

## Blu-Ray Review: Theatrical Cut of 'Red Cliff' Plays Like a Trailer For a Terrific Film

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on April 2, 2010 - 3:25pm

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CHICAGO – When moviegoers think of John Woo, the first image that comes to mind isn't legions of ancient armies fighting each other with bows and arrows, but rather two men holding each other at gunpoint (as in his 1992 classic "Hard-Boiled"). His best action set-pieces are the most intimate, with gunplay and bloodshed taking on an almost balletic grandeur.

Yet at age 61, Woo was clearly ready to venture out into new terrain, and tackle a project he had been dreaming up for nearly two decades, based on Guanzhong Luo's 14th century historical novel, "Romance of the Three Kingdoms." It's reportedly the most expensive film ever made in China, and certainly one of the most audacious. Unfortunately, like many epic films aiming to reach an international audience, the picture has been butchered for mass consumption.



Blu-Ray Rating: **2.5/5.0**

"Red Cliff" was originally a five-hour epic released theatrically in two parts for Chinese audiences (which is also available on Blu-Ray and DVD). But when it was released in American theaters, the film was unwisely cut down to 148 minutes, resulting in two-and-a-half deeply unsatisfying hours of abbreviated entertainment (it's like watching a three hour cut of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy). The film moves too fast to truly engage, throwing dozens of characters at the screen, most of whom fail to leave an impression. There's a massive battle sequence every forty minutes, and they quickly grow numbing, while utilizing phony computerized effects that would be more at home in a Michael Bay blockbuster. There's more palpable tension in a scene where two competitive allies play dueling stringed instruments than there is in most of the elaborately staged action sequences, featuring a DeMille-sized army of extras surrounded by countless digital co-stars.



Tony Leung reunites with director John Woo in the action-packed epic Red Cliff.

Photo credit: *Magnolia Home Entertainment*

The great Tony Leung ("Lust, Caution") stars as war strategist Zhou Yu, who plays a crucial role in the legendary battle that led to the demise of the Han Dynasty in 208 A.D. It's a classic "David vs. Goliath" parable, with rival warlords Liu Bei and Sun Quan forging an alliance to battle the forces of Prime Minister Cao Cao (Fengyi Zhang). Though the civil war carnage is inherently tragic, with countrymen pitted against one

another, Woo makes sure it looks as badass as possible, such as when a soldier rips an arrow out of his shoulder before thrusting it into the neck of an enemy on horseback. The spectacular scope and occasionally stunning imagery in "Red Cliff" is enough to motivate viewers to see the original cut in its entirety. The film's best moments center on awe-inspiring details, such as how the allied forces go about "stealing" Cao Cao's arrows, or how the soldiers' shields serve multiple purposes, or how a naval battle is fought using flaming ships.



Red Cliff was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on March 23rd, 2010.

Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment

"Red Cliff" is presented in admittedly breathtaking 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio) and automatically plays with an English audio track that will be unwatchable for anyone distracted by dubbed voices. Make sure to switch the film to its original Mandarin audio track, which can be accompanied by either English or Spanish subtitles. There's a 27-minute interview with Woo, in which he reveals why he utilized so many digital backdrops (the film was shot largely in Northern China, despite the fact that it's set mostly in the South). The disc also includes 98 storyboard stills and a brief HDNet featurette.

Yet the special feature film buffs are sure to salivate over is the epic documentary, "The Making of Red Cliff: The Long Road," which is about as long as the theatrical cut itself. Though its picture quality is disappointingly weak, and was clearly made for a Chinese audience (it comes equipped with English subtitles), this film will be an invaluable eye-opener for anyone sick of pat, sugar-coated featurettes. It offers a stripped-down look at the arduous task of making such a complex and challenging project, charting the film's production from its first shooting day to its last. There are times when the footage nearly resembles an Asian "Hearts of Darkness," as the filmmakers grapple with an endless array of obstacles, from burning sets and bailing actors to crying babies and attacking tigers (inspiring the usually calm Woo to lose his temper on-camera). The producers are surprisingly candid about their misgivings concerning the picture; one even admits that Woo's "Hollywood and Chinese styles are in constant conflict with each other." I couldn't have said it better myself.

*'Red Cliff' is released by Magnolia Home Entertainment and stars Tony Leung, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Fengyi Zhang, Chen Chang, Wei Zhao, Jun Hu, Shido Nakamura and Chiling Lin. It was written by John Woo, Khan Chan, Cheng Kuo and Heyu Sheng and directed by John Woo. It was released on March 23rd, 2010. It is rated R.*



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**Source URL (retrieved on Sep 19 2024 - 11:38pm):**

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