

## Yellow River Fighter (1988)

**Genre:** Action, Historical, Swordplay

**Director:** Cheung Yam Yim

**Origin:** Hong Kong

**Length:** 95 min

**Action Dir:** Yue Sing Wai, Yue Hoi

**Rated:** NR - Contains strong violence (some gore).

**Cast:** Yue Sing Wai (Ma Yi), Yue Hoi (Shaolin Abbot), Woo Gin Keung, Gai Chun Wa, Suen Gin Fook, Lau Wai Leung, Maan King, Ting Ji Saan Saan, Gan Tak Mau, Chiu Chi Gong

**Synopsis:** As ruthless warlords attempt to wrest control of China from the hands of the ambitious king, a noble swordsman driven by despair and a desire for revenge emerges to fight for the common people caught up in the struggle.



Distributor	Format	Aspect Ratio	Languages
World Video/CAV	DVD, Region 0, NTSC	Letterbox, approx. 1.85:1	Chinese & English w/ no subtitles
Video	Audio	Extras	Final Score
★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆

The color and clarity is excellent, but there is some white speckling and the disc was authored with the image slightly offset to the right, leaving a thin black border on the left. English, Cantonese, & Mandarin audio tracks are presented in Dolby Digital Mono. Unfortunately, there are no subtitles available. There are several brief chapter pauses. Extras include a trailer, plus director and actor filmographies. The back cover of the disc incorrectly states that the DVD contains biographies.

**Yellow River Fighter** is the sort of epic martial arts film that rarely sees the light of day, unless you're in mainland China and even then it's all too infrequent. Just as Tsui Hark was gearing up to dazzle Hong Kong audiences with more fantastic wire-fu spectacles like **The Swordsman** (1990), the director of Jet Li's first two mainland films, Cheung Yam Yim (**Shaolin Temple**, **Kids from Shaolin**) fired off this moderately large scale production with many of the same actors.

In an outstanding performance, Yue Sing Wai plays peerless swordsman Ma Yi, a tortured soul who has lost his young daughter during a raid on his village by a neighboring warlord. While attempting to get his revenge, Ma Yi inadvertently saves the life of the provincial king who is working to unite all of China under one banner. Ma Yi retreats into obscurity, drinking himself into oblivion until a foppish young street performer named Chi Cheng joins him. A failed attempt by a warlord to poison the swordsman in order to keep him out of enemy's hands leaves Ma Yi partially blind. The king finally catches up with Ma Yi and rewards him for saving his life earlier by offering gold and a cozy position by his side. Ma Yi is swayed by the king's desire to unite the country and volunteers to deliver a challenge to one of the warlords. The trip is a disaster. Ma Yi and Chi Cheng barely escape the warlord's fortress with their lives before being beaten by refugees who blame them for the wars, which have displaced and killed their people.

Ma Yi returns disillusioned and leaves the king's side to open his own sword school. At this time he saves the life of a woman who turns out to be the third warlord's daughter. As part of a brilliantly

twisted plan to get rid of his enemies in one fell swoop, the king convinces Ma Yi to escort the woman back to her father in order to avert another war. When the woman appears to have been killed, this trip also falls apart as Ma Yi is forced to kill the warlord who lashes out in anger. Convicted of murder, Ma Yi now faces execution at the hands of the king, but his friends make a final effort to save him.

The sets, costumes, and scale of the film matches the sweeping story while the desolate landscapes of Northern China provide a fitting backdrop for its violent and bittersweet outcome. The film opens with a massive battle set before a real ancient fortress. Although adorned in bulky armor, soldiers twirl about in the wushu tradition wielding ribbed iron swords and spears. Cheung veers away from authenticity to portray stunning sword duels, but wirework and trick camerawork is either absent or kept to a minimum. In fact, the feel of the film is more akin to classical samurai films where the drama and characterizations drive the action, rather than the opposite, which is common in Hong Kong films.

Another parallel to Japanese cinema can be found in the film's lead, Yue Sing Wai. He's a Chinese variant of Toshiro Mifune who bristles with charisma and raw intensity. Add to that his weather-beaten and chiseled features which automatically lends him a stoic authority to make this role believable. Now let's talk about his skills with a sword which some may recall from his supporting role in Jet Li's **Kids from Shaolin** (1984) where he plays a Wu Dang sword master. It's very impressive stuff to say the least. Whether he's performing a drunken style while lamenting his daughter's loss or battling the equally talented Gai Chun Wa with nothing more than a stick, it's potent viewing. Of course, his choreography along with Yue Hoi's, who plays the Shaolin Abbot is what sells the action. These two men are unsung heroes of Chinese cinema who never had the wide exposure their Hong Kong counterparts did in the West. While easily being responsible for creating some of the best martial arts cinema mainland China has had to offer, they continually rose the bar on the quality of the genre and this film is no exception.

Anyone who enjoys grandiose martial arts cinema with a more dramatic flavor such as **Deadend of Besiegers** (1992) or **The South Shaolin Master** (1984) will no doubt enjoy this film. The production values, story and acting are tops, although I will say that the character Chi Cheung and his constant "boy howdy" attitude becomes annoying which is only amplified by the English dubber's obnoxious voiceover. Yet, that's a small gripe considering just how entertaining the film is overall. **Yellow River Fighter** is definitely worth spending an hour and thirty-five minutes of your life on. Reviewed by Mark Pollard / Kungfucinema.com