

Visiting Speaker Series 2016-17 Term 1

# The Something of Nothing: Buddhism and *The Assassin*

## Victor FAN

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**5 Oct 2015 (Wednesday)**

**4:00 – 5:30pm**

**Room 1118, 11/F,**

**Yasumoto International Academic Park**

### ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Victor Fan is Senior Lecturer at Film Studies, King's College London and Film Consultant of the Chinese Visual Festival. His articles appeared in journals including *Camera Obscura*, *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, *Screen and Film History: An International Journal*. His book *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* was published in 2015 by the University of Minnesota Press.

### ABOUT THE TALK

After *Cike Nie Yingniang* [*The Assassin*, Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2015] has garnered Best Director from Cannes, many film critics have found the film exceptionally beautiful, yet content-wise, it seems to convey nothing. In fact, Kay Hoddy from [Easternkicks.com](http://Easternkicks.com) compares the film with a Ming-dynasty vase: "Beautiful ... but just as empty." In a sense, Hoddy is absolutely right. If one manages to see nothing after viewing *The Assassin*, one has indeed understood that *something* the film seeks to convey. Getting something or getting nothing from this film, I argue, depends on the way one approaches its reality. For some viewers, *The Assassin* conveys an ideal central to Chan (Zen) Buddhism: *mingxin jianxing* (illuminate the heart, thus allowing *prakrti*—popularly translated as nature—to reveal itself). Nevertheless, for others, the film is merely Hou's aesthetic exercise. Both opinions are honest evaluations of the film, and they are in fact one single idea seen from two different perspectives.

In my presentation, I will illustrate my point by first contextualizing *The Assassin* within Hou's realist aesthetics, which I shall draw from a conversation I had with the director himself. Such realist aesthetics, I propose, is best understood in terms of the concept of *xieyi* (describing ideation), originated in art commentaries and criticisms during the Song dynasty (960–1279) and was appropriated in film theories during the Republican period (1911–49), which was in turn informed by Buddhism. I will then use key concepts from Weishi Buddhism 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.

**Free Admission**

**The seminar is conducted in English**

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