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the Father by Way of Japan?*

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25 *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles: Redeeming the Father by Way of Japan?*

Faye Hui Xiao

INTRODUCTION

This essay examines Zhang Yimou's recent film, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (hereafter *Riding Alone*). Compared to Zhang's previous father-son narratives, *Riding Alone* visualises a more democratic and sensitive father figure, played by Japanese star Takakura Ken. Here 'democratic' is used in the sense of 'interpersonal democracy' practised through the bonding of intimate relationships in people's everyday life, which will be elaborated in the later parts of this essay.¹ While a remorseful Japanese father embodies a new patriarchal ideal in this film, Tokyo is depicted as the site where human relationships are alienated and traumatised. Hence, the father-son bond can only be materialised through the mediation of reinvented 'traditional' Chinese culture. The contradictions, negotiations and competitions between the narratives of 'Japaneseness' and 'Chineseness' in this cross-cultural and inter-ethnic melodrama invite two central questions. First, if Zhang's 'sentimental return' in his late-1990s' films indicates 'a distinctively nationalist quality' associated with historical specifics, then how should we read the national, ethnic and historical ambivalences in *Riding Alone*?² Second, how does this democratised father-son narrative articulate its relation to an emerging 'Greater China' discourse while simultaneously maintaining its appeal to a transnational audience? To explore these issues, I will situate my reading of the film within the theoretical framework of transnational Chinese cinema while taking into account the cross-current of a burning 'consumer nationalism'.³

In the face of Chinese cinema's increasing integration into a world film market, Sheldon Lu posits 'an essentially transnational nature' of 'Chinese cinemas'.⁴ Yingjin Zhang also points out that the film-makers in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have not only competed against each other but also worked in 'close cooperation as an effective

transregional strategy since the 1980s'.⁵ Pertinent to current developments in the Chinese film industry, the transnational perspective can serve as a fresh and effective approach to studies of Chinese cinema. However, Lu's and Zhang's arguments about transnationalism have overlooked two key issues. First, they focus on the commercial and cultural transactions between Chinese cinema(s) (including mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan) and Hollywood. They barely touch upon the influences from and interactions with Japanese and Korean cinema as well as other forms of regional popular culture such as soap opera. Second, theory about the increasing global and regional interconnectedness in film production and consumption does not fully examine the escalating tensions between transnational capital flows and rising 'consumer nationalism'.

For example, recent Sino-Japanese diplomatic conflicts have affected the circulation and consumption of popular cultural products. The former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's regular visits to the controversial Yasukuni shrine caused large-scale protests in China. A call for boycotting Japanese products ensued at some of the largest Chinese Internet portals, such as sina.com, tianya.net and ebay.com.cn.⁶ Under the great pressure of this nationalist campaign online and offline, the release of *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) was cancelled in China, despite the usual appeal of Hollywood big-budget films among Chinese audiences.⁷ Zhang Ziyi, the icon of a transnational Chinese cinema, has been severely attacked as a 'shameful traitor' (*hanjian*) for 'accepting the role of the beautiful geisha Sayuri without considering Chinese national pride'.⁸

Given the outbursts of 'consumer nationalism' in contemporary urban China, the warm reception of *Riding Alone* is thought-provoking and worth exploring. Setting a box-office record for Chinese arthouse films, this small-budget Sino-Japanese co-production

has been praised for its adept build-up of emotional resonance and mutual recognition transcending linguistic barriers and ethnic boundaries between a Japanese father and a Chinese son.⁹ It was selected as the Best Foreign Language Film at the 2006 San Diego Film Critics Award, while Takakura Ken won the prize for Best Actor. When *Riding Alone* premiered as the Opening Film of the 2005 Tokyo International Film Festival, audiences responded to this visual narrative of a cross-cultural emotional tie with overflowing tears and enthusiastic applause.¹⁰

Centring on a border-crossing journey of promise and redemption, *Riding Alone* is Zhang Yimou's second most recent film at the time of writing and was produced in close co-operation with Japanese director Yasuo Furuhashi. It opens with a medium shot of the lonely figure of Takata Gouichi (Takakura Ken), a fisherman in a small Japanese village. He is summoned by his daughter-in-law to Tokyo to see his terminally sick son. Returning to Tokyo for the first time after nearly twenty years, Takata feels alienated by the rapid modernisation of the city. His sense of loss is heightened by his son's refusal to see him, due to an unspecified past misunderstanding between them. As he leaves, his daughter-in-law hands him a videotape to help him know his son better. The tape is a visual chronicle of his son's obsession with Lijiang, a tourist spot in south-western China. At the end of the video, his son makes a promise to Li Jiamin, prestigious performer of the local *Nuoxi* opera, that he will come back to watch Li's exciting performance of *Riding Alone*, a time-honoured *Nuoxi* play. To fulfil his son's promise, Takata embarks on the first transnational journey of his life. Arriving in Lijiang, he finds that Li has been jailed for assault. Takata manages to get permission to go to prison and videotape Li's performance. However, when they get there, Li is unable to perform and bursts into tears. He tells Takata that he also longs to see his own son, an illegitimate child who lives in Stone Village. Takata then makes a trip to Stone Village and builds up an inalienable bond with Li's son, Yang Yang.

The father-son relationship has been an enduring leitmotif in the works of the Fifth Generation Chinese film-makers. Dai Jinhua suggests that the most prominent feature of the Fifth Generation's earlier works is a patricidal complex, which is a political allegory for the film-makers' scathing attack on Chinese mainstream culture, and specifically the party-state

ideology and Confucian patriarchy.¹¹ Zhang Yimou's earlier films engaged in this patricidal tradition, in which a visual narrative evolves around a strong desire to subvert the Law of the Father, or 'a feudal patriarchal system' in Zhang's own words.¹² From his debut film, *Red Sorghum* (1987), an anti-Japanese war epic that also presents a father-son story, to this recent melodramatic narrative of paternal bonds, Zhang's visual representations of the father-son relationship have taken a sharp turn.

A STORY OF A JAPANESE FATHER BECOMING CHINESE?

When China began to open up to the outside world and develop a market economy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a nationwide debate about the 'besieged masculinity' of Chinese men.¹³ Among all the cinematic and televisual masculine figures of the time, Takakura was regarded as *the* embodiment of a new vision of masculinity, the subject of modern individualism as a negation of Chinese collectivism. Fully aware of Asian audiences' nostalgic memories of Takakura, Zhang Yimou regarded the performance of this Japanese star as a major selling point of *Riding Alone*.¹⁴ To get Takakura's consent to play the Japanese father, Zhang kept revising the screenplay for six years.¹⁵ The tactic of invoking audience nostalgia has aided the transnational advertising and marketing of the film. Many audiences were in tears at the magnified screen image of Takakura's familiar face, stern, weather-beaten but still endearing.¹⁶ Nonetheless, an international cast has become a common practice of transnational Chinese cinema, and it does not necessarily guarantee the success of a film. Therefore, I propose that *Riding Alone* makes Takakura's star image more intriguing and acceptable through a narrative of reinvented 'Chineseness'.

The film title comes from a well-known chapter of the ancient martial arts classic *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*. In it, the Lord Guan, symbol of traditional Chinese masculinity and Confucian virtues, rides alone on a long journey to carry out his promise for Liu Bei, his sworn brother and sovereign lord.¹⁷ *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* has a time-honoured aura among East Asian audiences, and the term *danji* (pronounced *tanki* in Japanese), conjuring up a romantic masculine image of a solo rider on horseback, has circulated from Chinese literature to Japanese travel writings. This transnational appeal has been

translated into the central thread of this film, in which seeking the *Nuoxi* performance of Lord Guan's heroic feat is the vehicle for healing the Japanese father's trauma and rebuilding the father-son relationship. Through his cross-cultural journey, Takata re-duplicates Guan's legendary deed of riding alone on a long journey to reconnect a male bond. This conflation of the images of the Chinese hero and the Japanese star is visualised in the film poster, which advertised its Chinese release from 25 December 2005. Against the backdrop of the picturesque landscape and distinctive architecture of south-western China, Takakura's image is merged with a *Nuoxi* mask of the Lord Guan that he reverently holds close to his heart. Thus, Lord Guan, the regional emblem of Confucian ethics, becomes a central image linking not only a Japanese father and a Chinese son, Han Chinese and Naxi ethnic minority, but also audiences of a contemporary film and readers of traditional Chinese literature.

In addition to drawing on the trans-East Asian popularity of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the narrative of 'Chineseness' also revives some anachronistic Maoist revolutionary values. The residual socialist belief in the 'redemptive power' of labour is demonstrated clearly through the characterisation of the Japanese father.¹⁸ Takata rejects the urban middle-class lifestyle in the cosmopolitan metropolis of Tokyo. Instead, he chooses to make a living through heavy manual labour in a remote fishing village. In sharp contrast with the helpless characters confined within an enclosed walled space in *Ju Dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *Riding Alone* strikes



Chinese poster for *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*: Takata holds a *Nuoxi* mask of Lord Guan

audiences with its visualisation of the Japanese father's repeated border-crossing in the vastness of a transnational open space. All through the film, audiences witness Takata's body in motion, busily fishing, videotaping, walking, and so on. Travelling on a plane, in a minivan, a taxi cab or on a tractor, he sutures not only Japan and China, and the minority frontiers and cosmopolitan metropolises, but also the totally different value systems of the past and present. As idealised socialist labour aesthetics promises, in the end all his sweat, labour, suffering and bitterness are rewarded with redemption. The lost paternal bond and ethical truth are retrieved 'through a dialectic of pathos and action'.¹⁹

His heavy reliance on the collective help of local Chinese people to achieve his final goal makes this Japanese father more Chinese. For example, Jiang Wen, the woman interpreter from Kunming, helps Takata to communicate with villagers over the phone. Qiu Lin, Takata's aide in Lijiang, volunteers to help him for free. Under the leadership of an elderly patriarch, the Stone Village people help Takata to get Yang Yang and set up the spectacular mile-long *liushui xi* ('running-water' banquet) to celebrate the coming together of the Japanese father and the Chinese son. Rather than an individualistic hero like his earlier characters in Japanese films, this time Takakura is portrayed almost as a socialist hero. In contrast to the image of a solo rider featured by the film title, he treasures the tradition of making communal efforts for a common good and carries on the communist 'mass line' (*qunzhong luxian*). Constantly revealing that he himself can achieve nothing without the help of the people, Takata resorts to mass mobilisation as well as official support to achieve final success. Furthermore, the past utopian values of collective consciousness and communal bonding obliterate any traces of the consumerism that has encroached on even the most 'primitive' frontier areas and commercialised interpersonal relationships in post-Mao China.

DEMOCRATISING THE FATHER

Nonetheless, it would be oversimplified to conclude that *Riding Alone* is merely a story of integrating the cultural Other into a nationalist narrative. While making the Japanese father Chinese, this film also capitalises on the global currency of overflowing sentiments and human connections. With its 'universal'

appeal, it is believed that this sentimental narrative can overcome vast differences of gender, class, locality or ethnicity. Whether in Kunming (capital city of Yunnan province), Lijiang (internationally famous tourist spot) or Stone Village (a small Naxi community with an ancient history), Takata's repeated narration of his family story makes Chinese people – Han or non-Han – immediately identify and sympathise with him. His performance of a 'universal' father-son melodrama made possible with the aid of visualising technologies transforms him into a close member of the community. Just as the reason for Takata's rift with his son is never specified, any reference to historical trauma or recent Sino-Japanese antagonism cannot be found in the idyllic picture of harmonious coexistence and interaction of different generations, ethnicities, languages and cultures.

Unlike the almost invisible patriarch in *Raise the Red Lantern*, the oppressive pervert in *Ju Dou* or the literally and metaphorically blood-sucking communist cadres in *To Live* (1993), the local officials in *Riding Alone* (played by real Lijiang government officers) are portrayed as sensitive and compassionate individuals rather than abstract and impersonal symbols of the patriarchal system. On the Japanese father's arrival, they never contemplate any unpleasant associations connected with the exacerbated Sino-Japanese antagonism. Deeply touched by Takata's confession of the past wrong and his desire to find redemption, these communist cadres relate to this failed father and go out of their way to help him to rebuild the broken paternal bond.

Let's take the following sequence as an example. When Takata takes his camcorder to the local prison, the official in charge readily grants his request to videotape Li Jiamin's *Nuoxi* performance in jail on one condition: Takata must not produce a deliberately 'distorted' video of prison life and sell it to some 'ill-intentioned' (*bieyou yongxin*) Western media to denigrate China's image on the international stage. It cannot be clearer that these exhortations are targeted at numerous Euro-American reports and films about China's human rights violations. Takata gives his consent and gains admission to the jail. Via Zhang Yimou's camera, audiences get to see the austere but personal interior of the prison, the strict but humane management, and a highly organised music band composed of some talented prisoners. This narrative device of re-humanising the state apparatus serves as

a rebuttal not only to Western reports about China's human rights conditions but even more to the earlier charge against Zhang of producing self-Orientalising accounts of China to pander to Western audiences.²⁰ The place of the isolated and suffocating patriarchal Orient is taken by a harmonious China intimately bonded with the outside world through powerful expressions of inner feelings and emotional empathy.

In tune with this gesture of reconciliation towards the Father's law, the ideal of a democratic father is personified through Takakura's filmic role. This image is consummated in a sequence leading to the emotional climax of the film. After all the hardships and frustrations encountered on his border-crossing journey, Takata finally locates Yang Yang. On their way to the local prison to meet the boy's father, Yang Yang unexpectedly runs away. Takata catches him after a long chase through the hilly karst relief. Unfortunately, they get lost. Spending a night alone with Yang Yang, Takata fosters a close emotional tie with the boy and starts to reflect upon what kind of father he is in his son's eyes. The following morning, the rescue team sent out by the villagers and local police finds them. Takata begs the village chief to ask why Yang Yang refuses to see his father. When he finds out that the boy ran away because he has never met his father since his birth, Takata disagrees with the elderly village patriarch that they, as seniors, are entitled to force Yang Yang to see his father. Takata decides that a child's feelings and decisions should be respected. Before he leaves alone, Takata hugs Yang Yang tightly. His usually stern face breaks into an affectionate smile, while the boy starts laughing heartily. The emotional crescendo of the consolidated paternal bond is visualised in a lingering low-angle close-up shot of the two happy faces against the brilliant backdrop of the vast blue sky.

This rewriting of the father's image in the spirit of love and democracy draws on the aesthetics of regional melodrama. Since the late 1970s, foreign films and television dramas have come to dominate the Chinese cultural market, as well as the popular imagination of a new lifestyle and its accompanying structure of feeling. In the 1980s, Sino-Japanese racial and cultural affinity, as well as friendly diplomatic relations with Japan promoted by the Chinese government, meant that Japanese cultural products were better received by Chinese audiences than Hollywood films. Through the regional distribution of

these popular cultural products, a 'media regionalism' was spurred by 'the development of consumerism and electronic communication technology'.²¹ The palpable craze for Takakura's earlier films is one example of this Japan-centred 'media regionalism'. Another is Chinese audiences' enthusiastic embrace of Japanese television mini-series and anime including *Oshin*, *Doraemon* and a number of family melodramas starring Yamaguchi Momoe and Miura Tomokazu. Coincidentally or not, Yasuo Furuhashi, the Japanese film-maker who helped to make *Riding Alone*, was one of the major producers of 1980s popular melodramas.

Since the late 1990s, the landscape of Chinese popular culture has changed significantly. As a result of an emerging Korean cinema and Chinese consumers' rising nationalist sentiments against Japanese products, the 'Korean Wave' (*hallyu*) has taken Japan's dominant place in the Chinese cultural market. Thanks to the sweeping popularity of his character in the television melodrama *Winter Sonata* (2002), Bae Yong Jun, a Korean star, has become the latest dream lover for Chinese female audiences. In comparison to Hollywood counterparts, Chris Berry states, Chinese film melodramas of the 1950s and 1960s put more 'emphasis on ethical expectations based on hierarchically defined social and kinship position'.²² This ethical orientation is not limited to Chinese cinema, but also emphasised in 'Asian-style' melodramatic narratives produced in Japan and Korea.

On the other hand, melodramatic narratives targeted at modern Asian audiences have also contributed to a new vision of enacting the fantasy of democracy in people's everyday life and intimate relationships. In a number of Korean melodramas, we can identify a trend of democratising traditional family ethics and gender ideology through everyday resistance and negotiation. For example, Bae's roles are often portrayed as caring and sensitive lovers and primarily hailed by female audiences. *My Sassy Girl* (2001), a best-selling Korean film embraced enthusiastically by Asian audiences, features a rebellious and aggressive Korean girl and her submissive and devoted boyfriend. Through the regional circulation and consumption of these popular melodramatic narratives, the legitimacy of the conventional gendered division of labour and absolute authority of patriarchs is generally undermined, though also reinforced from time to time.

Discussing the transformation of everyday life and interpersonal relationships in modern society, Anthony Giddens contends that '[t]he possibility of intimacy means the promise of democracy'. He continues to argue, in marriage, parent-child relations, as well as other forms of kinship, 'egalitarian communication' serves as a mechanism through which interpersonal democracy can be pursued.²³ Cashing in on the transnational appeal of 'Asian-style' melodramas, *Riding Alone* exemplifies how this mode of 'egalitarian communication' between different generations, genders, localities, languages, cultures and ethnicities can be made possible, not through words but emotional power and ethical truth conveyed in the 'universal' language of transnational visuality. Ironically, in this transnational visual politics of 'egalitarian communication', the one who has lost his language is not Takata, but the local village people who are rendered impenetrable and unable to speak for themselves. Instead, they can only be accessed and understood through the lenses of visualising technologies, which are of course associated with Japan. Once more, Japan's technological superiority is endorsed by the circulation and consumption of transnational visuality.

CONCLUSION

In her essay, Dai Jinhua articulates the deep anxiety that the Fifth Generation film-makers felt in the 1980s: 'Their generation, following a historic act of Patricide, faces the castrating power of the double weight of ancient Eastern civilization and assaults launched from the West.'²⁴ In the light of Dai's argument, the final scene of a suicide attack launched by Chinese villagers against the intruding Japanese army in *Red Sorghum* can be viewed as a desperate gesture by the 'son-generation' against the invasion of a new order driven by the joint forces of the state and the market.

However, since the 1990s the position of the 'son-generation' of film-makers in a reconstituted power structure has evidently changed. Following Deng Xiaoping's famous inspection trip to the south of China in 1992, the Chinese market economy has expanded. Chinese film-makers, among other urban elite groups, are the major beneficiaries of this historical process of urbanisation and globalisation. Privileged by their ready access to the lion's share of transnational capital, government sponsorship and

the domestic film market, 'the son-generation' has formed a formidable alliance with the Father's law, renewed through the logic of the market economy and global consumerism. While gaining membership of the club of the New Rich, they are also confronted with a dilemma caused by the exponential globalisation of the Chinese film market. The opening up of the Chinese film market brings in overseas capital as well as the dual threat posed by imported Hollywood big-budget films (*dapian*) and sweeping 'Asian-style' melodramas produced mainly in Korea since the 1990s. Facing a new invasion of popular cultural products and the government's recent tightening control over the mass media and cultural market, instead of a heroic 'suicide attack', 'the son-generation' has turned to manufacturing their own melodramas with 'Chinese characteristics' to get an edge on the competition for market share as well as to produce a new politics of transnational visuality. Read in this context, a reconstructed father-son narrative in line with 'traditional' Chinese ethics marks a re-orientation of Zhang's 'transregional strategy' that intersects with a new 'Greater China' discourse.

While China's booming economy is moving the country away from its marginal position on the world stage, an emerging 'Greater China' discourse sponsored by the party-state promotes the new image of a 'harmonious' China. This seems to be a belated response to the 'clash of civilizations' theory.²⁵ One hundred and twenty-three government-sponsored Confucius Institutes 'in 49 countries and regions' extend a nationalist ambition to secure ethical-linguistic cohesion.²⁶ According to Tu Wei Ming, the centre of this 'Cultural China' lies in the Chinese diaspora living outside the geopolitical boundaries of the nation-state of China.²⁷ However, 'by making its traditional value systems known to the world', the Chinese government now attempts to allay worries about the 'China threat' and reclaim a central position in the 'imagined community' of a 'Cultural China'.²⁸ As stark political ideology is losing its appeal nowadays, the 'Greater China' discourse often resorts to cultural means to create the pleasure of consuming a melodramatic 'structure of feeling', in which 'the ideological principles that support a given arrangement of power are translated into regularised patterns of emotion and sentiment'.²⁹

Stripped of their historical contexts and socio-political relevance, traditional Confucian ethics and

vestiges of socialist labour aesthetics are re-presented as the eternal emotional and ethical truths of human interiority in pursuit of a unifying power transcending geopolitical boundaries as well as ethnic barriers. Along this line of rendering a discursive 'Greater China' as a gripping melodrama, a harmonious picture of Chinese and Japanese, the Han ethnicity and Naxi minority, and the central government and the frontier people is engendered in *Riding Alone*. Commenting on *Riding Alone*, Ni Zhen, one of the mentors of the Fifth Generation film-makers, said that it promotes an 'Oriental' ethics as a therapy to alienated interpersonal relationships caused by the prevalent modern individualism. More productions of films like this will enable Chinese national cinema to play a decisive role in promoting the image of a harmonious China.³⁰

Joining hands with global consumerism and the 'Greater China' discourse, melodramatic nationalism based on the reproduction of a 'traditional' structure of feeling is materialised and circulated through the 'universal' language of 'technologized visuality'. The transnational circuit of affective values derived from 'reified spectacles'³¹ of Chinese ethnographic detail is presented as a redemptive force to bridge the divide caused by generation gaps, class stratifications, ethnic differences or historical traumas. At the intersections of localisation, regionalisation and globalisation, the 'national' comes back to play a pivotal role in the context of transnational Chinese cinema. However, as a contested 'imagined community', the parameters of the 'national' have already been stretched, reconfigured and transgressed by intersecting and oftentimes conflicting forces of nationalist sentiment, transnational capital and image flows, and regional cultural production and consumption patterns.

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NOTES

1. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 188.
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13. A more detailed description of this movement can be found in Xueping Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2000). Takakura Ken's masculine image is briefly mentioned in Zhong's book on pages 3, 41 and 46.
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