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Analyzing *To Live* through the Mediums of Literature and Film: Two Vastly Contrasting Presentations of Twentieth Century China's Radical History

Abbie Doll

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the acceptance and public interpretation of modern China's rather turbulent past in light of Yu Hua's novel *To Live* and Zhang Yimou's film adaptation. It explores how fictionalized traumatic experiences have the ability to ultimately and effectively communicate social truth. Other aspects examined are the utilization of death as an effective political critique, the overall significance of and interpretive variances caused by the urban-rural divide in Chinese society, and also the particular molding of citizens' lives that occurs due to either Mao's overbearing presence or the conspicuous lack thereof. Types of sources referred to and used throughout the analysis include other significant interpretations of the text and film, recent studies that reveal new perspectives on relatively unexplored territory in China's past such as the Great Leap Forward and its famine, and other articles that strictly examine Yu Hua's writing style and his treatment of trauma throughout his literature.

This essay examines Yu Hua's novel *To Live* and Zhang Yimou's film counterpart in an attempt to present an interpretation of the narrative that places it in direct relation to contemporary China's difficulty in appropriating its traumatic past. The analysis throughout devotes particular attention to the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, focusing on the sacrifices of mankind deemed appropriate or acceptable by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Primary aspects considered and thoroughly analyzed are speculation of Yu Hua's motivation for structuring the novel as he has done, comparison of the two mediums' highly contrasting endings and potential meanings behind such varying presentations, the roles of hope and suffering for humanity, significances embedded within the rural-urban divide, the treatment of trauma and death in regards to its potential for communicating social truth, and exploring the myriad ways in which Mao's presence or absence can be held responsible for affecting the quality of citizens' lives.

Having a grasp on the synopsis and being familiar with the characters is essential for understanding all the points involving plot variances and emotional elements made later on. Thus, Yu Hua's *To Live* is the tumultuous tale of Xu Fugui's severely chaotic peasant life in the midst of historical events such as China's Civil War, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. The Xu family's once hefty fortune is quickly lost through Fugui's irresponsible, incessant gambling, and this, as an act of fate or karmic retribution, can be said to spur all of the subsequent decades' misfortunes that arrive on his doorstep in the form of ubiquitous death and illness. As the pages turn and history progresses, Fugui tragically loses each and every member of his family. His parents die from illness rather early on—possibly as a result of the indignation and shame felt towards Fugui's initially narcissistic, thoughtless behavior. He is dragged into the army during China's Civil War, and his family loses all their wealth and land during the Great Leap Forward; during all of this, Fugui and his kind and loving wife, Jiazhen, attempt to (either forcibly or willingly to appease) make worthy contributions of the construction of a vastly improved China. Throughout these efforts, their hearty and ambitious son, Youqing, dies while donating blood and their loving and caring daughter, Fengxia, who is deaf and mute from a childhood illness, marries Erxi, a local member of the Red Guards with a minor physical disfigurement. Not long after, Fengxia dies due to hemorrhaging during childbirth and the poor availability of medical expertise. Fugui also loses his wife to disease. Erxi persists for a few years and begins to raise his and Fengxia's son, Kugen, but he is involved in a fatal construction incident and is thus also killed off in rather moot circumstances. Nonetheless, Fugui survives and outlives them all—even young Kugen, who chokes on a simple meal. The tragic tale comes to a close with Fugui struggling to maintain a living through backbreaking labor in his old age with his only remaining companion being an ox.

Zhang Yimou's film portrayal, however, spares or even saves the lives of Jiazhen, Erxi, and Mantou (changed from Kugen). It leaves audiences with the lasting impression of an optimistic future through community and togetherness—no matter what the past has held; however, this is a seemingly unreliable ray of glimmering hope, in that it is rather incongruous with the film's dominant bleak ambience. The plot unravels in an incredibly similar fashion, except that Chairman Mao has much more of a suffocating impression within the film; he has an active presence and could actually be considered a primary character or force of nature at play throughout. As briefly mentioned, it concludes much more optimistically in comparison to the novel; survivors Fugui, Jiazhen, and Mantou (their grandson, the name having changed) hold a conversation about the future and how Mantou will undoubtedly have a better life riding on newly accessible technology like trains and airplanes. The implication seems to be that the quality of life in general will only continue to improve due to societal progression and advancements in technology on the glorious road to industrialization and modernization.

One review of the novel suggests that Yu Hua “details the grittiness of life under [c]ommunism but places a greater emphasis upon the frailty of the human condition than upon the politics behind the given scenarios” (Quan 137). Contrarily, a chosen review of the film centralizes around the notion that the “happiness of the family is abruptly and brutally destroyed by erroneous state policies” (“Asia” 1214). Both of these, though apt descriptions of the novel and film, are incomplete—especially in making the assumption that the novel disregarded coverage of communism in favor of an anthropological approach. Rather, the progression of loss surrounding Fugui in the novel version of Yu Hua's *To Live* is meticulously structured as entirely the result of past actions, depicted by a complexly intertwined wrath of fate; whereas

Zhang Yimou's film presents the deceased members of the Xu family in a manner that more or less sidelines the fault of the individual and instead reflects a heart wrenching victimization that generally stems from the immensely turbulent historical periods within the latter half of twentieth-century China and more specifically, Chinese Communist Party's policies.

In his essay, "The Chinese Perspective and the Assessment of Contemporary Chinese Literature," Chen Xiaoming, a prominent literary critic at Beijing University, argues for the need to abandon Western theories and methods for analyzing literature; he focuses on the uniqueness surrounding the Chinese experience, particularly the distinct features of rural-based narratives (Chen 24). This uncommon perspective is easily identifiable within the novel, in that it is "capable of dealing with historical legacies and critiquing current reality" and also has "unique access to the true culture of rural China and the depths of humanity" (Chen 25). By applying the aforementioned train of thought, this particular novel, though seemingly less politically radical than the film and its direct approach, is transformed into an intentional, ongoing commentary on Communist China, one that utilizes protagonist Fugui as a reality check with regards to the responsibility of individuals. The punishments for his early misdeeds (e.g. excessive gambling, sleeping around, narcissistic perspective on life, mistreatment of his pregnant wife, abandonment and utter disregard of his family, etc.) never cease. A teacher once described young Fugui as a "rotten piece of wood that could not be carved," (Yu 10), and all that rotten wood can manage is rotting further, slowly deteriorating and negatively impacting all others in its near vicinity. In short, Fugui harshly mistreated those around him, exploiting all that he could with zero concern for the inevitable repercussions that would eventually follow. Fugui's initial behavior is directly symbolic of the CCP's exploitation of peasants during the Great Leap Forward; just as Fugui has

naively imagined that the family fortune would endlessly sustain his degenerate lifestyle, the CCP has similarly assumed that the peasants could easily withstand and endure unsustainable grain-taxation while selflessly serving as an omnipotent workforce to provide sufficient sustenance for the rest of China's overbearing population.

Whereas Fugui's initial immoral tendencies provide a parallel of CCP mistreatment of its citizens, the film's propagandistic, optimistic ending is more closely related to the "official" historical representations that the CCP has deliberately and thoroughly edited in order to provide a presentable, politically acceptable reconstruction of this traumatic past to its public. The closing scene reveals Mantou happily marveling at his newborn chicks that will inhabit the same trunk in which Fugui stored his traditional paper puppets for decades; smiling faces are had by all while a sense of disconnect slyly makes its entrance. The implication is that the dense fog of violence and death that hovered over the past has already or is in the process of dispersing and has been promptly replaced by the carefree, plump face of a relatively young child who is much too young to comprehend the circumstantial factors surrounding his mother's death. The hard times seem to have finally lifted and passed, as if they were nothing aside from natural, unavoidable occurrences necessary to jumpstart the Communist government.

Furthermore, this scene of temporary peace constructs quite the advantageous theme as a means for which the CCP can merely sweep all past injustices and horrors under the metaphorical, optimistic rug: undeniably life has its fair share of difficulties, but these must be tolerated because it really can only get better and better. More importantly, the confident assertion is that life *will* improve significantly by the CCP's involvement. The road to modernization is nothing

other than brutal and treacherous; however, future rewards clearly outweigh whatever had to be thoughtlessly sacrificed—or so the message promotes. Among the new era's fresh, shimmering rays of hope, the subsequent generation will live a comparably more complacent life, one in which the political institutions meticulously mold a collective mentality that has deliberately "forgotten" the past horrors.

Another particularly powerful representation of the film's propagandistic promotion of continual improvement is the chicken-goose-sheep-ox anecdote, which places great emphasis upon the film's naively optimistic, incongruous conclusion. Towards the end, Mantou inquires what will happen after his baby chicks reach adulthood; Fugui replies that they will turn into geese, then sheep, and finally into oxen. As the conversation continues, Fugui amends the typical development and comments that Mantou's modes of transportation will be trains and airplanes—not the traditional ox. This is in utter contrast with the novel's pessimistic ending: Fugui, miserably old and alone minus the company of a decrepit ox and the narrator (albeit a temporary companion), still sustaining himself through backbreaking labor. In conversing with the ox, he often refers to deceased members of his family, stretching the idea of community even to the ox in an attempt to dissuade laziness, but a much more reasonable psychological explanation for this behavior appears to reflect an unwillingness or inability to properly deal with the tremendous amount of loss and grief—much akin to contemporary China remaining unable to properly digest its traumatic past.

Another way in which Yu Hua's novel effectively critiques Mao's regime and the CCP in general is through the omnipresent phrase he utilizes for marking and forewarning the

occurrence of yet another predictable misfortune: “who could have known/guessed that.” Particular examples of this foreshadowing are alluding to the Cultural Revolution’s faulty reliance upon, ignorant, inexperienced youth (Yu 109); exploitation of Fengxia’s muteness (138); predictable worsening of Jiazhen’s illness from overwork (146); Red Guards’ foolish accusations for “capitalist roaders” (194); Fengxia’s death (207); and Jiazhen’s death (212). Yu Hua’s consistent usage of this phrase hints at the predictability of widespread failure and disaster resulting from Mao’s unrealistic and impossible-to-execute blueprints for the rapid, widespread creation of a truly communist nation. Instances of this phrase can easily be associated with another: “what else could possibly go wrong?” Linguistically and symbolically speaking, this effectively constructs a sense of dread to mark the amalgamation of negative side effects that have arisen from the attempted implementation of communism’s purely theoretical tenets.

Cai Yongchun, in his article “The Aesthetics of Linguistic Divergence: Defamiliarization in Contemporary Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction,” discusses the complications within constructing literature that surfaced due to Mao’s restraints on freedom of expression, postulating particularly how Yu Hua uses style to create a defamiliarized setting that challenges the norms of reality. Under Mao’s reign, creativity has been all but banned and restrictions on language usage highly interfered with individual expression—in fact, “[a]ny deviation in language is interpreted as doing linguistic violence to the political reality or ideological spirit,” (Cai 334). Yu Hua effectively accomplishes this advantageous defamiliarization by “abandon[ing] normal verbal representationality and offer[ing] the reader the chance to review his or her perception of the ordinary, habitualized world and develop a fresh, new linguistic sensibility,” (339). In regards to creating protagonists such as Fugui that assist in Yu Hua’s cause, he focusses on placing great

emphasis on their general commonness rather than constructing admirable heroes (342); furthermore, the narrative maintains a conspicuously violent thread in hope of coercing readers into questioning and critiquing the presented norms.

Another examination of Yu Hua's writing style in regards to *To Live* is presented by Liu Kang, who provides extensive coverage for the author's relevance within China's avant-garde literary movement in "The Short-Lived Avant-Garde: The Transformation of Yu Hua." He describes the author's transition from avant-garde style to a realist approach as a "reflection of [Yu Hua's] effort to grapple with aesthetic expressions and the experiences of ever-changing reality without succumbing to any particular literary trend or model," (Liu 91). Yu Hua's main motivation is to create an efficient collage that depicts the relevant era dominated by such traumatic memories and collective experiences (93). As Kang articulates further, "in Yu Hua's case, life means, first and foremost, lived experience in China at its most intense moment of transformation," (117), and the essence of this is implanted into Fugui, whose direct involvement in the transformation is rather prominent.

To Live, in its coverage of the extremely broad theme of life, offers that "experience is a labyrinth waiting to be disentangled," (Liu 106), and it is this quote that provides significance to the novel's narrator. In order to properly grasp his past experiences and overall life, Fugui must in some way reexamine the significant moments from a slightly removed position—hence the recollection occurring years after the main narrative's events. The retelling of his lifetime to another individual is also a substantial factor, in that it attributes significance to this otherwise ignored, commonplace peasant life. Fugui has been provided this opportunity, accompanied by a

stage and an audience, in order to effectively “disentangle” his past. These factors assist in cementing an entire lifetime of memories and experiences, which under any other circumstances would be entirely forgotten.

As can be witnessed through the lens of Fugui’s experiences, the novel focuses particularly upon the extreme deprivation of the peasants’ overall quality of life, as is centrally depicted and emphasized by the entire community’s near fatal starvation. Many scenes illuminate the intensity and extent of the hunger: the consumption of wild plants, tree bark, or essentially anything remotely edible (Yu 137); exploitation of Fengxia’s muteness when another villager accuses her of committing theft of a sweet potato that she herself uncovered (138-41); Youqing drinking water from a local pond for no other reason but to have some substance in his stomach (143); and up to months without rice in between harvests (143). As Fugui astutely observed, “hunger can drive people to do all kinds of wicked and immoral things,” (139), and during the Great Famine it most certainly did.

Gao Hua’s chapter in *Eating Bitterness*, “Food Augmentation Methods and Food Substitutes during the Great Famine,” is particularly relevant. It discusses the CCP’s responses (or lack thereof) to the brutal starvation, denial in accepting the Great Famine as a legitimate issue, propagandistic methods for attacking this strictly “ideological” problem, and so forth. The initiated “Food Substitute” Campaign urged starving citizens to find anything from remotely edible wild animals or plants (including tree bark and insects) to synthetic foods such as artificial meat, milk, etc. (Gao 184-5). Though characters in the novel do not resort to the consumption of artificial substitutes with absolutely no nutritional value, the severity of their starvation remains

and should not be brought into unnecessary questioning. On the extremely rare occasions in which actual meat could be purchased, citizens “lined up as far as the eye could see,” (175), and this can also be witnessed through Fugui, who in hopes of procuring some funds for rice, barterers Youqing’s lamb at an otherwise abandoned slaughterhouse. A significant queue of starving townspeople has formed before Fugui even has the chance to take his leave (Yu 135).

In strikingly bold contrast, the starvation aspect is utterly ignored in the film, as Fugui and his family have a somewhat more urban-based living arrangement. This can be interpreted as being symbolic of the CCP’s initial convictions that the grain shortage was nothing more than an ideological issue erected and supported by the peasants...or further yet—i.e. that there was *no* famine. Felix Wemheuer expands upon this in *Eating Bitterness*’ “‘The Grain Problem Is an Ideological Problem’: Discourses of Hunger in the 1957 Socialist Education Campaign;” the CCP merely labeled hunger claims to be capitalist attacks and protests of the State’s implementation of communism—especially of collective agriculture, which had been introduced to provide for Mao’s extremely irrational, optimal desired speed of industrialization (Wemheuer 107). The peasants’ fear of rapid collectivization is well justified as they were left with but three choices: “to run to the cities, to organize food by themselves, or to wait until they starved to death,” (115). Even publicly expressing hunger became socially unacceptable considering that the “Chinese government came to the conclusion that thousands of peasants pretended to be hungry in order to sabotage state grain policies,” (126). The film’s lack of coverage, then, is in *direct* alignment with the CCP’s ideological approach—as far as official politics are concerned, the Great Famine is nothing more than a myth constructed by greedy, egotistical, anti-socialist peasants.

As seen with the example of starvation, these highly contrasting mediums of presentation splendidly emphasize the dichotomy between rural and urban life during the Great Leap Forward, revealing the many privileges that urban life contained. To name a few examples, the urban-based Fugui and his family maintain significantly better housing; are not within critical reach of the famine; and are spared from unyielding, backbreaking labor in the fields. Even though political movements have directly impacted their lives, the overtone during times of relative ease remains conspicuously more carefree than that of the novel's continually increasing accumulation of misery, loss, and deterioration. The primary purpose of this divide appears to be to simultaneously offer a critique of and illuminate the impossibility of the Great Leap Forward's overly idealistic goal to obliterate all tangible differences between rural and urban settings.

Urban-based privileges aside, discussing the CCP's continual imposition of severe psychological duress is crucial. This is another adverse effect from attempting to construct a socialist society while either marginalizing the importance of or just completely disregarding individualistic mindsets. The aforementioned loss within the moral realm presents itself here as well, effectively creating a paradoxical, Darwinian society dominated by notions comparable to "survival of the fittest." Essentially, even the individual's ownership of life is lost—existence has become synonymous with assisting the State in whatever ways deemed necessary. Chunsheng, an old military buddy of Fugui's, is a case in point here; in the novel, his wife has greater societal standing and is in need of a blood transfusion. Additionally, Youqing just happens to be the only potential donor, and so Chunsheng is indirectly, incidentally labeled responsible for Youqing's death and is blamed harshly by both Fugui and Jiazhen. Upon hearing that Chunsheng fervently wishes to commit suicide, Jiazhen harshly admonishes him and suggests that he should keep his

life as repayment for the life he usurped and owes to their family (Yu 200). The irony of the situation is that prior to committing suicide, Chunsheng is labeled a “capitalist roader” and is cruelly beaten by advocates of the very same State that not long ago employed him as a county magistrate. The result of residing in a society with such rapidly fluctuating structure, values, and laws is that its citizens live in perpetual states of justified paranoia—unable to trust any other “comrades” and even occasionally their own unpredictable actions if sufficiently provoked by a torturing from the Red Guards, fatal political accusations, etc. Essentially the CCP has chaotically warped citizens into being its mindless, subservient puppets: “All it took was one word from the higher-ups and we’d all think and do whatever they wanted,” (Yu 171).

Alongside unconditional obedience, Birgit Linder, in “Trauma and Truth: Representations of Madness in Chinese Literature,” examines madness within literature and discusses its substantial role as a voice with the potential and intent to deliver social truth. She notes madness’ general relationship with national, historical, and social trauma and offers that utilizing trauma theory to address relevant Chinese literary works is only natural, as it is “the literary appropriation of traumatic experience,” (Linder 292). Additionally, Yu Hua’s work in particular is said to highlight the necessary connection between societal defects and those of human nature (299). As Birgit argues, “Yu Hua expresses this unrepresentability in the symbolism of violence, until survival itself becomes part of the unspeakable trauma,” (300); this is reflected in *Fugui*’s seemingly inexplicable desire to just keep on living no matter how intolerable the circumstances—as if, philosophically speaking, there is some undefinable, inherent good in the mere act of surviving. The main idea behind violence’s symbolic role is that life in reality has become so traumatizing that it can only be properly expressed by ubiquitous violence. Attempts

at linguistic expression prove to be insufficient because the indigestible horror literally *cannot* be represented through any other means than direct reference to instances of it. Verbose explanations are useless; rather, the tragedies, misery, and devastation must be *shown* to readers firsthand. The key in properly analyzing texts like *To Live* that employ this use of violence is in consciously arriving at the realization that the violence has a distinct message behind it. However, a rather effective method for portraying the essence of said message is to construct a literary environment conducive to assisting the reader to come to his or her own conclusions, spurred on by the outrage or mere inquisitiveness caused by a narrative dominated by scenes infused with callous violence. Most importantly, trauma fiction “illustrates the need for social transformation,” (301). It essentially demands the immediate attention of all readers, exponentially increasing their conscious awareness.

Furthermore, the omnipresent death, particularly within the novel and especially during the Cultural Revolution, is much akin to a death toll, a counter that serves to illuminate the lack of effectiveness concerning the CCP’s methods, policies, and so forth; to phrase it differently, Yu Hua has managed to transform death into an effective tool for political critique. In particular, tragic, preventable death in cases like Fengxia, a most beloved character due to her relative innocence, unfading smile, and other gentle, reassuring characteristics, tempts readers to utilize hindsight, provoking harsh criticism and contempt for the Cultural Revolution’s asinine tenets. Ultimately, the victimization and sacrifice of such a lovable presence is heartbreaking, and through this emotional attachment, consumers of *To Live* bear witness to the devastation and adverse effects stemming from the implementation of the Cultural Revolution’s insanity.

As is especially relevant to Fengxia's lamentable passing, Fugui asserts in both the film and novel the importance in enduring the hardships that life presents, regardless of how brutal and unrelenting they may be. Along with Jiazhen's simplistic desire from the film, "Let's put the past behind us and live peacefully," these both reflect the CCP's impatient urgency to just keep advancing with its policies regardless of whatever obstinate obstacles are embedded in its path. This is due to a blatantly blind focus on the desired end result and nothing else. The CCP and Jiazhen alike display no proper understanding of the complexities involved in such an apparently simple statement, whereas a much more pragmatic assessment would reveal the impossibility of severing ties to the past. These assertions emphasize the CCP's incredulously unreasonable expectations for rural citizens and its constant, implausible push for greater efforts. Prominent issues such as the Great Famine are devalued, motivated by the notion that no amount of sacrifice can outweigh the positive effects communism will continuously bring—once effectively established.

Jiazhen's aforementioned desire is also inextricably linked to one of the Cultural Revolution's most dominant tenets: "the older, the more reactionary." Anything old or interpreted as old is denigrated and becomes rather taboo; even objects as seemingly trite as Fugui's cherished traditional puppets that assisted his livelihood for decades are perceived as a legitimate challenge to the new State and must be burned. These puppets can even be said to represent Chinese citizens in that they are acceptable while useful, but that which cannot adapt to the rapidly changing times must be eradicated and forgotten. Though this example of abandoning the past has no significant repercussions other than minor nostalgia for Fugui, the Cultural Revolution's labeling professionals such as doctors as counterrevolutionaries and as "capitalist roaders" has

become responsible for tragedies otherwise easily preventable such as Fengxia's death after childbirth. Doctors are forbidden from their practices and from even setting foot within medical institutions, and the CCP has inserted insanely young and unqualified replacements who display excessive confidence but have hardly any expertise. Fengxia's death, though merely a rather treatable case of hemorrhaging, arises as an "unexpected" complication for the naïve "professionals"—all in the name of this asininely foolish, prideful abandonment of the past.

Another factor that aids the novel's indirect approach at critical political evaluation is Mao's relative absence—especially in comparison to his ubiquitous presence within the film. His invisibility is symbolic of the CCP's failure to effectively integrate policies into the rural regions, and it can even be assumed that Yu Hua structured the narrative in this fashion with full intent to make Mao's invisibility appear bizarre or conspicuous at the very least to his readers. Mao's absence in regards to his relationship with rural inhabitants is comparable to that of irresponsible parents neglecting children at so young an age that survival is still utterly dependent upon parental care. As a result of the guardian's poor quality, suffering and widespread death are predictable results.

One particular scene that alludes to this is Fengxia and Erxi's wedding. In the film's portrayal, images of Mao and banners displaying his political jargon in strikingly bold red and white litter the scene, presenting the Chairman as a godlike guardian. Erxi's quote reveals the respect and unfaltering devotion aimed at Mao that permeated the Cultural Revolution: "In good times, we think of Chairman Mao. Let's sing a song." This virtually equates to an expectation of the State that citizens of Communist China were to attribute all good fortune, fortuitous events, societal

progress, etc. solely to Mao's doing. The intentional constructed image is one of citizens' complete reliance upon the Chairman and all societal progressions and life's positive moments as a direct result of *his* doing alone. Such meticulous construction aids both in strengthening the false belief that life is continuously improving and also in disconnecting citizens from reality—convincing them that communism is naturally flawless and a universal solvent for all of their problems.

The novel's depiction of the wedding scene, however, prioritizes the individual and familial level of happiness, placing emphasis on the natural blood ties that Mao attempts to obliterate with propaganda that serves to promote his importance and the message that his impact on the individual's development is greater than that which can be attributed to one's parents. Images of red remain but are symbolic of its traditional importance surrounding fertility as opposed to its relatively recent association with communism. Even mentioning Mao's name is neglected, whereas within the film, political songs are sung to express gratitude to the State and photographs are taken with family members proudly holding their Little Red Books. Perhaps even the film's preservation of Mantou's life can be attributed to the obedience and respect for Mao displayed at the wedding—a propagandistic actualization of Chairman Mao's active involvement in protecting his people.

However, analyzing isolated “unfortunate” incidences such as Kugen's death with the novel's plot and assigning arbitrary classifications is troublesome, as discussed by Shi Liang in “The Daoist Cosmic Discourse in Zhang Yimou's *To Live*.” The Daoist notions of yin and yang disrupt such classifications and are indubitably at work in Yu Hua's work; in particular, readers

must keep in mind the fluidity and interchangeability behind the concepts of fortune and misfortune. Basically, the two are always difficult to decipher amidst complex causal relations for other incidents and are ultimately inseparable. Identifying the events of Fugui's life as strictly unfortunate is problematic in that it utilizes the assumption that nature could even remotely care about these happenings (Shi 6). To reiterate, "the omnipresent Daoist cosmic discourse is not sensitive to the human mind and heart, and consequently it does not treat good and evil, sorrow and happiness differently than the ebb and flow of the tide or the waxing and waning of the moon," (12). Shi presents *To Live* as undeniable proof of Daoism's involvement in contemporary Chinese thinking and behavior (6). The seemingly simplistic title becomes relevant here, as it actually contains myriad complexities that are reflective of a passive resignation to fate and its inevitable, arbitrary impact upon the individual's life. The film certainly possesses a "recurring pattern of the cyclical movement between fortune and misfortune," (7), emphasized by the incredibly ironic twist that just as Fugui's temperament and personality begins to substantially improve, his "luck" takes a turn for the worse. One crucial distinction, however, is that the film also intertwines the CCP's ideological mindset, which in turn significantly complicates the act of attributing fault to the institution and its policies through the omnipresent, seemingly unfortunate occurrences.

Complicating the matters of interpretation further, Grant Jennings, In "The Destruction of the Idyll in the Mao Era: Inter-Chronotopic dialogue in Yu Hua's *To Live*," elucidates the traditional philosophical tenets' involvement and impact upon the Chinese mentality during these turbulent times. He primarily discusses how the CCP's goals to rapidly industrialize and modernize have negatively affected the generational cyclical nature within rural life. First and foremost, during

the Great Leap Forward the “idyllic way of relating to the ecosystem is uprooted” (Jennings 367), and this can be especially understood through collectivization’s impact on the lives of peasants. Possessions simultaneously become everyone’s and no one’s; individual responsibility dissolves into ruins and scapegoating becomes prevalent.

For example, upon the novel’s introduction of the commune, Youqing displays severe reluctance to release possession of the lambs that he has lovingly raised and responsibly taken care of on a daily basis. This behavior does nothing but irritate Fugui, who soon retorts, “They’re the commune’s lambs, not yours!” (Yu 114). Youqing alone has demonstrated the proper mindset and maturity for taking care of his livestock, yet arguably, the State still succeeds in eradicating this individualistic expression and in molding him into its collective identity through his “praiseworthy” death that saves a more valuable, significant life. Meanwhile, the other collectivized animals have gone underfed and have been slaughtered without any significant consideration for potential repercussions that the community might face. The problem: no one would claim responsibility, which has resulted in nothing other than prolonged and detrimental negligence. By introducing a highly unnatural disconnect between mankind and animals, collectivization has essentially interrupted this otherwise direct relationship, severing the relevant Daoist notions of “natural.”

Other examples include Fugui’s impotence and Fengxia and Youqing’s deaths. Considering both heirs have already passed, the impotence is an indication of the reproduction cycle having been shattered (Jennings 370). Fengxia’s death, however, alludes to the Buddhist notions of karma and reincarnation; Fugui mentions that his family and that particular hospital must “have a score left

over from another life,” (Yu 207), implying that the “suffering his family must endure is payment for something that happened in a previous incarnation, to console both himself and Erxi,” (Jennings 371). Karma, then, is widely accepted as a perfectly natural part of existence—one that simply cannot be avoided or combatted. Reincarnation is thought to be a hefty source of peace that assists individuals in their coping with these otherwise inexplicable tragedies.

Jennings astutely describes Youqing’s death as a “perverse inversion of the unity of the cradle and the grave, and the usurpation of family relations by political ones,” (372). The circumstances surrounding his death illuminate certain advantageous societal positions (mainly political ones) and the unnatural prioritization of the life of the magistrate’s wife over a young boy’s.

Furthermore, she and Fengxia both experience the same post-delivery complication, but Fengxia lacks the political privilege and access to the medical care that could have saved her life in other circumstances.

As a broader attempt at literary interpretation, literary critic Hong Zhigang, in “Another Look at Subjective Self-Consciousness and Contemporary Chinese Literature,” discusses the relationship between literature and history, arguing that true value can ultimately only be found through the individual’s subjective experience. Within that is the key concept that “using a contemporary lens to reevaluate and analyze all literary works and trends is not only necessary but inevitable,” (Hong 36). This quote highlights the significance of varying interpretations and their responsibility for the causation of any legitimate progress in literary analysis. The same goes for *To Live*. Yu Hua presents Fugui’s life through a rather uncritical lens, leaving it wide-open for ongoing assessment and urging readers to delve deep into consciousness in an attempt to decipher or at the very least make remote sense of what it means “to live.” Within a narrative

that utilizes violence and death so frequently, a metaphysical examination is highly necessary. The reader is assigned a crucial task: locate and identify the embedded meaning that is just begging to be found. Not one level of examination proves sufficient, however; this complex narrative must be holistically assessed in a multifaceted fashion that employs a wide array of methods: historical, political, ideological, theoretical, philosophical, and so on.

Just as *To Live* need be critically examined from a combination of the aforementioned various approaches, it simultaneously manages to present many diverse presentations of what it could feasibly mean “to live.” The film and its rather optimistic conclusion embody a much more uplifting approach. Perhaps as Fugui and Jiazhen seem to realize, living is merely the appreciation associated with maintaining the ability to sit down to a relatively peaceful meal with family amidst an otherwise tumultuous life. Or perhaps, as Fugui discovers when gazing at Mantou and his chicks, to live is to experience an arduous lifetime and then be rewarded by the smallest gestures, such as the broad smile of a carefree youngster who has not yet been tainted by the world’s hardships. The novel’s implied definitions are significantly less cheerful but no less legitimate. As Fugui and his decrepit ox are managing, perhaps life is simply about persisting and enduring in spite of all the grievances. Perhaps to live merely means to fill an inexplicable obligation, or a particular imperative feeling that one must simply continue existing—even if most certainly not thriving. Regardless of whichever option appears most plausible in regards to *To Live*’s gruesome narrative, one remains to be stated—i.e. that of the collective. Ironically, this in particular may prove most appropriate; it refers to the undying human spirit, embodied through survivors and newborns alike, and this is reflected both by the narrator’s decision to spread Fugui’s tale of all others and also by the perseverance of and continuation of the Xu

family line through Mantou. These rays of hope, however miniscule they appear from the initial perception, are ultimately what emerge from the midst of a scarred society in shambles.

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