

# Film Analysis of *The Assassin* (2015)

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## Abstract:

Directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, *The Assassin* redefines its conventions through an innovative treatment of time and pacing. Set during the Tang Dynasty, the film departs from traditional wuxia tropes by focusing on themes of emotion, solitude, and moral introspection, rather than relying on action-driven narratives. Its deliberate pacing, sparse dialogue, and exquisite cinematography craft a meditative atmosphere that underscores the protagonist's inner turmoil and feminist awakening. This analysis emphasizes the film's distinctive visual storytelling, which integrates Taoist principles and a philosophy of non-violence. Its historical authenticity, combined with the use of 35 mm film, immerses viewers in the rich cultural fabric of the Tang Dynasty. The character of Nie Yinniang serves as a lens through which the film critiques gender roles and patriarchal norms. Her refusal to engage in violence becomes a poignant expression of moral integrity and personal agency. Through a seamless fusion of cinematic realism, socio-cultural critique, and symbolic visual language, *The Assassin* transcends the boundaries of the martial arts genre. It offers a profound exploration of identity, morality, and the complexities of the human condition, elevating wuxia cinema to new artistic heights.

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## Keywords:

Cinematic realism  
Feminism  
Martial arts choreography  
Hou Hsiao-hsien

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**Online publication:** February 26, 2025

## 1. Introduction

*The Assassin* is a striking work in the martial arts film genre. Set in 9th-century China during the Tang Dynasty, the film tells the story of an assassin who finally gives up being an assassin. This film challenges the traditional martial arts paradigm, questions the stereotype of traditional martial arts films, and leads the audience on a fascinating trip to explore the substance of

homicide. The film pushes the boundaries of traditional martial arts films by probing unknown areas. In contrast to traditional martial arts films that emphasize the seriousness of fighting, *The Assassin* shifts its focus to emotion and loneliness, which deeply attracts the audience. Director Hou Hsiao-sien deliberately avoids the typical conventions of martial arts films, delving into the loneliness embedded in the protagonist's heart and

breaking away from established martial arts film routines. However, the innovation of the movie does not stop there. Through highly stylized cinematography techniques, sophisticated and meticulously recreated historical scenes, and characters adorned in gorgeous costumes, *The Assassin* immerses the audience in a world rich in cultural differences and distinct styles. Director Hou Hsiao-sien transcends the constraints of time, using deliberate and extended shots to craft a narrative that goes beyond the passage of time. Through these methods, intricate combat scenes and passionate moments are presented more deeply, providing strong support for the theme of the movie. In addition, it challenges the audience's thinking and transports them into a realm of art, allowing for intricate narratives, ingenious visual elements, and reflections on societal reality. This film offers valuable insight into the social and artistic environment of the Tang Dynasty, combining the ideas of Daoist culture to interpret the theme, especially its commentary on gender roles. This essay will explore how *The Assassin* is a compelling and unique martial arts film based on historical and cultural Daoist contexts, using cinematic narrative techniques and a gendered exploration of feminism.

## 2. Film analysis

First of all, the most notable feature of this film is that it subverts the conventions of previous martial arts films by presenting a style of martial arts film that does not merely portray martial arts action but goes deeper into portraying the heart. Unlike the passionate and fast-paced approach of previous martial arts films, stillness and slowness immerse the viewer in the story; the fight scenes are realistic but do not constitute a narrative. The *Assassin's* scenes use slow-motion which is indeed more emotional and fuller of impact. Every frame showcases delicate action and beautiful compositions. Slow-motion photography plays a crucial role in expressing emotions and narrative style in films, extending and deepening the audience's emotional experience of key scenes<sup>[1]</sup>. These thoughtfully paced moments intensify the emotional impact of crucial scenes. In a pivotal combat sequence, slow motion is used to emphasize the precision and grace of Nie Yinniang's martial arts skills, allowing the

audience to savor every fluid movement. This technique not only enhances the action but also adds depth to the character and her inner turmoil. In a quiet moment by a tranquil river, Nie Yinniang reflects on her inner turmoil. The camera captures her contemplative gaze as she watches a leaf float downstream. The slow, graceful movement of the leaf mirrors her inner conflict, and the scene is suffused with a sense of melancholy and longing. From the perspective of visual elements, the film transports the viewer into the narrative of the theme of loneliness through the use of long, slow, and empty shots, capturing the characters or landscapes as they are and portraying them as they are. *The Assassin* uses this component effectively, employing slow motion to enhance even the smallest gestures and facial expressions. For illustration, in the quiet scene where Nie Yinniang is planning on falling flowers, time seems to decelerate, allowing the audience to witness her meditative state. In this case, the use of slow motion not only extends the moment but delves into the inner feelings of the characters, creating a profound connection between the audience and the unfolding story. In action shots, the movie can start with the whirlwind, dynamic movements of the action image and then seamlessly switch to slow motion, thus extending the action time and allowing the audience to appreciate the artistry contained in the martial arts choreography.

However, director Hou Hsiao-hsien and photographer Li Pingbin paid great attention to the composition and framing of *The Assassin*. The most notable feature is that the director uses different forms of shading to portray Nie Yinniang's identity as an assassin. She is often hidden above the beams of the room to observe the arguments between the politicians, and the director employs overhead shots to present the assassin's viewpoint of the observed. Moreover, the most striking scene is the one in which Tian Jian and Hu Ji are talking in a room. Nie Yinniang is covered by a veil, and her blurred vision reveals the mystery of surveillance. The camera directly shows the assassin's perspective of watching and being watched. This perspective highlights the image of Nie Yinniang's character identity, she is the hidden and lonely assassin with no kindred spirits.

In fact, the film was shot on 35 mm film by a photographer, a fan of Chinese landscape paintings, who

refused to shoot digitally. It was set in China's Hubei Province to give the film an authentic and breathtaking view of the Tang Dynasty. This is apparent in the way wide-side lenses are used to capture the vast landscape, showcasing both the natural beauty of the terrain and the isolation and loneliness of the characters within their surroundings. A shot of Nie Yinniang standing alone on a towering mountain is an important illustration of this style, eliciting a deep sense of caution and loneliness, effectively featuring the film's core theme of emotional isolation. Hou Hsiao-hsien's cinematic style resonates with Bazin's notion of cinematic realism, which favors the use of long shots and long takes to preserve uninterrupted reality. These extended scenes encourage the viewer to become completely immersed in the characters' world rather than taking a direct position in the plot. As mentioned before, the candlelit discussion between Nie Yinniang and Tian Jian is a great illustration of how a long shot can intensify the emotional depth of a personal decision. As the film draws to a close, the nun and Nie Yinniang are atop a towering peak, and the natural aesthetics of time are brought into full view as time passes and clouds gradually cover the peak. Such visual language embodies the loneliness and stillness of the characters' image and echoes the loneliness of the theme. The film's daring use of long, fixed shots for extended periods achieves the ultimate in silence, placing all the visual emphasis on the image, which is significant in presenting the story's themes. Using techniques such as slow motion and long shots, *The Assassin* reaches the pinnacle of movie art and provides a profound and immersive viewing experience. These strategies disrupt the true course of events and allow observers to reflect on introspective moments, emotional connection, and pure beauty and its capability to tap into the inner studies of its characters.

The *Assassin* relies on carefully crafted visuals, combined with minimal dialogue, to convey the characters' emotions and the progression of the story. This visual storytelling approach creates a sense of immersion and allows the audience to interpret the characters' feelings and motivations through their expressions and movements. What's noticeable is that the film is quiet and spare, with visuals, editing, and the real, natural, non-diegetic sound being more valuable than language, which

plays a more significant role in this film's storytelling. According to Confucius, "Music was key in cultivating the individual and bringing good governance to the state"<sup>[2]</sup>. This film maximally simplifies the plot and lines, focusing on the camera to present the characters' inner selves. The streamlining of language serves as a good representation in highlighting Nie Yinniang's character. There are only a few lines in the whole film, and language is only used to express meaningful things or to respond meaningfully to others about her inner world. The audience can obtain key information through a small amount of content. When Nie Yinniang tells the fable of the Green Luan Bird, she breaks the silence, and the softness and vulnerability of her character are completely revealed. It is this condensation and rarity of language that makes every spoken word more precious and powerful, making it irresistible for the audience to listen and realize the true emotions of the character's heart. However, the use of *Guwen* (Classical Chinese) places the character in a historical context, but it also brings with it the same limitation of linguistic expression. The vocabulary of 'Guwen' is small, making it difficult to express the film's rich and subtle emotional details. The overly condensed lines make the storyline lack complex linguistic explanations and dramatic narratives to tell the audience why Nie Yinniang is deeply moved by the general's son and thus decides to give up the assassination mission. To the audience, the restoration of the ancient language is obscure and difficult to understand, but it is exactly the realist film effect that director Hou Hsiao-hsien wanted to present, where the heaviness of history and the history and culture of ancient China are shown through the language of the times.

Also, *The Assassin* offers a refined disquisition on gender roles, a theme that resonates explosively with its feminist standpoint. In a society where Confucianism and traditional patriarchal morals dominate, the movie introduces us to Nie Yinniang, a heroine who defies convention. She's a redoubtable martial artist, an assassin, and a complex character grappling with questions of identity and purpose in a world dominated by men. As a feminist martial arts film, the movie is essentially about a failed assassination mission, and the director reflects on killing through female heroism. The film does not advocate violence but rather articulates a noble respect for

life and nature through Nie Yinniang's struggle between domestic hatred and human morality. Nie Yinniang's journey is an important commentary on the awakening of gender consciousness and subjectivity. Her fight is truly surprising and demonstrates the perseverance of women in the face of all persuasion in a society that's invariably defined by regulations. Nie Yinniang defies Confucian filial piety by refusing to kneel to her parents, challenges loyalty by refusing to kill, rejects patriarchal ideology and political violence, and liberates herself from moral and human norms, representing a strong feminist value of non-violence. Her refusal to kill as an assassin is the originality and uniqueness of this film. The Assassin dealt a heavy blow to traditional gender concepts and made people start to re-evaluate the role of women. Indeed, she has no weakness when it comes to fighting and force, but when her mother talks about all the stories from the past, Nie Yinniang hides her face and cries. She doesn't want to expose her vulnerability to the world, her soft and delicate heart contrasts with her tough exterior. Let's take a look at a scene from the movie where Nie Yinniang walks alone into the distance that she under the shade of the mountains and the trees. It precisely tells us how important women's presence is. This poignant moment is a visual representation of her journey of self-discovery, reflecting the nebulous and inflexible nature of society's expectations. The light at the end of the shade symbolizes inquiry and self-reflection, which is the direction she pursues. The women in the film are captive to political power, yet Nie Yinniang does not fall victim to politics and the like. An assassin's identity eventually gives up being an assassin. She is not a tool for killing, she only kills people she thinks are bad, demonstrating a clear sense of subjectivity. In the face of the father who plays with his young son, the husband and wife love Tian Jian, she chose to give up the mission. However, the assassin is not allowed to have emotions, which is contrary to her identity, so in the end, she chooses to leave. She sees the human feelings in the world, which is the kernel belonging to the heart of this character and where the story tension of the film lies, exploring the construction of female subject consciousness through the soft and warm image of a woman in the guise of an assassin.

Furthermore, a discussion of *The Assassin* reveals a deep connection between the film and its socio-

cultural environment, a connection that greatly enriches its narrative. In doing so, it encourages us to consider the significance of these themes in the modern world and highlights the power of film in bridging the gap between history and reality. By immersing itself in the vibrancy of Tang Dynasty culture, embracing Daoist teachings, questioning traditional gender roles, and advocating a feminist standpoint, the movie holds a mirror to the complexities of a bygone era. During this era, Daoism wasn't merely a philosophical doctrine but also a state religion, permeating every facet of society. The Assassin masterfully captures this by weaving Daoist elements into its narrative. Its imagery echoes that of Chinese visual presentations dating from the Tang Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty<sup>[3]</sup>. The director refused to use special effects for the religious theological scenes, such as the smoke of witchcraft, and the cinematographer, drawing on the oriental aesthetics of Chinese landscape paintings, set the film in the real Chinese mountains and fields. Most of the empty shots present the beauty of the scenery, and the Daoist culture of tranquillity and nature complement each other. More specifically, the Daoist concept of "wu-wei" (non-action) resonates throughout the film, underscoring the importance of aligning with the natural order. The serene mountain settings, where Nie Yinniang hones her martial skills and contemplates her actions, are imbued with Daoist ideals of purity, harmony, and spiritual enlightenment. The concept of "jianghu" (literally 'rivers and lakes') and the characteristics of different martial arts skills portrayed in wuxia cinema also play a role<sup>[4]</sup>. Through a scrupulous reconstruction of the Tang Dynasty, the movie offers a window into a bygone period, prompting reflection on the contemporary applicability of literal themes. It delves into the Daoist ethos that permeated this period, emphasizing the significance of incorporeal chastity and alignment with the natural order. It is also worth mentioning that the film is more about showing the inner activities of the characters through hints. Political metaphors are buried under the art form, and political struggles are undercurrents. The film's ancient setting of China's Tang Dynasty, a distant historical period, avoids the sharp edges of modern political sensitivity. However, it is still not difficult to see that the pull of the clans and the centralized power symbolize the delicate relationship between mainland

China and Taiwan. Nie Yinniang chose to leave and stay out of the political fray, and the director is also articulating his artistic and political stance through the film.

### 3. Conclusion

In summary, *The Assassin* stands out as an innovative film that not only mesmerizes viewers with its stunning visual style and technological advancements but also delves into its sociocultural implications. Director Hou Hsiao-hsien and cinematographer Mark Lee Ping Bin's meticulous approach to cinematography effectively transports the audience to the era of the Tang Dynasty. The use of wide shots to capture the magnificence of landscapes, the intentional employment of slow motion to enhance emotional impact, and the reliance on visual storytelling with minimal dialogue all contribute to the movie's immersive visual experience. Nie Yinniang's

female self-awareness highlights the theme of non-violence and portrays a unique female warrior. The film's technological advancements, encompassing its cinematographic techniques and integration of Daoist symbolism, exemplify its commitment to pushing the boundaries of cinematic art. These elements strengthen the film's primary claim that cinematography can serve as a powerful narrative tool that surpasses the limitations of traditional martial arts cinema. Finally, *The Assassin* is an extraordinary film that transcends limitations and expostulates convention. Its visual aesthetics, technological innovations, and socio-artistic connotations provide movie enthusiasts with a daedal frame to interpret. As we bid farewell to this mesmerizing cinematic odyssey, we can't help but recall that the movie's impact extends beyond narrative capabilities to carry its ability to inspire study, drive change, and establish a continuing presence in the social environment.

#### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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