lot was set in China but (much) was filmed at the Hazelwood Power Station in the Latrobe valley."

Bassler says the tastes of Chinese film goers and those in the West are different, which is why it is still rare for movies to cross over and be embraced by both audiences. "The markets are different," he says. "The beat is different and there are cultural differences. People have tried to do it (but) what works for China doesn't always work elsewhere."

After helping to pioneer Australia's film relationship with China, Bassler believes the links will only get stronger. "Our experience on *The Whistleblower* bodes well for future Australian-Chinese co-productions," he says. "There is a bond between film makers from both countries that extends beyond the politics. We collaborate with mutual respect." **D**

Cameron Stewart is The Australian's Washington correspondent and US contributor for Sky News Australia



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