

To Live

A Novel

BY YU HUA

TRANSLATION AND AFTERWORD BY MICHAEL BERRY

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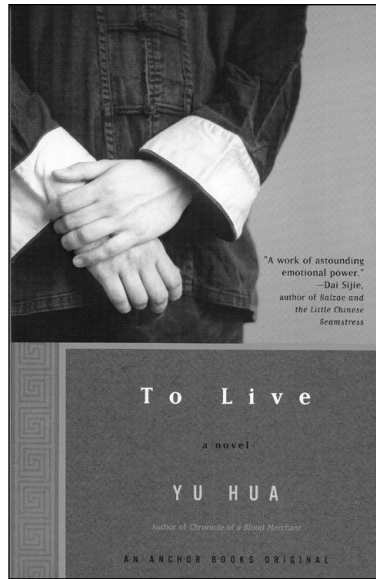
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Yu Hua is one of the leaders of the post-Mao generation of writers struggling to find a voice for their experiences in a literary world whose perspectives had been warped by the constraints of socialist realism and which could voice criticism only in a veiled historicism that located exemplary mistakes in the experiences of figures associated with dynasties well removed from the present. The results of that search led young authors to experiment with a variety of genres—science fiction, surrealism, “misty” poetry, avant garde use of language, and the “scar literature” that provided intensely personal memoirs of the abuses of the Cultural Revolution years. As a fledgling writer and an apparently voracious reader of international literature, Yu Hua explored many of these literary devices. His short story, “The Past and the Punishments,” is an almost Kafkaesque attempt to explore the problem of historical memory in China in the aftermath of the Maoist excesses. Other short stories are remarkable for their striking and graphic depictions of violence.

When Yu Hua turns to the novel, however, there is a notable change in his writing style. The language is spare but the storytelling becomes at once gentler, more first person, and more revealing even though violence and tragedy are never far from the surface. Stories of life in China are told through families and across generations . . . across decades of history and across the political movements of the twentieth century. Yu Hua’s novels of life in rural China echo the familial sagas of Faulkner or Steinbeck in the American context. Yu Hua himself has indicated that the inspiration for *To Live* came from the American folk song entitled “Old Black Joe” about an elderly slave “who experienced a life’s worth of hardships, including the passing of his entire family—yet he still looked upon the world with eyes of kindness, offering not the slightest complaint.”¹ The life of a black slave in antebellum America and the life of a rural peasant in twentieth century China are worlds apart, yet there is a common theme of suffering and quiet nobility in struggling simply to survive and in discovering the small joys of shared life in the midst of recurring pains.

Yu Hua’s title, *To Live*, is both a narrative statement and an exhortation. The novel is the story of a single family told through the eyes of Xu Fugui—a profligate son, an uncertain husband, an adoring father, and a dotting grandfather—who lives to see every one of his family members die, leaving him utterly alone, finally to



find company in an ox that he saves from the butcher’s knife and comically names after himself. “Fugui is a good ox. Of course he gets lazy sometimes, but even people drag their feet from time to time—how can you expect an animal not to? I know when to make him work and when to let him rest. If I’m tired, then I know he must be tired, too. When my energy returns, then it’s time for him to get back to work” (p. 234). The identity between man and beast is Yu Hua’s metaphor for the

human condition, and it is the vehicle that opens and closes the story, told through the mechanism of a double narration: one narrator is a young student wandering the countryside collecting songs and folk stories from the peasants and “learning from the people” in ways quite different from the enforced rustication of Mao’s Cultural Revolution; the other is the aged Fugui and his ox recounting their story to the wandering student. For Yu Hua and for Fugui, the

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dignity of life is in coping with the vicissitudes of fate and politics. "It's better to live an ordinary life. If you go on striving for this and that, you'll end up paying with your life. Take me, for instance: The longer I've managed to squeeze by, the more useless I've become, but in the end I've lived a long time" (p. 231).

Because the novel is only now being published in an English translation, students of China are likely to be far more familiar with Zhang Yimou's 1994 cinematic adaptation of Yu Hua's story than with the novel itself. Though Yu Hua shared in writing the screenplay, the film and the novel are significantly different stories, differently told through the possibilities and limitations of different mediums. The novel is placed in China's rural south, whereas the movie shifts the locale to a small city in the north. The movie adds the powerful symbol of the shadow puppets, emblematic of the "old" China yet protean in their ability to survive by adapting the old medium to the telling of new stories shaped to the politically correct demands of the moment—entertaining the troops first of the Nationalist Army and then of the Red Army, offering entertainment to those toiling in the fields of the agricultural communes, and even offering welcome distraction to the intense, if futile, backyard blast furnace workers of the Great Leap Forward. The novel is far less subtle in its social and political critique and lacks the almost comedic sense of irony injected into the film. Where the tragic death of Fugui's son is an act of fate in the film, when Youqing is crushed by a brick wall falling on him in an accident caused by a high ranking cadre, in the novel Youqing's blood is literally sucked dry by overzealous medical personnel attempting to save the life of a high ranking cadre's child at any cost. So too, when Fugui's daughter Fengxia dies in childbirth, the movie uses the mode of tragicomedy when the Chief of Obstetrics, who has been criticized by the zealous Red Guard unit of his hospital and kept under house arrest, arrives in such a starved condition that he stuffs himself on steamed buns and becomes so bloated that he is unable to take any action to save Fengxia from bleeding to death. The novel is much more matter of fact and crueler: after giving birth Fengxia hemorrhages and there is nothing an army of doctors can do to save her. For the novel, the hospital becomes not a place of healing but a place of dying, and it is not too much to see the literal hospital as a microcosmic China for Yu Hua.

Yu Hua has often been criticized for the violence in his short stories and novels. One after another all the lives that touch Xu Fugui's life are lost—some from natural causes, others from extraordinary events—two characters bleed to death, a landlord is executed, a party cadre commits suicide after being struggled against, a child chokes to death on beans, another figure is killed in an industrial accident, and Fugui's gambling losses literally cause his father to die of embarrassment when the family home and land are lost. Yet the violence is almost mundane, a passing—if crucial—part of Yu Hua's narrative. Yu Hua is quite explicit about his intellectual indebtedness to Lu Xun, and it is critical to see the violence of Yu Hua's stories against the backdrop of Lu Xun's image of cannibalism in "Diary of a Madman."² What Lu Xun introduced

metaphorically as the cannibalism of traditional Chinese society, Yu Hua (and others of his generation) introduce literally. The irony, of course, is that post-Liberation China, which was supposed to have brought a final end to the old "cannibalistic" order has produced an even more concrete version of it where the famine following the Great Leap Forward literally bleeds people to death and where the Cultural Revolution incited people to shed each other's blood. Taken as exhortation, Yu Hua's cry "to live" is the later day equivalent of Lu Xun's "Save the Children . . ." with the added benefit of fifty years of post-Liberation Chinese cautionary history that Lu Xun did not have.³

Both the novel and the film versions of *To Live* can be used effectively in the classroom, but they work in very different ways. The film does what films do: it offers powerful images of the historical eras through which Xu Fugui and his family live. The battlefields of north China and the hardships of winter combat come alive as do the gambling dens of pre-Liberation China. The images of communal living and the impact of the Great Leap Forward goals on peoples' lives as well as the images of the Cultural Revolution and a Red Guard wedding are unforgettable. They give students visual evidence of the changes in China's political life that they have only read about. At the same time, it is more difficult for film to deal in subtleties and ambiguity. The film carries a note of hopefulness for the future that is more muted in the novel. Because the novel does not have the accompanying visual images, but leaves the reader to conjure them, students may need more help understanding the political and historical backdrop against which the Xu family saga is played. The novel, on the other hand, gives a deeper sense of character development and a stronger sense of Fugui as a Chinese everyman whose sufferings are the stuff that political movements, however tentatively and often misguidedly, claim to alleviate. Politics is surely the backdrop of Yu Hua's novel but its power comes from the author's ability to question whether any political movement is capable of creating the utopias that leaders promise. The novel will richly repay close study when it can be put in context with other Chinese literature of the twentieth century and studied against the backdrop of human frailty, political movements, and historical change. ■

NOTES

1. Yu Hua, "Author's Postscript," *To Live*, 249.
2. Lu Xun, "Diary of a Madman," *Lu Xun: Selected Works* (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, trans.), Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1985.
3. Lu Xun, "Diary of a Madman," 51.

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