# LIFE





# White Snake holds a sting in the 'tale'

Latest offering sees end of trilogy as love takes center stage, **Xu Fan** reports.







**Top left:** The two snake demons with Xu Xian struggle against Fahai, a Buddhist monk who stubbornly holds the belief that humans and demons should not coexist. **Top right:** A poster for the film, *White Snake: Afloat*. **Middle:** A scene features Bai Niangzi, the white snake-turned-woman, encountering Xu, the man she has fallen for, on the Broken Bridge on the West Lake in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. **Above left:** The fox spirit, a popular supporting role, ponders on assisting Bai. **Above right:** Xu, Bai and her sister-like maidservant, Xiaoqing, among the crowd. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Over nearly three years, directing duo Chan Kin-hi and Li Jiakai devoted themselves entirely to producing the animated film *White Snake: Afloat*. However, they often grappled with the weight of its archetype *Legend of the White Snake*, a household tale established in folklore that has been reinterpreted over centuries.

Its earliest legend may date back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), where the titular snake demon was consistently depicted as a malevolent character throughout the Song Dynasty (960-1279). However, it was retold in writer Feng Menglong's *Jingshi Tongyan* (Stories to Caution the World) during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). That's when the tale took its current form — a poignant love story between the snake-turned-woman and a handsome man.

In the modern era, the story has been adapted into multiple movies, TV dramas, animated series and stage shows. Some of the most popular titles include the 1992 costume drama *New Legend of Madame White Snake* starring Hong Kong actress Angie Chiu, and director Tsui Hark's 1993 movie *Green Snake*, which casts more light on White Snake's sister-like maidservant, Xiaoqing, a green serpent demon.

The dilemma for Chan and Li was simple: How could they achieve a breakthrough in retelling a story familiar to Chinese people for generations?

They traveled to Hangzhou in October to seek inspiration.

During the over-one-week stay in the picturesque and verdant city, Chan says, they visited famous historical sites, iconic landmarks and scenic spots, such as the Southern Song Imperial Street, and the Nine Creeks and Eighteen Gullies.

Li adds: "We also spent several days strolling along the West Lake, observing how the light changes from morning to noon and night. This was particularly significant as one of the most highlighted scenes takes place on the lake."

"During the final days of conceiving the script, I suddenly realized — it is simply a love story depicting a man falling in love with a snake-turned-woman and how this unusual couple overcomes difficulties to be together," said Li, with Chan, during an interview with China Daily.

The two directors delved into the preparation work, especially the meticulous research of Song Dynasty painter Zhang Zeduan's masterpiece *Qingming Shanghe Tu* (Along the River During the Qingming Festival).

The over 5-meter-long scroll features numerous figures, cattle, houses and ships, making it a detailed record of the landscape of the dynasty's capital city of Bianjing (today's Kaifeng in Henan province), and the lives of people from various walks of life. It provided a good reference for the animators to re-create the story's backdrop, set in Lin'an, which is now Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, during the Song Dynasty.

The film premiered in theaters nationwide on the Qixi Festival, also known as Chinese Valentine's Day, the seventh day of the seventh month on the Chinese lunar calendar, which fell on Aug 10 this year. As of Thursday, it had grossed more than 245 million yuan ($34.2 million) at the box office, making it one of the highest-grossing blockbusters of the summer, according to tracking platform Maoyan PRO.

*White Snake: Afloat* marks the conclusion of the White Snake trilogy. The first movie was released in 2019, and the second installment, centered upon the green snake, was released in 2021.

The first film, which grossed an impressive 470 million yuan at the box office and fictionalizes a brand-new romance set 500 years before the original folklore, is widely viewed as a turning point for the success of Light Chaser Animation, one of the country's largest studios that focuses on producing animated movies inspired by Chinese history and culture.

Taking place around 500 years after the events of the first film but before the second installment, the new fantasy romance *White Snake: Afloat* follows the journey of Bai Niangzi, or Madam Bai, a white snake demon, who has taken on the form of a beautiful woman.

Accompanied by the green snake demon, Xiaoqing, the protagonist travels to Lin'an in hopes of reuniting with Xu Xian, her beloved. Now becoming a skilled polymath in medicine and patient care, Xu once again falls in love with Bai and gets married but their peaceful life is soon disrupted by Fahai, a powerful and stubborn Buddhist monk who is adamant in his belief that humans and demons should not coexist.

Spanning 133 minutes, the film has a crew of almost 1,000 people — consisting of 300 from Light Chaser Animation and 700 recruited from other companies.

Linda Jaivin, an Australian Sinologist who assisted in the English subtitle translation of Light Chaser Animation's successful film *Chang'an*, joined the team for *White Snake: Afloat*. She has added a unique touch to some poetic lines inspired by classic literature, according to the two directors.

In Chinese mythology and legends, wild beasts are often portrayed as monsters, demons or spirits, with vixens being among the creatures known for their ability to transform into beautiful women. Influenced by such legacy, the White Snake trilogy features a fox spirit with two faces, who has become a popular supporting character due to her captivating appearance and mysterious identity.

In the new movie, Li says, she transitions from being the owner of a weapon workshop in the first film to operating a magic house, helping customers retrieve lost memories in the second film, to becoming the head of an opera troupe, where she performs a work based on Tang Dynasty writer Yuan Zhen's *Yingying Zhuan* (Yingying's Biography).

"We live in a land saturated and nurtured by cultures thriving over thousands of years. While embarking on a journey to reexamine the historical corners once overlooked, we, as creators, are excited to find numerous inspirations," Li says.

According to Yu Zhou, president of Light Chaser Animation, the studio is scheduled to produce more Chinese culture-based films, with an upcoming adaptation from Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) novelist Pu Songling's *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio).

"Over the last decade, China's animation film industry has experienced rapid growth, with audiences showing a surging interest in stories that embody traditional cultural elements. This trend may be attributed to the cultural confidence exhibited by young people born after 1995 or the post-2000 generation," Yu says. "However, their expectations for film visuals and animation technology have also increased, necessitating greater efforts from domestic filmmakers."

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# Young Africans embrace benefits of martial arts

ABIDJAN — "One, two, three, four", a young man in a Shaolin Temple training jersey commanded, as he demonstrated movements and postures to students in a gymnasium at the Felix Houphouet-Boigny University in Abidjan, the economic capital of Cote d'Ivoire.

"I'm a member of our university's Chinese martial arts club, where students of all grades can train. We have three sessions a week, and about 50 students come to learn kung fu and Chinese culture," says Jean Philippe N'Dri, who is responsible for instruction at the club.

Like many young Africans, his interest in martial arts and Chinese culture began with martial arts movies.

"My love was born of watching great actors like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan," he says, adding that they taught him to appreciate martial arts.

As children, he and his friends would imitate characters from the martial arts movies they watched, but it wasn't easy to master the movements.

In 2014, he enrolled at the Felix Houphouet-Boigny University. During his second year, he joined the martial arts club out of an interest in kung fu.

With the assistance of the Confucius Institute at the university and the support of the club, he was given the opportunity to visit the Shaolin Temple in China's Henan province.

"It was a beautiful discovery and a great dream come true," he says.

On the way to China, he and his companions were curious how the Shaolin Temple would look, and wondered what they would see when they arrived.

"We saw people dressed the way they had been in the movies. They were wearing Shaolin attire and practicing techniques properly," he says of his first impression of the temple.

The group underwent three weeks of training, but the first two weeks were really challenging.

"It was so tough that we wanted to go back home. We understood then why Shaolin monks have such a reputation," he says. "It wasn't just physical training, but also mental fortification that we received."

With his kung fu dream coming true, N'Dri was keen to pass on what he had learned to people at home.

"We have set up the Shaolin Training Camp, which is the first of its kind in Africa. It allows us to give the same training we received at the temple to young people who are not able to go to China, but who share the same dream," he says.



Jean Philippe N'Dri demonstrates his martial arts technique at the Felix Houphouet-Boigny University in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. ZHANG JIAN / XINHUA

"We organize several competitions in which all of our students, some of whom are preparing for the Shaolin championship in China, participate. The competitions allow them to gauge themselves nationally."

He says that martial arts have become the backbone of his life.

"Before, I used to love to fight, but I never won," he says. "When I began practicing martial arts, my initial idea was to learn techniques to protect myself from people who wanted to hurt me."

But during the nine years he has been practicing martial arts, he has found the opposite to be true.

"As other people will tell you, I have become wiser. I can channel my anger, and have developed a spirit of sharing with my brothers," he says.

He adds that he hopes China will offer more support and opportunities to his compatriots, so that they can promote martial arts at home after returning from their studies.

"We are ambassadors of Chinese culture and also of African culture. We have these two advantages to enable Africans to get what Chinese and African culture are meant to offer," he says.

N'Dri is keen to convey to martial arts enthusiasts that practicing martial arts is an inner journey.

"You will develop extraordinary discipline. You will cultivate long-lasting health. You will also achieve peace of heart, which is the most essential," he says.

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