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Facing fate in Zhang Yimou's *To Live*

In his 1994 film *To Live*, director Zhang Yimou pits the fragility of life against the forces of fate as he thrusts his audience through three tumultuous decades in China's history. Although somewhat lacking in the visual vibrancy that characterizes Zhang's other fifth generation films and *wuxia* productions, *To Live* is rich in symbolism, which serves to share a message of perseverance through a lifetime of hardship. In his thematic and artistic choices, Zhang focuses on the devastating impacts of China's changing political and social climate while exploring the competing notions of agency and structure as they pertain to a family's survival.

To Live begins in the 1940s, opening with a scene set in a bustling gambling hall. The twang of traditional stringed instruments accompanies the click and clack of dice as they are rolled onto the table by Xu Fugui, the movie's protagonist, played by Ge You. Despite concerns voiced by his wife, Jiazhen, portrayed by actress Gong Li, Fugui squanders his father's money, resulting in the loss of the family property, as well as the departure of Jiazhen and their daughter, Fengxia. Searching for a way to make a living, Fugui is given a chest of shadow puppets by Long'er, the new owner of the Xu family compound, and begins performing shadow plays. Seeing that her husband has given up his vice, Jiazhen returns home to care for her ailing mother-in-law while Fugui travels the countryside with his puppet troupe. Yet, the family is broken apart once more when

Fugui and his friend, Chunsheng, find themselves first enlisted into the Kuomintang's troops and then captured by the revolutionary army during the Chinese civil war. When he finally returns home, Fugui is shocked to find his family mentally and physically exhausted by the changes sweeping the country. The children, Fengxia and her younger brother, Youqing, grow up during the Great Leap Forward, and Fugui settles into a new job of performing his puppet plays for the village every night. However, this relatively stable everyday routine is brought to an abrupt halt when Youqing is killed in an accident at school. Still in mourning a decade after their son's death, Fugui and Jiazhen celebrate their daughter's wedding with a mixture of pride and sorrow, but are once again thrown into emotional turmoil when Fengxia dies several years later during childbirth. As the film winds to a melancholic conclusion, the Xu family reflects on all that it has lost while looking ahead with cautious optimism toward what the future holds.

The incorporation of puppetry into the film goes beyond simply providing props for the actors. The things that happen to the puppets in Fugui's plays often thematically correspond to specific plot elements of the film. Thus, the shadow plays can be viewed as a mimetic representation of Fugui's life. For example, the puppets' first appearance, which occurs in the gambling hall, coincides with the revelation of Fugui's marital issues with Jiazhen. In this sequence, Zhang employs the editing technique of cross-cutting to draw parallels between the strained relationship of husband and wife and the shadow play unfolding on the stage. The fact that the puppets are happily frolicking in their marriage bed while, in the shots that follow, Fugui and Jiazhen glare at each other with barely contained disdain, adds an extra layer of irony to the scene. Later in the film, Zhang uses the element of puppetry once again when Fugui performs at a celebration in the midst of

the Great Leap Forward. The puppets behind the illuminated screen are deftly manipulated so that they whip back and forth and jab their spears at each other in anger. Off-stage, this same ferocious energy is shared by Fugui and Youqing, who are at odds following an argument that erupted earlier that day in the village cafeteria. By prominently featuring the puppets as part of the film's plot, Zhang shares the thoughts and emotions of Fugui in a way that does not interrupt the narrative's flow or believability.

Zhang also uses the puppet motif to contrast Fugui's confidence as a performer with the feelings of helplessness he experiences in the real world. Purely a pawn of fate, Fugui does not have a strong sense of agency over the circumstances that shape his life, which causes him to both benefit and suffer. His inability to control his gambling habits results in the loss of his family's home, his father and his wife. But, in this instance, Fugui's failings are his family's salvation, as their working class status protects them from persecution by the local government following the Chinese Communist Party's rise to power. Had Fugui not gambled away his inheritance, the Xu family would have still belonged to the gentry class, and they would most likely have been killed. As the new owner of the house formerly occupied by the Xu family, Long'er is executed in their place, a detail that does not go unnoticed by a shell-shocked Fugui, who tells his wife, "If I hadn't lost my home to him, that'd have been me." While serving in the Kuomintang army, Fugui and Chunsheng are also saved because of their seemingly irresponsible choices. Upon waking after a night of drinking with their friend, Lao Quan, the three men realize that the camp is empty and eerily quiet. When they walk over the crest of the hill, a field of dead bodies spreads out before them — the corpses of other soldiers who were

killed while Fugui and his friends were lounging around in a drunken stupor. Ultimately, seeing this poignant scene of mass destruction motivates Fugui and Chunsheng to survive by any means necessary.

Throughout the rest of the film, fate ceases to favor the Xu family. The deaths of Youqing and Fengxia are chilling reminders of how a single decision can irreparably damage one's destiny. In a tearful speech delivered on Youqing's grave, Jiazhen is deeply tormented by the guilt she feels for her son's death. "I shouldn't have let you go to school," she cries. "I should have kept your dad from making you go." Less than 20 years later, a similar scene unfolds when Fugui kneels on his daughter's grave and says, "If I hadn't given Dr. Wang those buns, everything would've been fine. He could've saved our Fengxia." Zhang bolsters the film's cruel view of fate by having the heartbroken parents lament the myriad actions that might have saved Youqing and Fengxia, but he also uses the family's tragedy to comment on the flawed structure of the Chinese government.

While Jiazhen is partially correct when she explains how allowing Youqing to stay home from school could have prevented his death, Zhang emphasizes the fact that Youqing was killed because he had fallen asleep beside a wall, which collapsed on top of him when an overworked district chief lost control of his vehicle. Had the country not been pushed to the point of exhaustion by Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward initiatives, neither Youqing nor the chief would have been so sleep-deprived, and the accident would not have occurred. Zhang uses the same logic when he presents the circumstances of Fengxia's death in the village hospital. Fugui's internalized blame is not entirely misplaced because Dr. Wang does, in fact, become ill after eating an excessive number of steamed buns and drinking too much water — all items that Fugui provides. But Zhang

argues that the chaos that ensues in this dramatic scene is initially caused by the social turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Had the nursing students not staged an organizational coup and banished the more experienced doctors, there would have been someone on duty who could have successfully operated on Fengxia. Furthermore, if Dr. Wang had not been starved for several days and tortured by the local party cadres, he would not have needed to ravenously devour the buns and water, an action that hindered his ability to assist the family in any meaningful way.

In addition to the plot's structure, Zhang uses several cinematic techniques to visually represent the unsympathetic forces that rule individuals' lives. The director's signature wide-angle shots are used in sequences such as the one that depicts Fugui and Chensheng futilely fleeing from the fast-approaching CCP army. The juxtaposition of the two characters and the surging mass of armored men visually affirms Zhang's assertion that a single person is powerless to change what fate has in store. The film's subdued color palette of dusty blues, grays and tans is uncharacteristic of Zhang, especially compared to his work in *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Hero*. However, the muted hues in *To Live* suggest a uniform practicality of life during these years, which jarringly clashes with the intricate patterns and jewel tones that adorn Fugui's puppets. The colors in the shots that depict Fugui's real life are dull in comparison to the emerald greens and ruby reds that appear in his shadow plays. Because Zhang uses color sparingly in this film, when pops of rich pigmentation appear, they immediately draw the audience's attention to the difference between the idealized and controllable realm of the puppet shows and the struggles of reality.

Despite its somber tone and depressing subject matter, *To Live* attempts to end on an optimistic note. Throughout the film, Fugui's puppets and the chest in which they are housed narrowly escape destruction on multiple occasions as China marches toward the Cultural Revolution. Their continued presence represents the resilience of art, culture and family despite society's efforts to permanently eradicate these values. Amid the changing politics and policies of each decade, these icons of traditional thought adapt until they feasibly cannot, surviving the bleakest environments and the most dangerous of situations. Although torn and battered, the puppets re-emerge from the civil war, where Fugui used them in his nightly performances for the Liberation Army. Ten years later, they are once again saved from dismantlement during the Great Leap Forward after Jiazhen says Fugui will present shadow plays in an effort to boost morale within the village. And although the puppets are destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, the chest is always close by, hidden under the bed for safekeeping for many years to come.

Zhang purposely reintroduces this specific prop in the film's final scene in order to send one last message to the audience about the possibilities that lie in China's future. While the wooden box is an ever-present reminder of the painful events of the past, it is repurposed to become a vessel for new life and fresh beginnings. Like the chicks that Fugui's grandson places in the chest, China will grow beyond the shadows of its history. Both the Xu family and the country will never forget all that they have lost. Nevertheless, they will move forward, as that is what it truly means to live.