

To Live

活着 huózhe

Leyburn PN1997 .T5937 1998 DVD and VHS
This should be available on YouTube

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. It shifts the story line of the eponymous novel from farm to town; the film is also 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. Here I provide historical and political background. Look for incidents (whole segments of the film!) that refer to the elements below.

Indirect 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.

Any critique is an implicit reflection of its time. This film was produced roughly two decades after Mao's death in 1976, while the Tiananmen uprising of 1989 would have been fresh in mind. It was also about 15 years after economic reforms began. By 1994 qualitative change in the standard of living was visible throughout China, though growth subsequently accelerated so the economy has since expanded 8-fold.

I concentrate below on historical and political elements; consider the film an exercise in social commentary, depicting what is heroic and good, and what is 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 training in Moscow under Stalin. Indeed, Communists were a third of KMT membership in 1926. Most were killed in a purge in 1927; the remainder fled into remote areas, setting up rural bases under their control and thereafter expanding their sphere of influence as they adapted from the Lenin-Stalin emphasis on workers to a focus on peasants. Within a decade the Communists were a political force, while the KMT proved unable to control regional warlords. In effect, China remained enmeshed in a multi-party civil war.

Then in 1937 Japan invaded China, bringing a truce to most such domestic conflicts; come 1945 the domestic civil war reignited, helped in the north by weapons acquired when the Japanese surrendered and the south with wartime aid from the US. 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, which had been part of Japan during 1895-1945.

Under Mao the government quickly cemented its rule. The Korean War in 1950 (presented to Beijing by Kim Il-sung of North Korea as a *fait accompli*) drew in China, which was thereafter cut off from the West. By the mid-1950s it began to implement socialist policies. Some was by default: the Soviets held Manchuria and parts of north China at the end of WWII; they nationalized industry and later handed it over to the Chinese. Politically "unreliable" elements had their assets confiscated. Southern China was conquered later (and only after 1950 were Xinjiang and Tibet reincorporated into the empire).

The South was something of a frontier society. Many villages were only a century or two old, and in parts of the southern rice-growing regions peasants owned no land. (In the wheat-growing regions of north China landlords were less important.) Land reform was aimed at the rural Southern elite, most of whom had supported the KMT. It also sought to buy the loyalty of the mass of rural poor. It was perhaps happenstance that this was in accord with socialist thinking about the wealthy – Marx was hardly unusual in viewing "feudalism" as vicious and backwards. 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, food production recovered – Mao became dissatisfied with the pace of growth. He launched a series of mass campaigns, to achieve economic goals, strengthen his rule, shift social structures, purge ideologically suspect individuals, root out corruption, and decentralize power away from the (new) political elite to local party officials. One was the "Great Leap Forward" (GLF, 1958-60), with goals such as surpassing Britain in steel output using "backyard furnaces" that would substitute labor for the capital. Iron ore wasn't universally unavailable, so ambitious local leaders used "scrap" metal to make sure they hit their targets for smelting iron. But the GLF threw agriculture into disarray. Local leaders boasted of surpassing production targets. Provincial and central government authorities relied on such reports and mandated peasants undertake irrigation projects – in the midst of plenty, fields could be abandoned. In fact, the weather turned bad, and harvests failed across much of China. Famine killed perhaps 30 million.

In the disaster that followed, Mao was effectively purged by Deng Xioping, Liu Shaoqi and others. To reassert authority, in 1966 Mao used his charisma and status to launch another mass campaign, the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (GPCR). Students were his vanguard, waving their red books of Mao's quotations and poetry. This movement allowed Mao to purge Deng (who survived) and Liu (who was killed). Large cities ended up run by teenagers, who vilified those in authority, including teachers and other intellectuals. That, obviously, had short-term economic consequences, and meant that for almost a decade higher education (including high schools). 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 GPCR were deposed. Hua Guofeng, Mao's anointed successor, was gradually pushed out of power, and by 1978 Deng Xiaoping emerged as the preeminent figure among a group of elder leaders who had somehow survived from the early days of the CCP's rural rise. 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 oil exports failed to develop. 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. 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.

Things to Ponder

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?
 - When did bicycles, electric lights etc first appear in the movie?
3. Why in the film did the Communists win / the Kuomintang lose?
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 – what was "bad" in Chinese traditions, what was sensible or beneficial? What were the costs of trying to uproot "culture"?
7. Did people accumulate skills ("human capital") 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? What was dangerous (safe?) in terms of politics in China under Mao? What generated good political credentials, and how did that change over time? What is the film's implicit evaluation of Mao? [*Note: the film was banned in China.*]
11. 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? Where is China similar to the US in this, and where different?
12. 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?”
13. How does the history presented by this movie contrast with that in our readings (Brandt *et al.*)?