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Woo reaches a new peak with big 'Cliff'

By DEREK ELLEY

One of the most ballyhooed Asian productions in recent history, and the most expensive Chinese-language picture ever, John Woo's costume actioner "Red Cliff" scales the heights. First seg of the two-part, \$80 million historical epic — with "The Battle of Red Cliff" to follow in late January — balances character, grit, spectacle and visceral action in a meaty, dramatically satisfying pie that delivers on the hype and will surprise many who felt the Hong Kong helmer progressively lost his mojo during his long years Stateside. Pic may, however, disappoint those simply looking for a costume re-tread of his kinetic, '80s H.K. classics.

Film is pitched more at an older demographic than traditional Asian youth auds, and the July 10 release (in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea) faces heavy competition from other summer titles after its first frame. But robust initial returns point to the two-parter

putting black ink on most investors' ledgers — apart, maybe, from Japanese investor Avex, which bankrolled more than half the budget. Non-Asian returns look to be much smaller, especially as, in the West, the whole 4½-hour movie will be available only in a single, 2½-hour version that could end up losing much of the character detail that motors the production.

Detailing an incident familiar to auds throughout Asia, the script by Woo and three other writers mixes elements from history (as recorded in a third-century chronicle by Chen Shou), the freely fictionalized classic "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" by 14th-century scribe Luo Guanzhong, and their own filmic imagination into a dramatic stew that has

engendered beaucoup debate among Asian specialists and auds who already have their own ideas from multiple comicbook treatments, TV drama series and school textbooks. However, given that even these ideas often contradict each other, pic always faced an uphill battle pleasing everyone.

But the picture indisputably works on its own terms. Though

Turn to page 31

RED CLIFF

Directed by

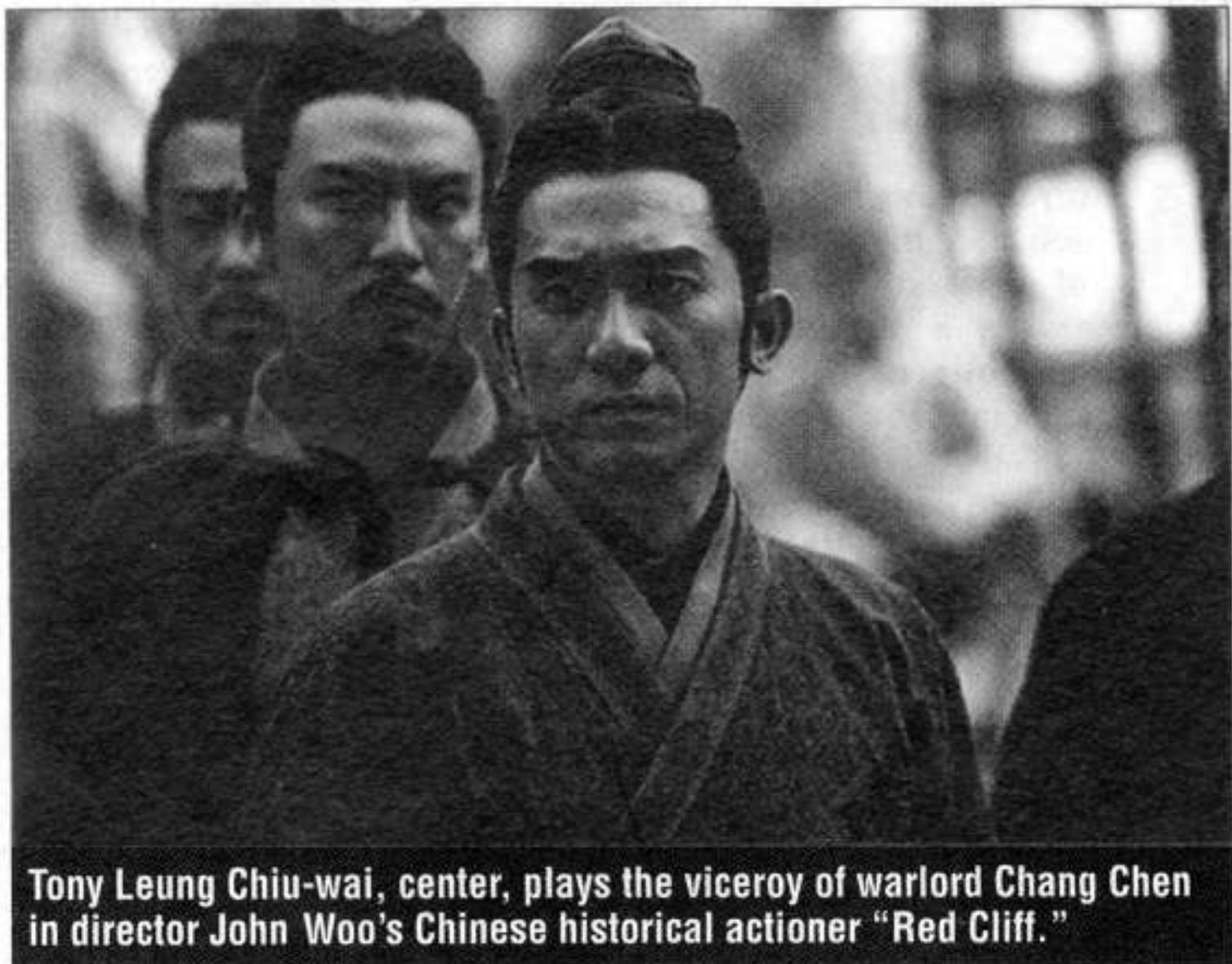
John Woo

Starring:

Tony Leung Chiu-wai,

Takeshi Kaneshiro,

Zhang Fengyi



Tony Leung Chiu-wai, center, plays the viceroy of warlord Chang Chen in director John Woo's Chinese historical actioner "Red Cliff."

RED CLIFF

Continued from page 23

this first part is a long warm-up to the part-two naval battle on the Yangtze River that saw the forces of the North rebuffed by those of the South, it contains more than enough action and drama to justify its length, as well as a cliffhanger ending that leaves auds hungry for more.

Yarn opens in summer A.D. 208, with prime minister-cum-general Cao Cao (powerful mainland Chinese vet Zhang Fengyi) asking permission from Han dynasty Emperor Xian (Wang Ning) to lead an expedition south to take on "rebellious" warlords Liu Bei (You Yong) and Sun Quan (Taiwan thesp Chang Chen). Jittery mood in the imperial court sets the stage for the political machinations that marble the whole movie — and forecasts the period of turmoil, known as the Three Kingdoms, that followed the imminent collapse of the 400-year-old Han dynasty.

Socko 20-minute action sequence, as Cao Cao's massive army sweeps south and meets Liu's forces in the Battle of Changban, establishes the gritty, chaotic tone of the movie's land warfare. Cool, almost grungy color processing and action that's exaggerated but not manga-like are underpinned by ace art director Tim Yip's realistic costumes and design.

As Liu & Co. lick their wounds after their retreat, Liu's canny strategist, Zhuge Liang (Takeshi Kaneshiro), proposes an alliance between him and Sun Quan vs. Cao Cao's seemingly unstoppable forces. Second act broadens here, establishing the nervous, indecisive character of Sun Quan; his tomboyish sister, Sun Shangxiang (lively mainland babe Vicki Zhao); and, last but not least, Sun Quan's commander, Zhou Yu (Hong Kong heartthrob Tony Leung Chiu-wai).

The appearance, 40 minutes in, of toplined Leung (a last-minute replacement for Chow Yun-fat) adds some real emotional heft. Though



Zhang Fengyi is a mighty general in the Chinese costume epic.

not the most physically imposing thesp in the cast, Leung is easily the subtlest, and the character's musical interests add extra layers to what, until then, has been simply a sturdy historical actioner.

Main cast has few weak links and traverses all shades of character. Zhang and Leung dominate the movie, while Kaneshiro is fine as wily strategist Zhuge, and Zhao adds welcome humor as the feisty princess. Chang is a tad lightweight in such company, and Taiwanese supermodel Lin Chi-ling mostly decorative as Zhou's wife. Multitude of colorful supports is led by Mongolian actor Basenzabu as a warrior who's a one-man moving mountain.

Dark-toned color processing doesn't glamorize the period and adds gravitas to many of the youthful actors. Japanese composer Taro Iwashiro's multifaceted score — braazy, playful, lyrical by turns — adds real dramatic clout throughout. Visual effects are just OK.

Version caught in South Korea (cut by local distrib-investor Showbox) was nine minutes shorter than that shown in Chinese-speaking territories. Japanese version, to be released later this year, will also be shorter than Woo's 140-minute cut.

RED CLIFF

(CHI BI)

(CHINA-JAPAN-TAIWAN-SOUTH KOREA-U.S.)

A China Film Group (in China)/Avex Entertainment (in Japan)/CMC Entertainment, Twentieth Century Fox (in Taiwan)/Showbox (in South Korea) release of a China Film Group, Chengtian Entertainment (China)/Avex Entertainment (Japan)/CMC Entertainment (Taiwan)/Showbox, Taewon Entertainment (South Korea)/John Woo presentation of a Lion Rock Prods. production. (International sales: Summit Entertainment, Los Angeles.) Produced by Terence Chang, Woo. Executive producers, Han Sanping, Wu Kebo, Masato Matsuura, Ryuhei Chiba, Huang Chin-wen, Kim Woo-taek, Ryu Jeong-chun. Co-producers, Anne Woo, Zhang Daxing, Yeh Ju-feng, David Tang, Wang Wei, Cheri Yeung.

Directed by John Woo. Screenplay, Woo, Khan Chan, Kuo Cheng, Sheng Heyu. Camera (CineLabs Beijing color, widescreen), Lu Yue, Zhang Li; editors, Angie Lam, Yang Hongyu, Robert A. Ferretti; music, Taro Iwashiro; production-costume designer, Tim Yip; sound (Dolby Digital), Roger Savage; sound designer, Steve Burgess; visual effects supervisors, Craig Hayes, Kevin Rafferty; visual effects, the Orphanage, CafeFX, Hatch Prod.; stunt supervisor, Dion Lam; stunt coordinator, Guo Jianyong; assistant directors, Albert Cho, Richard L. Fox, Thomas Chow; second unit directors, Zhang Jinzhan (army battles), Patrick Leung (naval battle); action director, Corey Yuen; casting, Cheng Jie. Reviewed at CGV Bucheon 3, South Korea, July 19, 2008. Running time: **131 MIN.**

Zhou Yu	Tony Leung Chiu-wai
Zhuce Liang	Takeshi Kaneshiro
Cao Cao	Zhang Fengyi
Sun Quan	Chang Chen
Sun Shangxiang	Vicki Zhao
Zhao Yun	Hu Jun
Gan Xing	Shido Nakamura
Xiao Qiao	Lin Chi-ling
Liu Bei	You Yong
Lu Su	Hou Yong
Sun Shucui	Tong Dawei
Li Ji	Song Jia
Guan Yu	Basenzabu
Zhang Fei	Zang Jinsheng
Huang Gai	Zhang Shan
Cao Hong	Wang Hui
Jiang Gan	Shi Xiaohong
Kong Rong	Wang Qingxiang
Emperor Xian	Wang Ning
Lady Mi	He Yin

With: Sun Chun, Jiang Tong, Kou Shixun, Koyuki, Li Hong, Menghe Wuliji, Wang Yuzhang, Zhang Yi, Wu Qi, Chen Changhai, Zhao Chengshun, Wang Zao-lai, Xie Gang, Yi Zhen, Jia Hongwei, Guo Chao, Cui Yugui, Xu Fengnian, Ma Jing, Hu Xiaoguang, Ye Hua.

(Mandarin dialogue)