

## **The father elsewhere. Commentary on the movie: “Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles”<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The article offers the opportunity to consider the loss and recovery of the paternal function in a culture that is different from ours, as well as to reflect upon contrasting and similar aspects. As far as the latter are concerned, in the movie the paternal function meets the child's need for a reference point outside of his relationship with his mother, someone who can understand and tolerate the negative feelings that build up at the moment of separation from her. The father appears in his new function if he manages to stay there without having a boomerang reaction. When this happens the child can then accept a group, after both the maternal and the paternal function have proved they are present. We cannot but agree, even from our “western” viewpoint. However, the movie also describes the recovery of the Japanese father's paternal function through a course in which the father starts over from point zero, where he symbolically goes back to being like a child. Thus, he goes through the various stages of development that enable him to understand his son's sufferings, from which he had previously run away, therefore losing contact with him. This is an unusual way of finding oneself, one's son and the possibility of a relationship, even beyond death.

**Key words:** son, identity, parental roles, paternal function

Once upon a time, and not so long ago, the definition of fatherhood was fairly clear and articulated, and differentiated the role of the father from that of the mother. Fathers were the custodians of social rules and of their son's emancipation; mothers were dedicated to the care of primary needs and of familial intimacy as the place where affects grow and develop.

The father's jurisdiction encompassed the extra-familial territory and on the rites of passage from family to society, while the mother had custody of the place where life gestation and birth took place, and growth was fostered.

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<sup>1</sup> “Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles” (Original Title: “*Qian li zou dan qi*”), 2005, China-Japan, directed by Zhang Yimou, starring Ken Takakura, Kiichi Nakai, Shinobu Terajima.

It was the father's duty to activate, supervise and protect the process of his sons' detachment from the place of origin, the home, where the mother fulfilled her role as caregiver.

In the last decades, it would seem that these social conventions have been overthrown by a sort of "tsunami", which requires a specific and careful recognition of both what has been lost and what has survived in terms of values and social and familial structure.

Studies on the changes of paternal role agree in underlining a progressive differentiation from what once it used to be: There is a trend showing that fathers are beginning to fulfill the duties which used to be in the mother's hands, while mothers are assuming new social and working roles. The father dealing with nappies or milk-feeding the child while his partner is at work, can be considered as an icon of today's world. A strange icon, which would be considered incomprehensible in past cultures (and probably even in human history).

The father seems to have lost those specific features which used to define him in the past, so much so that his identity is today considered weak or even lost, unless he's able to become a mother substitute when required.

How can the transformation of parental roles be viewed or considered through "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles", which presents the story of a Japanese father moving in a cultural scenario which is so different from ours? I believe cultural difference gives us a very good chance to identify some universal elements in paternal function, which are present throughout different cultures and environments. At the same time, acknowledging also the differences allows us to expand our knowledge and to enrich the picture we have about fatherhood.

I invite the reader to draw his/her attention to the beginning of the story, as we can find there a narrative element which is particularly meaningful when it comes to identifying paternal functions. I am referring to the voice of Ken-ichi, the protagonist's son, accusing his father of an unforgivable fault: having abandoned him to grieve the loss of someone deeply loved and irreplaceable, his mother.

As a consequence of his father's behavior, Ken-ichi has to face a double bereavement: his mother's death and the lack of a father's shoulder to cry on. This is too much for him. "I could even have endured the cruelty of destiny" he seems to say, "but I could never tolerate the weakness of a father, who tried to erase the pain by running away, renouncing the role I had assigned him of helping me face the overwhelming adversities of life".

And while the father surrenders his role in supporting his son in the face of life's suffering, the son, likewise, erases the father by rejecting him. However, Takata is not as fragile as we might imagine considering his flight in this painful moment.

Although we cannot know what happened inside of him, since he doesn't seem to be that kind of man who shares his feelings, he still shows the will to make an effort to reconnect to the son who doesn't want to forgive him.

The beginning of the movie allows us to detect a theme which is repeated in the plot; the importance of the father to act as a shock absorber of unbearable suffering experienced in the mother-son relationship. In witnessing the absence of this paternal support we are forced to acknowledge its importance.

The movie shows us that if the lack of a paternal figure becomes dominant throughout time, the risk of a paternal function's annihilation becomes very high.

Unless... and this is when a solution which sits on the boundary between genius and madness is unveiled in the film. And although it's true that Takata unexpectedly finds a potential solution both figuratively and literally in his hands, given to him by his daughter-in-law, it is finally his responsibility to realize it.

Takata's daughter-in-law gives him a videotape of a folk-opera show which took place "a thousand miles away", in China. The woman informs Takata of her husband's desire to film a new videotape of the same show starring the most famous Chinese opera star of that moment. But this wish is bound to remain unfulfilled since the son is severely ill. Takata has an idea which overturns the ancient and usual course of the father-son relationship where it is normally sons and daughters who are meant to carry on what their fathers have started. Instead, Takata decides to be the one to continue what Ken-ichi has started, the one who will make his son's ambitions come true. This task becomes more and more pressing as the son is diagnosed with a cancer and his decline from sickness to death approaches.

We could express our sympathetic appreciation for Takata's project, who is ready to face heroic hardships in order to fulfill his wish to retie his relationship with the son. Would this be sufficient? If we thought it were, I believe we would lose the chance to discover something important in the weavings of the plot, something concerning the value of paternal function, which emerges in the moment we search for it and discover it's not there.

I will start from some conclusions I have drawn reflecting upon the movie. Takata restarts from zero as far as his role of father is concerned: he is no longer the dad, on the contrary he put himself in his son's shoes, who wishes to fulfill a project somewhere very far from his familiar surroundings, like teenagers do.

He is like a child who is poorly equipped for the task he is undertaking. As a man from Japan he doesn't even speak the Chinese dialect, and therefore he's forced to put himself in the shoes of a child in a world of adults. He will find help and sympathy because he will speak the language of suffering, a universal language which allows the other to identify with him and to understand him.

Gradually he will discover the value of a communication based on feelings. When this process will be completed he will have found out both his capability to connect to

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the Other through an emotional communication, and the Others' availability to listen and collaborate in fulfilling his wish. This awareness makes him feel the desire and capacity to take care of the Others' wishes, represented in the movie by the Chinese artist who also wishes to find his young child.

We could say that Takata has started an initiation path to self-reappropriation, from a lost and not yet born self, reflecting off the Others: primarily his son Ken-chi, but also the Chinese artist who he finds imprisoned in a Chinese jail. He sees his own wishes in the Others, and progressively, while he tries to fulfill the latter, he fulfills his own. He leads his path of learning to completion, toward finding an answer to his question: how can I be son, how can I be father, how can I be myself?

He has been able to accept being like a lost child in need of care, he has been able to develop his capability to express his affections, he is close to achieving his goal: to complete what his son has started. The famous artist is there. He is ready to act, but he stops and cries: he can't perform on stage and accomplish his task, he says, because he wants to find the son he himself forsook. He suffers because as a prisoner he can't meet and know his child. This pain prevents him from performing in his show.

Here is a question: has the artist possibly felt that, just like Takata, he wants to find his son and his paternal function? If so, how could Takata ever help him, as he also failed in his role a father? It looks like a mirroring game, where one person asks the mirror to make a son-father couple appear, but the mirror answers: I can't represent what you are not, bring me here the reality you want to see through me.

At this point Takata undertakes a trip with the intention to reconnect a father, the Chinese actor, to his unknown and abandoned child forsaken after his mother's death. It is important to notice that the scenario changes right at this point: Takata is no longer set in a dimension of similarity identifying himself in the feelings of a son/child, as he did before. On the contrary, a new figure will emerge, that of a parent dedicated to dealing with the problems which arise in the relationship with a son.

As though it were the second act of a drama, Takata will start a new trip in the search of the artist's son, towards a little village lost in the mountains. There, he will no longer be Takata the needy child, or that adolescent who looks for his independence by moving to faraway lands, all in all similar to his son. He is now that sort of single parent who fulfills both paternal and maternal functions. At times, he will be like the mother who takes care of her lost child, Yang Yang, by following him, and standing by his side without asking anything in return. At other times he will take up the function which is traditionally considered in the father's realm. For instance, he teaches the child how to use a whistle in the event they lose track of each other during their travels. During this journey, he will have to put up with the child, without abandoning him. Yang Yang, in fact, refuses to have any contact with Takata, who had forced him to leave the village community where he had lived with his mother.

Here, Takata stands firm and holds the separation anxiety of the child which is expressed through the anger and rejection directed towards him. He seems to have understood, finally!

Nevertheless, at these levels of human experience, I believe paternal function tends to overlap with the maternal one, so much so that it could be considered its double, which is of particular importance when the mother is absent, or emotionally unavailable.

But the movie also tells us, or better said suggests to us, something more specific and difficult concerning separation processes.

Indeed, after bonding with the child, Takata makes important decisions together with the leaders of the village. He respects the child's will not to depart from the village and in turn, he insures that the villagers will demonstrate the same respect towards the child and allow the father to join his son there once he is released from prison.

Namely he verifies that the child has enough affective and social resources available, and a future to be shared with his real father.

After accomplishing this task Takata will be able to go back to his own life, although the child, in a scene which can be heartbreaking, now wants to follow him.

The movie doesn't show Takata's heart-felt sentiments towards the boy. It only tells us that he has left the child to live his own life, after establishing the conditions in which he can live it. And it tells us that the imperative to film the Chinese artist has changed because the trip in the end has a whole different meaning: the redemption for "flunking the exam" where his role as a father had to be evaluated. The movie contains a sort of repetition likened to repeating a course of study previously failed. Takata is the student who repeats a program, in order to learn and succeed. He does that starting from the basic elements, putting himself in the shoes of a young child with no resources, and progressively repeating, though in a different way, the scene where he as a father had been the object of his child's anger for being forsaken. Takata who had initially run away, is now able to stay, and he is therefore recognized in his paternal function.

The movie identifies two aspects of paternal function: the first one is about the need of the child for a figure who is external to his relationship with the mother, and who is able to comprehend the negative feelings which crowd together in the moment of separation from the mother. These feelings of anger and pain seek a place, other than that represented by the mother, where they can deplete themselves and heal their virulence. The paternal function rises if the father is stable and does not act as a boomerang. He needs to know what his son is going through based on his own experiences of separations. If this is possible, the son can gain his first experience of a different world from that where the mother is the only possible source of life. In this

way the separation can acquire less dramatic qualities, and the son is grateful to his father for that.

This phase is well defined in the movie, and it's characterized by a playful atmosphere in the relationship between Takata and the little Yang Yang.

But the second phase is also interesting, with the discovery of a world where there is not only a father and a mother, but also a group, to which one can be entrusted, once the paternal and maternal functions have already proved their presence.

The last scenes, where Takata hands over the child to his community after the Chinese artist has announced his return, are emotionally very intense. They have both arrived to the end of a journey where each of them realized what is important: Takata has finally understood the importance of the paternal function, not only as a possible support when the mother is absent, but also and particularly when the son has to face the inevitable process through which he separates from her, with all the angry and painful feelings involved. In these cases it looks like a key element of a father's duty to confront and tolerate the negative feelings without avoiding them. If the father can endure all this, likewise the son will learn to face the adversities of life. This is stated very clearly in the letter Ken-ichi writes to his father before dying. He let him know he saw him escaping the reality of pain when he left after the death of his mother. From this he also learnt to run away from suffering, and to disguise and hide it. That is why he had a passion for masks<sup>2</sup>, which hide real feelings, and only now, in the imminence of death, he can be himself and speak "unmasked". This explains the reason why it is no longer necessary to film the Chinese artist performing with his masks in the movie's finale. By this time, all the characters on the stage of life can finally be present without their masks.

It seems necessary though to give Takata an acknowledgement, by saying that part of his son's change was determined by Takata's sturdy spirit in seeking a contact with his son, and by the courage he showed when facing the adversities along this path.

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<sup>2</sup> In Chinese folk opera artists perform wearing masks

analysis. He has authored a great number of articles in the most important scientific reviews, and he has published *La bussola psicoanalitica tra individuo, gruppo e società* (Franco Angeli, 2007), co-authored with F. Caggio and A. Gottardi *Maggio, è un bel mese per la prima classe. Prime letture di antichi registri scolastici* (Mimesis, 2010) and, with A. Imbasciati and R. Sigurtà, *Schermi violenti* (Borla, 1998).

*Translated by Chiara Labadini*