

Redefining the Epic

China's latest big-budget drama has plenty of grit, gore and action but not a flying swordsman in sight.

By SONIA KOLESNIKOV-JESSOP

IN RECENT YEARS, CHINESE FILMMAKERS have achieved international success mainly with big-scale, sweeping historical epics, flamboyant costumes and lots of flying swordplay; think "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," "House of Flying Daggers," "Hero" and "The Promise." Back in China, however, those films fell short of blockbuster status. That's mainly because younger audiences who have grown up on all things Western

background of the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64), a large-scale civil revolt against Qing Dynasty rulers by a Christian movement that was eventually squashed with French and British help, "The Warlords" is above all a tale of military ambition, class differences and politics.

The film will likely surprise Chinese and Western audiences alike. "Some of the Chinese distributors who saw a first cut have been saying, 'But I thought it was a big-budget film?'" says Chan with a laugh. "That's because the Chinese associate big

days, Chinese cinema is increasingly tagging on Hollywood-style esthetics, with more realistic violence and action."

The gritty combat scenes in "The Warlords" are very physical and bloodily realistic—fairly violent by Chinese standards. Chan says he wanted to show the rawness of war and the "immediacy of death." Producer Andre Morgan argues that Chan has taken the production values and scale of the best Chinese cinema and married it with the photoreality of Western films, in terms of both action sequences and character development. "We want to show that Chinese filmmakers can make films that have the same realistic action that we've seen in the biggest American films, like "Saving Private Ryan" and "Braveheart," and that they don't just do Wuxia films with flying swordsmen and magic action," says Morgan.

Much is riding on the movie, which



FACING UP TO REALITY: The battle scenes have more in common with 'Saving Private Ryan' than with 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon'

consider such movies heavy on morality and light on reality.

A new Chinese big-budget film, Peter Chan's "The Warlords," is now hoping to break the mold. While the action-packed war drama has stunning cinematography, with 1,520 extras in military costumes and impressive horse-riding sequences, it doesn't rely on flashy action-choreography or colorful costumes; three quarters of the movie is shot in near monochrome, and actors wear raglike clothing. The \$40 million film, which opened across Asia last week and is set for release in Europe and the United States next year, tells the violent story of three men who have sworn brotherhood during war, but ultimately turn against one another. Set against the

budget with lavish visuals. They don't always appreciate less is more. And the film also doesn't match the Western image of what a Chinese film is because it doesn't have any of the extravagances that people have come to expect."

Chinese movies, especially historical epics, have tended to be very stylized and theatrical, a function of the way cinema grew out of Chinese opera and Wuxia literature, where heroes are seen performing impossible actions, often with a touch of magic. "Opera, martial arts and literary traditions—all these things stream right into Chinese cinema," says Kenneth Chan (no relation), author of the forthcoming book "Remade in Hollywood," about Chinese cinema and Hollywood. "But nowa-

needs a strong opening in China, as well as across the world, to recoup its budget. It will certainly help that the film stars three of Asia's hottest male actors: martial-arts superstar Jet Li, Hong Kong leading man Andy Lau and Japanese heartthrob Takeshi Kaneshiro. But using Li, China's most bankable movie star, without showing any of the high-flying fighting style he's famous for, could prove disconcerting to Western audiences. "Ironically, the more international you want the film market to be, the more 'Chinese' [the film] should be," says Chan. "People are used to watching martial-arts films, and that's what they expect to see." But "The Warlords" is poised to give audiences a whole new perspective. ■