

## “To Live” 活着 huózhe

Leyburn PN1997 .T5937 1998 DVD  
Starring Ge You, Gong Li. Originally produced in 1994.

Based on the novel *To Live* by Yu Hua: PL2928.H78 H8613 2003.

This film is a useful overview of a half-century of Chinese history, but shifting the story line of the eponymous novel from farm to town, and rewriting the story to be less unremittingly grim than the novel. Lying under the surface of the film are layers of social and political commentary. It touches on who was in and who was out of favor under Mao’s system, family roles, changing living standards and so on. The following gives background, both historical and political. You should be able to spot incidents (whole segments of the film!) that refer to the elements below.

Indirect or even covert political and social criticism via the arts has a long tradition. That is particularly the case in authoritarian political systems, where direct criticism is quashed and open discussion of policies can be distinctly unhealthy. That is not unique to Asia: remember the fate of Socrates. What was dangerous (safe?) in terms of politics in China under Mao? More specifically, what generated good political credentials, and did that change over time? Watch (read) for that!

Note that any critique is an implicit reflection of the situation at the time the film was made, in this case nearly two decades after Mao’s death in 1976 and a mere 5 years after Tiananmen. It was also about 15 years after economic reforms began; by 1994 qualitative change in the standard of living was visible throughout China, even if what people were then experiencing pales in comparison to what transpired thereafter. What sorts of social roles were held up as constructive and appropriate, and which as detrimental to society, or at least as inferior? More generally, what enhanced a person’s status in family and society? What status accrued to certain sorts of jobs (truck drivers...entertainers)? Is that different at the start, the middle, and the end?

Look also for depictions of “appropriate” family structure, the role of education and tradition *versus* modern and elite *versus* popular culture. More generally what makes for the “good life?” I concentrate below on historical and political elements; I ask you to watch / read in particular for everyday social commentary, of what is depicted as heroic and good, and what is seen as mundane, and what is outright evil.

To reiterate, note the standard of living. What sort of things are taken for granted in terms of physical amenities, food, drink, transport, clothing? Do fashions change - what to wear, what to eat? What consists of luxury? What does a family value? I have spent too much time in developing countries to be able to isolate what is surprising to contemporary Americans – I have stayed in locales that had neither running water nor electricity. Come up with your own list!

### History

The Qing Dynasty fell in 1911-12, replaced by the Republic of China. Parts of the country ended up dominated by one or another “warlord” after 1918, some of whom ran their regions virtually as independent countries. Meanwhile, Western influence – centered on Shanghai – was in tension with nativist influences. In addition, the gap in wealth and life-style between the rural poor and urban elite was huge, with the former often living in a non-monetized economy with very few “modern” goods (buttons, matches and sewing needles might be the only such goods a villager encountered, and kerosene the only chemical product).

Chiang Kai-shek rose to power in 1927 as head of the Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party), through a career with the central government’s military, and fought with warlords to increase his hold, while driving

out the Communists (a third of KMT membership in 1926). Then in 1937 Japan invaded China, bringing a truce to most such domestic conflicts. Eight years later the international war ended, and the domestic civil war reignited. The CCP (Chinese Communist Party) gained enormous prestige during the 1930s, because of “clean” government in the enclaves that they dominated (which gradually expanded to include wide swaths of northern and western China), and because they were vigorous in their pursuit of the war against Japan. Misrule by the KMT increased, and their inability to tax led them to print money to finance their end of the civil war; the resultant hyperinflation ended their residual credibility. The CCP won, launching the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949; meanwhile, a remnant of the KMT fled to Taiwan, taking over the local government there.

Under Mao the government quickly cemented its rule. With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 (presented to the fledgling government by Kim Il-sung of North Korea as a *fait accompli*), China was cut off from contact with the West and began to implement socialist policies. Industry in the north was nationalized or handed over to the Chinese by the Soviets after the Japanese surrender; “unreliable” elements had their assets confiscated (or worse...). Southern China was conquered last; its rural society was dominated by landlords -- it was something of a frontier society, with many villages only a century or two old. Land reform was aimed at that elite, and at buying the loyalty of the mass of poor rural Chinese; it was also in accord with socialist thinking about the wealthy (and with Western condemnation of rich landlords – Marx was not unusual in viewing feudalism as vicious and backwards). In the wheat-growing regions of north China landlords were unusual; again, in parts of the southern rice-growing regions they held much of the land. Whether or not intended by the leadership in Beijing, villagers in the south often used land reform as a means to settle scores with local landlords in a very final way.

Once the country was unified and peaceful – hyperinflation cured, local tax collection regularized and improved, food supplies recovered – Mao became dissatisfied with the pace of growth. In 1956 he started the collectivization of agriculture (urban areas were similar), and in 1958 launched the “Great Leap Forward” (GLF) that set up communes in the countryside. This era saw the first of a series of mass campaigns, which Mao used for various purposes – achieving economic goals, strengthening his rule, shifting social structures, purging ideologically suspect individuals, rooting out corruption, decentralizing power to local party officials. One of the hallmarks of the GLF was the goal of surpassing Britain in steel output, to be achieved in part by “backyard furnaces” that would use local ore to circumvent the cost and time needed to construct modern, large-scale mills. When local ore was unavailable, scrap metal would be thrown into a furnace, allowing local leadership to hit their targets for smelting iron. In the meantime, the GLF threw agriculture into disarray, in part because local leaders boasted of their boosting of production. With no need to harvest that much food, communes were urged by provincial and central government authorities to put their workforce to digging irrigation ditches and other capital projects... In fact, it was not a bumper harvest, and in the decentralized system at the time, provinces that had food stocks literally guarded their borders to prevent shipments to neighboring provinces, or the movement of starving refugees into their own territory. No exact account of deaths is possible; relative to trend, population fell by 30 million.

In the disaster that followed, Mao was effectively purged (1961?-65), with Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping in power. To reassert authority, and to correct what he saw as “rightist” excesses, Mao used his widespread contacts, charisma and status as the PRC's initial leader to launch a mass campaign to reassert his authority. This was the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (CR). As the vanguard, he mobilized students who waved their red books of Mao’s quotations (Mao had training in classical Chinese, considerable skills as a poet and great skills at rhetoric). This movement allowed Mao to purge Deng (who survived) and Liu (who was killed); the campaign focused on Confucius, on Deng and Liu, and on Lin Biao (Mao’s hand-picked successor, who fell out of grace and died in a plane crash). Parts of the country (especially large cities) ended up run by teenagers, who vilified those in authority. For obvious reasons, schools were one target, and more generally intellectuals. That, obviously, had consequences for keeping government and factory units operational, and meant that for almost a decade higher education (all colleges, and for most practical purposes all high schools) ceased to teach their technical subjects and instead focused on mastering Maoist ideology. In terms of human capital, this 10 year cohort is the “lost” generation.

Mao died in 1976, and the radical “Gang of Four” (including his wife) who officially ran the CR were deposed. Hua Guofeng, Mao's anointed successor, was gradually pushed out of power, and by 1978 Deng Xiaoping emerged as the preeminent leader among a group of elder leaders who had somehow survived from the early days of the CCP's rise to power in the 1930s. Deng began experimenting with “responsibility systems” (contracting out production to families instead of village work teams), and more generally with de-collectivization; some of this was out of desperation, as a “big push” development effort in 1978-9 collapsed when the initial hopes of oil exports were dashed when well after well came in dry. By default, local and soon regional markets were tolerated in the hopes that fewer demands would be placed on central government resources. Farmers and firms were permitted to sell their excess production for cash (and once enough people did that, cash had “real” value because it could be used to buy goods). At the same time, political reforms abolished the class system that Mao implemented, in which “rightists” were made to “wear the hat” signifying poor ideological background (parents who were landlords or former business people – class status was heritable – intellectuals who were too honest or too naive to change their line when the winds of politics shifted direction, ambitious individuals who lost out to rivals in one or another mass campaign). If you've counted carefully above, Deng himself was purged three times. He had been made to “wear the hat” and undergo public renunciation, but survived physically and without losing his spunk. He did his best to permanently end the system, to the point of ordering the destruction of the government's household records. That expunged all official claims as to whether someone comes from a landlord background, or of peasant stock – but did not permanently end the practice of keeping files on individuals, particularly at the enterprise level.

The economy has since had ups and less ups, notable for a recession in 1988-89. At that time inflation became a problem, and the government used its still dominant role in the economy to slow growth. This combination, and the policy disputes that surrounded it, fed into the factionalism at the senior level and the unrest at the popular (or at least student level) that culminated in the gathering at Tiananmen. Then in 1992 Deng made a tour of the south, to trumpet the benefits of openness and reform, with an emphasis on the private sector. While foreign firms had been encouraged to invest in a number of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), such as the then-village of Shenzhen, across the border from Hong Kong, they were now held up as exemplars, and many of the incentives they employed (enterprise autonomy, tax breaks, infrastructure, a tolerance for foreign investment) were extended to the country as a whole. That trip would have been fresh in the minds of viewers of this film – or its makers, since at least initially the film was banned inside China.

### Sample queries

1. What is the image of the well-off in the old China? Favorable? What is the source of their wealth?
2. What signs were there in the movie that China was backward? How did that change over time?
3. Why did the Communists win / the Kuomintang lose? (Of course, the only source you have for this is the movie.)
4. What was good about the period under Mao Zedong? Try to think of the favorable images.
5. Why collect metal during the Great Leap Forward? What did they do with it? Evaluate.
6. The Cultural Revolution sought to root out the old. Evaluate. Why was it sensible to try to do that? What were the costs of trying to do that?
7. Did people accumulate skills during the time period depicted in the film?
8. How good a use was made of the skills of people such as Mr. Xu? How did that vary over time?
9. Is technology good? How can we ask that in the context of microeconomic theory? – what criteria should we use to evaluate “good” and “better”
10. What political statements does the film make?