



## THE ASSASSIN

**\*\*\*1/2 (Audio: C-, Video: C+, Features: C+)**

*Zhang Fengyi, Rosamund Kwan, Max Mok. Directed by Chung Siu Hung. Released by CAV Distribution. Hong Kong (Cantonese/Mandarin). 95 minutes. Not rated. Trailers.*

Period Hong Kong martial arts films that also stand up as convincing period pieces are increasingly few and far between, but "The Assassin" makes the cut by leaps and bounds, thanks to the strength of stars Zhang Fengyi and Rosamund Kwan.

The story of Tong Po Ka, a prisoner whose gladiatorial survival skills earned made him a coveted but reluctant assassin, "The Assassin" is a riveting action and martial arts picture with a thoughtful soul at its center. And while it's technically a "swordsman" genre film, Zhang Fengyi's deft handling of a difficult character lends it a weight that most such films patently lack.

Best known for his lead role in "Farewell My Concubine," Fengyi here forges a character closer his other screen assassin, that of "The Emperor and the Assassin," a similarly conflicted and passionate figure from Chinese history. Rosamund Kwan, best known as Aunt Yee in the "Once Upon a Time in China" films, is also at her level best here, always a tempering and underrated influence.

Overall quality of the picture and sound is average for most Hong Kong pictures -- as spotty and uneven as the source materials, though the actual transfer of those materials is quite decent. Any such flaws here, however, are minimized by the quality of the cinematography and the scale of the staging which, even by Western standards, is quite impressive.

Extras include a trailer for both this film and the Jet Li film "Last Hero in China."

*-By Wade Major*

Collector Rating: WORTH FULL PRICE

## "The Assassin"

Released in Hong Kong:1993

Rating: \*\*\*



Mark Pollard / [www.kungfucinema.com](http://www.kungfucinema.com)

### Synopsis

Tong Po Ka is separated from Yiu, his lover and thrown into prison. After being tortured, Tong is pitted against his fellow prisoners in a life and death contest to select a new assassin for the kingdom. Having survived, he is renamed "Tong Chop" and enters the service of the kingdom's sadistic ruler. After a series of successful assassinations alongside Wong Kau, his new friend and fellow assassin, Tong fails a mission when he finds himself unable to kill a child. Wong, his ambitious friend finishes the job while Tong retreats into the mountains to escape his grim occupation. Tong happens upon his Yiu, who has remarried and begins a new life with her family and neighbors until he is found by his fellow assassins. Tong must face Wong, who has taken his place as top assassin and confront the kingdom's ruler.

### Review (3 stars)

THE ASSASSIN is a stylish and bloody film featuring some terrific actors, including Zhang Feng-yi (FAREWELL MY CONCUBINE) and Rosamund Kwan in an ambitious yet dizzying story that may leave viewers frustrated at first glance. This colorful film sports impressive outdoor imagery, menacing sets, and fanciful fights that could have come from Tsui Hark's masterpiece, THE BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR. The film also earned a category III rating for containing absolutely fiendish graphic violence where huge swords cleave limbs and vicious metal claws tear apart unsuspecting victims. The rapid pace of editing seen throughout the film (more on that later), greatly enhances the first scene where we see Tong engage in his first assignment with his cohorts. As the objectives and assigned positions are described to the assassins, the camera quickly pans through the narrow street, showing each assassin waiting in his hiding spot. Incredibly, one assassin even waits submerged in a nearby body of water covered with ice. Once the battle erupts, the camera deftly slides left down one side of the street, scrolling through the carnage. While the choreography is pure fantasy, the story's grim tone and the leading actors' somber performances keep the film from leaping completely past the realm of reality. Zhang Feng-yi plays the lead with no emotion and appears appropriately weary at times. His martial counterpart is Wong, played by Max Mok who is less convincing in his role as a ruthless killer. Rosamund Kwan's character, Yiu gets less screen time than she should have considering the character's relationship to Tong.

What the actors cannot help is the story's manic pace and abrupt editing. While modern action films from Hong Kong are well known for their visually high-octane editing, THE ASSASSIN appears to have taken that style to heart with the story's pacing as well. Most scenes appear hurried and the story which must have taken place over a couple of years is presented in a "Foot Notes" fashion as if the filmmakers were either pressured to keep the film short or significant cuts took place in post-production.

Its unfortunate that the film's story which has potential is marred by poor editing. The actors have little else to do but try and keep up. Against other swordplay films such as THE BLADE and Wong Kar Wai's ASHES OF TIME, that both mixed grim realism with stylish editing, THE ASSASSIN marginally holds its own thanks to the raw intensity of its violence and snatches of inspired cinematography.