Vimeo link for this week's film and **ALL** of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS

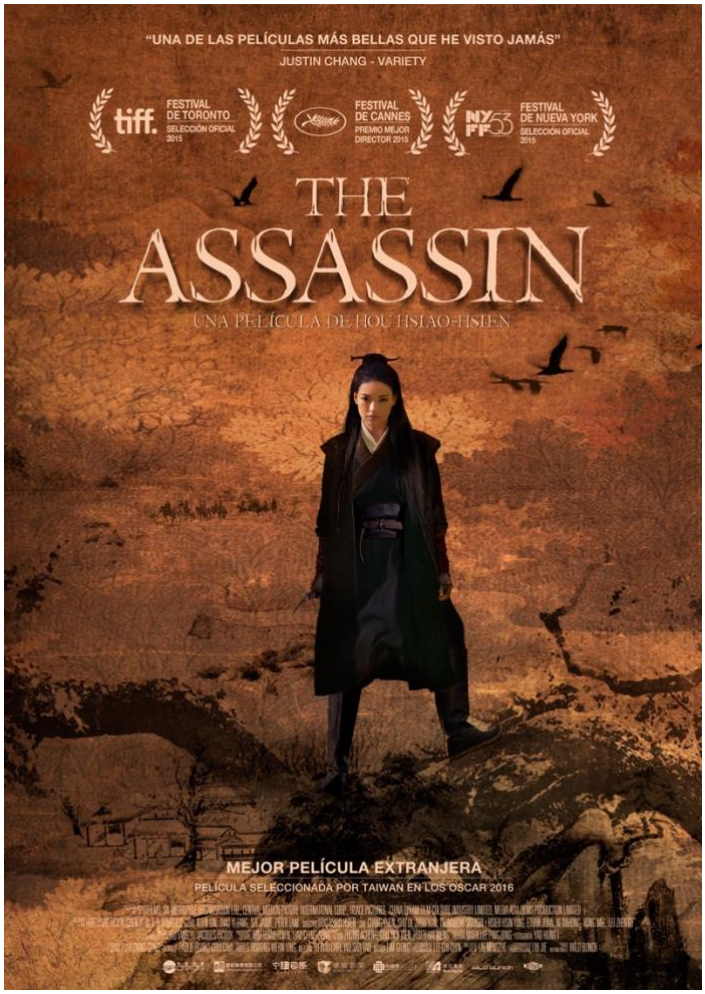
Zoom link for all FALL 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions

The film is available for streaming on Amazon Prime.

Directed by Hsiao-Hsien Hou
Writing Credits Cheng Ah (screenplay), T'ien-wen Chu (screenwriter), Hsiao-Hsien (screenplay), Hai-Meng Hsieh (screenplay), and Pei Xing (short story)
Produced by Wen-Ying Huang and Ching-Sung Liao
Music by Giong Lim
Cinematography by Ping Bin Lee
Film Editing by Paulie Chih-Chia Huang and Ching-Sung Liao

Hsiao-Hsien Hou won Best Director, Giong Lim won the Cannes Soundtrack Award, and the film was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival.
Sight & Sound named it the best film of 2015.

Cast
Shu Qi...Nie Yinniang
Chang Chen...Tian Ji'an, governor of Weibo
Yun Zhou...Lady Tian
Satoshi Tsumabuki...The Mirror Polisher
Dahong Ni...Provost Nie Feng
Mei Yong...Yinniang's Mother
Zhen Yu Lei...Tien Xing (Yinniang's Uncle)
Nikki Hsieh...Huji,Tian Ji'an's concubine (as Hsieh Hsin-ying)
Ethan Juan...Xia Jing, the aide-de-camp (as Juan Ching-Tian)
Fang-yi Sheu...Princess Jiacheng / Princess-Nun



Jiaxin
Jacques Picoux...Lady Tian's Teacher

Hsiao-Hsien Hou (8 April 1947, Meihsien County, Kwangtung, Republic of China) is a Mainland Chinese-born Taiwanese film director (22 credits), screenwriter, producer and actor. He is a leading figure in world cinema and in Taiwan's New Wave cinema movement. He won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1989 for his film *A City of Sadness* (1989), and the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2015 for *The Assassin* (2015). These are some of the other films he has directed *Cute Girl* (1980), *Cheerful Wind* (1981), *The Green, Green Grass of Home* (1982), *The Sandwich Man* (1983), *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983), *A Summer at Grandpa's* (1984), *A Time to Live, a Time to Die* (1985), *Dust in the Wind* (1986), *Daughter of the Nile* (1987), *The Puppetmaster* (1993), *Good Men, Good Women* (1995), *Goodbye, South, Goodbye* (1996), *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998), *Millennium Mambo* (2001), *Café Lumière* (2003), *Three Times* (2005), and *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007).

Pei Xing was a Chinese writer who lived during the Tang dynasty. *The Assassin* (2015) is based on his story "聶隱娘" ("*Niè Yǐnniáng*").

Giong Lim (7 June 1964, Changhua, Taiwan) has composed for 59 films, some of which are: *Dust of Angels* (1992), *Goodbye, South, Goodbye* (1996), *Millennium Mambo* (2001), *The World* (2004), *Three Times* (2005), *Do Over* (2006), *Still Life* (2006), *Wuyong* (2007, Documentary), *Xiao Jia Going Home* (2007, Documentary), *24 City* (2008), *Judge* (2009), *Mr. Tree* (2011), *A Year in the Clouds* (2011, Documentary), *Forgetting to Know You* (2013), *The Assassin* (2015), *Kaili Blues* (2015), *De Lan* (2015), *City of Jade* (2016, Documentary), *The Road to Mandalay* (2016), *The Foolish Bird* (2017), *The Gangster's Daughter* (2017), *Missing Johnny* (2017), *End of Summer* (2017), *Yun J*ie (2018), *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (2018), *Looking for Kafka* (2018), *Jinpa* (2018), *Half the Sky* (2018), *Asian Three-Fold Mirror 2018: Journey* (2018), *Nina Wu* (2019), and *ANIMA* (2020).

Ping Bin Lee (8 August 1954, Taiwan) has shot 82 films, such as: *Portrait of a Fanatic* (1982), *Amazing Stories* (1984), *Run Away* (1985), *A Time to Live, a Time to Die* (1985), *Papa's Spring* (1985), *Dust in the Wind* (1986), *Strawman* (1987), *Hero of Tomorrow* (1988), *Runaway Blues* (1988), *Dull Ice Flower* (1989), *My American Grandson* (1991), *The Puppetmaster* (1993), *Heaven and Earth* (1994), *Whatever Will Be, Will Be* (1995), *Modern Republic* (1995), *Goodbye, South, Goodbye* (1996), *Eighteen Springs* (1997), *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), *Princess D* (2002), *Café Lumière* (2003), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (2004), *Snowy Love Fall in Spring* (2005), *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007), *The Sun Also Rises* (2007), *Claustrophobia* (2008), *Rail Truck* (2009), *Love in Disguise* (2010), *Norwegian Wood* (2010), *Once Upon a Time in Tibet* (2010), *Renoir* (2012), *Love* (2012), *The Rooftop* (2013), *(Sex) Appeal* (2014), *Somewhere Only We Know* (2015), *The Queens* (2015), *The Assassin* (2015), *The Last Women Standing* (2015), *Crosscurren* (2016), *Eternity* (2016), *Seventy-Seven Days* (2017), *Single Cycle* (2019), *Looking for a Lady with Fangs and a Moustache* (2019), *Somewhere Winter* (2019), and *ANIMA* (2020).

Shu Qi (16 April 1976, Xindian, Taipei County, Taiwan) is a Taiwanese–Hong Kong actress and model. As of 2014, she was among the highest paid actresses in Taiwan. She has appeared in 87 films, some of which are: *Unexpected Challenges* (1995), *Sex and Zen II* (1996), *Street Angels* (1996), *Growing Up* (1996), *Viva Erotica* (1996), *A Queer Story* (1997), *Love, Amoeba Style* (1997), *L-O-V-E... Love* (1997), *Portland Street Blues* (1998), *Love Generation Hong Kong* (1998), *A Man Called Hero* (1999), *My Name Is Nobody* (2000), *Martial Angels* (2001), *So Close* (2002), *Three Times* (2005), *Home Sweet Home* (2005), *Confession of Pain* (2006), *New York, I Love You* (2008), *If You Are the One* (2008), *Look for a Star* (2009), *City Under Siege* (2010), *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen* (2010), *The Second Woman* (2012), *Tai ji 1: Cong ling kai* shi (2012), *Tai Chi 2: The Hero Rises* (2012), *Chinese Zodiac* (2012), *Journey to the West* (2013), *Gone with the Bullets* (2014), *The Assassin* (2015), *All You Need Is Love* (2015), *The Last Women Standing* (2015), *Mojin: The Lost Legend* (2015), *Bull Brothers* (2015), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (2016), *The Village of No Return* (2017), *Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back* (2017), *The Adventurers* (2017), *The Island* (2018), and *Shanghai Fortress* (2019).

Chang Chen (14 October 1976, Taipei, Taiwan) is a Taiwanese actor who has appeared in 44 films, such as: *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991), *Mahjong* (1996), *Happy Together* (1997), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Silk* (2006), *The Go Master* (2006), *Blood Brothers* (2007), *Missing* (2008), *Passion Island* (2012), *The Last Supper* (2012), *The Grandmaster* (2013), *Christmas Rose* (2013), *Brotherhood of Blades* (2014), *Helios* (2015), *The Assassin* (2015), *Monk Comes Down the Mountain* (2015), *Mr. Long* (2017), *Forever Young* (2018), *Savage* (2018), *The Soul* (2021), *A Garden of Camellias* (2021), and *Dune* (2021).

Yun Zhou (17 December 1978, Wenzhou, Zhejiang, China) is a Chinese actress who has appeared in 8 films and TV series: *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* (2003), *The Sun Also Rises* (2007), *Bodyguards and Assassins* (2009), *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010), *Jin hun feng yu qing* (2011, TV Series), *Gone with the Bullets* (2014), *The Assassin* (2015), and *Hidden Man* (2018).

Satoshi Tsumabuki (December 13, 1980, Yanagawa, Fukuoka, Japan) is a Japanese actor who has appeared in 91 films and TV series, such as: *The Dimension Travelers* (1999), *GTO: The Movie* (1999), *Platonic Sex* (2001, TV Movie), *Sabu* (2002, TV Movie), *Sayonara, Kuro* (2003), *Slow Dance* (2005, TV Mini Series), *Snowy Love Fall in Spring* (2005), *The Haunted Samurai* (2007), *Tokyo!* (2008), *The Magic Tokyo Family* (2013),*Hour* (2008), *Pandemic* (2009), *Boat* (2009), *Villon's Wife* (2009), *Fly with the Gold* (2012), *Lady Maiko* (2014), *The World of Kanako* (2014), *Stand by Me Doraemon* (2014), *The Vancouver Asahi* (2014), *The Assassin* (2015), *Gukoroku - Traces of Sin* (2016), *Rage* (2016), *Museum* (2016), *What a Wonderful Family* (2017), *A Boy Who Wished to Be Okuda Tamio and a Girl Who Drove All Men Crazy* (2017), *Detective Chinatown 2* (2018), *The Miracle of Crybaby Shottan* (2018), *Paradise Next* (2019), *The 47 Ronin in Debt* (2019), *Not Quite Dead Yet* (2020), *I Never Shot Anyone* (2020), *The Asadas (2020)*, and *Detective Chinatown 3* (2021).

Frederick Blichert: "Coloured Judgement: Hou Hsaio-hsien's *The Assassin* (*Senses of Cinema*, September 2016)

Hou Hsiao-hsien's first film in eight years was also his first foray into the *wuxia* genre. With *The Assassin*, he joins other top-tier auteurs like John Woo, Wong Kar Wai, Ang Lee, Zhang Yimou, and Jia Zhangke in revisiting the Chinese tradition of swordplay and knight-errantry, popularised in the cinema by King Hu with classics like *Dragon Gate Inn* (1967) and *A Touch of Zen* (1971). Hou's addition to the canon takes place during the 9th century Tang Dynasty and follows assassin Nie Yinniang (Shu Qi). Abducted and trained by the nun, Jiaxin (Sheu Fang-yi), Yinniang becomes a killer, taking out the country's corrupt politicians with surgical precision at her master's bidding. But in *The Assassin*'s opening scene, Yinniang allows one of her marks to live, abandoning her mission when she sees him playing with his young son.

Her next assignment seems to be selected to punish and harden her as much as to eliminate a deserving target when Jiaxin sends her to kill her cousin and the governor of Weibo Province, Tian Ji'an (Chang Chen). In addition to their familial bond, Tian and Yinniang were once sweethearts, betrothed until a political alliance led to Tian marrying another woman (Zhou Yun).

Yet on some level, describing the plot of *The Assassin* risks overshadowing the greater effect of the film. With sudden temporal shifts and convoluted political machinations that are not fully developed, it is not always easy to follow. Hou keeps us at arm's length, even staging many shots so as to rob us of a direct line of sight on the action. We watch Tiang and his concubine (Hsieh Hsin-ying) through flowing curtains, not fully obscuring the characters and actions, but giving us a sense that we are intruders, stealing only brief glimpses of the full picture. He similarly pans away from characters in mid-sentence – never fully interrupting them as such, but allowing our attention to wander, briefly taking in settings and other characters. At the other extreme, he includes several of his his signature long shots (already familiar to his loyal audiences), meandering as he follows minor characters, captures musical asides, or composes static tableaux that briefly halt the action. Hou even employs *guwen* (Classical Chinese), both situating his characters firmly in history and giving himself the added challenge of a "foreign" language with less expressive potential. "It had a much smaller vocabulary, and did not communicate emotional subtleties easily," he said in an interview in *Film Comment*. "Language was more basic back then."[1]

The sparse dialogue and narrative confusion are not as alienating as they might seem. With little to communicate orally, the actors showcase their talents in other ways. "The actors had to practice how to draw out the emotional nuances in their performances with their bodies and faces, because they couldn't rely on the dialogue," said Hou.[2] Qi in particular reflects

an impressive balance of stony resolve and growing inner conflict. And the film is, perhaps above all else, stunningly beautiful and may well be Hou's best work visually. Mountains and forests flirt with sublimity, while the photography of long-time Hou collaborator Mark Lee Ping Bin captures the extravagant colours and textures of the film's breathtaking costumes and architecture. The colours are all the more dramatic when compared to the opening scene, shot entirely in black and white. For Jordan Cronk, this introduction "efficiently outlines the narrative's deceptively simple dramatic impetus."[3] But it does more than this: rather than reveal the simplicity of the plot, the shift from black and white to lush, sumptuous colour reveals the complexity of many of *The Assassin*'s thematic foci. It introduces the notion of contrast that underpins much of the film – and is subverted at every turn. Hou presents us with many binaries: honour/corruption, love/hate, guilt/innocence, enemy/ally. But he does this to consistently stray into the messy middle ground, where allegiances are tested, promises are broken, and where a straightforward assassination is complicated by a shared past.

At one point Jiaxin says to Yinniang, "Your skill is matchless, but your mind is hostage to human sentiments." For all her willingness to kill, Yinniang does show respect for the impact of her actions, and draws lines where she feels they need to be drawn. She kills on command, but her targets are corrupt, and she falters at the sight of the innocence of a child at play. These moral grey areas – or ranges of colour, as the film codes them – humanise Yinniang, and give her a sense of honour. She is no petty criminal or heartless killer.

Yinniang's moral code – coupled with her expert swordsmanship – is the strongest marker of *wuxia*. The *wuxia* film features a sense of honour with principled motives and a devotion to justice that is divorced from class or social standing, but instead relies on belonging to a cult of the sword.[4] We see this religious dimension in the figure of the nun and the extreme, almost ritualistic devotion of Yinniang to her craft, and even in her lost faith. As a woman, Yinniang is also a continuation of the figure of the female knight errant emphasised by King Hu throughout his career.[5]

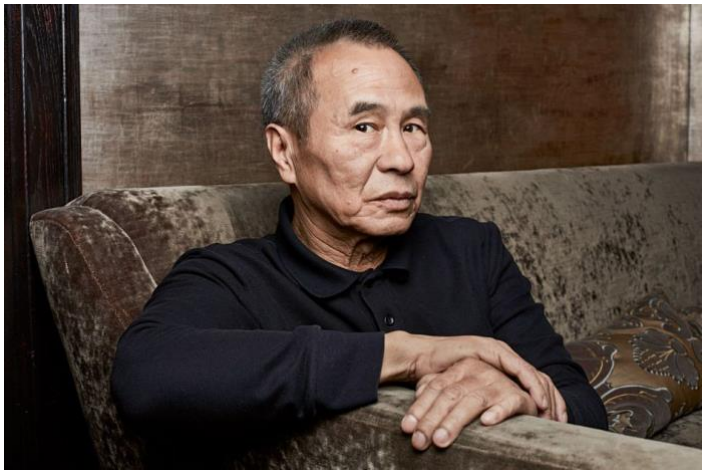
While Hou has had a rich and varied career, he stretches into a new direction with *The Assassin*. In some ways, it is his most traditional film, as it fits so neatly into a specific generic history. And yet he makes *wuxia*feel new, and makes it his own. The action of wire fighting on display in the films of King Hu and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000) are here replaced by a profound sense of restraint. Hou withholds action and explicit violence bar a few notable exceptions that are strengthened by their rarity. *The Assassin* is remarkably original, and Hou proves the potential and versatility of one of China's oldest narrative traditions with his latest, fresh addition.

Amir Ganjavie: "When Minimalism Meets the Martial Art Tradition: An Interview with Hou Hsiao-hsien" (*Senses of Cinema* June 2015)

After an eight-year absence, Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien has boldly returned to feature filmmaking with *The Assassin* (*Nie Yinniang*), a Tang dynasty-set story set amidst the political conflict between the central government and provinces. Reinforcing Hou's position as an indisputable cinematic master, the film justifiably won the Best Director prize at Cannes. From a script by Hou and his regular collaborator Chu Tien-wen, the films is complex and truth be told it requires more than one viewing to truly understand it in detail (impressed cinephiles flocked back to repeat screenings during its Cannes premiere run). As with almost all of Hou's films, it is finely multilayered, each plot point bringing another story into the picture, while simultaneously mesmerising viewers with its sublime imagery (courtesy of another Hou regular, DP Mark Lee Ping-bin).

What sets *The Assassin* strikingly apart from the myriad martial arts films that cinema (and in particular Chinese cinema) has offered throughout its history, is that the bustling marital arts dynamics are barely registered. True to the director's unique vision, it has a calmer outlook, with a philosophical and meditative atmosphere permeating the cinematic space and its rituals. At its centre are strong female

characters, not least the title character (played by Hou muse Shu Qi), a femme fatale named Nie Yinniang who is very different from the usual Western conceptualisation of this type of character. She does not exist in the film to seduce but has herself been seduced in the past, a situation that informs her actions, as she is sent back to her hometown with orders to kill her old flame, who now leads the largest military region in North China.*The Assassin* creates its own inner logic and needs to be understood on its own terms, without resorting to comparisons with other seemingly similar works. The following is the result of a roundtable interview undertaken with Hou Hsiao-hsien at Cannes.



Can you tell me about the source of your inspiration for the movie?

I can say that tales from Tang dynasty inspire *The Assassin*. I know these tales from my childhood and always had dreams of making a film from them. You know, the novel is written in old Chinese, which means that one character stands for one meaning, which is why it can be short, though the story is relatively clear. *The Assassin* is inspired by the novel called *Nie Yin Niang* (聶隱娘). Nie (聶) is 3 ears (耳); Yin (隱) means hiding; Niang (娘) is a lady. Her name is Nie Yin. So in the beginning, I thought these three ears are interesting and could be made into a movie. I thought she must be an assassin, hiding somewhere in the tree, or somewhere else. Her eyes are closed and she relies completely on her hearing. In a noisy environment, if there is any sudden change, she probably knows it and would then open her eyes and come down from the tree immediately. It is originally designed in that way. Later we learnt that Shu Qi (the heroine) cannot jump. We tried many times but she screamed every time so there was no choice but to change it to the way it is now. I didn't know at first that she was afraid of heights; we only discovered that after shooting for some time.In general, I took the basic dramatic idea from [the tales]. I was keenly interested in the female characters from this period, an era when women often held higher positions than men. This fit well with the qualities of the actress since there is something solid which corresponds perfectly with this dynasty, which was also very colourful. The dynasty and the literature from that time comprised lots of fantastic tales. I read them extensively since I love them and realised that I wanted to make a movie about this period.

Another fascinating thing about the literature of that period is that it is filled with details of everyday life; I tend to call it realist in some sense. But that wasn't enough for me so I spent a huge amount of time finding and reading stories and histories related to that period in order to become familiar with the way that ordinary people lived. When you make such a movie you should be very careful with details and, of course, people behaved differently based on their social and economic positions. I also researched the political context of the era in order to know more about the chaotic events that happened and how different forces threatened the Tang Emperor. I wish I were able to talk with the dynasty directly to make the movie more authentic!

Why did it take so long to produce this movie?

I've been busy with film festivals in Taiwan, particularly the Taipei Film Festival and the Golden Horse Film Festival. I planned to spend only two or three years on these film festivals but found it impossible to do that, and in the end I actually spent eight years on them to improve their quality; only then could I shoot the film. On the other hand, when it came to realising my project it was a difficult decision since it was hard to find financing. Furthermore, it took me a lot of time to fully understand the spirit of the history and its social and political significance; there are many conflicts in the story and I thought to myself that I should wait until I am little bit older to shoot this type of movie. However, time passes quickly and I became old so I told myself to hurry up and make this film. The actors had also become more mature and experienced so I made my decision and said it was the right time to make this film.

Can we say that this is a genre movie?

I am very familiar with kung-fu films; I watched lots of them and I particularly like Japanese samurai films because they are so realistic. At certain

moments, I thought deeply of Akira Kurosawa's films in which the real issue was the philosophy behind being a samurai, not the action scenes themselves. There are very few tricks in Japanese combat films and that inspired me to make my martial arts film in this way, which fits well with my approach towards cinema, but it might be difficult to find other people who have the same position and approach. I still want to make another martial arts movie.

The plot is very complex and a general audience might have difficulty understanding it. Are you concerned about that?

It is a question of choice about what type of approach one selects; it is very personal. If you start thinking about audience when you are making a film then you end up making another style of film. At the same time, I feel very privileged since I had $15 million for this film, which is a luxury. If someday I become poor I might not be able to shoot what I like but I always do what is dearest to my heart. I know that the lead actress would have acted in my movies even if I did not have the money. I formed a network; we know each other very well and as a group we want to make similar types of movies with the same costume and stylistic approach. However, I can make a very simple film with less money. This time it was a very costly film and if the investors cannot recoup enough money then I'm sure it will be difficult for me to find investors in the future. This film was a challenge but I find joy in experiencing such a challenge. It is resistance against Hollywood control over the market and we now live in a very different time period compared to the time of [the Taiwanese] new wave; we do not want future cinema to become poorer.

Why is the opening scene in black and white?

I did not have a clear intention for this from the beginning but I like it more this way. However, we might say that she is a woman, an assassin, and when you think of it that lack of colour suits her very well; in colour things would be very cruel. Black and white could also refer to a traditional way of making films; in this way it could refer to the protagonist's past. As the film progresses, the movie switches to colour, which could be read as the present tense of the story.

You did not think of shooting a film with the actors or actresses flying here and there?

I cannot do that since it is not in my blood to have fighters flying through the air. If you use too much external force then it is hard for you to control and what they shoot is useless. I want real things in my film but it is difficult because the force must come out. Besides, every movement in martial arts has a specific meaning so we had to work meticulously. You should consider that the personality of the role decides the movement of the character when engaged in martial arts. Every personality has its own traits.

Can you talk about your experience working on the action scenes?

I had to think seriously about my actors so we used safety precautions and wooden swords. Still, even with these the lead actress, Shu Qi, was full of bruises after the action scenes. Generally speaking, I don't like to be so close to actors that I can whisper in their ears. Once they come on set, I trust them and let them do the acting in their own way. I tend to accept what happens in the scene. For this, I used to go someplace where the actors could not see me, and eventually have no idea where I am.

And you worked with both actors and non-actors for this movie. The peasants are not professional actors.

The peasants in the movie are real peasants who did not change their behaviour because of the film. As soon as they were hungry, they started to eat regardless of whether we were doing something or not. I liked this since it let me capture whatever happened. Having said this, I am also very sensitive to the sense of reality in the movie. For example, during one of the intimate moments between governor Tian Ji'an and his concubine Huji we took many shots and did many takes. I didn't do this to make the actors suffer but I wanted to feel that the scenes belonged to the actors. This was a difficult movie for the actors, especially since the actresses were not fully trained in martial arts.

How was the training process for the actors?

Shu Qi had some training before we started shooting and she expected that she had to fly and she practiced that for a couple of months but then it wasn't what I wanted. Instead, what I wanted was the

atmosphere around the characters. What was more important for me was the instinct before the action; I was not very interested in the stunts themselves.

In order to achieve my goal I asked the actors to read lots of book and watch documentaries about the time period as well as to read novels about Japanese samurai. In these novels, each individual has their own skills and specialties and that was enough to express the personality of the characters. So our actors prepared everything individually, which was important for achieving the relaxed atmosphere that we had in the end.

I would like to know more about your style, and especially the reason you prefer long shots in your work.

I always tend to use long shots since I prefer to show what is happening behind the characters, meaning the objects behind the actors, the landscapes. When you use a long shot, you can better capture reality. I am in favour of realism in movies and am against the theatricalisaion of action. I hate explanation in films, especially anything related to psychology, preferring instead that the movie help audiences to bring their own imaginations into the story. I have tested this strategy in my other movies, like *Flowers of Shanghai*, which is pretty long but contains only thirty shots. I think the long shot is very useful to capture duration in the movie.

And how this quest for reality impacts the editing of this movie?

I have a condition when I shoot a film. If it is not so true – and by "true" I mean that it can be borrowed – then I won't try it. Even if I have a shot then I will not use it. So the whole shooting process often stops and starts because some adjustments must be made. When editing, if I find that some parts are unrealistic either technically or because of the actors or actresses, I will cut them. This is how I edit the film.

What location did you use for shooting?

The scenery comes from Inner Mongolia in Hubei province of northeastern China. I liked it because it has a totally imaginary quality, similar to Chinese classical paintings.

The movie has fascinating image quality and every shot looks like a painting. Do you consider yourself as a painter?

No, I don't have much experience as a painter. I remember at school that a teacher asked us to paint a boat. I painted something very quickly and then realised that it was much faster than the others had done. Maybe you are right that I am somehow a painter. I think I might be a good painter, but I prefer to be a filmmaker.

Did you prepare this picturesque set before? Did you try to change anything during actual shooting?

For the events in the Tang Dynasty, they were usually prepared beforehand so it's almost impossible to change because you cannot have immediate preparation and can only shoot what is already prepared. If you want to change on site, it is impossible so I can only shoot as that. If there were no preparation then I wouldn't even think about it. If I cannot do it then I just can't. During editing I would cut the part that is poorly filmed. Actually, we shot a lot and cut a lot since I felt that it was hard to shoot well, especially the part about the children, so I cut them.

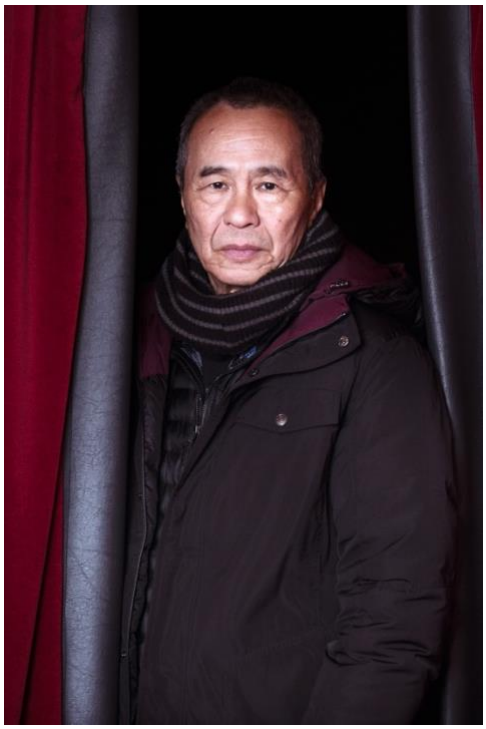
How did you create these striking images in the film?

The images are created using many silk curtains, which were very popular during the Tang Dynasty, as well as purdahs (heavy curtains) and things like that, which are used for separation. Even for a bed, it is handled in this way. We also used many screens (*byobu*). All the materials are silk by nature, which the art director bought in South Korea and India. He went to select the materials in person based on his imagination for the script and one advantage of getting genuine silk materials is that it is very beautiful under the sunshine.

And what about the background like the mountains?

I shot them by using film because I don't know how to use digital. Lee Ping-Bin, my longtime collaborating DP, and I both prefer film, though later on I found out that I had to scan all of the films into digital because everything must be finished in this

format nowadays. It was very simple for me to scan 500,000 frames in the past since I just scanned, made a copy, cut, and finally printed it out. Now after scanning it is very difficult to conform because although I have finished scanning and cutting I have no numbers so I cannot conform, which is big trouble. The technician persuaded me not to do that so I used digital to cut but I then found adjusting light in the digital to be a very different kind. I tried many times but the light adjustment systems are very different and my cameraman did something that had never been tried before in Taiwan. We had attached a lot of importance to adjusting light so when this failed, we found out that there is another system which had never been used in Taiwan and after using this system, you could finally see the current effect. I don't know how long it took using that system so I feel that digital is really not easy. After going through such a long process, we now find that the effect is even worse than before but it will change sooner or later for the better.



What is the relationship between this film and the rest of your body of work?

It is the same as my other movies since I won't accept anything fake or false. It must first be accepted by my eyes or else it is impossible. For example, if the lighting or acting isn't good then I won't take it. It is not important for me whether or not this film is related to my other works since I connect them in my own way. It is kind of weird but I feel that it is fine. Basically l will approve a work only if I can accept it according to my criteria.

Finally, do you have your next project in mind?

The most difficult thing is to find financing for a project so if this film is successful and makes money then I will make another one soon but if not then you will have to wait a long time before I can make another film.

<u>Alza Ma: "Killer Technique" (Film Comment, Sept-Oct 2015)</u>

> Films need people more than stories.
> Landscapes also harbor emotions.
> Music can blow like the wind through a scene.
> —Hirokazu Kore-eda, *Things I Learned from Hou*

An unparalleled reservoir of cultural memory, the *wuxia* genre has deep roots in ancient Chinese history. Fueled by fanciful imagery of Heaven and Hell, these stories about legendary assassins who once roamed the country unfold against the backdrop of China's vastly shifting political climes, bearing an otherworldliness anchored in a certain social realism. Ever pervasive in poetry, novellas, and serials, they have stirred the imagination of filmmakers for as long as the medium has existed in China. The *wuxia* film—combining elements of music, dance, literature, and martial arts—is a total art form that belongs wholly to Chinese tradition. By now it's almost a rite of passage for a major filmmaker from Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Mainland China to make one, from Wong Kar Wai to Jia Zhang-ke.

Once praised by Jia as "the genius narrator passing down the memories of a nation through films," Hou Hsiao-hsien, at age 68, has made his first *wuxia* film. Its long and arduous production (adhering to a $15 million budget) began shortly after *Flight of the Red Balloon* was released in 2008, leaving the longest gap in the Taiwanese filmmaker's career since his first feature in 1980. Because it had originally been scheduled to be completed last year and timed to an international touring retrospective, the anticipation for its Cannes premiere was all the more ardent.

Adapted from the Tang Dynasty short story "Nie Yinniang," *The Assassin* is about a princess (Shu Qi, in a piercing performance) who was abducted from her Imperial family by a nun in exile and trained to become a vigilante killer for the sole purpose of murdering corrupt politicians. As punishment for failing one of her assignments, the nun (Zhou Yun) sends her home to kill her beloved cousin (Chang Chen, who starred opposite Shu Qi in 2005's *Three Times*), now a prominent military leader.

Scenes of breathtaking, expansive, and meditative stillness alternate with swift, cutting sword-fighting action. With his uncanny visual and aural ability to draw the past into the present, Hou instills scenes set in the 9th century with a haunted realism. Whereas

the opiate-tinged beauty of the Qing Dynasty pleasure quarters in *The Flowers of Shanghai* (98) was tempered by formal strictures, here Hou lets cinematographer Mark Lee Ping Bin's indelible long takes linger and steep us in the Imperial grandeur and sublime imagery. His third film to reckon with Chinese history (*The Puppetmaster* was the first film he shot in Mainland China), *The Assassin* is also his most monumental in scale and breadth, and a poised distillation of his aesthetic codes. Delving into themes of captivity and freedom, Hou finds a parallel between his own contrasting visual strategies—defined by rigorous formal planning and on-set improvisation—and the plight of these characters trapped between their piety and unrequited emotional desires.

Can you talk about the history of the *wuxia* genre?

The *wu* in *wuxia* means both "to cut" and "to stop." It also refers to the weapon—usually a sword—carried by the assassin, the hero of the story. The genre became very popular during the Song Dynasty [960–1279]. These stories often depicted a soldier in revolt, usually against a corrupt political leader. In order to stop corruption and the killing of innocent people, the hero must become an assassin.

So *wuxia* stories are concerned with the premise of ending violence with violence. Although their actions are motivated by political reasons, the hero's journey is epic and transformative—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In the Tang Dynasty, a prominent poet named Li Bai wrote some verses about an assassin. This is the earliest example I know of *wuxia* literature.

Gradually, the genre gave shape to ideas and stories that had been percolating in historical and mythological spheres. Although these stories were often inspired by real events of the past, to me they feel very contemporary and relevant.

It's one of the oldest genres in Chinese literature, and there are countless *wuxia* novels today. I began to immerse myself in these novels when I was in elementary school, and they quickly became my favorite things to read. I started with newer books and worked my way back to the earliest writing from the Tang Dynasty.

When did you first encounter *wuxia* films?

They were among the many films I watched by sneaking into movie theaters as a kid. I would tug on the sleeves of the grown-ups in line and ask them to take me inside. In middle school, I often went to the cinema with a friend. We would go to the first screening of that day, and after, when the lights came on, we would look for ticket stubs that had fallen between the seats on the floor. Then, we would go to the ticket-taker booth and steal the other half of the stubs that have been torn off. We glued the two parts together to make a complete ticket.

Back then, there were only four theaters in my hometown of Fengshan. Three would show film, and one was an opera house. I became obsessed with movies there. Every time a new film was on screen, I would go see it. This hobby carried over when I left for Taipei to go to film school. After school, I was a computer salesman for about one year. Those huge machines were very pricey back then! After that, I sought film-related work, and eventually entered the industry as a writer and assistant director. In all these decades, I never stopped reading *wuxia* novels.

When did you decide to adapt Pei Xing's "Nie Yinniang" story?

In university, I was reading a lot of Tang Dynasty literature. The *chuanqi*—which "Nie Yinniang" was written as—was a popular short-story form from that period, and there are many female characters in these stories. I read this *chuanqi* in freshman year, and I loved the idea of a princess turned female assassin. I always kept this book in my memory, and thought about adapting it ever since I entered the industry working as a writer and assistant director.

So you have been waiting to make a *wuxia* film for a long time.

From very early on in my career, it has been my intention, but there is a process to everything. In the beginning, I couldn't afford not to pay attention to things like box-office earnings. I had to appease the market, prove my abilities as a filmmaker, and earn people's trust so they could invest in my future films. What everyone wanted me to make back then were comedies, so that's what I made. They were highly marketable and sold very well. After proving myself,

I earned a position that allowed me to make personal films about my own past experiences: my childhood and how I grew up. I was acutely aware of the *wuxia* film as being the one missing piece of the puzzle, because the memories of those novels from my childhood have lived inside me for all these years.

The reason for this long delay is very clear: it is the most difficult kind of film to make. It is epic on the level of choreography, mise en scène, and movement. You need to set everything perfectly into place before you start, and that requires a lot of preparation and planning. In recent years, I started thinking to myself that if I don't make this soon, I'll keep getting older. The people I work with will get older. So I made the decision to finally adapt one of the *wuxia* novels that captivated my young imagination—to resurrect the Tang Dynasty and the heroine who stirred my imagination. But it wasn't easy. The historical and cultural background of the Tang Dynasty is very complex, which is why traditionally a lot of filmmakers stayed away from portraying this period. A lot of work needed to go into the design to reach a level of authenticity, from the sets to the costumes, down to the smallest details. It took us years to prepare.

I heard you were going to use a Bolex camera. Why did you finally decide against it?

My cinematographer Mark Lee Ping Bin and I did some tests with the Bolex before principal photography in Japan. Although he is a few years younger than me, Lee is not a young man anymore, and he had a difficult time looking through the view-finder of this camera and getting precisely the right shot. One of Lee's assistants, who has been with my company for many years, knew how to use one, but I thought one camera wasn't enough. I wanted to shoot with three cameras on the actors at all times. It was difficult to find anyone else who knew how to use it, so we had the scrap the idea. We decided to go with a regular 35mm film camera. In the end, I shot nearly 500,000 feet of 35mm film!

What would it have been like if you had used a Bolex, and made the film in 16mm?

I specifically wanted to use a wind-up. You wind the camera up, and shoot for less than one minute, and you have to wind it up again. I like the inscribed structure of this filming process and the inherent limitation it posed. I always want to set some kind of external limit for myself before working. They become a very important part of my process and the structuring principle of each film. *Flowers of Shanghai*, for example, was made with only 30 shots. I believe that imposing such limits forces an artist to be more creative. Complicating the terms of the filmmaking process with these structures can lead to interesting surprises beyond what I could have imagined on my own.

How does this artistic tenet relate to the Nie Yinniang character?

An externally imposed set of limits also defines her freedom. Yet it's those limits that bring forth her unrequited emotions and her destiny. As with her life—and with filmmaking—you need to know your limit before you can know where you're going. Without this structure, you may have absolute freedom, but have no direction. Without direction, your imagination can't be activated. Once you know the perimeter that defines your reality, you would no longer waste time contemplating where those limits lie, because they become part of your concrete reality. Only then can you know your true freedom.

Can you talk about how the script came together, and your collaboration with the three other writers?

Xie Hai Meng is an author I admire, and a Tang specialist. I got her together with Zhong Acheng and Chu Tien-Wen, and we had long conversations about the historical background for the film. Details from the Imperial court in this period were all very scrupulously recorded and passed down. We read them and looked for details that had dramatic qualities. It was most important to pin down the exact historical moment when this story could have happened. We needed to know this before thinking about the inner qualities of each character.

When did you know you were going to shoot in Mongolia and Hubei province?

As soon as we finished the script, I went to Hubei province. I found indelible landscapes there. We went to a village where the way the people live hasn't changed very much from ancient times. They still reside in large agrarian families. In the nighttime

they light fires and go to sleep with it burning next to their beds. I left these interiors virtually untouched during the filming process. The forests there were too small for the fight scenes, so we went to Inner Mongolia to shoot those outdoor scenes.

Were Shu Qi and Chang Chen involved from the beginning?

I had them in mind from the very beginning, even before I started writing the script. I've worked with Shu Qi on many films now. I can understand Shu Qi's range of emotional states very well. I also understood very clearly how Chang Chen could inhabit his role. We see each other at film festivals often, and we always call each other over holidays. I always see them when I'm in Hong Kong. We're very good friends, and I love collaborating with them.

What was the biggest challenge for the actors?

The biggest challenge was getting the right emotional tenor while speaking in this old language [*guwen*, or Classical Chinese]. The spoken language back then was different from the written language. It had a much smaller vocabulary, and did not communicate emotional subtleties easily. Language was more basic back then. Or you could say that each word carried much more meaning. The actors had to practice how to draw out the emotional nuances in their performances with their bodies and faces, because they couldn't rely on the dialogue. That was the most difficult part. It's not a big deal if they mess up the lines—we can always fix that in postproduction. The important thing is we get the shifting emotional qualities of each character.

You often set aside your scripts when you're filming. Was this the case with *The Assassin*?

Although we worked on the script for a long time, when it came time to film, we were faced with the reality of the present moment. After we see all the actors in their costumes inhabiting the sets for the first time and how the natural light of the location affects the image, when the concept is met with concrete execution, certain adjustments are always needed. Once we were on location, I needed to make all kinds of recalibrations until I could convince myself this was a scene from the past—that it held the flavor of the Tang Dynasty, and felt it was okay to begin shooting. Aside from setting the atmosphere, some of the dramatic moments often needed to be revised, so the script would also change accordingly.

Did you stick with your no-rehearsal rule?

Indeed, no rehearsals. The only rehearsal we did was for the dance sequence, just to memorize the choreography. Everything else, including the fights, had to be spontaneous and unstudied. I want to feel like the actors are speaking to me directly, and I am filming them directly. If it doesn't work, we try again. Sometimes, we wait a few days and try again. Sometimes we discarded the scene entirely. I can tell by looking in the eyes of my actors if they are not ready for a scene yet. This method also gives them a positive kind of pressure. If they know what they're doing isn't working, they can find another approach quickly because they learn to be impulsive.

How did you conceive of realism with this story from such a remote location and time?

Conceptualizing the realism of the Tang Dynasty first begins with the written word. I started by rereading all the books from my childhood, and reawakened their worlds in my mind. Books written during and about the Tang period, especially in the *chuanqi* form, often described scenes of daily life in great detail. People had their distinct castes: Imperial court workers, poets, doctors, and so on. I respond very intuitively to the written word. In each Chinese character, there is a world of connotations. For example, the old character for bed, *ta*, describes the various parts of the bed; its shape and functions are all represented in this single Chinese character. The word for dance, *wu*, describes the body, dressed in traditional clothing in motion. Sometimes, I couldn't find the specific detail I was looking for in my research, but from these characters you can reverse-engineer a great deal of Chinese history.

I tried to close in on some key details of daily life, and then zoom out to a wider canvas. For example, I learned that at dawn and dusk, the sound of the beating of drums would fill the streets.

According to Tang custom, 3,000 drumbeats would sound from the imperial quarters. Every *li* [the unit in which distance was measured at the time], there is another drum that starts to beat, until everyone knew it was time to get up. This signified the beginning of a day. When it got dark, the drums would beat 500 times. This meant curfew time, when people had to stay confined to within one *li* of their living quarters. You can learn all this by reading the *wuxia* novels carefully. Beneath all the mystical or fantastic elements, you will find traces of daily minutiae, which help you understand the limits that defined life back then—how each day was bookended.

I read one book about a fox spirit who takes on human form and falls in love with a man. The other women in the village become suspicious of her identity because she goes to the market to buy clothes, rather than making them herself. From that, I learned that all women used to sew their own clothes in those days. Through these different levels of understanding, a reality of this past can slowly present itself. All you need is a little extra imagination to complete the picture. Of course, no one living has seen the Tang Dynasty with their own eyes. Moreover, the paintings of that period were very minimalist. But the more I read about it and steeped myself in it, the more real this world became to me.

Can you explain the motif of the bluebird and the mirror in the story first told by Nie Yinniang's master, and later recalled by Nie?

This imagery came from Tang Dynasty literature. It quickly became a widely used metaphor all over the country. In the original story, the bluebird is a peacock, an exotic pet kept by the King of Jibing. Wishing it would sing, the Queen and King decide to place a mirror in front of it, hoping it might think its reflection was a companion who had come to visit. When it saw its own image, it began to sing out all its sadness until death came the next morning. The mirror and the bluebird are interchangeable metaphors for the self, and the deepest sadness, and loneliness. It describes the emotional quality of someone living in solitude, like Nie Yinniang, who was taken to Weibo and lived in isolation, away from everyone she knew.

What kind of directions did you give to Lim Giong for the film's percussive score?

I left the music completely up to Lim Giong. He always knows just what I'm looking for. He recorded the sounds of popular instruments used in Tang music and familiarized himself with their sonic qualities before composing the score. The drums in the first part of the film correspond to the dawn or dusk, as I just described.

It's been eight years since your last film, *Flight of the Red Balloon*, came out. Can you comment on the vast changes that have taken place in the Asian film industry?

For three of these eight years, I was serving as the president of the Taipei Film Festival. For the last five years I have been the president of the Golden Horse Awards. I have been observing the shifting landscape of contemporary Asian cinema from these positions on the other side of filmmaking. I've seen a huge spike in the number of Mainland films being made year after year. Inversely, Hong Kong productions have slowed down considerably. It's an undeniable fact that the Mainland film market is increasing in magnitude. Given the population there, and the new theaters being built, it's not surprising. Sadly, the Taiwan market seems to be getting smaller. People are making fewer films here compared to eight years ago. In general, there is less local cinema being made compared to eight years ago. What is local film identity? Being able to really look at your environment, the people in it, and be inspired to condense all this into a script for a film that in turn reflects back on daily life. That's what the Taiwanese New Wave represented. Of course, these types of films have always been rare around the world, and they have a small audience. They are outliers in the market. Now audiences in Mainland are viewing all kinds of films online. In this ever-changing climate, perhaps there will be a new wave.

You've talked about your dream of owning your own cinema. Have you realized this dream yet?

I have three art-house theaters in Taiwan. They're called Spot cinemas, and I think they may be the only places that still project celluloid.

Will your next film be shot on 35mm, like *The Assassin*?

I'm pretty sure it will be digital, because it's so expensive to shoot on film these days. If you use film, the footage needs to be scanned digitally, which takes a lot of time and money. I'm thinking to myself, maybe forget about film, and try going digital. I've been putting it off until now. With celluloid, other tests are required to find the tone, palette, texture of the exact image I need to create. With *Goodbye South, Goodbye* [96], I added red filters to accentuate the indigos and greens and blacks in Taiwan's landscapes. We do this before shooting each film, including *The Assassin*, to find the right tone for the image. With *The Assassin*, all the "effects" were applied directly on the camera, and not in the postproduction process. In making this switch to digital, I'll need to do a lot of tests. I'll try a lot of different filters. I need to grasp the essence of this digital medium first—to find its limit. Only then will I be able to determine whether it works for me.

Mekado Murphy: "In 'The Assassin,' a Director Blends the Fantastical and the Realistic" (*New York Times*,Oct 7, 2015)

The opening scenes of "The Assassin," Hou Hsiao-Hsien's ninth-century tale of a young Chinese woman's abduction by a nun and training to be a killer, unfold in black and white. But not long after, color fills the frame, adding vivid punctuation to picturesque locations. The imagery, the scene design and the settings make the film (opening Friday, Oct. 16 and also playing in the New York Film Festival) feel almost painterly.

It is the first time this Taiwanese director has made a movie rooted in martial arts, and he was inspired by wuxia, a genre of Chinese fiction that he read as a college student.

"I liked these short stories because they were realistic yet also kind of fantastical," Mr. Hou said by Skype from Taipei, speaking through an interpreter. And he took an untraditional approach to the martial arts genre, using action to occasionally break up a more subdued, meditative narrative. Here is a look at scenes and imagery from "The Assassin," with commentary from Mr. Hou.

Landscapes: In the Clouds

To create a sense of a time long past, Mr. Hou and his team traveled to locations in China that had changed little in decades. "We looked for higher-altitude places where modern society hasn't come in," he said.

One of those spots was the Shennongjia district in Hubei province. Scenes in which the title character, Yinniang (Shu Qi), learns her trade take place high in the mountains where clouds move through the frame like fog. These are not visual effects, just the director and his cinematographer, Mark Lee Ping Bing, taking advantage of otherworldly locations.

Mr. Hou and his team used the environment as part of the filmmaking as well. "We allowed the weather to change the content," he said. "If it started snowing, we would not stop shooting." The camera relishes nature, holding on long takes of rustling trees with the sound of birds in the background.

The crew traveled further north into a starker, colder landscape in Inner Mongolia. One fight scene is staged in a windswept birch forest with mostly leafless trees, allowing room for the two fighters to move freely with their weapons.

Fights: True And Messy

Mr. Hou approached the martial arts action from a more practical perspective. "The fighting sequences are based on the limits of the characters themselves," he said. "When we watch fighting movies and see people flying, I don't find that realistic. So developing the characters and the action, I kept them in the realm of what they could actually accomplish."

This meant choreography that was a little messy. Additionally, the actors were not trained in action or stunts, so the choreography needed to work for people with limited skills. Mr. Hou asked the cast to break the fighting into small sections, which he would shoot one at a time.

Some of the action was captured in wide shots, a perspective Mr. Hou has frequently used in

his films. He put his camera on a track at a distance; sometimes the actors didn't know exactly where it was. He wouldn't call action but instead just let the actors start fighting when they felt ready.

Interiors: Natural Light

As much emphasis is placed on the warm interiors as on external shots. From the stories he read, Mr. Hou had long been interested in traditions of the Tang dynasty, but he did more research into life then. He studied paintings from the period to get a sense of what a room needed. And the stories he had read offered more specifics. "Much of the furniture was multiuse," he said, "so you could sit on it, sleep on it or stand on it."

Mr. Hou has a 20-year working relationship with the production designer Hwarng Wern-Ying, who also serves as the costume designer, and they have developed a shorthand over that time. "Before each shot, she draws a picture of the scene and shows it to me," Mr. Hou said. "I trust her so much that there aren't a lot of changes being made."

It was important to Mr. Hou for everything to seem natural and authentic: "If we shoot during the daytime, we will try to use natural lighting to light the colors of the room. If it's at night, then the light should look as close to candlelight as possible." (Above from left, Chang Chen and Hsieh Hsin-Ying.) Some interior scenes were shot from a camera outside, so the sheer curtains would move in and out of the frame, covering, then revealing, the characters.

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