

THE BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR



Directed by Tung Kan Wu

Produced by Richard Tu

Written by Yi Kuang and Tu Liang-Ti

Music by Chen Tsun Chi

Cinematography by Woo Kuo Hsiao

Cast: Hwang Jang Li, Meng Hoi, Chien Yuet San, Lung Fei, Hu Chin Ying, Hou Po Wei, Fang Fang, Chen Ti Men, Chong Yi Kuei, Yu Hsiao-Chao

Video: Full Frame (1.33:1)

Subtitles: None

Packaging: Keepcase

Chapter Stops: 8

Trailer

85 Minutes

Korean superstar Hwang Jang Li and Meng Hoi first appeared opposite one another in Fortuna Film's 1979 martial arts classic, *HELL'S WINDSTAFF*. The success of that film warranted a follow-up, and Fortuna Films was quick to recapture the chemistry they shared. The studio hired filmmaker Tung Kan Wu to direct the following effort, *BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR*, which provided meaty roles for both actors in addition to their requisite martial arts skills. Hwang Jang Li made a career for himself playing the lead villains in several Kung Fu classics (which translates to little screen time and limited speaking roles), while *BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR* offers Hwang Jang Li star billing, and plenty of screen time (even though he still plays the villain). Meng Hoi is an under appreciated actor/stunt choreographer who toiled in the low-budget Hong Kong arena before achieving success in noted films like *LEGACY OF RAGE*, *MILLIONAIRE'S EXPRESS*, and *HEART OF THE DRAGON*. *BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR* comes to DVD from CAV/World Video, in that company's ever-growing line of Kung Fu treasures.

Prince Tsoi (Hwang Jang Li) is the cruel lord of the Ching regime. He has earned his high rank by using his Lohan Fist techniques to destroy the Ming rebels, who, in turn have targeted Prince Tsoi for assassination. Enter Shao Hai (Meng Hoi), a naive Kung Fu scholar who earns a living by acting as a janitor for the local Shaolin Temple. The monks here apparently don't take their positions too seriously, as they spend their days bullying Shao Hai instead of praying or practicing the martial arts. Shao Hai lives with his Aunt who adopted him, and learns the martial arts from his drunken master Uncle (Chien Yuet San, doing his best Sam the Seed routine), formerly a head monk of the local temple. The day Prince Tsoi comes to the temple, Shao Hai watches the arrival from the roofs above. He sees incognito rebel assassins about to attack Prince Tsoi, and yells out to the Prince to take cover. Upon hearing Shao Hoi's warning, the guards leap into action and chase off the rebel offenders. Prince Tsoi then shows his gratitude towards Shao Hai for potentially saving his life.

Prince Tsoi (who really doesn't like Shao Hai) allows the young man to think he has gained favor with the Ching. So this immediately goes to the head of Shao Hai and he goes around alienating those around him. Meanwhile, Shao Hai's Uncle asks him to spy on Prince Tsoi to determine which form of martial arts he practices. When Shao Hai informs his Uncle that the Prince practices Lohan style, he convinces Shao Hai to ask Prince Tsoi to teach him this super secret form of Kung Fu. The Prince is suspicious of Shao Hai's desire to learn Lohan Fist, but agrees because he sees the kid as a pawn of the rebels. In short time, Shao Hai learns Lohan and Buddhist Fist techniques. He finally gets to apply these skills when masked rebel assassins penetrate the palace security to kill the Prince. He beats off the assassins, and manages to kill one. When he removes the mask of the dead rebel, Shao Hai goes into shock when the assassin is none other than his Aunt who adopted him. Shao Hai now realizes that he is on the wrong side of this conflict. He goes to seek the advice of his Uncle, who recruits him into the rebellion, something that his Aunt firmly believed in.

The Prince's advisors warn him that someday Shao Hai could become a potentially great opponent with Lohan Fist training. But the Prince still plans to use Shao Hai to expose the underground. Over time, Shao Hai becomes more knowledgeable with the Lohan techniques, and begins to train his Uncle. The Prince finally catches on about whom Shao Hai is, and demands he send his Uncle to the palace to face him. After the two fight to a standstill, the Prince's guards interrupt the fight, giving the Uncle the opportunity to escape. The angered Prince Tsoi organizes a search party to track down and kill Shao Hai and his Uncle. Meanwhile, both men have hidden themselves in the forest where Uncle begins training his nephew in the ways of the Buddhist's Palm; the only know method of counteracting the Lohan Fist. After undergoing training of the Five Elements Buddha's Palm techniques, the enlightened Shao Hai returns to the palace to challenge his opponent. He fights through Prince Tsoi's bodyguards to finally engage the Prince himself. Shao Hai must defeat the Prince not only to avenge his Aunt's death, but in the name of freedom itself...

BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR was filmed in the aftermath of Jackie Chan's DRUNKEN MASTER, so it is very close in plot and structure. Much like that heralded film, BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR includes quite a bit of goofy humor, but I have to admit Meng Hoi balances the levity and martial arts pretty well, nearly as good as Sammo Hung. Some funny moments include Meng Hoi getting beat up in a gambling parlor. The thugs outnumber him and beat him down and then pig-pile on top of his body. His drunken Uncle runs into the room and instead of saving his nephew, jumps on top of the pig-pile instead (crushing his nephew even more). Meng Hoi plays his character with an immature naiveté, which is the complete opposite of Hwang Jang Li, who portrays Prince Tsoi with deadly seriousness, (with the exceptions of some evil grins, of course). Though Meng Hoi and Hwang Jang Li don't fight each other until the end, they both share some great scenes together, such as when Prince Tsoi "befriends" Shao Hai. Though the movie is humorous and offers some fine fight choreography, it suffers from slack pacing and Kung Fu clichés (such as the training sequences that never seem to end).

Underneath all this humor is a historical subplot on the Buddha Fist style. At one time Meng Hoi's Uncle and Prince Tsoi trained together at the same school. When they left the school, Prince Tsoi learned the Buddhist Fist while Uncle mastered Buddha's Palm. Both these styles complemented each other, but neither one had the upper hand. The Chings recruited Prince Tsoi who quickly rose in rank, and Uncle became a key member of the Ming revolutionaries. The script has Prince Tsoi doing away with any other practitioners of the Buddhist Fist, so he is the only one left who has mastered it. Meng Hoi's character eventually benefits from learning both styles from each of his masters. During the training sequences, Chien Yuet San teaches Meng Hoi the five elements of the Buddhist Palm. Meng Hoi is amazingly nimble and acrobatic despite his diminutive size, and pulls off the intricate movements even though he is not an intimidating fighter. Hwang Jang Li really cuts loose on Meng Hoi and Chien Yuen San with his head-snapping kicks. He demonstrates three different sub-forms of Lohan Style, called Dragon Stance, Catching the Eagle, and Flying Horse Kick. Though I have some issues about the plot and pacing of BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR, the final fight scene between Hwang Jang Li and Meng Hoi makes up for the film's many weaknesses. This is some of Li's best work here, and Hoi manages to keep up with the Korean Taekwondo champion. We witness a 10 minute display of all the styles (and sub-forms) shown earlier in the movie.

SIGHT

BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR was originally released in the 1.85.1 aspect ratio. CAV's transfer mattes the film to 1.33.1. The fight choreography is mostly one-on-one in nature and is not lost in the cropping—the action is perfectly captured in the center of the frame. The video master used for the transfer is in very good shape; scratches, dirt, and other blemishes are minimal. The color is accurate and the black level is truly deep. There is no softness in the image, as in the transfer for CHINESE SUPER NINJAS. The detail level is also good, but because the cinematography and production design are weak, you never notice the enhanced resolution of the backgrounds. The one area where the movie excels is the wild costuming. Though the peasants and revolutionaries are plain, the Prince and his followers sport extravagant threads. CAV's presentation allows you to marvel at the costume designers' handiwork. The opening credit sequence to BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR, features Hwang Jang Li and Chien Yuen San fighting inside a colorfully lit temple, with a giant statue of Buddha in the background. Too bad the movie didn't keep producing this exotic imagery. Considering the 1980 vintage (and the ultra low-budget) of BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR, CAV puts forth a pleasing full frame transfer.

SOUND

CAV presents the audio in Dolby Digital Mono 2.0. The soundtrack is clean with a wide frequency range. There are no unwanted audio anomalies like hiss, drop-outs, or background noise. The sound effects consist of the martial arts strikes, leaps, and bone-cracking kicks. The English dubbing is sloppy at times, which really adds to the goofy humor element. There is not a single "but still" in the entire movie. Many of the voice actor's sport Australian accents, which makes BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR seem even more bizarre. Still, the dialog is prominent in the soundtrack, and exhibits no distortion. The music is by Chen Hsun Chi, a specialist in the Hong Kong low-budget industry. The score is good, but does not add to any of the dramatic moments. For instance when Shao Hai's mother is killed, there is no pathos or emotion because the score does not react to this tragic event.

FEATURES

From the Main Menu, you can access the Trailer sub-menu to view World Video's English language compilation trailers for THE SHAOLIN KID, THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE, and BORN TO DEFENSE.

CONCLUSION

BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR is recommended to those who prefer their Kung Fu with comedic touches. Fans of Hwang Jang Li will also get a charge out of the film, since he receives as much screen time as the protagonist, Meng Hoi. If you worship Chang Cheh, there's probably no need to pick up BUDDHA ASSASSINATOR. The transfer is commendable, and the overall DVD presentation is satisfactory. However, CAV's DVD authoring still includes pauses at the chapter marks, a problem that plagued their initial releases. This slight pause is about a half-second long, so it doesn't distract from the viewing experience, but CAV should have addressed this technical issue by now.

There's an unwritten rule in Hong Kong cinema that says every Kung Fu comedy must have a dirty drunken martial arts master!

-- Tony Mustafa

Movie: 3.0 Extras: 1.0

Video: 3.0 Overall: 3.0

Audio: 3.