

# TO LIVE (HUOZHE)

1994 Dir. ZHANG Yimou. Screenplay by YU Hua and LU Wei.

Based on *To Live: A Novel* by YU Hua (1993; Tr. Michael Berry. NY: Anchor-Random House, 2003).

## CHARACTERS

### *XU Family*

- *Fugui* (Shoo Foo-gway: family name: Xu)
- *Jiazhen* (Jya-zhen) wife of Fugui
- *Fengxia* (Fung-shya) daughter of Fugui, Jiazhen
- *Youqing* (Yoe-ching) son of Fugui, Jiazhen

- *Long'er*: teahouse owner; a gambler
- *Chunsheng* (Chwun-shung) tea house waiter, then puppet troupe, Party official.
- “*Mayor*” *NIU*: Party (Cadre)/ head of the municipality.
- *WAN Erxi*, worker; marries Fengxia
- “*Little Bun*”: their son

## PLOT SUMMARY: FOUR DECADES

**OLD SOCIETY 1940s** Fugui gambles away the family home at Long'er's tea house; Jiazhen leaves, taking Fengxia; Fugui's father dies of rage. Jiazhen returns to Fugui, explaining she wants only a peaceful life with her family: *huozhe*, “to live” or “survive.” Fugui asks Long'er for a loan, but Long'er gives him the trunk of shadow-puppets. Fugui's puppet-troupe, including Chunsheng, are conscripted into Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist army then Mao's People's Liberation Army.

**LIBERATION 1949-** Fugui returns home with a PLA certificate showing he “participated in Revolution”; Chunsheng drives trucks; Jiazhen delivers hot water; Fengxia is mute; Long'er executed as a landlord.

**GREAT LEAP FORWARD 1958-61** “Mayor” Niu collects iron for backyard furnaces Youqing volunteers puppets, Niu says they cheer workers; Commune “big pot” meals are free; Fugui explains progression to Socialism; Youqing defends Fengxia, dumps spiced noodles on bully's head; Fugui scolds Youqing; Jiazhen/ Youqing deliver vinegar-tea to Fugui; Fugui carries sleep-deprived Youqing to school; new district chief (Chunshen), drives jeep into wall, kills Youqing.

**CULTURAL REVOLUTION 1966-76:** Mayor Niu finds Fengxia a husband; Wan Erxi lame but from “good class background.” Fengxia agrees; Niu and Chunsheng attacked as “capitalist roaders”; Fengxia taken to hospital, but no doctors, only students armed with the Thought of Mao Zedong; Dr. Wang imprisoned as “counter-revolutionary,” eats too many buns; Fengxia bleeds to death giving birth to Little Bun.

**DENG XIAOPING REFORMS 1976-** Erxi, Fugui, Jiazhen, Little Bun visit graves; simple family meal; Fugui again explains progression to Socialism.

## QUESTIONS AND THEMES

- Films reflect the time in which they are made, not the period in which they are set. When was this film made (not just the year, but the political period)? Is the film critical or supportive of *Deng Xiaoping* and the Reforms?
- The 1949 Revolution was known as “Liberation,” a complete break with China's feudal history and the establishment of a powerful nation – liberation from feudalism and imperialism. Does this film portray revolution in this way?
- Zhang Yimou's education was interrupted by Mao's Cultural Revolution and he was sent to the countryside. Is this film sympathetic to Mao's goals? Would you expect Zhang to give a neutral and/or reliable account of the period?
- Party officials -- Mayor Niu, Chunshen -- are they portrayed as Bad Guys?
- Mao Zedong is scarcely mentioned, but watch for his pictures. Where are they? What shape are they in?
- Food: What do people eat? Where? Who do they eat with? What do they use food for and what does the food do? Does food always do good?
- Who is the film about? Who is protagonist? Fugui? Jiazhen? The Family? Who is it that “lives”? What “survives”
  - Who financed this film? Who was the primary audience? What is most important in a film – to be accurate history? To entertain? To sell tickets?
- Next Step: Yu Hua's novel, *To Live* is a good short read, and differs from the film in interesting ways.

- Kelly Long, “Teacher's Guide to *To Live*” (Asian Educational Media Service): [http://www.aems.illinois.edu/downloads/To\\_Live.pdf](http://www.aems.illinois.edu/downloads/To_Live.pdf)