

Zespa Media hits the right notes with Dream Choirs

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Dream Choirs, the Chinese adaptation of Shine's hit format *Clash of the Choirs*, has proved a massive hit with Chinese audiences and shows it is still possible to deliver compelling entertainment-based shows despite the recent government clampdown.

The first season was aired on CCTV-1's primetime Saturday evening slot from November 2011 and topped the audience ratings with a regular audience of 25 million. *Dream Choirs* has been named CCTV Programme of the Year for 2011. CCTV-1 has confirmed its intention to commission a second season.

Dream Choirs came about after Zespa Media identified the original Shine show as a potential candidate for adaptation for CCTV. The format sees eight celebrities return to their home towns in eight different provinces to form a choir and compete with each other for a large cash donation to a charitable project in the winning choir's local community.

Zespa Media advised on the adaptation and localisation of the original format, consulted on the best channel to target and negotiated a format licensing deal on behalf of Shine. The format licensing deal broke new ground as it saw CCTV agree, for the first time, to share the rights in the new Chinese episodes. CCTV produced the show and Zespa Media acted as Consultant Producer working alongside the original producer team from Shine's Friday TV.

In the context of SARFT's much publicised recent restrictions on what is loosely called "entertainment" programming in China, *Dream Choirs* won over audiences with a potent blend of entertainment, emotion, competition, human interest and philanthropic impact.

"The government want people in China to watch shows with a positive social message and a degree of humanity, not just undermining people's dignity and playing on the vulgar, base or ugly sides of life, as those are the type of shows that give the entertainment genre a bad name in China," explains Jean Dong, Managing Director of Zespa Media. For example, a quiz show where the losing contestants were forced to undergo humiliating forfeits such as removing items of clothing, having underarm hair plucked out has been publicly condemned by the government. "Adapting *Clash of the Choirs* is a good example of how to steer through the maze of cultural, regulatory and political hurdles in the Chinese TV market. It is quintessentially an entertainment talent reality show, with auditions and studio-based competition, but we have steered away from government sensitivities to make it work."

"*Dream Choirs* presses all the right social buttons, at the same time as underplaying the pure entertainment aspects," says Dong. "On the one hand the government has told TV channels to tone down their "entertainment" elements and, on the other, these channels have to supply popular and engaging programmes, so it's a very interesting moment for Chinese TV."

Dream Choirs demonstrates the potential to create engaging and entertaining programmes which strike a successful balance between political and regulatory requirements, on the one hand, and the demands of increasingly discriminating viewers and sponsors on the other. Zespa Media has a number of other similar deals in the pipeline and is also working with international partners to develop original formats for China.

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About Zespa Media Limited:

Zespa Media was established in November 2010 to identify international TV programmes and formats which are suitable for the Chinese market. With offices in London and Beijing, the Company has well-established

relationships with the major state-controlled and commercial broadcasters at the national and provincial level, leading publishers and other media groups in the People's Republic of China.

Zespa Media works with producers, rights-holders and distributors looking to license and develop programmes and formats in China. With a deep understanding of the Chinese TV market and key regulatory, political and cultural sensitivities, Zespa Media is well placed to advise clients on which of their properties are suitable for China and how they may be adapted to suit local tastes. The Company acts as cultural interpreter, facilitates genuine creative collaborations, helps international clients negotiate the best terms with Chinese broadcasters and acts as Consultant Producer on the Chinese versions of the formats. With established relationships with a broad range of leading media and commercial companies in China, Zespa Media is also well placed to help clients fully commercialise their IP through the development of merchandising, publishing and wider ancillary revenue opportunities.

Dream Choirs success rounds off a busy year for Zespa Media. In addition to building a pipeline of licensing and development deals, the Company arranged a number of three day Masterclasses at which senior representatives from major UK indies and independent experts presented to CCTV in Beijing with a view to licensing and developing formats for China and forging long term creative collaboration opportunities.

About *Dream Choirs*:

The Chinese adaptation - known locally as "Meng Xiang He Chang Tuan" - involved eight celebrities returning to their hometowns (all in different parts of China) to put together eight choirs each made up of twenty ordinary local people. After provincial auditions, the choirs all travelled to Beijing to compete in the studio-based finals. The winning choir received a substantial donation to the charitable project of their choice in their area. Runners up also received smaller donations to their own chosen projects. The projects supported ranged from helping disabled orphans, building a bridge for students to safely cross rivers on their way to school in the mountains, or a multi-media classroom for children of migrant workers. The charitable prize fund was provided by China Merchant Securities, one of the largest financial services groups in China. Something the producers did not anticipate, however, was the number of other corporations who came forward while the show was being aired to offer additional financial support for projects featured on the show. These corporations were all keen to be associated with the success of the show. The finale episode of the show, aired on Chinese New Year's Eve and saw the Yunnan team winning the 1 million RMB grand prize. However one of the surprises was another corporation came forward on the night and offered an additional 30 million RMB to one of the charity projects. The title sponsor of *Dream Choirs* was Procter & Gamble's Oil of Olay.

Key Quotes:

The Deputy Minister of Civil Affairs, Mr Yupei Dou, who attended the studio recording of the finale episode, said:

"*Dream Choirs* has successfully built a bridge to bring together the power of government, media, corporations, celebrities and the public to mobilise resources and help society's best philanthropic endeavours."

Miss Li, Managing Director of PR for Beauty & Fashion at P&G Greater China - the major title sponsor of the show, said:

"We are very grateful that CCTV has given us this platform. We have seen many heart-touching stories, battling with hardship in life, the spirit of perseverance, and met a group of wonderful choir leaders who are so passionate towards social philanthropic affairs. We have been deeply moved and inspired by them. As a symbol of beauty for Chinese women, Olay will continue its support of these projects, as well as participating in them. Olay not only wishes to help its Chinese customers to realise their dreams of perfect skin but we would also like to encourage and help people realise their wider dreams in life and the other possibilities this programme may bring."

A taste of what is being said on micro-blogging site **Sina Weibo**:

"The *Dream Choirs* has a resonance that touches deeply on the heart, it is a cultural ambassador"

“Entertainment shows do not necessarily have to expose the ridiculous; we look forward to more good shows like The Dream Choirs.”

The People’s Daily reported:

“The Dream Choirs has gone beyond pure entertainment and reached a higher level, with a charitable aim rather than personal fame. The format of the competition emphasizes teamwork instead of personal performance. Yet the show is richly entertaining, engaging and it touches the heart because it explores the simplest emotions between human beings. Through this programme and the spirit it encapsulates, the audience has rediscovered and reconnected with the best of society’s cultural qualities such as perseverance, gratitude and self-development.”