

“To Live”

A film about China

Characters

Wu Fugui	wealthy young man with a gambling addiction
Jiazhen	Fugui's wife
Fengxia	Jiazhen & Fugui's daughter (becomes partly deaf and mute)
Youqing	their son
Long'er	gambler who wins everything Fugui owns
Chunsheng	musician and Fugui's friend (becomes powerful “District Leader”)
Mr. Niu	friendly neighbor and local “Town Leader”
Wan Erxi	crippled Red Guard official, marries Fengxia

The film opens in the 1940's when three great forces are fighting for control of China: (1) the Japanese; (2) the Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek; and (3) the Red Army of the Communists, led by Mao Zedung.

Fugui and his family enjoy the luxurious life of the rich urban Chinese “landlord” class. Fugui does not work, but spends his evenings gambling. Jiazhen and Fugui's father worry that he will ruin them all. Jiazhen tries to make Fugui stop gambling, and when he refuses, she takes their daughter and moves out. Soon, Fugui loses literally everything his family owns, and is forced into living in the streets.

Fugui and Jiazhen are reconciled following the birth of a son, whom Jiazhen threatens, playfully, to name “Don't Gamble.” Fugui asks Long'er (who now lives comfortably in their old home) for a loan. Long'er refuses, but instead gives him a loan of his shadow-puppets. Fugui and his friend Chunsheng form a puppet troupe, and hit the road.

They are captured by troops of the Nationalist Army, and forced to be soldiers. They survive battle, hunger, and bitter cold long enough to be captured by the Red Army. Once again, they become soldiers, only this time, for the other side.

By 1949, the Communists have taken control of all of mainland China, and Fugui returns home to Jiazhen and their two children. Fugui is terrified when he witnesses the trial and execution of Long'er, accused of being a landlord and a capitalist---because he lives in Fugui's old house! They realize that only Fugui's record of service in the Red Army protects them now, and they work hard to appear as good Communists, and cooperate in every way with Mr. Niu, the local political boss.

In the 1950's tragedy strikes: Youqing is killed in a freak accident caused by Fugui's long-lost friend, Chunsheng, who has risen in the ranks of the Communist Party and is now a powerful District Leader.

In the 1960's, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is underway. Zealous young "Red Guards" are hunting down "capitalist-roaders" who are guilty of the "Four Olds"---old customs, old habits, old thoughts, or old culture. Fugui and Jiazhen arrange a marriage for their daughter to Wan Erxi, a Red Guard leader. When the time comes for Fengxia's baby to be born, the family gathers at the local hospital, but there are no doctors to be found---only inexperienced young student nurses. The doctors and experienced medical staff have all been arrested. Erxi brings an old doctor from prison, but he is too sick to help, and when Fengxia begins to hemorrhage, there is no one who knows what to do.

During the French Revolution, there was a saying---"the Revolution devours its own children." In China, too. Both Mr. Niu and Chunsheng are themselves accused of counter-revolutionary activities, of being "capitalist-roaders," and they are stripped of power and face likely imprisonment, or death.

But Fugui, Ziazhen, and their grandson survive. They have learned "to live."

Questions (choose any 3 and answer in 2 to 5 complete sentences)

- 1) In what ways did the loss of his house and fortune, become---ironically---the best thing that ever happened to Fugui and his family?
- 2) When Mr. Niu comes to the family to take steel and iron items (to be recycled for the Red Army) why does little Youqing volunteer his father's puppets, and why doesn't Fugui just say, "no"?
- 3) Both of the children, Youqing and Fengxia, become "victims" of Communist Party policies. Explain.
- 4) The Communist Revolution is widely seen to have been successful in raising living conditions for millions of Chinese. Give some examples from the film of ways in which revolutionary policies seem to have "done good."
- 5) "The Cultural Revolution had a disastrous effect on the Chinese economy, especially in the skilled professions such as engineering, medicine and science." Explain, using at least one example from the film.
- 6) Using Fugui and his family as an example, describe some of the characteristics of the Chinese which have helped them "to live" and prosper though the centuries.