

EAA Interview

with Yu Hua, author of *To Live* (*Huo Zhe*)

Interviewed by Helen Finken

Yu Hua, author of the novel *To Live* (*Huo Zhe*), was a participant in the University of Iowa's International Writing Program during the fall of 2003. Realizing that many readers would appreciate knowing more about Yu Hua and his recently translated novel, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (Random House, August 2003, trans. Michael Berry), Helen Finken, Iowa Partner Site Coordinator for the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia at the University of Iowa's Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, spoke to Yu Hua on behalf of *Education About Asia*. Translation of Yu Hua's answers was done by Nancy Tsai, who graduated from the National Kaohsiung Normal University in Taiwan. She is currently a graduate student in the Translation Program at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, IA. She hopes to work as a literary translator upon receiving her degree.

Helen Finken: *This is the first opportunity for American educators to meet you. Please tell readers about your early life.*

Yu Hua: I'm very happy to meet with American high school and university teachers. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. An ancient Roman poet said, "To recall the past is to live again." To talk to teachers about my past life enables me to relive the past once again. I grew up during the Cultural Revolution. My father was a surgeon. My mother was a physician. My childhood was



spent roaming in the hospital. I came to like the smell of Lysol in the hallways. I often saw my father covered with blood walking towards me. He'd glance at me and quickly brush by. He was busy with work and didn't want to stop to talk to me. My mother was better. When I walked past her office, sometimes she'd call to me. If there were no patients I could even sit next to her for a bit.

We lived in the hospital compound. The morgue was in front of us. I practically grew up among wails. Relatives of those who died would spend the night in the morgue in front of my window, anticipating the next day's cremations. There were many nights when I would suddenly wake up to sounds of crying. You could say I heard all the crying the world had to offer. All kinds of different ones. After some time they no longer seemed like they were crying. Especially when dawn arrived, their cries turned into wails of agony, which affected me deeply. I felt in the cries a familiarity, a painful familiarity. For a long time I thought this was the most moving song in the world.

I found out then that many people died during the night. I often passed the morgue on my way to the bathroom during the daytime. I saw that there was only a concrete slab. It was neat and clean. I sometimes stood at my window and looked at this mysterious little house. It was situated under a canopy of lush trees. The heat was especially unbearable during the summer. I often woke up in the afternoons to see the form of my sweaty body imprinted on the mat. Sometimes I'd be so drenched that my skin would turn pale. So one day I walked into the morgue and discovered that it was very cool. I lay down on the concrete slab. It was a sweltering afternoon but I felt cool. It wasn't death for me. It was happiness and a good life. Later in life I came across a poem from the German poet Heinrich Heine:

DEATH

*Our death is in the cool of night,
our life is in the pool of day.
The darkness glows, I'm drowning,
The day has tired me with light.*

*Over my head in leaves grown deep,
Sings the young nightingale.
It only sings love there,
I hear it in my sleep.*

Helen Finken: *What formative experiences led you to become a writer?*

Yu Hua: I believe experiences influence everyone, how everyone thinks and works, including writers. That aside, I believe I can talk about how reading has played an important role in my becoming a writer. Every writer is a reader. A writer must

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acknowledge his position as a reader. Reading classic literary works impressed this upon me. From reading, I am better able to correct the faults in my writing.

I grew up during the Cultural Revolution. It was a period without literature. Reading began for me when I was twenty. The Cultural Revolution had ended. I fell in love with literature and I wanted to write, so I started to read a lot of literature. That was twenty years ago. Then a wealth of foreign literature was introduced into China, and classical and modern Chinese works were reissued. A lot of literary magazines sprang up. All of a sudden I went from living in a bookless age to an age teeming with books. I didn't know what to choose. I had been a person who had no experience of reading.

I accidentally came upon Jack London. I remember Jack London saying something like this to the young people who loved literature: You're better off reading a line from Byron or Keats than reading a hundred literary magazines. I followed his advice and didn't read many literary magazines. I have since benefited from reading the many classics throughout these twenty years. Classics are the epitome of human wisdom. They chronicle the path of the human soul. A child immersed in the classics will grow up feeling the shared wisdom of humankind, and this wisdom will continue through him.

Helen Finken: *What motivated you to write To Live?*

Yu Hua: The phrase "to live" in Chinese (huo zhe) is charged with power. The power doesn't come from shouting or attacking, but enduring. To live is to endure the responsibilities life has thrust upon us, to endure the happiness and sufferings, the boring and banal, that reality has given us.

To Live talks about the friendship between a person and his fate. It is a moving relationship because they appreciate each other and hate each other at the same time. They can't get rid of each other and they can't complain about each other. When they live, they walk together on the dusty roads. When they die, they turn together into rain and mud.

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Helen Finken: *To what degree are the characters and events in the novel autobiographical or based on others' real-life experiences?*

Yu Hua: Of course, in *To Live*, Fugui comes from China's reality and history. But is there a Fugui prototype in real life? If there were, I believe there would be more than a thousand Fuguis, myself being one of them. This is the relationship between the writer and his characters.

Helen Finken: *How accurately do you think you captured the thought and language patterns of the Chinese villagers in To Live?*

Yu Hua: They are as real as possible because I grew up as a villager and am very familiar with that environment.

Helen Finken: *Fugui is torn between his desires and his responsibilities to uphold filial piety. To what degree is filial piety still an important norm in today's China?*

Yu Hua: There is still the concept but it is not as strong or as commonly expressed. In my opinion, that is not healthy for China. But I think the concept will return because family is very important and it is in the Chinese tradition to put emphasis on the family.

Helen Finken: *Why do you think some people just try to survive, like Fugui, while others try to change their circumstances?*

Yu Hua: I think it is easier to be an activist now. Previously, there was no notion of the individual being separate from his or her family. People traditionally could only exercise power over another family member. After the 1990s, there is more opportunity for independent action in China.

Helen Finken: *To what degree did you want to make To Live a hopeful story?*

Yu Hua: I think the entire book is full of hope. I began writing it in the third person, as an observer. I switched to first person and the story went more smoothly. But it is not just the narrative technique. It is the attitude you have toward life. If you use the third person, you are only recording Fugui's life and therefore can only see tragedy. But when Fugui tells his own story, you see the hope in his life. So in Fugui's story, he appreciates what life has given him. He doesn't complain. He thinks his wife is the best and that his children are, too. Even though he lost the family property to Long Er, in the end he is the most fortunate because Long Er is punished as a class enemy. Even though Fugui didn't become a

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county magistrate like Chunsheng, he lives and tastes happiness.

I used the traditional Chinese parable about the animals to show that life gets better. In every detail in the book there is a streak of hope. *To Live* is not a novel with one happy ending. I think in a good novel the story manifests itself in every little detail, not just in the ending.

Helen Finken: *The cover of the book states that your novel was banned in China. Please provide more information about how the book was received in China.*

Yu Hua: I have to explain that the novel wasn't banned in China. It is a very popular novel in China. There are more than six thousand articles and reviews about the novel on Chinese Web sites. It's one of the best-selling books in China. It is read in major universities' Chinese and political departments. Most readers are high school and college students. The movie has indeed been banned from public screening. I don't think there was a political reason. I think it was that they submitted the movie to the 1994 Cannes Film Festival without first gaining permission to do so.

Helen Finken: *How do you account for *To Live* being selected by the Chinese people as one of China's top ten most influential books of the last decade?*

Yu Hua: It was chosen by more than a hundred literary critics and editors. My other novel, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, has also been selected. The English version, published by Random House, came out in October 2003. It was translated by my good friend Andrew F. Jones. The fact that the two books have both been selected points to how important they are, and how the readers and professors appreciate my work.

Helen Finken: *Many American high school and college students view Zhang Yimou's film *To Live* in their Asian studies and world history classes. To what degree did you collaborate with him in the production of the film?*

Yu Hua: Everybody knows that Zhang Yimou is a good director. But seldom do people know that he is also a good screenwriter. I have come to know this after working with him. I have to say he is also a good friend of mine. He is very sincere toward his collaborators. In China, many directors do not pay the full amount or choose not to pay at all. Zhang Yimou never does that. He respects all who work with him.

Helen Finken: *What value do you think the film and the book have as teaching tools for learning about China?*

Yu Hua: I realize that students are viewing the film in classes, and it has been incorporated into the curriculum. I believe the value of this film is that it teaches the American student about

Chinese history and reality, about how the Chinese people cope with life and endure, while at the same time allowing them to enjoy a good movie. I think it is important to use literature to teach about the history of other cultures. Facts are not as important as what people feel during a particular period. They will better understand China, the Chinese, and Modern Chinese literature by reading *To Live*.

Helen Finken: *What can the book offer that is absent from the film?*

Yu Hua: There is a certain length to a movie. If the movie is too long, the audience won't like it. Regarding this, I can say that the novel has even more to offer, is even more moving than the film. It will let American students better understand the Chinese, China's history and reality. Many people who have read the novel and have seen the film tell me: "The novel is much better than the movie." I think that the people Zhang Yimou meet will tell him: "The movie is better than the novel."

Helen Finken: *Since you wrote *To Live*, how has the opportunity "to live" changed for the Chinese people?*

Yu Hua: I finished writing *To Live* in 1992. Twelve years have gone by. During these twelve years, China's economy has soared. Many people have become rich, but still there are a lot who suffer in poverty. People like Fugui are gradually disappearing, but I believe they will always be there.

Helen Finken: *What advice do you have for young writers?*

Yu Hua: Keep on writing. Writing is like living. Keep on living to understand life—keep on writing to understand writing. The Chinese believe that you have to live your life on your own so you can discover your own writing path.

Helen Finken: *Where will your writing path take you next?*

Yu Hua: I am working on a long novel that will encompass the modern history of China. It involves four major families. My goal is to write an epic novel. ■

Note

1. Jin is unit of weight. One jin equals half a kilogram.

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