

Confucius

Kong Zi

(China-Hong Kong)

By [DEREK ELLEY](#)



'Confucius'

A China Film Group release of a Beijing Dadi Century, China Film Group Corp. (China)/Dadi Entertainment (Hong Kong) production. (International sales: Dadi Entertainment, Hong Kong.) Produced by Han Sanping, Chui Po-chu, Rachel Liu. Executive producers, Han, Liu, John Sham. Directed by Hu Mei. Screenplay, Chan Khan, He Yanjiang, Jiang Qitao, Hu.

Though he was probably the last person on most people's lists to play the venerable Chinese philosopher, Chow Yun-fat makes a commanding screen presence as "Confucius." Combining calm sagacity with a potent physicality that more than fills helmer Hu Mei's big visual stage, Chow carries the biopic almost single-handedly and prevents it from becoming overly respectful. Released Jan. 22 in China amid the "Avatar" tsunami, "Confucius" hauled a very wise but not heaven-storming 99.5 million yuan (\$14.6 million) in its first three frames. Beyond Asia, this entertaining, often thoughtful pic mostly will be seen, alas, on the smallscreen.

The media brouhaha over the 2D version of "Avatar" being bumped off many screens to make way for "Confucius" -- supposedly for political/patriotic reasons -- has obscured the fact that the pic is an exceptionally good-looking and largely well-played historical drama. Released at any other time -- its original date was last fall, to coincide with the 2,560th anniversary of the sage's birth -- the film would never have been bruised by what became a fabricated Hollywood-vs.-China media-cultural war.

Since "Curse of the Golden Flower," Chow has shown he can bring a physical heft to mature costume-drama roles that's equaled only in Chinese-speaking cinema by mainlanders such as Zhang Fengyi, Wang Xueqi or Hu Jun. But even more surprising is the film's portrayal of Confucius as a very worldly man of action and war, with large-scale setpieces that carry an almost "Red Cliff"-like adrenaline charge.

Though Hong Kong d.p. Peter Pau was clearly a major influence on the movie's widescreen look, the biggest surprise by far is that the helmer was Hu Mei, who made a small impression early on with "Army Nurse" and "Far From War" but then segued into commercials and TV dramas. Hu has done nothing on this scope before, though she's surrounded herself with some of the best technicians in East Asia (Pau, Hong Kong costume designer Yee Chung-man, mainland composer Zhao Jiping).

Film opens around 500 B.C., in the northern kingdom of Lu, during the end of the so-called Spring and Autumn Period and just prior to the chaotic Warring States Period. Feudal China is controlled by princes under titular kings, and Confucius (Chow), a commoner already in his 50s, is made minister of law by the Lu king so the territory can be managed under civilized principles. Chief among Confucius' band of pupils is his son, Yenhui (Ren Quan).

Confucius abolishes practices such as burying servants alive with their dead masters and adopts a boy who escaped from one such funeral. But as Lu becomes more powerful, he's eyed with suspicion by the more warlike kingdom of Qi, ruled by Duke Jing (Ma Jingwu).

Confucius, himself the son of famous warrior, proves his military know-how against a powerful Lu prince, Gongshan Niu (Chen Jianbin), and ends up leading Lu's troops against Qi's. Neatly staged first setpiece, balancing drama and spectacle as the two sides meet in a large ravine, turns into a game of bluff that Confucius wins.

Meanwhile, Lu's main ally, the weak kingdom of Wei, cozies up to Confucius in the form of Nanzi (Zhou Xun), the aged king's young consort, who unsuccessfully tries to divert the bearded sage from his principles. However, when Confucius returns to Lu from his visit to Wei, the Lu nobles move against him. Final reels, as Confucius finds himself pulled this way and that by his principles, pack quite an emotional punch.

Tightly constructed pic, which shows signs of having been edited down from a longer cut, has a pacey tempo without seeming rushed, and is immeasurably helped by Zhao's score, which smoothly binds together the shifts from scholarly discussions to scenes of war. Lean but lavish production and costume design, using the huge stages of Hengdian World Studios in Zhejiang province, color-code the various kingdoms for visual appeal without becoming as operatic as Zhang Yimou's recent costumers (set during later, lusher eras).

Chow, now in his mid-50s, gives Confucius an internal toughness that keeps him from being simply a goody two-shoes, and the Cantonese thesp is expertly revoiced by a native Mandarin speaker. Among the many supporting thespis, it's Chen who makes the biggest impression in the longest-limbed role, though the throaty Zhou, despite being in only two-and-a-bit scenes, gives Chow a real run for his money as Wei's (fictional) femme fatale.

Reported budget of 150 million yuan (\$22 million) is all up on the screen, with exteriors shot in Hebei province.

Camera (color, widescreen), Peter Pau; editor, Zhan Haihong; music, Zhao Jiping; production designers, Lin Chaoxiang, Mao Huaiqing; costume designer, Yee Chung-man; sound (Dolby Digital), Wu Jiang, Wu Ling; second unit director, Yang Jun; second unit camera, Choi Sung-fai; postproduction supervisor, Pau; visual effects supervisor, Guo Jianquan; stunt co-ordinator, Ye Qiang. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (market), Feb. 15, 2010. Running time: 115 MIN. (Mandarin dialogue)