



The reel deal: Ang Ziqian's lifestyle company One Tree Holdings (below) chose to invest in *The Wedding Diary* (left and above) because he believes that the journey before death is one filled with life's finest moments, such as weddings and celebrations



Trailblazers of local films

The CEO of Singapore's oldest bereavement services company, a fashion entrepreneur and a philanthropic organisation have taken the bold move to venture out of their comfort zones and invest in the film industry, writes **DYLAN TAN**



'We're all business people. There are people going to the movies every day but whether this is a good or bad time to be in the business or not, it's difficult to judge'

— Fashion entrepreneur Teri Tan whose company, Cornerstone Pictures, released its first feature film, *The Ultimate Winner* (above), last year. The gambling drama marked the big-screen directorial debut of television actor Li Nanxing (above, left) who also starred in it

ANG Ziqian is not your typical film investor. As the CEO of the oldest funeral services company in Singapore, one doesn't associate his line of work with the glitz and glamour of the movies. But that hasn't stopped the avid film buff from getting into the industry.

His lifestyle company, One Tree Holdings, has invested in two local films so far – last year's horror-comedy *The Ghosts Must Be Crazy* and rom-com *The Wedding Diary*, which opened yesterday.

The 30-year-old self-professed film buff is not alone. With local films now commonly sharing the screens alongside Hollywood imports at multiplexes, the industry is undergoing a resurgence and attracting a diverse range of investors like Mr Ang.

Fashion entrepreneur Teri Tan is another. Her company, Cornerstone Pictures, released its first feature film, *The Ultimate Winner*, last year. The gambling drama marked the big-screen directorial debut of television actor Li Nanxing, who also starred in it.

Both Ms Tan and Mr Ang say despite not coming from a film background, their entry into the industry came almost naturally because of what they do every day.

"Whenever a television station or production house needs to stage a funeral scene, my company will come on board and assist; that's how we got into films," reveals Mr Ang.

For Ms Tan, being in fashion means working with celebrities on a constant basis and a lot of them have ended up being friends with her.

Both approach films with the same business sensibility of their day jobs.

"Like the bereavement market, film is very niche and I love doing niche market businesses because there's a potential for growth in them; if more investors come in, we can grow the film industry faster," says Mr Ang.

Or as Ms Tan simply puts it, "We're all business people." For her and her partners – all professionals, some who hail from sectors as diverse as property – the immediate potential of feature films made entering the industry an interesting proposition.

"There are people going to the movies every day but whether this is a good or bad time to be in the business or not, it's difficult to judge," she notes.

While Ms Tan did not reveal box-office takings for *The Ultimate Winner*, she says the company is happy with the returns for the film which cost \$1.5m to make.

Cornerstone recently co-invested in Jack Neo's recent Lunar New Year offering *We Not Naughty*, while production for the company's second feature film will commence by the end of the month.

Despite film investing making up only about 10 per cent of his business, Mr Ang says he takes the opportunity seriously and is in it for the long haul.

"The movie business is actually not very open to a lot of people so it can be quite difficult to get into it; like all businesses, it's about relationships and who you know," he says.

"You might make money on some projects and lose money on others so there are many people who won't do it again after they're burnt the first time but in business, you must have a long-term view."



Message and the medium: Home-grown Cornerstone Pictures bought a stake in *The Ultimate Winner* (above) as well as co-invested in Jack Neo's recent Lunar New Year offering *We Not Naughty*. Lee Poh Wah, chief executive officer of Lien Foundation (seen here with Elsie Chua, resident of St Joseph's Home and Hospice and Sister Geraldine Tan) believes in the power of the film medium to communicate its social justice issues



The potential that a film has to travel is also what makes film investment an interesting proposition for him. *The Wedding Diary*, for example, boasts a cast that includes familiar faces from the region including Malaysian pop singer Ah Niu, Hong Kong actress Elaine Kwong and local actor Shaun Chen. That allows the film to appeal to a wider audience and it opened simultaneously across the Causeway yesterday.

There's also no shortage of filmmakers looking for investors to fund their projects.

"I can get up to 20 scripts coming through my e-mail so we definitely have to say 'no' to some. For example, we don't do ghost stories even though they tend to be popular with the public be-

I was taking instructions from everyone," she recalls with a laugh. "You have to learn to accommodate everybody, and producing a gambling movie requires a lot of pre-production work in terms of research."

Mr Ang, on the other hand, leaves the creative process entirely to the filmmakers, though like Ms Tan, the theme of the film is also important to him before he decides whether he wants to invest in it.

"In *The Wedding Diary*, there's nothing about dying or death but we chose it because even though our core business is bereavement – which deals with the end of one's life – the journey before it is full of celebrations like weddings," he says. "The wedding theme is also something that will attract a mass audience because it's something everyone can relate to regardless of whether they're single, married or divorced."

The wide appeal of film has also led to philanthropic organisation Lien Foundation dabbling in it to spread the message of their causes, though its projects are less commercially driven than those Mr Ang and Ms Tan have dabbled in.

"The Foundation is a proponent of using media to move our mission, and we recognise that film is a powerful medium to communicate social justice issues with the intent to provoke discourse and invoke change," notes its chief executive officer Lee Poh Wah. "This is especially true when we are grappling with a universal theme for a global audience."

It premiered its fifth film, a documentary about palliative care and pain management called *Life Before Death* – named after one of its initiatives – last week in Singapore, ahead of World Cancer Day.

Lien Foundation invested \$360,000 on production and \$80,000 on website and social media activities to promote it.

But Mr Lee says he's not expecting to recoup the investment as their agenda is "to provide a platform to rally the international stakeholders and to foster greater awareness, in the hope that it will lead to new conversations, new collaborations, and new solutions."

About 25 per cent of *Life Before Death* was shot in Singapore and Mr Lee said the inspiration came from the phenomenal success of two works of philanthropy in action – the Al Gore climate-change documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, produced by Participant Media which is owned by ex-eBay-president-turned-philanthropist Jeff Skoll; as well as *Sesame Street* which was supported by Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation among others.

Mr Lee also adds that the foundation prefers to partner the private sector to deliver social impact as they have stronger execution power. Even though *Life Before Death* is less commercially driven than theatrically released films like *The Wedding Diary* and *The Ultimate Winner*, he doesn't rule out the possibility of venturing into mass appeal feature films one day.

Citing the example of Bruce Lee, a personal hero of Mr Lee's, for bridging the East and the West with his movies, the 41-year-old says, "He inspires me to practise philanthropic gongfu with film; but I haven't found my Bruce Lee!"

The Wedding Diary is in cinemas; *The Ultimate Winner* is available on DVD and *Life Before Death* can be viewed on the website www.lifebeforedeath.com