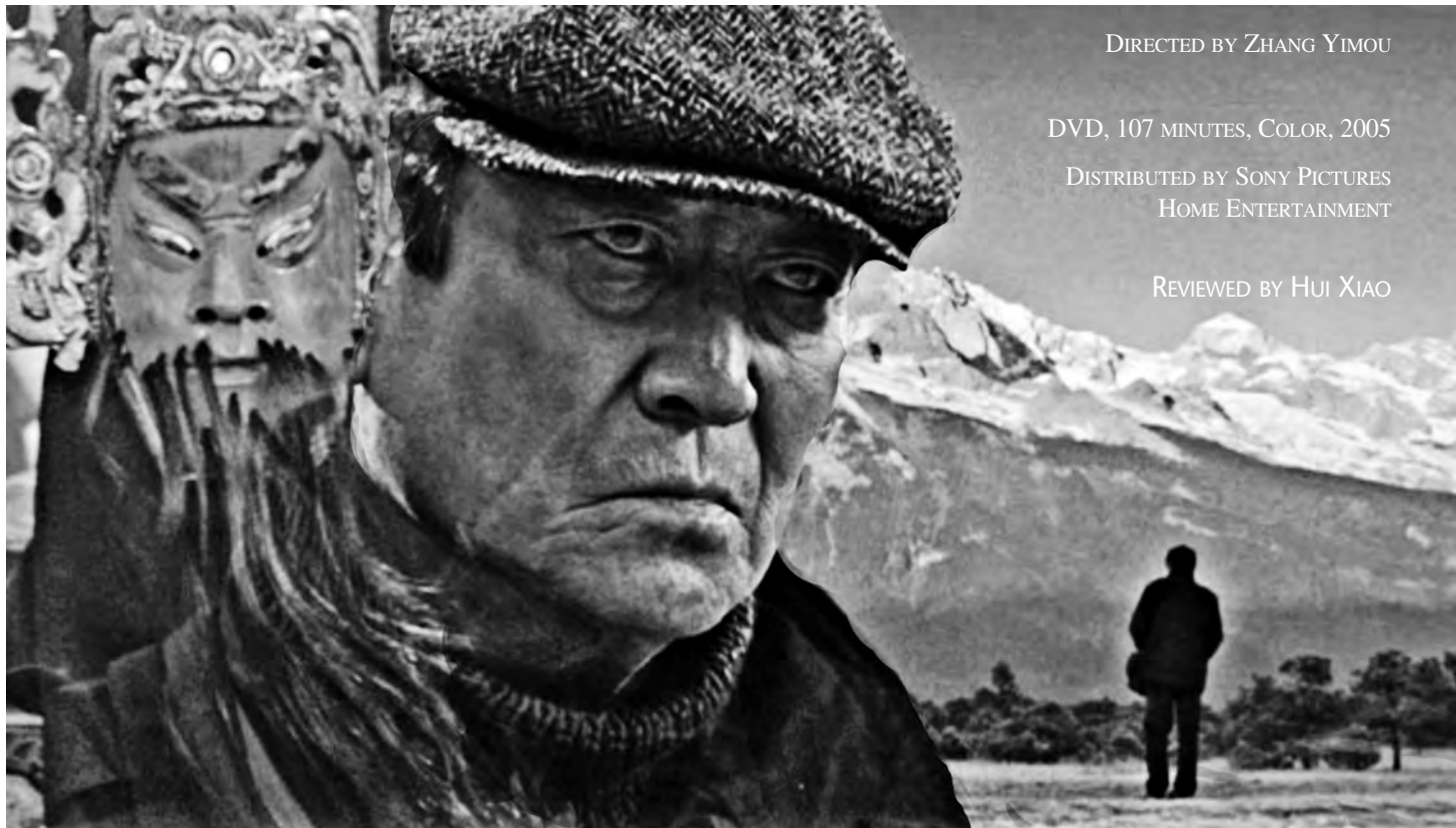


## RIDING ALONE FOR THOUSANDS OF MILES



DIRECTED BY ZHANG YIMOU

DVD, 107 MINUTES, COLOR, 2005

DISTRIBUTED BY SONY PICTURES  
HOME ENTERTAINMENT

REVIEWED BY HUI XIAO

Photo montage created by Willa Davis. Images ©2005 Elite Group (2004) Enterprises, Inc.

**Z**HANG YIMOU IS ONE OF THE "FIFTH-GENERATION" CHINESE FILMMAKERS WHO HAVE BROUGHT CHINESE FILMS to a global audience. Released in 2005, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (*Qianli zou danji*) is Zhang's second recent film. Although it has not become a blockbuster hit as Zhang's big-budget martial arts films *Hero* and *The House of Flying Daggers*, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* has been showered with compliments from audiences in China and abroad. The heart-wrenching film highlights a cross-cultural bond between a Japanese father and a Chinese young boy that transcends linguistic barriers and ethnic boundaries. This warm reception forms a sharp contrast with recent Sino-Japanese diplomatic conflicts, such as former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's regular visits to the controversial Yasukuni shrine that honors war criminals of WWII. These escalating tensions affected the circulation and consumption of popular cultural products. The release of *Memoirs of a Geisha* in China was cancelled and Zhang

Ziyi, the icon of transnational Chinese cinema, has been severely attacked for playing a Japanese *geisha* in this Hollywood film. Against this cultural backdrop, the success achieved by *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* is thought-provoking.

As the film starts, Takata Gouichi (Takakura Ken), a Japanese fisherman, receives a phone call from his daughter-in-law (Terajima Shinobu) summoning him to Tokyo to see his ailing son (Nakai Kiichi, voice). Returning to Tokyo for the first time in twenty years, Takata feels alienated by the rapid modernization of the city. What enhances his sense of loss is that after Takata arrives at the hospital, his son refuses to see him due to a certain past misunderstanding between them. As Takata is about to leave the hospital alone, he is stopped by his daughter-in-law who hands him a videotape to help him know his son better. The videotape is about his son's border-crossing journey to Lijiang, a southwestern small town in the Yunnan province of China. His son spent a long time there, wandering around,

meditating alone and watching *Nuoxi*, the local opera of Lijiang. At the end of the video, his son makes a promise to Li Jiamin (Li Jiamin), the most popular performer of the local opera, that he will come back to videotape Li's glamorous performance of *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*, a time-honored *Nuoxi* play. Learning all this, Takata decides to help fulfill his son's wish.

**TAKATA EMBARKS ON A JOURNEY OF PROMISE AND REDEMPTION** to seek out a way to fix the sour father-son relationship. Although he speaks no Chinese, surprisingly Lijiang does not give him the sense of estrangement or cultural shock that Tokyo gave him. With kind help from a Chinese interpreter and some warm-hearted local people, Takata manages to find out that the performer Li has been jailed for attacking people. Takata does not give up and gets permission to go to prison to videotape Li's performance. However, when they get there, Li cannot perform and bursts into tears. He tells Takata that he also holds deep regrets for his own son, an illegitimate



Montage of Mr. Takata's farewell scene with Yang Yang. Images ©2005 Elite Group (2004) Enterprises, Inc.

child now living in a small Naxi village. Hearing this, Takata decides to help this Chinese father to see his son. With local people's generous help, he locates Li's son (Yang Zhenbo) and forges an unbreakable bond with the boy, who becomes a surrogate for Takata's son in Tokyo (whose face is never shown in the film).

**IT IS NOTEWORTHY THAT METROPOLITAN CITIES** are depicted in this film as the site where human relationships are alienated and traumatized, while the father-son bond can be realized only through the mediation of traditional Chinese culture. Seeking cultural roots has been a persistent theme in Zhang's major works ever since his 1987 debut film, *Red Sorghum*. Compared to Zhang's earlier films, what makes *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* more appealing is its intertwining of multiple cultural themes. The film title comes from a well-known episode of the literary classic *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, which is about how Lord Guan, the symbol of traditional Chinese masculinity and Confucian virtues, rides alone on a long journey to carry out his promise. This literary masterpiece has a regional appeal to East Asian readers in China, Japan, and Korea. Thus, promise becomes a central theme to link not only a Japanese father and a Chinese son, but also modern transnational film and traditional Chinese literature. Another central factor contributing to the film's popularity among international audiences is the regional circulation and consumption of the star image of Takakura Ken, a prominent Japanese actor. Ever since

his first films were shown in China in the early 1980s, Takakura has become *the* embodiment of a new vision of Asian masculinity. Strong, independent, adventurous, and individualistic, Takakura's masculine image is drastically different from conventional Chinese heroes who adhere to the collectivist mentality of traditional Confucian ethics or party-state ideology. In this 2005 film, his performance as the Japanese father adds nuance to his usual "tough guy" image and boosts the film's international appeal.

Although the film's clean erasure of recent Sino-Japanese conflicts makes its melodramatic, apolitical cross-cultural narrative questionable, still it can serve as a good educational tool in the classroom. A productive comparison can be made between this film and many others about cross-cultural contacts and (mis)communications, such as *Lost in Translation*. A series of significant issues are also worth investigating, such as how to read the relationship between the urban and the rural in the process of modernization, and what kinds of changes the tradi-

tional Asian family is undergoing in a globalizing world. Furthermore, more in-depth and active discussions about economic and cultural exchanges between China and Japan at the juncture of localization, regionalization, and globalization can be expected in the classroom. ■

**HUI XIAO** is a PhD candidate in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her special areas of interest are modern Chinese literature and culture, film studies, and gender studies. Her publications have appeared in journals such as *Orientations*, *Concentric*, *China Media Research*, *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, and collections such as *Globalization and Chineseness: Postcolonial Readings on Contemporary Culture*, and *From Camera Lens to Critical Lens: A Collection of Best Essays on Film Adaptation*. Currently she is working on her dissertation project "Representing Chinese Style Divorces: Narratives of Gender, Class and Family in Post-Mao Chinese Literature and Culture."

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