

# Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles (2005)

Our ratings: V-0; L-1; S/N-1. Running time: 1 hour 48 min.

*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."*

*Luke 18:1-5*

Acclaimed director Zhang Yimou, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* after his spectacular martial arts *Hero* and *House of Flying Dragons*, returns to the smaller scale, more domestic themes of his earlier *The Road Home* and *Not One Less*. In his current work he deals with inter-cultural and family relationships that belie the old image of the Orient as being inscrutable to westerners. For the first time in many years a father takes the bullet train from his home in a fishing village in northern Japan to visit his hospitalized son in Tokyo. Gou-ichi Takata (played with great skill by Ken Takakura) has been summoned by

his daughter-in-law, Rie (Shinobu Terajima), because his son Ken-ichi (Kiichi Nakai) is dying of cancer. But when Ken-ichi, holding on to a decades long grudge, refuses to see his father, the old man leaves the hospital. Rie catches up with him outside and begs him to watch the videotape she gives him.

Takata does so, discovering from the excerpted portion of a TV program that his son, a professor of Chinese folk music, has been a regular visit to China once a year to record the folk opera music found in Yunnan Province. The taped segment shows him interviewing the famous singer Li Jiamin (Li Jiamin) in the hope of recording him performing the masked opera "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles." The singer declines because he has a throat ailment but invites Ken-ichi to come back when he will sing for him. The filmmaker agrees to do so. The father impulsively decides to complete his son's desire, so he sets off for China, telling Rie not to tell her husband what he is up to.

In China Takata runs up against a myriad of obstacles: after a long journey with his tour guide/translator Jasmine ( Jiang Wen) to the village where Li lives, he discovers that the man has been sent to prison for stabbing a man during a drunken quarrel. Takata refuses to tape another singer who 'is just as good." Jasmine tells him there is not a chance that he can get in to see the singer, and besides, her three-day contract is ending so that she has already been assigned by the travel agency to another client. Lingo (Qiu Lin), a local guide who knows the singer agrees to conduct Takata to the officials for permission to visit Li, but Lingo knows just a few phrases of Japanese, which forms the core of a number of humorous

incidents for the remainder of the film. Jasmine gives Takata her cell phone number, kindly agreeing to help with translation.

Convincing the local official is not easy, requiring Takata to produce his own videotaped appeal, with translation provided by Jasmine and Lingo. Then at the prison, when the compassionate warden produces the prisoner and the singer is in full costume, Li, having just heard that the mother of his illegitimate son (whom he has not seen since birth) has died, cannot sing. Removing his mask, his tear-filled eyes are revealed. Takata leaves, this time heading with Lingo to the remote mountain village where the boy is being cared for by the entire village. Rie has urged him to return to Tokyo because Ken-ichi has but a short time to live. But now the father sees that he has an even greater mission, so he presses on to the village. There are further complications, all hinging on whether the boy wants to see the father who had abandoned him.

This road genre film is full of moments of grace, and its picture of rural China is probably no more true to life than was Frank Capra's version of small town America in the 30s and 40s. One never finds any criticism of government corruption or oppression in Mr. Yimou's idealized version of his country (except, we should say, in his epic film *To Live*, set during the terrible Red Guards period). The film becomes both a journey of self-discovery for the father, who now realizes that both he and his son have lived lives isolated from those around themselves—Takata is even terser than any of the characters played by John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. His struggle, aided by the many gracious people who come to this aid, is wonderful to behold. Thanks to the strong acting and direction, the film does not fall into the bathos of the usual Hollywood melodrama. This is a film well worth searching out in the small theaters to which it is relegated.

## For Reflection/Discussion

Note that the last two questions contain spoilers!

- 1) How does Mr. Takata show throughout the film that he is remote and disconnected from other people? What meaning do you see in the film's title?
- 2) How is his daughter-in-law Rie the first of several agents of grace to affect his life? Given that the son, as we discover as the film progresses, is much like the father, what must her life have been like with Ken-ichi?
- 3) How is Mr. Takata like the widow in the parable told by Jesus? At what points in the story do we see his persistence paying off? Those who have seen the director's film about a young, inexperienced teacher—Not One Less—might compare the two characters, although from different cultures and stages in life, yet so similar. At what points in your life has persistence been an important trait?
- 3) What moments of grace do you see in the film, beginning with Rie? Jasmine and (even) Lingo? The government official and the warden? The village chief and the villagers? Compare the banquet with Luke 13:29?
- 4) How is the episode with little Yang Yang in the mountains symbolic of Mr. Takata's life? What wisdom and compassion does Mr. Takata and the village chief display when they accept the boy 's decision concerning visiting his father?
- 5) How does Takata discover that the purpose of his quest is larger than just his concern for his relationship with his son? Would you have made the same decision not to return to his son? How is this like "taking up the cross"? What breakthrough does his pressing on produce? How is his original purpose achieved, despite his not being able to talk with his son face to face? What does the son's letter show of the healing that has taken place, a healing that extends to the

father as well?