

Film

Sex sells



Blow up Director Sam Voutas's (inset) film centres on Shunzi, who runs a hutong sex store

China makes more sex toys than any other country, but the public's attitude to sex is only just catching up. **Nicola Davison** talks to the makers of new indie film *Red Light Revolution* about China's secret sex boom

'Nobody does it more than us Chinese,' Shunzi, the tubby, loveable anti-hero of *Red Light Revolution*, confides in the film's opening shot. 'Because there's 1.3 billion of us. That's a hell of a lot of people getting it on.'

What people may not realise is that nobody makes sex toys like the Chinese, who create 70 per cent of the world's rotating, blow-up and buzzing goods. Despite this hefty output, people's use of these toys in China is a relatively recent phenomenon. There was just one 'adult health retailer' in Beijing in 1996. Today there are more than 2,000.

It's this boom that interested Sam Voutas and Melanie Ansley, the film's director and producer respectively: 'People don't talk about it very publicly, but you wouldn't have the explosion

of sex shops if there wasn't a demand for this,' says Voutas. 'For me, seeing sex shops on the street was a big surprise, so I thought other people would be surprised too.' So far the film has proved a hit at international film festivals. After it premiered at Sao Paolo, *The Hollywood Reporter* dubbed it 'a sexy stride forward for independent Chinese cinema'.

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At the centre of the film is Shunzi, a Beijing cabbie who suddenly finds himself without a job or a wife. Willing to do anything – even sell diet medicine, paunch protruding, in a badge saying 'don't end up like me!' – he opens a sex toy shop called Dream of Red Light in a traditional *hutong*,

to the dismay of the ageing neighbourhood.

Both Voutas and Ansley (who hail from Australia and Canada respectively) resided in China during the '80s and '90s, when opening a sex shop like this was unthinkable. 'I think in the '90s you had people making out on park benches; I don't think you had that even in the '80s,' says Ansley. 'Then, even holding hands was a huge no-no. It was unthinkable 20 years ago but now there are celebrities talking about their sex lives on their blogs.' A recent survey by the Family Planning Agency found that almost 70 per cent of Chinese people were not virgins when they married, compared to 16 per cent in the 1980s.

'I was there when there was one legal sex shop in Beijing,' says Voutas. 'It was served by women wearing laboratory coats and it felt like a pharmacy or a clinic. Coming back for the third time to live in China, I was amazed. There are so many sex shops, and a big variety, from high-class down to small local places.'

The biggest sex shop of all is in Shanghai. At the annual Adult Care Expo, sex toy companies – China has

some 10,000 – come to do business. 'Sexpo' proved fruitful for Voutas and Ansley, who met China's biggest sex toy retailer, www.x.com.cn, who provided the vibrators, anal beads and dildos lining the shelves of Dream of Red Light. 'We literally took boxes and boxes of stock,' says Voutas. 'This is a comedy, and many of these toys do look weird and comedic.' The team have a particular affection for a blow-up doll called Candy, who they plan to take on the film festival tour this year.

But *Red Light Revolution* has a more serious side. 'I always wanted to make this a comedy,' says Voutas, 'because I think you can tackle things better through comedy than if you're making a really serious drama. That's part of the goal of this film, in an entertaining and light way, to push the envelope a little bit.' This

manifests itself in subtle touches: from the 'Permit Form To Find Out Where To Get Permits' Shunzi must complete to try to get a licence; to the screen going blank at 'climactic' moments, only to be replaced by 'This shot has been deleted'.

The film also meditates on the repercussions of venturing outside the status quo. 'Our film is about a guy with very good intentions who wants to open a shop,' says Voutas, 'but for whatever reason the system's there and he can't seem to do that. In a similar way, we've had very good intentions and it's been very difficult for [our film] to get a permit. In a sense the film is reflective of our struggle.'

But mainly, *Red Light Revolution* is a witty contemplation of how modern China does the deed – with unexpected results. 'I think the most surprising thing I learned was just how willing the older actors were to be a part of the film,' says Voutas. 'They were feeling stereotyped in other movies – they were suddenly asexual because they'd passed the age of 40... but there is life after 40; humans will be humans and you're never going to kill desire.'

Red Light Revolution screens at *Lola* on Saturday 29 as part of Time Out Shanghai's *Sex and the Cinema* event. See *Film listings* for details.