

# *The Assassin*

Hou Hsiao-hsien's World of Tang China

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# Introduction

Peng Hsiao-yen

Hou Hsiao-hsien's 侯孝賢 *Cike nie yinniang* 刺客聶隱娘 (The Assassin), representing the world of Tang China, finally came out in 2015, eight years after his previous feature film, *Le voyage du ballon rouge* 紅氣球 (Flight of the Red Balloon, 2007).<sup>1</sup> Because it was his first film after such a long break, his anxious fans already had the highest expectations. On top of that, it was his first attempt at the *wuxia* 武俠 (martial arts) genre. What and how could he, as an internationally celebrated *auteur*, contribute to this commercial genre marked by fighting and action, which so many top-notch Chinese-language directors have helped to define? The Hong Kong and Taiwan director King Hu's (Hu Jinquan 胡金銓) three *wuxia* film classics immediately come to mind: *Da zuixia* 大醉俠 (Come Drink with Me, 1966), *Longmen kezhan* 龍門客棧 (Dragon Gate Inn, 1967), and *Xianü* 俠女 (A Touch of Zen, 1971). Three decades later Ang Lee's 李安 *Wohu canglong* 臥虎藏龍 (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, 2000) revived the genre, brought the fighting action sequences to a new level and won for Taiwan the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Then the Chinese director Zhang Yimou's 張藝謀 *Yingxiong* 英雄 (Hero, 2002), with its fantastic swoops and dance-like fights, earned Best Cinematography, Best Art Director, and Best Action Choreography in various international film festivals. Certainly, one also has to mention the Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai's 王家衛 *Yidai zongshi* 一代宗師 (The Grandmaster, 2013), which likewise showcased splendid martial arts stunts and won the Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Cinematography, and other awards at the Fiftieth Golden Horse Film Festival. Why is the *wuxia* film such a revisited genre by these leading *auteurs*, and what are its attractions to them?

That so many *auteurs* have tried their hands at the *wuxia* genre is something worth pondering over. The superhuman stunts that can transform into aesthetic splendor on the screen are certainly an irresistible allure as well as a challenge to *mise-en-scène*.

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1. Since 2007 Hou has made two shorts, "Dianji guan" 電姬館 (The Electric Princess House), a three-minute short as part of *Chacun son cinéma: Une déclaration d'amour au grand écran* (To Each His Own Cinema: A Declaration of Love to the Big Screen, 2007), and a five-minute short, "La belle époque" 黃金之弦 (The Golden Era), as part of *10+10* (2012). *To Each His Own Cinema* is an anthology film made by thirty-six directors from twenty-five countries on five continents to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Cannes Film Festival in 2007 (*Chacun son cinéma 2007*). *10+10* is a collection of Taiwanese shorts produced by the Golden Horse Film Festival as part of the Panorama Special at the 2012 Berlin Film Festival (Mintzer 2012).

According to Ang Lee, the attraction of the genre for him is that, in contrast to the real world, it is an abstract world set in ancient China where he can “represent and externalize the myriad internal emotions and choreograph dance-like action sequences; the genre is a form of cinematic expression that is wildly free” (Zhang 2002, 269). In addition, the fantastic elements of the genre seem most likely to appeal to a global audience, as can be testified by the worldwide box office successes of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hero*, and *The Grandmaster*. What is more intriguing is probably, however, the infinite possibilities to rewrite the official historical narrative and to relate it to present-day politics. The imaginary world of *jianghu* 江湖 (the underworld, literally “rivers and lakes”), in parallel to the mundane political system, provides an arena for the creative imagination to run with free rein. In *Hero*, should the assassin spare the life of the first emperor of Qin, a dire despot who might be the only one able to reunite the country and keep the peace? The situation certainly calls to mind contemporary China, in which the despotic leadership has brought about decades-long wealth and power unseen since the late nineteenth century. And then, of course, there is the challenge to rewrite the genre. For Ang Lee, *xia* 俠, the knight-errant, is defined by compassion (*qing* 情) and justice (*yi* 義) as well as swordsmanship. With *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* he intends to create “a *wuxia* film with humanistic atmosphere,” where the real emotions and dreams of the scholar-warrior and beautiful swordswomen go far beyond mere sensory stimuli. For him, the *wuxia* film, as the best conduit to understanding Chinese culture, warrants repeated revival (Zhang 2002, 269–70).

What unusual martial arts splendor can we expect from a Hou Hsiao-hsien *wuxia* film? However diverse our opinions are, everyone would agree that since its release at the Sixty-Eighth Cannes Film Festival, *The Assassin* has aroused an unusually polarized reception. Winning the Best Director and Soundtrack awards at Cannes, it moved on to garner awards at the Fifty-Second Golden Horse Festival for Best Feature Film, Best Director, Best Cinematography, Best Costume Design, and Best Sound Effects. Audiences worldwide marvel at the breathtaking beauty of the film, agreeing that it is one of the most beautiful films ever made. While devoted fans are much relieved that Hou Hsiao-hsien is still himself even when making a *wuxia* film, general moviegoers complain about difficulty understanding the story. In addition, the pervasive quiet and slowness of the film seem to be without action at all, distinct from the usual *wuxia* films, which are boisterous and replete with fast, fantastic movements and flying stunts. How does one approach a *wuxia* film that seems to be in every way contrary to its genre expectations? What aspects of Tang China does the film emphasize? Does the film tell a story that is causally linked? If so, how does it tell it? In what way does the film stick to and depart from the original Tang *chuanqi* story and other source texts? How are the picture-perfect landscape shots and subtly veiled scenes connected to the content of the film? How do the much-lauded soundtrack devices reinforce or disrupt our viewing experiences? In depicting a swordswoman who eventually refrains from killing, does the film intend to rewrite the meaning of swordsmanship and, thus, rework the *wuxia* film genre? Or does the film, with its compassionate female



protagonist, serene scenery, and electronic music full of sounds of nature and the materiality of the mid-Tang world, intentionally call attention to traditional philosophical thinking such as Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism? These are the various issues the contributors to this volume address to help viewers understand the film.

## The Plot of the Film

Set in Tang China in the ninth century, the film does tell a story, and an intriguing one at that. It would be easier if one follows the story along with the Character Chart, Chronicle, Map, and Map Notes in this book. Instead of telling the story in medias res as the film does, let's start from the beginning. Princess Jiacheng 嘉誠公主 of the Tang court was married to Tian Xu 田緒, governor of the militarized province Weibo 魏博, in order to keep the peace with an unruly border power. Later, for the sake of political stability, she adopted Tian Ji'an 田季安, her husband's child born of a concubine, as her own son. Under Princess Jiacheng's arrangement he was betrothed to Nie Yinniang 聶隱娘 (called Yaoqi 窈七 as a child), the daughter of Nie Feng 聶峰, a general of Weibo, and Lady Nie-Tian 聶田氏, her lady-in-waiting. Then Yuan Yi 元諲, governor of Luozhou 洛州, defected to Weibo with his army and subjects under his protection. To seal ties with Yuan Yi, Princess Jiacheng arranged for Ji'an to marry his daughter, who would become Lady Tian-Yuan 田元氏, while Yinniang, now at the age of ten, was taken away by the Nun-Princess Jiaxin 嘉信公主, Princess Jiacheng's twin sister, to avoid conflict. She was trained by the nun-master in the mountains as a professional assassin to kill traitors and corrupt officials. Thirteen years later after concluding her training (as depicted in the prologue of the film), Yinniang returned home with the assignment to kill the rebellious Ji'an, her cousin and childhood sweetheart. The movie begins at this point.

While Yinniang clandestinely observes Ji'an as the drama unravels in his court and family, she comes to the rescue of people caught in the pervasive political wranglings. Her uncle Tian Xing 田興, who offends Ji'an because of his loyalty to the Tang court, is sent into exile. On the way, he is attacked by a group of assassins sent by Lady Tian-Yuan. When he is about to be buried alive, a mirror-polisher who happens to witness the crime endeavors to rescue him. As the rescuer's own life is threatened, Yinniang suddenly appears and saves both him and her uncle. Then, Lady Tian-Yuan, disguised as Jingjing'er 精精兒, has two fighting encounters with Yinniang in the woods. After Yinniang wins the fight but is injured in the second encounter, the mirror-polisher treats her wound with great care. In the meantime, Jingjing'er conspires with her master, Konkong'er 空空兒, to use magic to do harm to the pregnant Hu Ji 瑚姬 (literally "Sogdian girl"), Ji'an's beloved concubine, because the future child may threaten her own son's status as heir apparent. In the nick of time Yinniang comes forward to rescue Hu Ji and informs Ji'an of her pregnancy. He immediately has Konkong'er executed and would have killed his wife with his own sword but for their three children present at the scene. At the end Yinniang goes back to the mountains to bid farewell to her

nun-master, telling her that she will not kill Ji'an, because with a young heir apparent Weibo would be thrown into chaos if he were killed. Then Yinniang goes away with the mirror-polisher, who has apparently won her heart, to Silla (Xinluo 新羅 57 BC–AD 935; see Map and Map Notes: Silla), one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea.

### The Tang Dynasty and Sogdian Culture

The film is adapted from a *chuanqi* 傳奇 (tale of the supernatural and the fantastic) written by Pei Xing 裴鏘 (fl. 860), a writer and politician of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Readers can refer to the original *chuanqi* story and its English translation by Pedro Acosta included as Appendixes. Hou's adaptation retains only the first half of the original, from Yinniang's kidnapping in Weibo by the Buddhist nun up to the point she returns home as a trained assassin and then meets with the mirror-polisher. In the other half, which is not included in the film, she leaves with him as a married couple on a mission planned by the Weibo governor to assassinate Liu Changyi 劉昌裔 (752–813), the governor of the prefectures of Chen and Xu 陳許 (today's central Henan). But she turns around to safeguard him against two following assassination attempts by Kongkong'er and Jingjing'er resorting to sorcery (Pei [ninth century] 1987). When Liu is later called to serve in the capital, Yinniang sets out on her own, leaving her husband behind. As Hou divulges in a July 2015 interview (translated by Christopher Lupke as Chapter 1), he decided to drop the second half of the original story because it is impossible to represent the magical fight scenes on the screen (Yang, Hou, and Xie 2015, 35). Chapter 3 by Yuan-ju Liu and Peng Hsiao-yen provides a detailed discussion of the transformation from the original Tang tale to a Qing poetic drama and then to the film.

In addition to the Tang tale, the film combines various other sources, including historical documents and genre paintings: (1) Liu Xu's 劉昫 (887–946) *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (The Old History of Tang, 945), a Five Dynasties (907–979) work; (2) Ouyang Xiu's 歐陽修 *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (The New History of Tang, 1060), a Northern-Song (960–1127) work; (3) the episode of the bluebird (*qingluan* 青鸞) dancing to the mirror in volume 3 of Liu Jingshu's 劉敬叔 (fl. 420–479) *Yiyuan* 異苑 (The Exotic Animal Garden); (4) Tang and Five Dynasties ladies' portraits and landscape paintings, which inspired the visuality and art design of the film. The result is a Tang-dynasty story of Hou's own invention, as Xie Haimeng discloses in the interview in Chapter 1 (Yang, Hou, and Xie 2015, 36).<sup>2</sup> All these source texts are carefully and repeatedly examined in this book, creating an intersection of ideas from the viewpoints of various academic disciplines, including Tang history, classical literature, and art history. While the bluebird episode—crucial to our understanding of the female

2. According to Xie Haimeng, when she first joined the script team, Zhu Tian-wen showed her the story that Hou Hsiao-hsien himself had written down after examining *Jiu Tangshu* and *Xin Tangshu*.

protagonist—is a recurrent leitmotif in the chapters, each time it is analyzed, more meanings are unraveled.

In Hou's film, the female protagonist becomes a modern character suffering from unrequited love and torn between ethical choices in a much more complicated plotline than that of the original Tang tale. However, the film does entrench its story in Tang history while trying to reproduce meticulously the everyday reality of the Tang world—not only what it looked like but also what it sounded like. In addition to the spectacular costumes and the visual splendor of interior decor and serene landscapes, the film uses its extraordinary electronic music to reinvent both the natural and manmade sounds of Tang life. It has recreated a Tang China of mixed Han and non-Han culture, full of the sounds of ordinary life and merriment as well as assassinations and war.

The period depicted in the film was both the golden age of cultural and economic flourishing and a time of sociopolitical unrest in Tang China, full of stories about knights-errant seeking patronage from one lord to another. The Tang also saw Sogdian traders coming from Sogdiana (see Map and Map Notes: Sogdiana) through the Silk Road to roam its cities and towns or settle as émigrés. They were intermediaries between Central Asia (see Map and Map Notes: Central Asia) and the Tang court in Chang'an 長安 (modern Xi'an 西安; see Map: Chang'an), acting as diplomats; many enlisted in the Tang army. The Sogdian populations spread from the Northwest of China to the Northeast, where Weibo (approximately south of Hebei 河北 and north of Shandong 山東) was located (see Map and Map Notes: Weibo). Sogdian culture was therefore a prominent presence during the Tang. But keeping the foreign generals in line was an increasingly troublesome task for the court. The outcome was the famous rebellion of the Turkic-Sogdian general An Lushan (Rokhshan 安祿山, 703–757), which lasted from 755 to 763 and eventually severely weakened the imperial power (see Map Notes).<sup>3</sup> Later Sogdians became mixed with the Chinese populations because China abandoned its Central Asian empire after the rebellion, cutting off their connections with Central Asia (La Vaissière 2009, 77).

In the meantime, education promoting a common Chinese cultural identity was reinforced by standardizing the Confucian canon as state orthodoxy and by consolidating the civil service examinations. As a result, even the offspring of non-Han elites, who used to be high-ranking members of the military, needed to pass the examination to be appointed officials. Although foreign trade continued to thrive after the rebellion, bringing increasing numbers of Arabs and Persians to Chinese coastal ports, the apex of Chinese cosmopolitanism gradually came to an end (Holcombe 2011).

3. According to Dunhuang scholars Susan Whitfield and Étienne de la Vaissière, from the fifth to the eighth century Sogdians came from Central Asia to China in abundance. The Sogdian language belongs to a north-eastern group of the Iranian languages. The Chinese conquest of Central Asia from 640 on brought more Sogdian traders and emigrants to China. Gradually, some enlisted in the Tang army. The famous foreign general An Lushan was a favorite of Emperor Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (685–762) and adopted as son by his consort Lady Yang (Yang Guifei 楊貴妃, 719–756). The alleged incestuous relationship between An Lushan and Lady Yang aroused great controversy (Whitfield 1999, 79). His subsequent rebellion brought about the doom of Xuanzong's rule.

According to Marc S. Abramson, the Tang as an initially “self-conscious multiethnic empire united by a heterogeneous Chinese culture” gradually evolved into a “self-consciously mono-ethnic empire united by a significantly more homogenous Chinese culture” by its end in 907 (Abramson 2008, xi). The Tang began its golden age in the seventh century with ethnic and cultural diversity that culminated in the expansion of its territories aided by foreign militaries (see Map Notes) but ended as an effete empire with gradually increasing Han Chinese homogeneity.

Pei Xing’s *chuanqi* “Nie Yinniang” depicts the post-An Lushan Rebellion Tang world still marked by ethnic and cultural hybridity. In the *chuanqi*, the sorcerous fights carried out by Nie Yinniang, Jingjing’er, and Kongkong’er imply the supposedly Sogdian supernatural power that piqued the Chinese imagination. Although in Hou’s movie the magical fights are not included, we nevertheless see a Sogdian-looking Kongkong’er (played by Jacques Picoux) with deep-set eyes and a high, aquiline nose (Abramson 2008, 83–107), who casts spells over a paper doll, intending to kill Hu Ji with her child. The filmic depiction of Kongkong’er as an esoteric monk from the Western Regions 西域 (see Map and Map Notes: Hexi Corridor) resorting to magical powers refers to the prevalence of Vajrayāna Buddhism 密教, or Tantrism, during the Tang dynasty (see Chapter 3 by Yuan-ju Liu and Peng Hsiao-yen). In Hou’s film Yinniang’s nun-master categorically distinguishes the two cultures: those who resort to sorcery follow the Evil Way (*xiedao* 邪道), while she herself, refraining from such practices, follows the Righteous Way (*zhengdao* 正道). But does her so-called Righteous Way give her the supreme power to decide who should live and who should be punished by death? That is the ethical issue Hou’s Yinniang faces.

Sogdian culture also contributed to raising women’s status in Tang China. Unlike a woman in pre- and post-Tang societies, who obeyed first her father, then her husband, and finally her son in due course, women during the Tang dynasty enjoyed unprecedented freedom. It was legal for an adult woman to choose her own spouse, and a wife was allowed to divorce her husband on grounds of illness, poverty, failure to get along with the husband, or mutual consent. A divorced or widowed woman was allowed to remarry (Duan 2000, 103–16).<sup>4</sup> In Pei Xing’s *chuanqi*, the minute Nie Yinniang sees the mirror-polisher, she declares to her father that she will take him as her husband, while the old man willingly complies with a handsome dowry for her. On top of that, as a swordswoman, she is free to come and go, and she chooses her own patron as she does her husband without blinking an eye—indeed a carefree woman.

Hou’s Yinniang, although sharing some traits with the original *chuanqi* character, is a different person. Indeed, in Hou’s film we see Yinniang always making choices of

4. The loosening of ethical codes concerning marriage can be witnessed by the practice in the Tang court. Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (625–705), Emperor Gaozong’s 高宗 consort, used to be his father’s concubine, while Lady Yang, Emperor Xuanzong’s consort, had been his son’s concubine. It is well known that Empress Wu Zetian openly kept gigolos in her palace, while one-third of the princesses of the early Tang married twice or three times. In addition, Tang women, including nobles and commoners, were allowed to appear freely in public and participate in outdoor sports, while it was common for court ladies to be involved in political maneuverings (Duan 2000, 116–30).

her own. She repeatedly refrains from killing despite her nun-master's decree to kill; she chooses to save the weak whose lives are in jeopardy; she bares her shoulder for the mirror-polisher to treat her wound, with her father watching them attentively, perhaps disapprovingly; and eventually she decides to go away with her confidant to a foreign land. She takes responsibility for her own actions instead of following orders. In every way Hou's Yinniang is a woman who endeavors to maintain her freedom of movement and free will. However, unlike the carefree, boisterous heroine in the original *chuanqi* story, Hou's Yinniang is depicted as a woman suffering from tremendous psychological problems and moral constraints. The dramatic tension created between constraints and free choices in Hou's film is unmatched by both the original Tang *chuanqi* and its Qing poetic drama adaptation, as analyzed in Chapter 3. The reader can find more about this topic in Chapters 1 and 4 as well.

To Hou Hsiao-hsien, even though he is making a *wuxia* film, it is human nature rather than the spectacular fight sequences that interests him. It is as much a film of human drama as a period film. It is true that the film takes great pains to achieve verisimilitude with the Tang era: the much-researched costumes; wooden palaces resounding with footsteps; the *guqin* 古琴 (ancient-style zither) music recalling a distant time;<sup>5</sup> the *huxuan* dance (Sogdian whirl 胡旋舞) music displaying the unrestrained Sogdian spirit; the night watchman's regular drumbeat or the drumbeat portending war; the dialogues in Classical Chinese, which are often stilted and undecipherable even to the Chinese ear; and so on and so forth. Chapters 5, 7, 8, 10, and 11 discuss these topics. All the simulacra of a ninth-century Tang world serve as a backdrop for an intriguing human drama centering on an extraordinary woman suffering deprivation of love, who faces her ethical choices alone. Her expressionless face and intense look both conceal and highlight the suppressed passions within.

### Cinematic Reality and Hou's Freedom as *Auteur*

*The Assassin* is the full expression of Hou Hsiao-hsien's theory of cinematic reality, which can be best illustrated by Xie Haimeng's statement in the interview in Chapter 1, "The screen frame is only a faintly discernable existence in the real world" (Jingkuang zhishi yige zhenshi shijie litou ruoyouruowu de cunzai 景框只是一個真實世界裡頭若有若無的存在). In other words, the viewers are supposed to feel that the story told within the screen frame can spill into, or is part of, the "real world" that is outside the frame, so that what is outside the frame and what is inside are seamlessly connected.

5. In the film, in the scene when Nie Yinniang tells the mirror-polisher that Princess Jiacheng taught her to play the *guqin*, the English subtitle reads "zither" (which is the usual translation for *guzheng* 古箏). The latter has either twelve (since the Qin dynasty), thirteen (since the Tang dynasty), sixteen, eighteen, or twenty-one strings (modern day), whereas *guqin*, existing since ancient times, has seven strings. The zither has a much wider range than the *guqin*. Compared to the serene tone of *guqin*, played with fingertips, the zither, played with plectra attached to the player's fingertips, is much more boisterous. The two seem similar but are different instruments ("Guqin" 2016; "Guzheng" 2016).

To explain this concept, she juxtaposes the documentary tradition with montage. Referring to the actuality films of the Lumière brothers and their 1896 documentary *L'arrivée d'un train en Gare de la Ciotat* (The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat), she points out that they have handed down the cinematic tradition of faithfully documenting reality. By contrast, with the technique of montage, as first used by the Russian director Eisenstein, the narrator does not record reality as it is but directs the viewers to see what he wants them to see. With montage, the frame determines the messages that are given within; there is absolutely nothing else outside the frame (Yang, Hou, and Xie 2015, 40–41).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Yao Hong-yi 姚宏易, one of the deputy directors of *The Assassin*, described in December 2015 his experiences of working with Hou on *Kaifei Shiguan* 咖啡時光 (Café Lumière, 2003) and *Flight of the Red Balloon* as similar to making documentary films: for street scenes, instead of hiring extras, they shot real pedestrians on the sidewalks and then chased after them to secure their signatures for portrait rights, because extras were simply not “real” enough for Hou (Pan 2015).<sup>7</sup>

In the same interview, Hou Hsiao-hsien responds to Xie by comparing montage with his signature aesthetic of the long take. He points out that when the frame functions too strongly in a film, the result will be “the structure of simple messages” (danchun de xunxi jigou 單純的訊息結構). For him the seamless connection between what is inside and outside the frame is achieved through his longtime practice of long takes. With the camera positioned for a long take, he observes through the lens how the characters, who have read the script, deliver their parts in the arranged setting and how they behave naturally or react with the scene development. He never teaches the actors how to act. Having no idea what will happen, he waits for the unexpected, which often sends out more information than the script does, making him feel that the camera lens is “alive” (huode 活的) (Yang, Hou, and Xie 2015, 41). There are two scenes in *The Assassin* that he finds most satisfying in transmitting additional information, scenes that he often recounts in private conversations or public talks.

One scene concerns the child actor’s performance in the black-and-white prologue. The scene was originally designed for the child to play with the ball. But when the shooting started, a moth out of nowhere flew into the range of the camera frame and caught the child’s attention. The insect then rested on the father character’s hand. The child naturally approached the father, trying to touch the insect, which then flew away. The child’s eyes followed the moth’s trajectory all the way, from the father’s beard

6. Xie is the niece of Zhu Tianwen (Chu Tien-wen) 朱天文, the renowned Taiwanese writer and Hou Hsiao-hsien’s long-term collaborator. At the conceptual stage of *The Assassin*, Xie joined the scriptwriting team, which included Zhu and the celebrated Chinese writer Acheng 阿城. Working closely with Hou during the writing and numerous rewritings of the script, the shooting of the scenes in China, Japan, and Taiwan, and eventually the publicity of the film, Xie often speaks and writes as the spokeswoman of Hou and *The Assassin*, a role that Hou bestows on her. Please refer to her book that records the making of the film (Xie Haimeng 2015).

7. A director, photographer, and scriptwriter, Yao has worked with Hou since *Haonan haonü* 好男好女 (Good Men, Good Women, 1995). *Jincheng xiaozi* 金城小子 (Hometown Boy, 2011), the documentary he directed about the Chinese artist Chen Xiaodong 陳小東, won the Forty-Eighth Golden Horse Award (Wang 2011).



to the ceiling, from upper right to left of the frame, until it disappeared. The unplanned conversation among the child, the father, and the nurse concerning the moth developed naturally. Even after the child's attention was diverted by the rolling ball, he still thought of the insect and looked up to the ceiling, until the nurse told him it had already flown away. For Hou Hsiao-hsien, the impromptu performance of the child and other actors in this scene, triggered by the moth that flew unexpectedly into and out of the screen frame, was a godsend. It creates the feeling that the reality seen on the screen is part of the larger, real world beyond the frame (Chen and Chen 2016, 254).<sup>8</sup>

Another example Hou often mentions is the scene in which Tian Ji'an threatens to kill his wife after her failed attempt to murder the pregnant Hu Ji. This long take scene lasts two minutes and twenty seconds. When the shooting started, Lady Tian-Yuan (played by the Chinese actress Zhou Yun 周韻) and the eldest son, seemingly poised, were sitting on the couch of her boudoir. The uneasiness of their facial expressions revealed an unspoken tension, however, indicating that they had been expecting Ji'an's anger to explode. As his arrival was announced, she immediately said, "Come here, boys," calling to her side her other two sons, who apparently had been waiting in the room outside the camera frame. After Ji'an entered the room from the lower left of the frame, she stood up to greet him. Without uttering a word, he waved in her face the paper doll, the culprit that had made Hu Ji ill, confronting her with her responsibility for the murder attempt. As the paper doll dropped on the floor, the eldest son stepped forward to intervene between them, stretching out his arms in front of his mother to protect her. Drawing his sword, Ji'an couldn't bring himself to kill his wife in front of the children. He brandished the sword in rage at objects in sight, including curtains and vases of flowers, and then stormed out of the room. Lady Tian-Yuan then said to the children, "Sit, all of you." Picking up a piece of the broken vases from the floor, she said to the maids, who apparently had been on their knees in the room all the time but outside the screen frame, "All rise. Clear this away" (Chen and Chen 2016, 256).

For Hou, it takes an experienced and talented actress like Zhou Yun to end the scene impromptu with such an unplanned line. It shows the character's royal deportment, which remains unshattered in the face of crisis: Lady Tian-Yuan is able to avert a calamity by reverting to the daily routine of house cleaning, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Giving the actors only basic information about the scene (what happens), Hou enjoys watching during the long take how the actors react naturally to the course of events. It is of course a tremendous pressure on the actors, while at the same time they also have the freedom to act on the spur of the moment. To Hou, traditional ideas of performance often lead to overacting, while what comes naturally to people is closer to life and reality. Thus, the long take, liberating Hou as well as the actors from the bondage of the screenplay and stilted performance, connects the inside and outside of the screen frame: the film itself is tied with, and is part of, the larger reality that is life. While for traditional studio practices the screen frame indicates

8. The impromptu performances in this scene with the child and the scene with the actress Zhou Yun discussed below were explained by Hou Hsiao-hsien at a talk at Academia Sinica on December 14, 2015.

constraints and regulations, for Hou the frame is open, “faintly discernable.” That is why Kurosawa Akira (黑澤明, 1910–1998) once said to Hou Hsiao-hsien:

I wish I had the same freedom as yours. Your film makes one think of the world outside the frame. But even the photographers fail to cope with you, because they are unable to get rid of the habit of the studio. I think this is where you are most formidable, because you have complete freedom; the world outside the frame is just as real. (Zhu 2015)

Hou began to use the long take even before he learned the name of the technique, according to Zhu Tianwen 朱天文 (Chu Tien-wen). After he graduated from National Taiwan Academy of Arts (now National Taiwan University of Arts), he entered film-making in 1973 and worked as clapper-loader for two movies and as assistant director for a dozen others. In those days, to save money and time, short camera shots were taken one after another. When two characters carry on a conversation, one actor speaking would be shot first, and the second shot would be another actor speaking. Later the two shots would be edited to make it seem like a conversation. During the shooting the actor had to make faces and pretend to speak with the other person, who was not on the set at all. It was a great strain for the actors to perform in such a fragmented way. To solve this problem, during the early 1980s Hou and Chen Kunhou 陳坤厚 began to try out a different way of shooting. Letting the camera run for an extended length of time, they would shoot a scene nonstop. If a certain character was the center of the scene, this person would be reshot alone, while the other characters involved in the scene would perform once more to help with the central character’s acting. Investors began to complain about the extra lengths of celluloid used, wondering why it took them more rolls of film to finish shooting a movie than before. Later, during the filming of *Erzi de da wan'ou* 兒子的大玩偶 (The Sandwich Man 1983), Hou often chatted with Zeng Zhuangxiang 曾壯祥 (1947–) and Wan Ren 萬仁 (1950–), who had been to the United States for film studies and had just come back to Taiwan. It was then that Hou first learned the name of the technique: “master shot” or “long take” (Zhu 1989, 201–2).

Gradually Hou discovered that, when the results of the long take were scrutinized in the editing room, it became clear that there were more possibilities to choose from, while the shot materials might be different from what had been designed. The editing process is where Hou departs completely from the script, and where his creativity as *auteur* exerts itself to the full (Zhu 2015). This complete freedom from the screenplay is most true in the editing of *The Assassin*. Readers can refer to Chapter 4 by Tze-lan Deborah Sang for a detailed analysis of this topic.

## Chapters of the Book

This book investigates how Hou Hsiao-hsien recreates the world of Tang China in *The Assassin*. Not only do we tackle Hou’s oeuvre from the angle of film studies, discussing



theoretical issues and technical topics such as camera movement and Hou's mise-en-scène and signature shots, but we explore the film's source texts—the original Tang tale, historical documents, and genre paintings—that inspired Hou's imagination in reinventing mid-Tang culture. As a result, going far beyond film studies, the chapters in this book constitute an interdisciplinary study, covering history, literature, the adaptation processes, appropriation of Chinese visual aesthetics (landscape paintings and ladies' portraits), music, philosophy, and religion. Together, they form a cross-disciplinary conversation that is accessible to all these disciplines.

We investigate Hou's oeuvre as the reinvention of "China" in contemporary culture. As Jen-hao Walter Hsu analyzes in Chapter 9, although *The Assassin* depicts a character in a premodern world, it is a premodern world reinvented by Hou Hsiao-hsien, who since his early films has been preoccupied with nostalgia and its relation to Taiwan's modernization, which leads to the sense of homelessness. In many interviews Hou has divulged that the female protagonist is a projection of himself, trapped in a lonely endeavor while trying to do what is right. In addition, Tang central power challenged by its border regions as depicted in the film resonates with present-day identity politics in China and the fight for greater autonomy, and even independence, in regions like Taiwan and Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet. An allegorical reading of the film cannot be ruled out.

The cosmopolitan chic of the costumes, music, and dance in *The Assassin* is a window on the complex processes of the making of an empire. Showcasing the hybridity of Tang culture as represented in the film, we maintain that Chineseness has always been marked by its historical openness to non-Chinese elements that have become an integral part of China today. China's One Belt, One Road policy that seeks connectivity between China and the rest of Eurasia in the twenty-first century would not have been formulated without the Silk Road in the Tang as a precedent. For Charles Holcombe, "The Tang Dynasty was 'perhaps the crucial period in the formation' of a Chinese ethnic, and even proto-national, identity" (2011, 95).

The chapters of this book examine topics grouped under these four sections: (1) the *auteur* speaking and *auteurism* revisited, (2) literary and film adaptation and editing, (3) sight and sound, and (4) *xia* and traditional worldviews. While the eleven chapters are divided into four groups, one of the main strengths of this book lies in the way the contributors resonate while provocatively challenging each other. Repeatedly explored themes include to kill and not to kill, word and image, secretive listening and voyeurism, moral constraints and ethical choices, passion and repression, nothingness or emptiness, action and nonaction, visibility and invisibility, audible and inaudible sound, and justice and compassion. Revisiting the same thematic concerns back and forth, the chapters bring to light the film's historical complexity, audio-visual aesthetics, theoretical engagement, and philosophical depth.

### *The Auteur Speaking and Auteurism Revisited*

The two chapters in this section echo each other, one showing the *auteur* speaking for himself on *The Assassin*; the other tackling the implications of *auteurism* and the essence of *The Assassin* as an *auteur* film. Although Hou Hsiao-hsien himself repeatedly declares that an *auteur* makes a movie for his aesthetic beliefs rather than for the audience's understanding, a careful reading of the storytelling techniques used in *The Assassin* shows that the film does more to help the audience understand the story than he admits. Tracing the theoretical origins of the concept of *auteurism* to 1950s France helps us understand better the complex *auteurist* stance toward popular films.

Yang Zhao 楊照's 2015 interview with Hou Hsiao-hsien and Xie Haimeng, referenced by many of the following chapters, is translated by Christopher Lupke and placed as Chapter 1 of the book. Through the interview we are privy to the behind-the-scenes process of research on source materials, writing and endless rewritings of the script, and Hou's collaboration with the scriptwriters, which highlights the tension between word and image. Vividly playing itself out in the dialogue between Hou and Xie, the tension becomes one of the main leitmotifs in the book.

Peng Hsiao-yen argues that *The Assassin* blurs the boundaries between art house and commercial films, and maintains the significance of storytelling in both. Peng examines the debate on *auteurism* carried on in *Cahiers du cinéma* (Notebooks of Cinema) during the 1950s, when the concept was first launched by the French critics, and points out that the French New Wave critics never excluded Hollywood and Hong Kong commercial productions from their ranking of *auteur* films. Hou, who prides himself on his New Wave heritage, has insisted on an *auteur's* artistic vision at the expense of the audience's understanding, but it is clear that *The Assassin* has had recourse to traditional techniques of storytelling, although the way it tells the story seems elliptically encoded. Referring to Hou's idea of "pure image" as disclosed in the interview in Chapter 1, Peng takes it to be the new cinematic language that Hou has wanted to create in his films since early in his career. His divulgence in Chapter 1 reveals "pure image" as the pivotal aesthetic technique in *The Assassin*.

### *Literary and Film Adaptation and Editing*

This section illuminates how Hou's team recreates the Tang world, while stressing that all adaptations are (re)writings or (re)creations. The two chapters explore the complicated layers of adaptation, including literary and film adaptations and Hou's film editing. By comparing the film with a Qing drama likewise adapted from the original Tang tale, and the film we see on the screen with the screenplay, it is clear that Hou knows exactly what kind of film he wants. The "quarrel" between the screenwriters and Hou as revealed in Chapter 1 shows that word and image follow different kinds of logic.

The chapter by Yuan-ju Liu and Peng Hsiao-yen provides information on the historical background of the popular imagination that nurtured the way of swordsmanship and the Daoist-Buddhist symbolism of the mirror and the sword that found expression in *The Assassin*. It compares the film and the Qing poetical drama *Heibai wei* (The Black and White Donkeys), also adapted from Pei Xing's Tang tale, with the film. The original Tang tale, in addition to reflecting the historical fact of vendetta killings among the militarized provinces of the time, is filled with strange accounts of immortals, Daoist practitioners, Tantrism, and magical battles. Its rendering of the extraordinary female protagonist and events has been endlessly reworked in later times, especially during the Ming and the Qing. *Heibai wei* was one of the most famous adaptations. Liu and Peng identify and analyze the differences between the Qing drama and the film. What they respectively adopt and omit from the common source text discloses Hou's unique methods of film adaptation.

Tze-lan Deborah Sang focuses on the relationship between word and image in the making of this film. Hou's retelling of the fantastic aims less to impress the audience with supernatural plot elements through special effects than to observe and capture what happens impromptu on the set: the actors' emotions and body language, the scenery, the natural light, the ambient sound, and so forth. In terms of storytelling, Hou also deliberately hacks away at the elaborate narrative that his screenwriters painstakingly developed. Sang analyzes the adaptation from the classical source texts into the screenplay, as well as the transformation from the screenplay into Hou's final cut of the film. She views the film and its many narrative extensions, including the screenplay and other publications, as a transmedia project. Examining the theory on adaptations, including self-adaptations, the chapter intends to achieve a better understanding of Hou as *auteur*.

### *Sight and Sound*

Sight and sound either reinforce or are juxtaposed to each other in *The Assassin*. The visual effect of the film, including cinematography and costume design, and its unique soundtrack have won multiple awards in various international film festivals and warrant four chapters to discuss them. How does the film recreate the Tang world? For its visual effect, the film draws inspiration from traditional aesthetics of genre paintings. For its sound effect, it relies on non-Chinese as well as Chinese music. In scene after scene of veiled seeing and secret listening, the acoustics of the film world evokes the affect that draws the viewer into the silent mind of the main protagonist, while the material reality of the cinematic world becomes alive through the soundtrack consisting of the rich natural soundscapes and myriad manmade sounds. While the film is indisputably an audiovisual feat, its sound design appeals to globalized cultural capital.

It is well known that the art director of *The Assassin* consulted Tang ladies' portraits and landscape paintings to create the visuality of the film. Peng Hsiao-yen explores the discourses of visuality in the tradition of these art genres in depth to explain the

mixed Han and Sogdian fashion, as shown in the female characters' costumes, and the worldviews of the landscape paintings, as reflected in the film. Then Peng discusses the music of the film, which is groundbreaking in its nearly exclusive use of diegetic film score. Other than music of traditional Chinese instruments such as the *gugu* (ancient zither), the film score also has recourse to Balkan, Breton, and African music. The art and sound designs of the film manifest the concept that "Chineseness" takes its strength by assimilating and transforming elements from different cultures.

Timmy Chih-ting Chen and Hsiao-hung Chang interpret Nie Yinniang's failure to accomplish her assassination mission as a "hearing problem": her extraordinary sensitivity to sound and storytelling centers on selected focus and leads eventually to ethical responsibility. Yinniang is described as an "affected object" subject to enhanced naturalistic soundscape and entangled interpersonal histories. Chen and Chang tease out the ways in which Hou's image is always already filled with a certain "acoustic affectivity" and how the "affected object" redistributes the order of audio-vision.

Nicole Huang situates *The Assassin* in a long history of cinematic voyeurism and argues that the film supplies some of the best examples of how the film medium visualizes secretive listening. In the film, Nie Yinniang is seen perching high in the trees, hovering from indoor ceiling beams, and surfacing among layers of fluttering curtains and veils, constantly with her attentive ears tuning in to private conversations of the inner chamber. Huang analyzes a few pivotal scenes where listening and being listened to are meticulously staged and defines veiled listening as a key narrative device of the film and critical method.

James A. Steintrager points out that the song of the cicada is a good example of a group of sonic elements in *The Assassin* in which the materiality of the sound source is asserted via grain and attack, such as the scraping of fingers or fingernails along *gugu* strings. He examines how attention to sound in *The Assassin* opens up possibilities of discussing the political and cultural stakes of the film without recourse to reading the plot as national allegory. Instead, he examines the tension between the materializing or realizing effects of sound in the film and symbolic networks: how sounds simultaneously evoke and mask cultural references, notions of historical and ethnic continuity, and appeal to the distinction-bestowing agencies of globalized cultural capital.

### *Xia and Traditional Worldviews*

What makes *The Assassin* such a unique *wuxia* film is its concept of *xia* embedded in traditional worldviews as represented in the film. It is a human drama about ethical choices. The three chapters in this section analyze the film from the perspectives of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, the three teachings that have guided the Chinese and molded their thought and behavior since ancient times. The female protagonist's as well as the film's actions, or nonaction, is interpreted from these angles. The portraiture of the female protagonist and the stylistics of the film create a tension between Confucian and Daoist ethics, and Daoist and Zen Buddhist aesthetics.

Jen-Hao Hsu points out that, adapted from the Tang *chuanqi* “Nie Yinniang,” *The Assassin* does not depart significantly from the original storyline at the level of narration. The most prominent difference in the movie version is Hou’s addition of the motif of “The Bluebird Dancing to Its Own Image in the Mirror.” The bluebird tale has an allegorical function that explicates the theme—“one person without kindred” (yigeren, meiyou tonglei 一個人沒有同類)—as laid bare in the movie poster. Hsu takes this moment as the heart of Hou’s movie adaptation and argues that *The Assassin* is a poetic and philosophical visualization of the “stateless” existential questions raised by the figure of *xia*. Hsu attempts to understand how the picture-perfect mountains and rivers in the film reflect the philosophical thinking of breaking the self/other boundaries through the sentimental interconnections among beings and nature as found in traditional landscape paintings, and how they serve affective functions for the audience to understand the eternal pull between putting down roots and wandering in the era of global nomadism.

Hsiu-Chuang Deppman ties Hou’s aesthetics with his techniques and the theory behind it. *The Assassin* is a film about transformation and self-realization. Yinniang, a young woman trained to be a ruthless killer, slowly comes to reject death and embrace love. Twice she fails her mission on purpose, and, instead of cultivating austerity as a typical assassin, she longs for socialization. Her evolution embodies the philosophical clash, and ultimately compromise, between transcendental Daoism and humanistic Confucianism, two pillars of Chinese thought that have helped shape the Asian ways of life. Deppman analyzes the aesthetic and ethical tensions between Daoist visions of stylistic simplicity (including fixed camera, minimal editing, long takes, and nominal dialogues to indicate subtle but important changes in the characters’ state of mind) and Confucian teachings (advocating the propriety of behavior, class hierarchy, filial piety, and social stability) in a film that showcases the repression and liberation of individual passion.

According to Victor Fan, whether one thinks *The Assassin*, like a Ming vase, is “beautiful . . . but just as empty” depends on the way one approaches its reality. For some viewers, *The Assassin* conveys an ideal central to Zen Buddhism: *mingxin jianxing* 明心見性 (illumine the heart, thus allowing *prakṛti*—popularly translated as nature—to reveal itself). Nevertheless, for others, the film is merely Hou’s aesthetic exercise. To illustrate this paradox, Fan first contextualizes *The Assassin* within Hou’s realist aesthetics, which is best understood in terms of the concept of *xieyi* 寫意 (describing ideation), a concept that originated in art commentary and criticism during the Song dynasty (960–1279) and was appropriated in film theory during the Republican period (1911–1949), which was in turn informed by Yogācāra and Zen Buddhism. Fan then uses key concepts from the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (more commonly known as *The Diamond Sutra*) to conduct a close analysis of the film. In a sense, *The Assassin* is like an empty vase. But, without the vase, one cannot manage to see the emptiness within it, and there is no emptiness unless there is a vase that demarcates its boundaries.

This volume has grouped together some of the best-known Chinese-language film and literature scholars, in Taiwan and internationally, to collaborate on a detailed analysis of *The Assassin* and the Tang China it reinvents. The first and so far the only collection in English devoted exclusively to the topic, this volume is an indispensable textbook for teaching this unique film. For readers who are interested in different approaches to the film, this volume appeals to a variety of disciplines, including film studies, Chinese history, art history, visual culture, sound studies, adaptation studies, classical Chinese literature, literary and cultural studies, and East Asian studies. Although *The Assassin* may seem opaque and inaccessible on first viewing, as so many have testified, it contains nonetheless a rich world of imagination if one cares to train one's visual capability by repeated viewing. With the human drama at its center, the film provides the luxury of supreme audiovisual enjoyment unmatched by any of Hou Hsiao-hsien's other movies. Its deep layers of historical, cultural, and philosophical implications, thoroughly researched by the film team and meticulously represented on the screen, constitute a gateway to the remote Tang-dynasty world. It is a world of ethnic and cultural diversity, inviting the reader to ponder on the meaning of Chineseness and being Chinese today. The chapters of this volume intend to guide readers into such fascinating, varied experiences.

## *Appendix 2*

### **“Nie Yinniang”**

Translated by Pedro Acosta

Yinniang was the daughter of Nie Feng, a general from Weibo [covering parts of modern Hebei and Shandong Provinces] in the Zhenyuan reign period (785–804). When she was only ten years old, a nun came begging for food at the house of Nie. Upon seeing Yinniang, she was pleased and said, “Sir, please let me take this girl that I may instruct her.” Nie was greatly angered and rebuked the nun, who said, “Even if you hide her in an iron chest, sir, I will still snatch her away.” That night, Yinniang did indeed vanish. Nie Feng was very much alarmed and had her searched for, but there were no clues to her whereabouts. Her parents longed for her but could do no more than look at each other and weep.

Five years later, the nun brought Yinniang back and said to Nie Feng, “She has completed her tutelage. You may have her.” She then suddenly disappeared. The entire household cried with delight. They asked her what she had learned, and she replied, “At first I did nothing but read sutras and recite incantations.” Nie Feng did not believe her and persisted in his questioning. Yinniang then said, “If I tell you the truth, I am afraid you will not believe me. What is the use?” Nie Feng said, “Just tell the truth then.”

She replied, “When I was taken away by the nun, we traveled I don’t know how many miles. At dawn, we reached a big, bright stone cave. There were no inhabitants for many paces around, only plenty of apes, pines, and creepers for a great distance. Two girls were already there, each also ten years of age. Both were bright and beautiful. They did not eat and could fly over sheer cliffs without losing their footing, like nimble gibbons going up a tree. The nun made me take a pill and gave me a sword, which she told me always to keep at my side. It was about two feet long and so sharp that one could cut a hair by blowing it against the edge. She directed me to learn to climb by following the two girls who were there, and I gradually felt my body become as light as the wind.

“A year later, I could attack and kill monkeys without ever missing a single one. Afterward, I struck at tigers and leopards, and I always succeeded in cutting off their heads. By the third year I was able to fly, and if I struck out at hawks and falcons, I would hit them all. The blade of my sword gradually shrank to five inches. When flying birds encountered it, they would not know where it came from.



"During the fourth year, the nun left the two girls to keep watch over the cave and took me to a city somewhere. She pointed out a man and enumerated his wrongdoings, saying, 'Go and sever his head for me, and do not let him realize what you are doing. If you calm your nerves, it will be as easy as killing birds.' She gave me a ram's horn dagger, the blade of which was three inches wide. I then hacked off the man's head in broad daylight without anyone seeing me. I put the head in a pouch and returned to my mistress, who used a potion to change it into water.

"In the fifth year, she said, 'A certain major official is guilty of transgression. For no reason at all he has brought harm to many. Go at night to his bed chamber and cut off his head.' I again took up my dagger and entered his chamber, passing through the cracks in the door without difficulty. I then lay on my stomach upon a beam. At dusk, I made off with his head and returned. The nun said in great anger, 'Why are you so late?' I replied, 'I saw him playing with a child. It was so touching I could not bring myself to carry out the task right away.' The nun scolded me, saying, 'From now on, when you run into his kind again, you are first to kill the loved one, and then you may slay the man.' I acknowledged my mistake. The nun said, 'I will open up the back of your head and secrete the dagger there without any harm to you. When you have need of it, draw it out.' Then she added, 'You have already mastered your craft. You may go home.' Thereupon she escorted me back, saying, 'Only after twenty years have passed will we see each other again.'"

When Nie Feng heard these words, he was very much afraid. At nightfall she would disappear and then return in the morning. Nie Feng no longer dared make inquiries of her, and, as a result, he also came to lose his affection for her. One day, a mirror-grinder<sup>1</sup> happened to come by their door. The girl said, "This man may be made my husband." She informed her father, who dared not gainsay her and married her to the man. Since the husband could do nothing but grind mirrors, her father kept them both generously supplied with food and clothing. They lived by themselves in a separate house.

Several years later her father died. The regional commander of Weibo, knowing something of her exceptional qualities, took her into his service by offering her payments of gold and silk. Several more years passed in this way. In the Yuanhe reign period (806–820), the regional commander of Weibo was not getting along well with Liu Changyi,<sup>2</sup> viceroy of Chenzhou and Xuzhou (both commanderies in Henan Province). He thus ordered Yinniang to assassinate him. Yinniang took leave of the regional commander and went to Xuzhou with her husband.

Viceroy Liu, who was an adept in the magic arts, already knew that she was coming. He summoned one of his officers and bade him go early the next day to the northern part of the city, there to await a man and a woman coming up to the gate astride a black

1. Mirrors were made of bronze and occasionally needed grinding to recover their luster. Mirror grinding was a specialized craft. The mirror was heated until it was red hot. It was then submerged in water, removed, and put to a grinding stone.

2. Liu Changyi (?–813) was a military governor supportive of the central government; for his biography, see Ouyang et al., [1060] 1976, 7:5166–67.



and a white donkey. They would hear a magpie screech and the husband would shoot it with a slingshot bow<sup>3</sup> but fail to hit it. The wife would then take the husband's bow and slay the bird with a single pellet. He was to make obeisance to them and say that the viceroy, wishing to see them, has bid him to welcome them at a distance.

The officer went to meet them as directed. Yinniang and her husband said, "His lordship must be versed in the arcane arts. Otherwise, how could he have known of our coming? We wish to see Lord Liu." The viceroy gave them audience. Yinniang and her husband paid their respects and said, "We deserve ten thousand deaths for plotting against you!" Liu replied, "Not so. It is a common matter for each man to be loyal to his master. But there is no difference between Weibo and Xuzhou now. I hope you will remain here and will not doubt my intentions." Yinniang admitted her fault, saying, "Your Lordship has no one worthy at his side. I wish to leave the other lord and declare my allegiance to you. Your Lordship's divine perspicuity has made a convert of me." She knew that the regional commander of Weibo was not the equal of Viceroy Liu. The viceroy asked what she had need of. She said, "Two hundred cash a day would suffice." It was done as she requested.

Not knowing where the donkeys had gone, the viceroy had them searched after, but no one knew where they were. Later on, they secretly looked inside Yinniang's bag and found two paper donkeys, one black and one white.

After somewhat more than a month had passed, Yinniang said to the viceroy, "My former master does not know when to stop. He will surely send someone in my place. Allow me to cut off a strand of my hair, tie it to a red tassel, and place it before the regional commander's pillow, in order to show him my determination not to return." The viceroy gave his consent. During the fourth watch, she returned and said, "I have relayed my message. The night after tomorrow night he will send Jingjing'er to kill me and carry off your head. When the time comes, I will do everything to destroy the assailant. Please do not be concerned." Viceroy Liu was candid and valiant, and showed no fear.

That night, in the candlelight after midnight, there appeared two streamers, one red and one white, floating about as though attacking each other around the four corners of the viceroy's bed. After a long time, someone fell to the ground from midair, head and body separated. Yinniang also came out and said, "Jingjing'er has been slain." She moved the body outside and used drugs to change it into water, leaving not a single hair behind.

Yinniang said, "On the night after tomorrow night he will send Kongkong'er the Adroit. Kongkong'er's magic is such that no human can understand its use, no spirit can follow its tracks. He<sup>4</sup> can enter the netherworld from the heavens; he can disappear and leave no trace of his shadow. My own arts are no match for his. We'll therefore have to rely on Your Lordship's good fortune. Please wear a collar made of Khotan jade<sup>5</sup> and

3. A bow-like weapon that projects arrows.

4. Kongkong'er's sex, like that of Jingjing'er, is not clear from the text.

5. Khotan, a place in Xinjiang renowned for fine jades.

sleep with it. I will turn into a cootie and conceal myself in your innards to wait it out. Besides this, there is no escape.”

The viceroy heeded her advice. During the third watch, before his eyes had been closed long, he heard a sharp ringing sound from something striking at his neck. Yinniang jumped out of the viceroy's mouth and congratulated him, “Your Lordship no longer has anything to fear! This person is like a fierce falcon. If he fails to accomplish his goal in a single blow, he will turn and go away, ashamed over the failure. Before the watch is over, he will be a thousand miles away.” Later, they looked at the jade and saw that it had been cut by a dagger, the mark quite long. From then on, the viceroy treated Yinniang with great generosity.

In the eighth year of the Yuanhe reign period (806–820), when Liu left Xuzhou to pay a court visit to the emperor, Yinniang chose not to accompany him, saying, “Henceforth I will roam in the mountains and rivers to search for Accomplished Persons.”<sup>6</sup> She asked only that her husband be given a sinecure. The viceroy did as they had agreed and gradually came to lose track of her whereabouts. When the viceroy died in office, Yinniang came to the capital on her donkey and wept before his coffin before disappearing again.

During the Kaicheng reign period [836–840], the viceroy's son Liu Zong was made governor of Lingzhou [roughly the area of modern Sichuan Province]. In his travels, he met Yinniang on a plank trail along a precipice in the Su [Sichuan] mountains. Her countenance was as it had been in earlier days, and she still rode a white donkey. She was pleased to see him and said, “Don't go to Lingzhou. A great calamity is in store for you there.” She took out a pellet of drugs and bade Liu Zong swallow it, saying, “Next year you must resign your post and return to Luoyang [the eastern capital]. Only thus will you avert disaster. My drugs will protect you for but a year.” Liu Zong was not much of a believer in such things. He offered her colored silk, but Yinniang did not accept any of it. Instead, she drank with Zong and left only when she was inebriated.

One year later, Liu Zong still had not resigned and indeed soon died at his post in Lingzhou. After this, no one ever saw Yinniang again.

### Note

This is a rare example of a *chuanqi* story with a description of the training of a *xia* (here an assassin). The contests of magic between Yinniang and Jingjing'er and Kongkong'er move the story from the category of the fantastic into that of the supernatural. These episodes have inspired many imitations by later writers.

The professionalism shown in the nun's attitude toward assassination is consistent with her aim of ridding society of evil. But her zealotry also points to an ethical problem in this time of political disorder. As reflected in Yinniang's amoral criterion

6. Those who have attained immortality.

in her choice of master, the chivalric code of the original *xia* has by now totally disappeared. The skills and magic are here enlisted to serve the purposes of military governors in rivalry with each other for power.

The plot of a play by Yu Tong (1618–1704) entitled *Heibai wei* (The Black and White Donkeys) is based on this tale.

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