

**Editor's Note:** In the winter 2003 issue of *EAA* (vol. 8, no. 3), *To Live* was extensively featured with reviews of the novel and film adaptation as well as an interview with the novel's author, Yu Hua. The significant success of the novel and film warrants reintroducing *To Live* to new readers.

## To Live (Revisited)

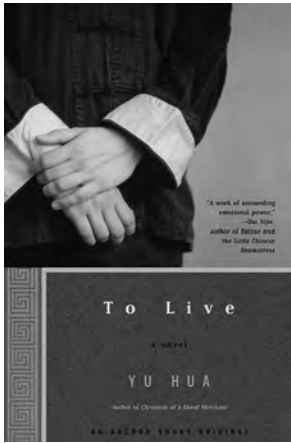
By YU HUA

NEW YORK: ANCHOR BOOKS, 2003

(ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN 1993)

256 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1400031863, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Charles Newell



Since its publication, Yu Hua's novel *To Live* has been popular in China and around the world. It was first published in China in 1993 and immediately became a national bestseller. When it was translated into English in 2003, it quickly became an international sensation. The famous Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou even made an adaptation of the book in 1994 because he liked the text so much that he could not help but turn it into a movie. This movie was quickly banned in China because of its grim depiction of peasant life, but it still became popular on the international market and won many

awards. American teachers still show the movie in schools today, often as a narrative summary of twentieth-century Chinese history. On its surface, the novel is a simple tale about the struggles of a Chinese peasant. Why, then, has it been so popular and influential? Yes, the story is in some ways a unique Chinese story, but it is also a universal one that shows how ordinary people often suffer through forces beyond their control.

The novel follows the life of a Chinese man named Fugui. He begins his life as a wealthy young landowner, but because of his libertine lifestyle, he wastes his family fortune on drinking, women, and gambling. He becomes a poor Chinese farmer, just like millions of others. From this, we get to see what life must have been like for the millions of peasants who depended on agriculture for survival, as the cycle of the rice harvest is the most important thing in their lives. The story of his downfall coincides with many important events in twentieth-century Chinese history. When he was a wealthy young man, Fugui witnesses the end of World War II as the Nationalist forces expel the Japanese. After he loses his fortune, he is conscripted into the Nationalist army and is forced to fight against Mao's Communists until he is captured and sent back home. Once back in his village, Fugui is witness to and often a victim of the many programs of the Chinese Communist Party. He sees the land reform era when peasants are given land of their own. His family suffers through the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), and he sees the violence and the excesses of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Thus, one can see why this novel would be popular with teachers of history and Asian studies. It puts a human face on all the political changes and social upheavals of modern China.

However, this novel did not become an international literary sensation because it is a rough outline of Chinese history. It is a widely read and studied novel because of the basic but brutal human story it tells. Fugui is more than just a witness to history, he is an active participant. The reader

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can see how an everyday person struggles with the demands of and changes in society but also fate itself. The novel becomes a universal story about how the average person suffers because of decisions made by people in power. Fugui deals with the rise of Communism in his country, but this story could be told in another place and time with a simple villager being subjected to a socialist dictator or, conversely, to some of the negative consequences of global capitalism.

We also see the simple humanity of Fugui. He struggles not just against the political turmoil in his country, but the cruelty of fate as well. After his original downfall, Fugui tries to live a simple but productive life. He lives with his wife, his children, and his grandchild. But each one is taken away from him by unbelievable twists of fate. Still, he finds a way to endure, "to live," if you will. This idea is a universal sentiment. People around the world suffer differently from Fugui, but throughout history, people have found a way to press on, to overcome the cruelty that life throws at them. Every culture has stories of people who seem to endure, despite what life does to them. Cruelty and uncertainty seem to be the only guarantees in life, and Fugui shows an example of how one faces such trials.

Yu's literary artistry is another reason this novel has a wide appeal. Even in translation, the novel has a stark beauty. Yu uses simple and occasionally crass language to depict the hard, ordinary lives of Chinese peasants. One might even call his technique a type of hyperrealism that conveys tragedy after tragedy that his first-person narrator, Fugui, must endure. It was wise and intuitive for the author to use this first-person approach. Seeing these events through the eyes of the man who experiences them creates a connection to the story that a more objective approach would not.

A good way for Western audiences to view this story is to compare it to one that is more familiar to them. Others have compared Fugui's struggles to those of Job in the Old Testament. While this comparison is valid, the differences between the two stories might help students better understand why the narrator of the novel suffers so much. Job begins as a prosperous patriarch, but he is tested by the Hebrew God, and tragedy by tragedy, he has all his possessions and family taken from him. Others want to blame the sins of Job for his predicament, but Job is blameless and remains faithful to Yahweh, and all that he once had is restored. Fugui, on the other hand, does not suffer because of supernatural agency. His initial downfall comes about because of his own reckless behavior. He tries to make a good life for himself as a rice farmer, but fate (perhaps this is a supernatural agent) deals him blow after blow until he is alone in the world, just an old man and his ox. Again, Yu's stark realism shows life as it is. Fugui will die alone and in poverty, like many in the world will, but the triumph and appeal of the story is that he endures and always presses on, despite impossible odds, as all humans must. ■

CHARLES NEWELL is an English Teacher at Notre Dame High School in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and has published articles and curriculum materials on Korea. He has recently become fascinated with Korean *sijo* poetry. He has videos on how to teach *sijo* in a high school classroom published on the Sejong Cultural Society website.