

Video Guide: *To Live* (1994)

Name _____ Block _____

Background Information: *To Live* is set against four decades of Chinese political turmoil. *To Live* follows the lives of one couple, Fugui and Jiazhen, as they struggle to survive their own changing station in life within the upheaval. At the beginning of the film, Fugui gambles away his family's fortune and loses their home. He is left with a trunk full of puppets by which to make a living. His ability to entertain with the puppets first lands him in the company of the Nationalist Army and then in the Red Army. As the years go by, many bizarre twists, tragic losses, and profound hopes happen to Fugui and his family. Fugui and his family eventually accept what the future has in store for them and decide to do the one thing they know how to do best—"To Live". The film traces the course of human life in conjunction with China's twentieth century history by examining the impact of pre-revolutionary Chinese society, war, and Mao Zedong's successive reforms on four generations of the Fugui's family.

Cast of Characters

In order of appearance

Xu Fugui-gambler, husband, puppeteer, father

Longer-Fugui's gambling partner who owns a puppet troupe

Xu Jiazhen-Fugui's long suffering wife and loyal mother

Xu Fengxia-daughter of Fugui and Jiazhen whose childhood illness renders her a mute

Chunsheng-puppeteer who becomes Fugui's friend and fellow soldier, their paths cross throughout the movie

Lao Quan-veteran KMT Nationalist soldier who befriends Fugui and Chunsheng

Mr. Niu-village leader and local Communist Party Secretary

Xu Youqing-son of Fungu and Jianzhen, affectionately known as "Don't Gamble"

Wan Erxi-model worker and Red Guard leader who becomes Fengxia's husband

Dr. Wang Bin-former head of obstetrics at the People's Hospital, now a victim of the Cultural Revolution

Xiao Mianbao-grandson of Fugui and Jiazben, son of Fengxia and Wan Erxi, nicknamed "Little Bun"

Nationalist China 1940s

With the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 there was no well-organized government. In addition, civil war raged as the Communist warlords claimed the right to rule China. Then, in 1937, China became involved in World War II. Millions of Chinese lives were lost during the war. With Japan's surrender at the end of World War II, the Chinese civil wars raged once again between the Nationalist and the Communist. During this time, the Communist gained strength each day. The film opens during this confusing, fragile time.

1. How does Fugui's life compare to the standard of filial piety described in the textbook?
2. What is Jiazhen's wish in life? Why is it so simple?
3. How is the deed for the Xu family home a symbol for China's long history? How can the puppet show be used as a metaphor for the Chinese people?
4. What advice does the veteran Nationalist soldier, Lao Quan, give Fugui and Chunsheng? Why is Lao Quan fighting?

5. How does the war change Fugui?

6. What observations can you make from the film about the Nationalist and the Communist who are fighting in the Chinese Civil War?

The Revolutionary Era
Late 1940s and early 1950s

Upon victory by the People's Liberation Army, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces were forced to flee to Taiwan. It is at this time that Fugui is discharged from the army. Years of war had created chaos and much suffering in China. To restore order and achieve their revolutionary goals the Communists turn the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) into a totalitarian state.

7. What does Fugui find when he returns home?

8. What happens to Longer? Why?

9. Why does Fugui believe that gambling saved his life and those in the Xu family?
How can it be argued that this is not the case?

10. Why do Fugui's discharge papers from the P.L.A. suddenly become so important?

'The Great Leap Forward'
1958-1961

The "Great Leap Forward" was Mao Zedong's attempt to close the gap between China and the developed industrial world. In order to do this the village leaders organized everyone into work brigades and began the process of building a new classless, model society. The Xu family's job was to deliver boiled water to others. Despite Mao's idea of a classless society, this job clearly placed them on the bottom end of the revolutionary social ladder. Food plays a big part in this section of the movie, as "The Great Leap Forward" gave rise to one of the worst famines in China.

11. Why is the village gathering up all of the metal tools and implements, including toys?
How does young Youqing show his class loyalty over family loyalty?

12. What does Mr. Niu, the village Communist leader, tell the excited workers about the steel?

13. Why does Fugui, over Jiazhen's protest, force his exhausted son to go to school?

14. Why is the death of Youging a tragedy?

"The Cultural Revolution"
1966-1976

During the "Cultural Revolution", life is even more regimented than during the earlier "Great Leap Forward" period. Giant wall posters of Chairman Mao and copies of "Quotations From Chairman Mao Zedong" ("The Little Red Book") are everywhere. At the center of this revolutionary fervor are the "Red Guards". They are young revolutionary workers and students who have dropped everything, including education, to back communism and follow Chairman Mao. They do this by criticizing their elders and rooting out all forms of counter-revolutionary activity. Political ideology is now placed ahead of any and all forms of expertise. Older leaders and those in authority are "struggled against" and removed from their positions. Rustification is a program where intellectuals, bureaucrats, and communist officials are sent to work in farms and factories to learn the practical revolutionary wisdom of the workers and peasants.

15. What is dramatically different in this section about the street from all other decades of the movie?

16. Why does Mr. Niu suggest Wan Erxi as a "beloved comrade" for Fengxia? Why must the puppets now be burned despite all of the service they have provided in the civil war and the "Great Leap Forward"?

17. What gifts does Wan Erxi bring to his potential father-in-law?

18. Why does news that the Red Guards are at the Xu home bring terror to everyone in the shop?

19. Why does Chunsheng come to Fugui in the middle of the night with such a generous offer?

20. What is happening to Mr. Niu and his wife?

21. Why are there no doctors at the hospital?

22. How does the story that Fugui tells his son and grandson change between the two tellings?

***To Live* won the Grand Prize for Best Film at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival in France. It was banned from showing in China until director Zhang Yimou wrote an apology to the Chinese people for his critical depiction of the movie's events.**