



## **TEACHER'S GUIDE TO *To Live***

(Available online at <http://www.aems.uiuc.edu/HTML/ToLive/Contents.html>)

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*To Live*, a film directed by Zhang Yimou, provides an overview of key events in twentieth-century China, moving from the 1940s to the 1970s. American high school students will enjoy contemplating the effect of historical events on the intimate life of a single family.

### **Connections to National Standards for World History**

*To Live* opens the study of twentieth-century Chinese history in a creative and personal way. The film and this guide relate to the [National Standards for World History](#) (Los Angeles, CA: National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA, 1996) in ways that include:

Era 8, "The 20th Century"

- Standard 3B, rivalry between the Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party in the context of political fragmentation, economic transformation, and Japanese and European imperialism;
- Standard 5A, Chinese Communist Party, 1936-1949 and civil war, Maoism after 1949 and how it changed China, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution;
- Standard 6A, population growth in China Analyzing the internal causes of Civil Strive in China; analyzing the goals and policies of the Nationalist and Communists in China; evaluating the effect of the Communist takeover in China in 1949.

### **Objectives**

#### *Knowledge*

- Analyze various events and movements in China's history from the 1940s to the 1970s;
- Analyze the goals and policies of the Chinese Communist Party and its impact of China's modernization;
- Assess China's involvement with internal groups and other nations during this era; examine the social and personal costs of historic movements;
- "Understand how international power relations took shape in the context of the Cold War and how colonial empires broke up." (National Standards page 270).

#### *Attitude*

- Gain an appreciation of the experiences of people in other cultures;
- Understand the influence of major historic events on the lives of common people.

#### *Skills*

- Use primary source material;
- Annotate, synthesize, and apply understanding through developing characters and responses to key questions
- Compare secondary source interpretations with ones own readings of primary sources;
- Reinforce skills of cooperation, active listening, shared decision-making, and delegation of duties;
- Assess the accomplishments and costs of Communist rule up to the Great Leap Forward of 1958. [Analyze cause-and-effect relationships]. (National Standards 270).

## Materials

- Film To Live
- VCR
- Handout #1: Rebellion and Revolution
- Handout #2: Overview of the film director and film characters
- Handout #3: Synopsis of the film with highlighted terms
- Handout #4: Film Reviewer's Form, one copy per student Teacher's Form
- Activity #1: Assess the key themes and symbols of the film. Activity #2: Art and the Art of Propaganda
- Activity #3: Create a timeline and symbols
- Activity #4: Create character monologues or diaries Activity #5: Performance: Create a shadow puppet show, opera, or political campaign

## Suggested Time

3 or 4 class periods

In the film *To Live*, a man and his family experience the effects of historical events on their own lives while living in China from the 1940s until the late 1970s. Students have the opportunity to contemplate historical events not as they affect the elite and high-level political or diplomatic players, but rather as they influence the lives of ordinary in a community in China. Students should be reminded not to generalize the events in the film as representative of all Chinese lives during this era in China's history. The events are artistic representations and reflections upon significant events during this period. The title resonates with *entendre*: it is at once a key theme of the film, the struggle in which the characters are caught, and the essential motivating force of the characters.

## Procedures

### *Before Viewing the Film*

1. Tell the students that the film they will be viewing is set during a tumultuous period in China's twentieth century history, spanning the years from the late 1940s to the 1970s. The film brings to light many significant events during this period. Nevertheless, it is a work of fiction, not history. It creates generalizations about the era in its depiction of the lives of common people. Distribute Handout #1, *Revolutions and Rebellions*, which provides a historical context for the film. Allow students to review the material in small groups and to consider the questions at the beginning of the handout.

2. Ask the students to consider the issue of artistic license and representation in this film. Inform the students that many of Zhang Yimou's films have been censored within China. After viewing, students will be asked to discuss ideas that they believe might have been unacceptable to authorities in China during the 1990s. Give the student's handout #2, about the director and the characters.
3. Give the students Handout #3, the synopsis of the film with highlighted central events or themes.
4. Give the students Handout #4, the film reviewer's form. Assign groups to be responsible for one section of the form. As they view the film, students should record information for their section.

### *Viewing the Film*

*To Live* is subtitled in English. It may be necessary to allow students to change seats in order to see the subtitles. It is advisable to use at least two days to view the film. Review the students' responsibilities with regard to their assignment as film reviewers before showing the film.

A good place to stop the film might be after the scene in which the son is killed: a life has been lost, and a promise has been made. In what ways do these events relate directly to the title of the film, *To Live*? What statement do you think the film writer might be trying to make about the events in China up to this point?

### *After Viewing the Film*

1. Provide time for students to analyze the information they have recorded on their Reviewer's Form. Ask students to share their responses in a discussion structured to offer critical review of the film
2. Ask students what they learned from the film.
3. Other suggested activities: Distribute the activity sheets #1, #2, #3 to small groups of students. Give the groups at least 30 minutes to work on their activity.
4. Have each group present their project or findings to the class.

### **Assessment**

For Activity #1: How well have students determined and interpreted key themes and symbols in the film? How well did their group work together? Was their presentation effective?

For Activity #2: Did students effectively understand key points of the campaign and did their symbol or artistic device work to communicate these aims to others? Did students analyze the visual medium and come to understand the message being communicated?

For Activity #3: Did the students grasp the key historic events touched upon in the film? Have they rendered a chronologically correct timeline, and are the symbols used appropriate to the event?

For Activity #4: Did students create an effective and true-to-character monologue or diary entry for Fengxia?

For Activity #5: Does the students' short script reflect an understanding of the key events or themes with which the director of *To Live* was concerned?

*General Assessment criteria for all groups*

Students will write a self-assessment of their part in the group project:

- Did you demonstrate understanding of the texts and assigned readings?
- Did all group members contribute to the group process?
- Was the project well organized?
- Were all members of the group prepared to respond to the duties assigned them?
- What grade would you assign yourself? The group?

The teacher will use similar criteria to evaluate the presentations.

**Follow-up Activities**

Have students research in more detail one of the historic events. (7-12)

Have students research the lives of key figures during this period. (7-12)

Have students create a diary based on one of the characters. Record everyday life events from that character's perspective. (7-12)

Have students compare the events in China during this era to those in the United States, The Soviet Union, Japan, or India. (10-12)

Have students read other works of literature or view other Chinese films that treat similar themes. (10-12)

Allow students to select among short stories that depict events during the Cultural Revolution. In a presentation, students might offer a traditional book review, or offer comparisons between their selected work of literature and themes in the film *To Live*.

## Handout #1: Essay: Rebellions and Revolutions

This brief historical overview traces key events in China's mid-nineteenth- and twentieth century history, and provides a picture of the historical background against which the story of *To Live* is set. Although the story of the film opens in the 1940s, it is important to explain how China arrived at a critical juncture during that decade, and so a brief overview of key events in the mid-nineteenth century is offered as well. In the following essay, key terms or concepts are highlighted in bold font. Many of these terms are mentioned directly, or form the background context, for events in the film.

Consider these questions as you read the following handouts:

- What influence did the establishment of Treaty Ports have on the internal politics and development of China?
- In what ways did China's traditional culture change as it interacted with the West? What was the effect of the Sino-Japanese War on China?
- What impulses and frustrations did native participants in the "Boxer Rebellion" reveal in their actions?
- Was the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 determined decades earlier or was it the result of a spontaneous accident?
- Why did the Guomindang (GMD) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) battle one another although all were Chinese?
- Why do you think the Communists won on the mainland?
- What was the symbolic and nationalistic importance of the Great Leap Forward?
- What were the positive and negative effects of that national campaign?
- Why do you think the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was set in motion?
- What consequences did that era have for China's modernization and development?

China had for many centuries regarded itself as self-sufficient and culturally superior to other nations. An attitude of xenophobia, or dislike of foreigners, governed China in its relations with Western Powers. China restricted trade with the West and limited Western access to certain port areas, primarily Canton and Macao. While China had goods such as porcelain and silk to offer to the West, it did not desire to purchase items from the West. Over time, Western nations became increasingly dissatisfied with these limitations and with a growing trade imbalance. Some nations, including Britain and the United States engaged in the import of opium to China as a means to offset this imbalance. Chinese petitions to cease in this activity did not gain the sought after response. Lin Zexu, a commissioner for the Qing emperor, set fire to several crates of opium owned by the British. The British retaliated by defeating the Chinese in what is referred to as the **Opium War**.

The loss of that war in 1842 resulted in the Treaty of Nanjing, which granted the British trading privileges and important ports, including Nanjing. Hong Kong was ceded to the British. Americans sued for similar rights in 1844 with the Treaty of Wangxia. Additional ports were opened to Western powers as a result of the second "Opium War," also referred to as the Anglo-French War (1856), during which Britain and France joined forces against China. The **Treaty Port System** was developed, and foreigners enjoyed privileges of **extraterritoriality** in their **concession areas** within these port cities.

Western European nations and the United States had undergone significant changes prior to and during the nineteenth century. Meiji Japan (1868--1912) followed suit in making efforts to westernize. Events

in China highlighted the advanced technology and naval superiority of the West. These changes gave such nations an advantage in dealing with China, and included events such as:

- the scientific revolution
- the industrial revolution and its innovations - rise of technology
- political revolutions, independence movements, nationalism, and formation of modern nation states
- economic development
- increase in military might, proficiency, and technology

In addition to such confrontation with outside cultures, China also faced internal difficulties that included uprisings, governmental corruption, unequal and inefficient taxation, increasing poverty among some parts of the population, and environmental problems that included drought and famine in some areas. A lack of internal cohesion grew pronounced and undermined Chinese efforts to offset the influences and aggressions of foreign powers.

Internal dissent awakened in China during the 1850s and early 1860s as the **Taiping Rebellion** challenged the power of the Qing court. During the late nineteenth century China's Qing government lost ground in the face of continuing foreign influence and demands. In 1894 Japan attacked China over a dispute concerning territory and authority in Korea. The **Sino-Japanese War** resulted in Japan's victory against the vastly larger China. Japan won territories and concessions from China, including Taiwan and areas in the Shandong peninsula.

A dissatisfied and impoverished peasantry responded in various ways to the difficulties in their lives, which included drought and famine. In the north, displaced peasants joined together to form a rebel group that became known in the West as the **Boxers**. Over time the movement spread to other areas. Although the Boxers in different areas were diverse in their practices and beliefs, a general anti-foreign theme arose among the groups. By 1900 they had gained the support of the **Empress Dowager Cixi** and her Qing troops, who helped to direct peasant frustration toward anti-imperialist and anti-foreign ends, and the Boxers struck out against vulnerable Western missionaries and foreign residents. In time, combined military forces of Western nations and Japan suppressed the **Boxer Rebellion**. Punitive measures meted out against China included the Boxer Indemnity that nearly bankrupted the Qing court. Such events greatly weakened the floundering dynasty. The Qing dynasty fell in 1911.

The **Republican Era** ensued. Although many Chinese and foreigners anticipated that the nation would be led by **Sun Yatsen**; in fact, the presidency fell to Yuan Shikai, a strong Northern warlord who also had the support of some westerners. Within four years, he had made plans to have himself invested with powers of an emperor. However, he died in 1916. No single strong leader emerged, and the nation fell into a period of warring and disunity known as the **Warlord Era**.

In the wake of these events, factions developed within the **Nationalist (Guomindang or GMD)** party that Sun Yatsen helped to establish. Following Sun's death from cancer in 1925, a period of struggle ensued as individuals fought for the right to lead that party. In time **Chiang Kai-shek** emerged as the leader, claiming authority as the chosen disciple of Sun Yatsen. The **Chinese Communist Party (CCP)** formed in 1921. For a time Communists and left-leaning Chinese worked with the Nationalists, but as factions developed and struggled for control, the Nationalist party split.

For a short period beginning in 1925 the Nationalists and Communists formed a **United Front**, joining

forces to drive out the warlords in the North in a movement known as the **Northern Expedition**. Moving north from Canton and on to Nanjing, the United Front forces pushed out rival generals and continued northward to win over or wipe out many of the warlords. In the spring of 1927, however, leaders of the Nationalists decided to eradicate the Communists once and for all. Thousands of Communists were trapped in Shanghai and executed. Those Communists who survived the massacre fled to the rural area of Jiangxi province where they established communes.

In early 1934, Communists fled those communes with Nationalist forces in pursuit, beginning an arduous journey known as the **Long March**. The Communists set up an encampment in the northwest area, in the province of Shaanxi, above the city of Xian. They eventually established their base of operations in the caves and city of Yenan. The Communists and Nationalists continued to fight against each other, with only a brief period of a second United Front during which they joined forces to fight against the Japanese. The second Sino-Japanese War started on July 7, 1937, when fighting broke out between Japanese and Chinese troops just north of the city of Beijing.

During the era of World War II, and during the Civil War that resumed in China thereafter, the Communists were successful in the rural areas for a number of reasons. When they entered a village, Communist soldiers were ordered to pay for any supplies or food they took and were advised not to harm the villagers. Mao's form of communism depended upon workers and peasants to create a social revolution, and focused on doing away with exploitative classes. Such directives led to positive feelings toward the Communists among the rural masses.

After the end of World War II in August 1945, civil war resumed as forces of the GMD and CCP struggled for control of the nation. The Chinese Communist Party, led by **Mao Zedong**, won victory on the mainland by October 1949, when Mao proclaimed the **People's Republic of China** from a podium in front of the Forbidden City facing Tiananmen Square. Meanwhile, by October 1949 the Nationalists had begun to establish a stronghold on Taiwan. Chiang Kai-shek moved to Taiwan and established the Nationalist government of the **Republic of Taiwan**.

The Communist victory on the Mainland did not mean immediate calm after years of warring in China. It took years to consolidate Communist rule throughout the country. Members of the **People's Liberation Army** moved into areas of China after 1949. Cadres were sent to spread propaganda among the peasantry and to reform the people through example. Communist propaganda included ideas that were especially appealing to poor rural dwellers. These ideas, directed at reforming the old society, focused on improving the lives of the peasants through:

1. **Land Reform:** Mao believed in land redistribution, and knew that one way to overthrow old power structures was to divide and distribute the wealth and land of the "elite." Part of the Communist program to displace the old power holding elites and to share the land and wealth more equitably made individual landlords the targets of struggle sessions and purges. Many landlords were run out of their villages and others were killed. Sometimes individuals were charged with being **counterrevolutionaries** or **rightists**, which meant that they did not support the aims of the new revolutionary rule, or perhaps had been affiliated with the Nationalists.
2. **Education for the Masses:** Many individuals gained their first opportunity for education. The written character system was simplified to make reading more accessible to the masses. Although often classes were little more than indoctrination sessions, they did provide a basic level of education. Further educational reforms were directed toward the sciences in order to provide a skilled and trained work force capable of moving forward China's industrial

expansion.

3. **Equality for Women:** Women looked hopefully toward the communist reforms because they promised equality between men and women, socially, economically, and politically. Women were hailed as holding up "half the sky." Wages and working hours for women and children were improved. Marriage laws were rewritten to provide women with greater voice in marriage arrangements, to allow for divorce and child support, and to give women property rights. Sick pay, leave time during childbirth, and childcare systems were some ways of improving the lot of women. In urban areas some women saw improved working conditions and opportunities for leadership. Many women saw improvement in their lives; others did not. In time, intellectuals began to criticize the communist propaganda as empty promises. Today, critics observe that in the countryside, where women have supposed equality to men, women bear the chief burden of laboring both in the fields and within the home.
4. **Modernization:** The Communists also strove to develop the country's infra-structure, industry, and prosperity. Slogans called on workers and individual citizens to provide the base by which China would surpass the industrial output of western nations such as Great Britain. Following the Soviet Union model, the Chinese developed a set of **five-year plans**. The first five-year plan was implemented in 1953. In 1958 Mao Zedong launched another program to advance China's industry and agricultural system. Known as the **Great Leap Forward**, the strategies eventually proved disastrous. Farms underwent **collectivization** and **communes** were established. Communities worked together to meet industrial and agricultural quotas. Communal kitchens and child care programs developed in order to economize on time so that women would be free to work toward these goals. The agricultural reforms included the implementation of quotas and planting programs that were not suitable in all areas of China. Drought complicated the picture in north China, and crop yields dropped. Nevertheless, model communes were created for show. Officials toured areas where harvests had been brought in from villages far away and where extravagant claims were made about the positive effects of the Great Leap programs. By the early 1960s, millions of Chinese had starved. Scholars estimate more than 20 million deaths resulted from starvation and related complications due to the failures of the Great Leap Forward campaign. This reform also aimed to move China into an industrial age. Local communities engaged in **scrap metal drives** and held competitions to determine which could gather and smelt the most metal in backyard furnaces. With this product China would build its new infrastructure. This program also did not meet its aims.

Mao's Communists sought to form allegiances and to work with other Communist world powers. Yet during the late 1950s, tensions began to develop between China and the Soviet Union. The Soviets viewed the policies of the Great Leap Forward as too extreme. Soviet leaders disagreed with China's approaches to reform and its ambition to regain Taiwan. Alienation between the Chinese Communists and the USSR led to a break between these nations. Soviets withdrew their advisers and military strategists. Nevertheless, China developed nuclear capacity by 1964.

After the disaster of the Great Leap Forward, there was a brief period of relative calm when more moderate party leaders gained prominence. Mao was threatened by the dwindling support for his policies and feared China's revolutionary spirit was waning. In order to regain control and solidify his image, he launched a propaganda movement, the **Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution** (1966-1976), to regain the support and enthusiasm of the masses. Young people, organized into groups of **Red Guards**, were the vanguard of the movement. At official levels, the movement was spearheaded by a group of individuals, later known as the **Gang of Four**. Among them was Mao Zedong's third



wife, **Jiang Qing**.

Enthusiastic Red Guard members went out from the cities to the countryside to spread propaganda and enlist support. Revolutionary slogans included such invectives as "destroy the old," which meant traditional thoughts and things. Cultural treasures were destroyed and religious centers were attacked. Faces of Buddha and other religious figures were defaced. Universities and schools were closed. As part of the effort to overthrow old traditions, individuals were "sent down" from the city to the countryside. Intellectuals were sent to the countryside to perform hard labor and to learn from the people. Sometimes rural people were sent to the city. Communist leaders espoused the idea that the common people held strength and intelligence. Youth received minimal training and took on roles of health providers known as "**barefoot doctors**."

In time, the zeal of the Cultural Revolution dwindled. Relations between China and the United States began to open in the early 1970s. In the spring of 1976, **Zhou Enlai**, who had been with Mao since the revolutionary days of World War II and who was much loved by the Chinese people, died. On September 9, 1976, Mao Zedong, who had been in poor health for years, died. Shortly thereafter, the Gang of Four was arrested and imprisoned, and the tumultuous days of the Cultural Revolution drew to an end.

## Handout #2: About the Director and Characters

### About the Director, Zhang Yimou

Zhang Yimou (Je-ang EE-Mo) is part of China's "Fifth Generation" of filmmakers. Zhang Yimou's first directing effort was *Red Sorghum* in 1987. He followed with the 1989 production of *Ju Dou* and with *Raise the Red Lantern* in 1991. In *The Story of Qiu Ju* in 1992, Zhang took his first look at contemporary China. *To Live* followed in 1994. Despite a popular reception abroad, Chinese censors prevented showing of the film on the mainland. Zhang's most recent film, *Not One Less*, appeared in 2000.

One commentator notes that "Although *To Live* has been banned in its country of origin because of the supposed negative portrayal of certain pro-Maoist historical events, Zhang's presentation of three turbulent decades of life in China seems reasonably balanced." [http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/t/to\\_live.html](http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/t/to_live.html).

Yet another critic sees possible cause for the censorship in noting that the film "Is about the epic plight of a family during those decisive decades in Chinese history. It highlights Zhang's underlying critical attitude towards the Chinese state and the backwardness of traditional feudal society." <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/may2000/not-m27.shtml>

### About the Characters

The Xu (tshoo) family :

Ge You plays the role of the husband, **Fugui** (Foo - gway). Ge You also portrayed Master Yuan in Chen Kaige's film *Farewell My Concubine*.

Gong Li plays the wife, **Jiazheng** (jaw - jen). Gong Li is a frequent star in Zhang Yimou's films, as she was in *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*.

**Fengxia** (Fung - shaw) is a daughter of the new China. Fengxia is old enough to have been born during the strife of World War II and continuing Civil War, yet she is young enough to bear impressions of the new era of China.

**Yongqing** (Yoong - ching) is the son of Fugui and Jaizhen.

Others:

**Wan Er'xi** (Waan R - she) is the Communist Red Guard who becomes Fengxia's husband.

**Long'er** (Long - r) is the man who cheats Fugui out of his property and is later shot for being a counterrevolutionary.

**Chengsheng** (Cheeng - Shung) is Fugui's friend, met when Fugui is captured by Nationalist soldiers. He later becomes the district chief. He accidentally kills Yongqing and also arranges Fengxia's

marriage. He is later accused of being a capitalist roader.

**Mr. Niu** (Nee-oo) is the leader of Fugui's town when Fugui comes back from serving with the Communists.

**Lao Quan** (La-ow - Chuan) is Fugui's friend, met while they are fighting for the Nationalists.

### Handout #3: Synopsis

Viewers enter the realm of 1940s China through the lives of Fugui and his wife Jiazhen. Although viewers may recall that the 1940s were rife with warfare in China, the film makes no immediate reference to the rampant war engulfing China during that decade. Instead, it draws us into a more private set of battles, those between gambling men, where the stakes may or may not be life itself.

Against the backdrop of the opening scene in the gambling house, local players perform a shadow puppet show. As we watch the more savvy gambling house owners manipulate the unwitting and debt-crazed Fugui, we recognize that like the players on that other stage, these men pull Fugui's strings, as though he is a puppet. Yet they too are the subjects of forces larger than themselves. This motif recurs throughout the film.

Master Fugui is a gambler and a drunk. His wife, Jiazhen, pregnant and angry, warns him to quit gambling. At their family home, we meet Fugui's father, who scolds his son and calls him "Big Idiot Ox." We also meet Fugui's daughter, Fengxia.

Despite his wife's warning, Fugui goes back to the game and is winning when his wife comes to retrieve him. Fugui sends his wife away, scolding her for embarrassing him. He continues to lose, and finally he loses everything, including his property and home. The audience is aware, as he is not, that Long'er and the others have set him up by nursing his ego and pride in order to draw him to this position. Fugui offers to bet his life, but the others respond that it is worth nothing, now that he has lost his property. Fugui's wife awaits him outside the gambling house to tell him that she is leaving and taking Fengxia with her. She tells him that if the baby is a boy she will not allow him to grow up like his father.

The Xu family home is given over to Long'er. Fugui's father acknowledges that a debt is a debt, and both sides sign the document. The father proclaims that he had thought to live his final days in that house. He becomes hysterical and dies. Long'er agrees that Fugui can leave his sick mother there for a few days while Fugui sets up a business. Fugui makes an attempt at selling needles and thread.

Time passes, and the scene opens on a street scene in which Jiazhen is searching for Fugui. He is living in an old, rundown shack with his mother. We learn that Fugui has used his mother's jewelry to pay the rent. Jiazhen has had a son. She tells her husband that she named him "Don't Gamble Xu," but in fact she has called him Yongqing.

Fugui goes back to Long'er to borrow money in order to set up a shop and to reunite his family. Long'er will not lend him money but gives him the puppet show instead, complete with puppets and a carrying box, so that he can earn a living. Fugui learns to perform with the puppets, but during a performance is interrupted by Nationalist (GMD) soldiers. They force Fugui and others to join them in order to fight the communists. The GMD soldiers tell Fugui that he will be shot if he tries to escape. He makes friends with Chengsheng and Lao Quan, an old man from the same town who looks after and advises these younger men.

Fugui and his friends are cowering near a battleground as the next scene opens. Fugui says that he just wants to live, and expresses the lament that there is nothing like family while Chengsheng takes coats off corpses. They find the whole place deserted and believe that the other soldiers have run off. All kinds of military equipment has been left behind, including trucks, cannons, jeeps. The friends assume the "reds must be on attack." Lao tells them if they run they will be shot, so instead they

should to wait and become prisoners of war. He puts up his hands, exclaiming that the Reds treat POWs well, and will give them food and tickets home.

In fact, the GMD troops have not left; they have been massacred, presumably by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) troops. The friends make a pact to make it back to their community to tell the families of the dead what has happened. Lao Quan is fatally shot while looking among the corpses for his brother. As the Chinese Communists near the scene, the two friends run, carrying with them the box of puppets. They are captured and the scene closes on the box and puppets scattered in the snow. It reopens to Fugui performing a shadow show for the Communists.

As Fugui returns to his village, the camera fixes upon a little girl collecting money under water thermoses. She is his daughter, Fengxia. His wife enters the street with their son strapped to her back. We learn that his mother died the day Fugui sang for the communist People's Liberation Army. The new government paid for his mother's funeral and gave his wife a job delivering water. We discover that Fengxia does not talk because she lost her voice after a fever.

Mr. Niu is the town leader and Fugui tells him that he served in the Liberation. As part of the new China, landlords are put on trial during the land reform effort. Long'er is on trial as a landlord and counterrevolutionary. Fugui recognizes that it would have been him in this place if Long'er had not taken his property. Long'er is sentenced to death and, while moving through the street, sees Fugui in the crowd. They exchange a meaningful look. Long'er is shot. Fugui is frightened by the knowledge that it could have been he who died. He fears what might happen to his family. Jiazhen argues that they are ordinary townspeople. They work to carefully piece together the military service document that she mistakenly washed.

The scene moves to the 1958 during the Great Leap Forward. The cadres come for the family's donation of iron, which is carried to backyard furnaces for the smelting process. Yongqing, the son, pulls out the puppet box and shows the cadre the metal nails in it. The cadre praises the son for being more patriotic than his father. Fugui tells the cadre that he sang for the Liberation Army and promises to entertain the younger cadres. They agree not to take his puppets.

In the next scene, Yongqing comes to the rescue of his sister, Fengxia, when older boys are throwing rocks at her. Later, as the people gather at a communal dinner, Yongqing dumps a bowl of noodles and chili sauce on another boy's head. The father of that boy threatens the Fugui family and Fugui punishes his son by hitting him with a shoe. Jiazhen is angry that Fugui hit the boy, but Fugui tells her not to be so liberal on him. Although Fengxia can not speak for herself, she demonstrates in this scene that she can take care of the family by serving them bowls of noodles.

A new scene opens to people sleeping in streets after completing their community effort and smelting their share, which they determine is enough to make three cannon balls. Happy villagers claim that this metal will fuel the military machine of China. Men boast that they will use these weapons to liberate Taiwan.

Boys come calling for Yongqing, telling him that the schoolteacher wants him. Fugui insists on waking the boy up even though he is extremely tired. Jiazhen does not want him to go. She tells the boy a sort of parable, that "our family is like a little chicken, it will become sheep, then the ox. After the ox is communism and then there will be dumplings every day." The boy goes off to work, but is so tired that he falls asleep behind a wall, which collapses when the district chief accidentally backs

into it. Fugui loses his senses when he sees the body of his son. The crowd takes the body away and won't let the mother see him. The women of the village hold her back from the sight, but she sees the bloody sheet as the body is moved. Jiazhen later stands at the graveside and blames herself for not stopping his father from making him go to work.

The district chief sends a wreath and comes to the grave. We discover that he is Chengsheng, Fugui's friend from the war days. He is stunned, and asks how it could be Fugui's son that he killed. Fugui also cannot believe that it is his old friend who has killed his son. Chengsheng offers 200 yuan as a token of his sorrow. Jiazhen screams at him to give her their son back. She tells him to remember that he owes them a life. He agrees that yes, he owes her a life.

The story moves into the 1960s. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) is underway. Mr. Niu comes with a letter to Fugui and tells him to get rid of the puppets because everyone knows that they are part of the old culture. He reminds Fugui that the older something is, the more reactionary it is to possess it. Although the puppets remind Jiazhen of her son Yongqing, the family burns the puppets.

Chengsheng sends word to Mr. Niu to get Fugui a better job. He also announces that he has a man for Fengxia to marry. The potential groom, Wan Erxi, has a lame leg and is also a leader in the Red Guard. He carries Communists items as a gift to the family and to demonstrate his solid worker background. He points proudly to the framed document on the wall. Everyone agrees that the match is a good one. Fengxia likes Wan Erxi. Her parents, though very poor, plan a big wedding for Fengxia. She wears her CCP uniform and at the celebration they sing a party song. The Cadre pay respects to Mao and bow to him. Chengsheng comes to congratulate the couple and the situation becomes awkward. Fugui asks Chengsheng to put the past behind them. Chengsheng offers a picture of Mao as a wedding gift.

In the next scene, Chengsheng has been charged as a capitalist roader. Wan Erxi says that the family should draw a line between themselves and Chengsheng. Chengsheng gives Fugui a certificate telling him where his money is, and says that all his debts have been paid. He reveals that his wife killed herself the day before and that he wants to kill himself. Fugui scolds him, telling him that he has to live, and returns the money to Chengsheng. Jiazhen comes out of the house to ask Chengsheng to enter. She thus shows forgiveness. She reminds Chengsheng of his promise, and tells him that he still owes her a life, and so he has to value his own.

In the next scene, Wan Erxi and Fengxia have announced that they are having a baby. As she enters labor they go to the hospital, and the family observes that all the nurses are very young. There are no doctors because the Red Guards are in control and doctors have been imprisoned or sent down to the countryside. Wan Erxi tries to get a doctor released to look after Fengxia. He pays for release of the head of obstetrics, but that doctor is so famished that he is nearly unconscious. Fugui buys him a bundle of mantou (hot steamed buns). The doctor eats so many buns that he passes out. The untrained nurses (barefoot doctors) are overwhelmed when Fengxia hemorrhages after giving birth. She dies.

Some years later, Fugui and his grandson enter. Jiazhen is sick. She reminds Fugui that he should not have given the doctor the buns. They put the grandson's chicken in the puppet box. Jiazhen tells the story of the chicken that turns to geese, to sheep, to an ox. Fugui tells them no, that it will be planes and trains; from here everything will get better.

Terminology:  
shadow puppet show  
Nationalists (GMD)  
Chinese Communist Party (CCP)  
People's Liberation Army  
land reform  
landlord and counterrevolutionary  
Great Leap Forward  
cadre  
The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)  
Red Guard  
sent down  
barefoot doctors

## Handout #4: Film Reviewer's Guide

Groups of students should be assigned to keep track of the actions of the following characters, or the appearance of the following themes:

1. Fugui seems to portray the corruption of Chinese society before the Communist takeover in 1949. What events transform him?
2. Jiazhen betrays common stereotypes of Chinese women as weak and submissive. Note the ways that she takes charge of her own and her children's lives. In what ways does she convey conventional wifely loyalty?
3. Fengxia is a daughter of the new China. What does it mean for the daughter of the new China to be silent or silenced? Why is she the one who cannot speak?
4. Yongqing is the son of Fugui and Jiazhen. Sons have long been preferred in Chinese society. He is pampered, yet nevertheless, he dies young. It is an old friend, who is now a communist party leader, who has accidentally killed the boy. What might the significance of that death?
5. Wan Er'xi is the husband of Fengxia. Why is he considered a suitable husband for Fengxia?
6. Long'er represents the old culture. He has won the house from Fugui. What happens to him and what might it mean?
7. The shadow puppet show is a recurring motif in the film. Keep track of the times the shadow puppets appear or are referred to in the film.
8. Social structures: Make note of the types of community interaction and traditions in the film. Observe the roles of grandparents, parents, and children.
9. Make note of the number of different campaigns of conflicts in the film. (Examples: Civil War, land reform, landlord and counterrevolutionary, Great Leap Forward, Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), barefoot doctors)



## Activities for Students

Activity #1: Assess the key themes and symbols of the film. The title conveys the theme that life is difficult; the challenge is to live. What events in the film uphold or reveal this theme?

\* In small groups, determine the key themes and how they are conveyed in this film. One person, the director, will organize the discussion and assign roles. One person, the presenter, will report to the class. Another, the artist, will create a visual representation of the theme.

Activity #2: Propaganda posters.

Propaganda posters became a prevalent form of social indoctrination and a sanctioned form of artistic expression from the 1950s until the late 1970s. Ask students to describe the scene depicted in the poster in very concrete terms first. For example: I see a working man carrying a bucket, a woman wearing red, also working and smiling, and a large building under construction in the distance.

Next, ask the students to imagine the purpose of the poster. Some posters have captions, others do not. Having determined a probable purpose for the poster, ask students to analyze what might make it effective as propaganda for a social campaign.

Have students compare a number of posters. What common aspects do they perceive? Access the following websites, or print a selection of posters from the website.

<http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/crc.html>

<http://www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/chairman/>

Activity #3: Art and the Art of Propaganda

\* Pretend that you are a cadre sent down from the city to gain support among the peasants for a new social program. Or, select one of the scenes in the film to publicize. Write slogans and create a visual aid.

\* Pretend that you are a Chinese peasant living in a rural village during the 1950s or 1960s. Design a propaganda poster that reflects your demands or indicates your support for government programs.

\* Read some of the poems written by Mao Zedong and Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Write your own poem in the style of one of those you read.

Activity #4: Create a timeline and symbols This activity reinforces concepts of cause-and-effect. It also helps students to recognize the impact of large historical events on individual people.

\* Create one time line that traces events in the life of Fugui's family. Create another timeline that shows major events in Chinese history during the same era.

\* Indicate intersections between the big events and those that transpire in the lives of Fugui's family.

Activity #5: Create character monologues or diaries

\*Write a monologue from the point of view of Fengxia. What are her inner thoughts about the events that happen in her life?

Activity #6: Create a shadow puppet show, an opera, or a communist propaganda scene.

Communist cadres often used short dramatic presentations to educate the masses about their agenda. Assume the role of a cadre sent from the city to rally support among the peasants for the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution. Write a speech geared to enlist their enthusiasm and support. Shadow puppets are but one aspect of abundant and rich cultural traditions in the performing arts.

Like the Shadow Puppet shows, regional opera forms combine music, movement, and lyric to convey stories and themes of history. During the era of the Cultural Revolution, traditional operas were banned and new patriotic operas were created. Create a script for an opera.

Students might want to do some background reading about the history of shadow puppets. Print out or consult the following websites:

<http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/9924/content.html>

<http://www.chinavista.com/experience/piying/piying.html>