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John Woo tells Clarence Tsui why he has changed tack to focus on making movies about his homeland

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Having spent much of the past three years working on *Red Cliff*, John Woo Yu-sum could be forgiven for wanting to talk about nothing but the historical epic - especially given that its second instalment is still in production, with more than 800 special-effects scenes still awaiting completion. As he takes his seat in a plush suite at the Peninsula hotel, however, the director seems to have other, more pressing concerns on his mind.

"We're going to head to Chengdu to do some charity events - we hope we can raise some money to build schools there," he says, referring to the fund-raising drive for the victims of the Sichuan earthquake that he's spearheading with his actors from the film. "We just want to do our bit in the reconstruction side of things there."

Cynics may find his philanthropy a little too convenient - after all, the charity drive has given his *Red Cliff* nationwide publicity and a very respectable sheen. It'll come in handy, given the film's difficult birth: the departure of Chow Yun-fat and then Tony Leung Chiu-wai from the project (Leung has since returned to take up Chow's role), busting its budget, and the death of a stuntman during shooting last month.

Woo's sentiments, however, are far from token - speaking to him more than a decade after he relocated to the US for what would become a chequered spell in Hollywood, it's impossible not to notice his unfettered patriotism. He professes a desire to dedicate himself to telling "stories about the Chinese people", and says his return to Chinese-language filmmaking is down to a wish to empower young people involved in the film industry on the mainland.

"I've learned so much in Hollywood and I hope I can bring my experiences back to China, so that the younger generation has more opportunities to understand how blockbuster productions are made, how the special effects are created and how the latest equipment is to be

used," he says.

Once well-known for his heavily stylised action films (he could have lived off royalties alone if he had patented the slow-motion gunplay he turned into an art form in *A Better Tomorrow*), Woo now seems intent on trading the moral ambivalence and gloom of his previous films for heavy doses of goodness and light.

"My films in the past were more centred on tragic heroes or lonely hitmen, but as my age has advanced my perspective on life has become much more upbeat," the 62-year-old says. "I've become more optimistic - I think there will always be good people and hope in this world."

He draws parallels between his newfound optimism and the fortunes of China. "I can see that there have been a lot of changes on the mainland - the changes have been really swift, and a lot of the youngsters are finding it hard to keep abreast of it all, but there's still hope for them. And it's in light of this that I want to make films with more positive themes, things which can serve as an encouragement for them," he says.

Woo's new optimism about humanity underlines his creative endeavours today. *Red Cliff*, for instance, is unlike the relentlessly gritty period war epics that have graced local and national screens in the past year - and that's probably the reason it's now positioned as a "showcase of Chinese history" (a phrase Woo's long-standing business partner, producer Terence Chang, used to describe the film) and the cinematic precursor for the Olympian summer.

Although Peter Chan Ho-sun's *The Warlords* and Daniel Li Yan-kong's *Three Kingdoms: Resurrection of the Dragon* present the bloodshed and treachery that comes with war, Woo's film is less gloomy about human nature. It has an emphasis on what Woo describes as "strength through unity", as seen in how strategists Zhou Yu (played by Leung) and Zhuge Liang (Takeshi Kaneshiro) cast aside their differences to bring down the gargantuan military machine led by Wei warlord Cao Cao (Zhang Fengyi).

Based on the Battle of Red Cliff - a legendary clash during the Three Kingdoms era, in which Cao's army was defeated by Zhuge's much smaller but tactically canny army - the film also dwells on the relationships the military men have away from the fighting, with nearly every male character engaged in a romantic liaison. (Even Cao, who has always been pictured as an out-and-out villain by storytellers throughout Chinese history, is provided with a love interest, in the form of a fictional admirer played by Song Jia.)

"I've seen quite a few of these historical epics and they're really heavy and a bit too grey - and there's a lot of hatred in there as well," says

Woo. "I don't think we actually need things like that now - what we need is a positive way of looking at life."

The same goes for his upcoming project, *1949*. Due for release next year to chime with the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic, the film is a sprawling romance involving three couples whose relationships are broken (and eventually reconciled) amid the social turbulence that brought the Communists to power and drove the Kuomintang regime to Taiwan. Again, the political upheavals and horrors of the civil war are not something Woo wants to dwell on. "It's a story about the fate of the Chinese people," he says, "the fact that we are all dismayed by the pandemonium of war, and that it's best that we could all become one again."

Woo's enthusiasm for his cultural ancestry today is curious. The Guangzhou-born director - a protege of martial arts master Chang Cheh, and who cut his teeth with comedies for Golden Harvest before hitting it big with bullet-ballet flicks such as *A Better Tomorrow*, *The Killer* and *Hard Boiled* - has spent the past 15 years living in Los Angeles and working on American-backed projects.

Given how his Hollywood career has been curtailed in the past few years (his last box office hit in the US was *Mission: Impossible II*), the question remains whether his frustrations with Tinseltown feed into his zeal for a Chinese cinematic renaissance.

Woo insists his work today is not driven by any bad experiences in the US, and maintains his Hollywood blockbusters contain elements that hark back to the aesthetics he perfected in Hong Kong. His American sojourn had its downside, however: it was on the set of *Paycheck*, the critically panned adaptation of a Philip K. Dick short story in 2003, that he says he realised the vacuity of his work, heading productions with which he had no connections.

"I felt really empty making these films, when all I had to do was finish the film as dictated by the screenplay," he says. "I couldn't find the meaning there - whatever I was doing, whether it was making a commercial or an arthouse film, I would try to find a message. Or else why would I want to spend such a long period in my life doing that?"

It's not the first time Woo has asked himself that question, as his spell in Hollywood has been far from plain sailing. His first English-language film, *Hard Target* (1993), was disappointing - not least because he felt his original vision was distorted by interference from his backer, Universal Studios, which toned the violence down to make the film palatable for American audiences. The same fate befell *Broken Arrow* (1996), an action thriller starring John Travolta and Christian Slater. It wasn't until *Face/Off* (1997) that he hit his stride, a success consolidated

three years later by the triumph of *Mission: Impossible II*, a global box office smash in 2000.

Yet he didn't anticipate the quick fall awaiting him - in the form of *Windtalkers* (2001), a film set in the American-held Micronesian island of Saipan during the second world war. Although it was supposed to be about a group of Navajo soldiers whose native language becomes the code through which messages are transmitted without fear of Japanese interception, the film was reshaped into a bombastic war movie in which the emphasis is shifted to two white soldiers (Slater and Nicolas Cage) assigned to protect the "windtalkers".

"It took a lot of time for me to convince them that I'm not just able to do action films," says Woo. "It took *Face/Off* and *M:12* to let them slowly realise my films are not just endless action scenes. And after *M:12* I had much more clout - to a certain extent they would have backed me on whatever I wanted to do.

"I'd wanted to use *Windtalkers* to explore human nature, making a film in which the emphasis is on friendship and the tragic nature of war, but the film company wanted me to make an American hero type of movie, so we were a bit out of synch there."

The film went down badly with critics and audiences alike, even though Woo insists it's one of his top Hollywood movies.

"Maybe there were critics [in the US] who felt I wasn't American, and was not able to make a film that looks like an American historical epic. It's probably the same way Chinese audiences might feel if they saw a foreign director making a film of a Chinese story - they might feel uncomfortable about it."

However troubled his experiences in the US have been, Woo insists he's not done with his American career yet. He says he turned down five projects from the US and Europe to make *Red Cliff*, but that the company he owns with Chang (which goes by the Hong Kong-flavoured name Lion Rock Entertainment) is still mulling over plans for several American projects. They include a remake of *The Sicilian Clan*, a 1969 film about the mafia starring Alain Delon; a real-life adaptation of *Caliber*, a comic-book series that recasts King Arthur and his knights as gun-slingers in the Wild West; and *The Divide*, about the travails of a Chinese man working as an indentured labourer on the American transcontinental railroad in the 19th century.

Getting these projects off the ground, however, will be hard work. "There have been things which I wanted to do but, due to circumstances I couldn't control, I wasn't allowed to," Woo says. "In Hollywood, once you make your name with blockbusters, you're boxed in. For example,

there's a project [Martin] Scorsese wanted to work with me on - a very low-budget arthouse film about street kids in Brooklyn, something along the lines of Francis [Ford] Coppola's *The Outsiders*. It's something I really would have loved to do, but no studios believe in me on doing something like that. It's something I'm very unhappy about. I told people I would do it for free, but even my agents and lawyers don't want me to be involved. But it should never be just making money - and that's when I think, well, maybe I should just come back and do some Chinese-language films."

With their nine-digit budgets, however, *Red Cliff* and *1949* are hardly indie fare. The raison d'etre for these films lies elsewhere - and nationalistic sentiments aside, the shift in power in the international economic landscape has played a part in Woo's decision to return to China. It's not for his own sake, he says, but for his mantle-bearers.

"Hollywood is now cutting down on its own productions and investing more in projects in places such as China, India and Russia," he says. "If young people there get a chance to exercise their skills, they may prove themselves able to collaborate [with Americans] ... and *Red Cliff* is just the film that could prove China has the talent and the diligence to make a Hollywood-style historical epic."

***Red Cliff* opens on Thursday**

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