

# Analysis of the Similarities and Differences between The Assassin Nie Yinniang and the New Taiwanese Films

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**Abstract:** Director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film *The Assassin Nie Yinniang* diverges from the conventions of the New Taiwanese Cinema movement, blending black and white with color tones to reflect the emotional and thematic nuances of its protagonist, Nie Yinniang. stands apart from typical martial arts films by de-emphasizing elaborate combat scenes and instead focusing on ambiance and an exploration of loneliness. The film depicts a journey of conflicting ideologies between righteousness and personal emotions, as Nie Yinniang transitions from an assassin adhering to Taoist teachings to a woman entangled in familial affections and personal values. While the film maintains technical elements and filming techniques characteristic of the New Taiwanese Cinema, its thematic divergence focusing on individual subjective expression sets it apart. Unlike the movement's societal reflections, the film delves into personal narrative, exploring the internal conflict of its central character amidst cultural and familial ties. *The Assassin Nie Yinniang* thereby embodies a unique departure from the thematic trajectory of the New Taiwanese Cinema while maintaining some of its stylistic elements.

**Keywords:** Taiwanese New Films; Hou Hsiao-Hsien; Black and White vs. Color Tones; Taoist Teachings.

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## 1. Introduction

*The Assassin Nie Yinniang* is a martial arts film directed by Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao Hsien. However, unlike other martial arts films, it does not focus on the excitement of the fight scenes, and the pace is much slower than other martial arts films. It seems that the film is just a cold-eyed spectator from beginning to end, but one can't help but feel the emotion of the film, there is warmth in distance, and there is compassion in indifference. In the filming of *The Son's Big Doll*, Hou Hsiao-Hsien mixed with other overseas directors, and he was confused by the Hollywood-style techniques that those directors had learnt in the West. At this time, a good friend gave him a book, "Shen Congwen's Autobiography", and it was the point of view expressed in this book, which was concerned about life itself, that guided him, and enabled him to preserve his own unique wildness and vigour, and to find a style that belonged to him.

## 2. The Theme and the Differences between This Film and Traditional Martial Arts Films

The biggest difference between this film and other martial arts films is that it hardly relies on flashy fight scenes and the assassin's vocation of "assassination". Instead, the film downplays the plot and focuses on creating an atmosphere. The theme of the film is clearly implied in the allusion to *Dancing Mirror and Luen Shui* at the beginning of the film: Miaoqi is the bird that can't find its companion. The film's control of reality and fiction is more in the style of writing. The film revolves around a tragic character who is unable to find a companion and almost all of the film is devoted to depicting this unappreciated loneliness. Therefore, the theme of this film is to tell a kind of jianghu character in the director's mind, an assassin who is strong on the outside but soft on the inside, an ordinary person with flesh and blood,

and her insistence on her own way of being a martial arts warrior.

Traditional martial arts films focus on the design of the fight scenes, often using blood-curdling fight scenes to fill in the climax or to arrange plot changes. In terms of thematic design, the film is more concerned with telling the story, using the love and hatred of the children of the jianghu as the basic element, designing and arranging conflicts. These traditional martial arts films usually have a mythological protagonist to a certain extent, and the plot is designed in a typical three-part structure. However, this is not the case with *The Assassin Nie Yinniang*. The whole film is very plain and there are no intense scenes. Even the fights are quiet, with only a few moves to win. For example, in the film, Myrtle Seven intentionally appears in front of her cousin to attract him to go up to the roof of the house. The ambient sound is used throughout the film, with only footsteps and the sound of weapons clashing. The long shot of the two fighting on the roof also makes the pace not to be elevated. Even the action scenes, which are left out of the fast editing process, don't create too much emotional turmoil for the audience. It's as if the film is just recounting a trivial matter of daily life. This treatment not only follows the tone of the atmosphere that the film tries to achieve but also highlights the main character's own lonely, isolated and contradictory state of mind.

Traditionally, martial arts films focus on portraying the external actions of the characters, and the inner portrayal of the heart is weakened, only as the driving force for action to be dealt with in a simple way. For example, in the Wong Fei Hung series. Most of the time, the main character is making a decision or carrying out a certain belief. The editing speed is very high, and the shots are many and varied. *The Assassin Nie Yinniang* is the complete opposite of this, as all the external actions are meant to portray an internal struggle. In the second assassination scene, in order to portray the character of Myrtle, the director spends a lot of time showing the target's warm and harmonious family life, in order to let

the audience understand the world through Myrtle's eyes. By facing everything from the same perspective, the director's aim can be felt very directly.

In the final part of the film, the Taoist nun knows that Nieh Hinniang is no longer an assassin, and they decide to end their relationship with each other, but the fight is also over. In Hou Hsiao Hsien's eyes, the jianghu is not filled with blood and gore, but rather focuses on the rules and the so-called "way". Instead, it is about the rules and the so-called "way". After a fight, the high and the low are decided immediately, and they go their separate ways from then on, and the bloodshed is meaningless. This is perhaps one of the more romantic and profound aspects of Jianghu in the eyes of director Hou Hsiao-hsien. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, this is a film that focuses more on the director's self-expression, and more on the expression of martial arts on a spiritual level. It is a film that focuses more on the spiritual aspect of martial arts. It is a film that focuses more on the virtual and irrational aspect of the combination of reality and fiction.

### 3. Black and White and Colourful Tones, and Nieh Hinniang's Human Emotions and Compassion

In the film director Hou Hsiao-Hsien uses both black and white and color tones, breaking the convention of new Taiwanese films.

In the first part of the film, when Yao Qi and the Taoist nun (Princess Jiaxin) are together, black and white are used; after she is arranged to go home and assassinate Tian Ji'an, colour is used. In the first part, Yao Qi's father brings her to the Taoist nun to learn the sword. As Yao Qi's master, the Taoist nun gives her what she thinks is right: to punish evil, eliminate evil, and stand for a certain position of false righteousness. "You have become a skilled swordsman, but your heart of the Tao is not strong" is her assessment of Yao Qi, which is because Yao Qi saw the target, she wanted to kill had a beautiful family and could not bear to kill him. So, the Taoist nun thinks that her position is not strong enough, and she still has the least worldly benevolence as an assassin. Yao Qi's heart does not agree with this viewpoint, but she cannot reveal it under the idea of "being a teacher for a day equals to a parent for a lifetime," and her heart is full of suppression. At the same time, this film is a typical emotional work, so the black and white tone is used to express the emotion and atmosphere of Yao Qi.

The colorful part is used after Nieh Yinniang returns to her family. At this time, Yao Qi had a close family to rely on, and this affection and the events of her hometown further deepened her emotions. The clothes her mother sewed for her, the jade penannular ring given to her by the princess, her old lover Tian Ji'an and her wife and son, all of them have left indelible traces of affection in her heart and soul. After all those things, it's hard for her to be cold-blooded and ruthless only for the sake of so-called righteousness. Therefore, at this point, emotions in the film are full of sensuality and tenderness. In Yao Qi's mind, emotions are much greater than the righteousness taught to her by the Taoist nun. Or perhaps she has a new definition of righteousness. "The way of the sword has no relatives, not with the sage; you have now sword skills but cannot cut off the bond of humanity." This Taoist nun's view of the way of the sword is denied here by Yao Qi, who cannot cut off humanity's bond, but her heart has already

determined what she wants to do.

### 4. Compared with the Characteristics of New Taiwanese Films

*The Assassin Nie Yinniang* theme is full of strong personal and subjective expression. Director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film is more about showing the Jiang Hu in his own eyes or the story of Nie Yinniang as a character. It has little to do with the themes of new Taiwanese films, which generally reflect on social issues and thoughts on society through the changes or growth of characters over a long period.

However, at the same time, new Taiwanese films is equally keen on exploring women's changing status and role amid social changes. They often depict the tragic side of women and portray many simple, kind-hearted images. In this regard, *The Assassin Nie Yinniang* itself is also a tragic story about a woman but otherwise does not have much in common thematically.

In terms of filming techniques, *The Assassin Nie Yinniang* continues the characteristics of new Taiwanese films, which uses natural light to shoot and express first. High-key lighting is evident in many scenes. At the same time, a large number of long shots and depth-of-field shots in the film are characteristics of the new Taiwanese cinema. The new film absorbs Western cinema's advanced technology and artistic techniques, focusing on sound, light, and images to express the connotation. Instead of emphasizing the complete dramatic structure and plot, they are good at structuring the story in prose style, for example, paying attention to expressing feelings in ordinary and everyday life details and scenes, showing a plain and elegant artistic style. The new film has a simple and elegant artistic style and leaves the audience space for reflection and enlightenment.

### 5. Conclusion

In terms of shooting style, the new film's pursuit of realistic style is manifested by 1) the use of dialect in the dialogue according to the needs of the plot; 2) the use of non-professional actors instead of big stars; 3) the extensive use of live-action and exterior scenes, and 4) the preference for natural lighting effects. The presence of literary dialogues in *The Assassin Nie Yinniang* is similar to the effect of dialect. Many non-professional actors were used, some with very weak line-speaking skills, and these settings are very much in line with the filmmaking styles of the new films.

In general, *The Assassin Nie Yinniang* has undeniable characteristics of new Taiwanese films, but it is not essentially a work that should be classified as one of them. The filming technique is maintained due to the resignation of the unchangeability on a technical level, and the difference in themes is the main reason it should not be counted as new film work.

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