

FILM REVIEWS

**To Live**

Directed by Zhang Yimou

Screenplay by Yu Hua and Lu Wei, 1994

VHS/DVD. Color. 2 hours 13 minutes.

Available through [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), and [www.blockbuster.com](http://www.blockbuster.com)

In the last ten years the ground-breaking feature film *To Live* (*Huo Zhe*), directed by Zhang Yimou, has offered filmgoers, educators, and China watchers an intimate glimpse at the lives of one fictional family (the Xu family) as they live through critical moments of four decades of China's twentieth-century history. Combined with stunning dramatic visuals and a window into Chinese film and censorship, this feature has been a hit with World and Asian history classes at the secondary and undergraduate levels since its release in 1994. This review provides a brief synopsis of this internationally recognized film and suggested teaching strategies.



Set in a small town in northern China, the film begins in the 1940s. The opening scenes take us into a gambling house where we are introduced to Fugui, played by the famous Chinese comedy actor Ge You. Fugui, arrogant and smug, is deeply involved in his gambling pursuits. Against the protests of his wife Jiazhen (Gong Li), he continues to gamble his family worth away with his dice-throwing companion Long'er. Eventually he loses everything: the family mansion, his father, his pregnant wife, and his daughter.

Time passes and we see him struggling to make ends meet, but since his gambling days are over, Jiazhen returns to him. Now they can begin to live the peaceful and quiet life that Jiazhen always wanted. However, any student of China's twentieth-century history will understand that a quiet life, even for the most common family, is not possible. Tragedy and devastation will visit again and again as the Xu family continues to struggle through the circle of ironic fate they must endure.

From this point the film continues to take us through the forties when Fugui borrows a collection of shadow puppets and takes his show on the road to earn a living for his family. All goes as planned until he is forcibly drafted into the Nationalist army and finds himself pushing cannons in the snowy battlefields of China's civil war. This stint with the Nationalist army is short as the Chinese Communist army is victorious. But in another twist of fate, the shadow puppets provide life for him as he performs for the "Red" Army on the battlefield for inspiration. Ultimately he returns home to his family, a certified revolutionary ready to begin life again as a member of a new, "liberated China." But before long, it is clear that the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution will be the dramatic backdrop for the common affairs of the Xu family.

The film progresses and we see the Xu family trying to live their lives the best they can despite decades of political turmoil. Zhang Yimou has carefully crafted each scene to create a mood of rich understanding and connection with the Xu family. We want them to succeed and live a quiet life as each dramatic twist of fate intervenes. Zhang also presents dramatized stereotypical characters that represent major themes of each historical decade: the ruthless gambling landlords of the early 1940s, the faceless fighters of a civil war unaware of what they are fighting for, the rhetoric-laden Mao revolutionary leaders, and the precocious Red Guard "doctors" from the Cultural Revolution. Students might notice that the

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music in the film plays on this drama and at times is out of step with the pace of the film, nearly creating a distance filled with dramatic cliché. Despite these moments, Zhang Yimou successfully creates an epic journey filled with glimpses of what it might have been like for the average family.

Many educators have used this film successfully in its entirety and in clips. History Professor and former high school teacher Kelly Long has created a useful lesson plan for high school students available for free on the Asian Educational Media Services (AEMS) Web site at <http://www.aems.uiuc.edu/HTML/TeachersGuides.htm>. Short clips from the film offer enrichment for lessons on a particular historical event. For example, a scene that skillfully depicts the Great Leap Forward has Fugui and family with town cadre and others collecting steel for backyard furnaces. The revolutionary rhetoric of the time and the idea of “leaping” ahead of the industrial world are carefully portrayed. Fast-forward to the end of the scene to a small gathering of townsfolk: they’re preparing to send their steel quota off, enough to make three cannonballs for the revolution. The scene is a fine example of a visual that well complements a lesson on the Great Leap Forward.

Teachers might also consider including the context of the film’s release in 1994 when it was banned in China for public screening and Zhang Yimou was criticized for this work. There is some debate about the reasons behind this move by Chinese officials. Perhaps the film’s less-than-positive commentary on the “Party’s Promise” or the way certain political events are portrayed encouraged China’s Film Bureau censors to take action. Many film critics argue that the real reason Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* was “banned” in China was because he sent it to the 1994 Cannes Film Festival before the Film Bureau had a chance to review it and sanction its release to the international market. Exploration of these events could provide a nice stepping-stone for a deeper discussion of banned art and censorship in China, a complex and multi-layered issue.

Finally, *To Live* offers an opportunity to explore the role of marketing and the use of “otherness” in the contemporary international art market. After the international success of Zhang Yimou and other directors in the late 1980s, the so-called Chinese “Fifth Generation,” a debate ensued both in and outside of China about who these movies were being made for and marketed to. Were Zhang Yimou and other artists pandering to an international and Western market by creating an “exoticized” view of China? Or was international marketing playing this card for better distribution? Again, these questions provide fertile ground for further discussion on how images of China are packaged and distributed around the world. In the end, whatever side of the debate you sit on, Zhang Yimou is clear in interviews that he is a Chinese filmmaker making films in China. As he has said, “I’m one hundred percent Chinese and so are my films.” ■

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## Who is Indian? A Review of *My Mother India*

Written and directed by Safina Uberoi

Produced by Penelope McDonald

VHS. Color. 52 minutes. Chili Films, 2001



**M**y *Mother India* weaves together the experiences of one family over three generations, the past with the present, 1947 with 1984, Australia and India. Written and directed by Safina Uberoi, this documentary begins as a hilarious account of a marriage between an Australian woman named Patricia, and Jit, an Indian-Sikh man—Uberoi’s parents. They fell in love and married in Canberra but decided to settle in India. Uberoi paints a colorful picture of her childhood and her multi-cultural upbringing in New Delhi by discussing her parents’ notorious *kitsch* calendar collection and how her mother Patricia, because of her foreign upbringing, causes scandals



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