

## FRAPA New Member Profile: ZESPA MEDIA

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CHINA is taking IP seriously, cracking down on piracy and seeking international formats that mix entertainment and commercial traction with responsible social, cultural, regulatory and political messages. So says **new FRAPA member Zespa Media**, established in 2010 to identify international content and formats suitable for the Chinese market. The London-and Beijing-based independent, co-founded by Chinese media specialist **Jean Dong**, former investment banker **Oli Rayner** and multimedia producer **Anthony Lilley**, maintains that, if you approach the world's largest market in right way, with the right partners, the right attitude and the right show, the rewards vastly outweigh the risks.

What's more, Zespa can support its claim. Early in 2011, the company was enlisted by state television broadcaster CCTV to scout for international media partners and formats suitable for Chinese audiences.

"CCTV has a huge demand for finished programmes and formats, as well as know-how, expertise and partners for co-development projects," **Dong** says. "As an organisation, it has a very international ambition."

The first fruit of this collaboration was a local version of Clash of the Choirs, which came about after Zespa identified the original Shine show as a likely candidate for adaptation. The action follows eight celebrities, who return to their home town to form a choir and compete with each other for a large cash prize. The money is donated to a charity that benefits the winning choir's local community. In addition to advising on the reversioning and localisation of the format — renamed Meng Xiang He Chang Tuan (Dream Choirs) — Zespa also brokered a groundbreaking licensing deal for Shine, under which CCTV agreed for the first time to share the rights in the new Chinese episodes.

Dream Choirs finished its primetime run on flagship variety channel CCTV-1 in early January, pulling in audiences of more than 25 million. "*Even in China, that's an impressive result*," Rayner says. He reports that the format out-performed every other show in its primetime slot, as well as generating massive micro-blog discussion on the Chinese equivalent of Twitter.

Unsurprisingly, CCTV is now in negotiations for a second season of Dream Choirs. Rayner adds: "This is exactly the sort of show that the Chinese government wants. It's watchable and fun, but it also has a positive message. The Western stereotype is that the Chinese want to broadcast nothing but propaganda, but CCTV is actually a highly commercial operation and understands very well the need to engage its viewers. Like any commercially driven broadcaster anywhere in the world, it knows stale educational programming won't attract audiences, advertisers or sponsors."



The kind of shows that the Chinese government is keen to discourage, Dong explains, are the kind that peddle the "vulgar, base or ugly side of life". She cites a quiz show in which the losing contestants were given humiliating forfeits, such as removing clothing or having their underarm hair plucked. The show was publicly condemned by the government.



In addition to sourcing suitable international content, Zespa is also on a mission to reassure Western companies that China's days as a pirate stronghold are all but over. In response to World Trade Organization pressure, CCTV has now set up a department dedicated to ensuring that its channels do not infringe copyright.

"There is an increasing acceptance of the need to work in partnership with IP holders and a realisation that doing so will actually lead to better programmes being made," Rayner says. He adds that CCTV has also earmarked a large budget for acquiring and licensing IP: "That, for me, is the clincher. It shows how serious they are and why we are happy to deal with them."

But be warned: China remains a daunting market, with its own peculiar mores and laws, penchants and preferences, many of which are not "intuitive or natural to Westerners", Dong says. "It's also impossible to take a format off the shelf and just chuck it at China," she adds. "The cookie-cutter approach never works. A lot of fine-tuning is needed." But for those brave enough to chance their arm, flexible enough to adapt their modus operandi — and canny enough to sign up Zespa to help them negotiate the best terms, prices and payment conditions — the opportunities represented by a country with 686 channels serving 1.25 billion viewers are awesome.

"The Chinese are very like us," Rayner concludes. "They want to laugh and be entertained and find out about things like parenting and how to improve their lifestyle. In the end, we have a lot more similarities than differences — which means that there are a lot of successful Western formats out there that, with sufficient adaptation, could be made to work a treat for Chinese viewers."

Joanna Stephens