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## "To Live" Beyond Good and Evil

### Rujie Wang

*I believe that for a long time now Chinese films have been too abstract, conceptual, gimmicky. They don't relate at all to the lives of ordinary Chinese people. I'm certain that most audiences will like this film. We haven't gone overboard on the tragic elements, but rather have focused on the minute, amusing details in the life of a nobody. There are tears and laughter, one following the other in a gentle rhythm like the breath of a bellows.*

Zhang Yimou

But details are significant only in the schemes of cultural interpretation. Even in film, which many believe communicates through the universal language of montage, there is no unmediated perception. The contents of a given film are always cultural specific: the beggars in Bombay India may evoke awe and respect from the locals but be viewed as a total nuisance by foreign tourists. So, what meanings are there with which "the life of a nobody" is imbued who spends the turbulent years of Chinese communist revolution in survival mode? What rhythm is Zhang referring to when he talks about the tears and laughter in his 1993 film *To Live*? Is the film really about a "nobody," or is it reflective of a "... continued fascination with `the people,'" as one critic puts it, which ". . . suggests an attempt to cling to the beliefs that lay at the foundation of modern Chinese national identity"?

Iconologically<sup>2</sup> speaking, the story of one individual suffering so much as a result of the forces over which he has no control and about which he has very little comprehension is reminiscent, at least in the West, of the Book of Job.<sup>3</sup> But in China, the symbolic values of Fu-gui's struggle to stay alive, after he loses his money, house, father, wife (at one point), son and daughter, are iconographical properties of the ancient myth of *sai wong shi ma*, which goes like this:

Once upon a time, there lived along the border a man who had with him a son and a horse. One day, the son came home by himself crying because the horse was nowhere to be found. The father said to the son that to lose the horse might not be a bad thing. The next day, their horse came back with another horse, much to the delight of the son. However he was promptly told by his father that having another horse might not be necessarily a good thing. As the day ended, news came that the son had crippled his leg after falling from the new horse. As can be expected, the father didn't seem particularly saddened by the accident as if his son's physical injury wasn't altogether bad. When war broke out again along the border, the son was exempted from the military draft because of his physical infirmity.'

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One of the lessons here is perhaps that the world is too complex and too volatile for man to either comprehend or moralize in absolute terms such as "good" and "bad." Embedded in this ancient legend is what might be perceived as a moral pessimism often associated with the faith in the order of the natural universe as the final arbiter of human affairs, which is now brought into circulation again by Zhang's film. The attitude of the sage-like father, one of humility, resignation, and transcendence, comes alive in Fu-gui and moves many viewers, especially those disillusioned with Mao's absolutism and wary of political campaigns like the ten-year disastrous Cultural Revolution made in the name of social progress. After decades of communist revolution, the end of which caused life-immanence of meaning to vanish beyond recovery, it seems that the world of deeds has separated itself from men. To reconnect the Chinese with their ancient past, Fu-gui is thus the epic hero as Georg Lukacs understands him in the novel, which is "... the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality." As an epic hero, Fu-gui is a case in which one's individual destiny is fully connected to the totality of being; he is the symbol, as is the ancient legend, of Taoism. The film therefore signals "... a historical resurrection of Chinese thinking" and "social and cultural reconstruction."<sup>6</sup> It offers a countervailing narrative to the state discourse and shows that the views of traditional Chinese beliefs have swung from contra to pro in the 1990s.

One of the issues the film addresses seems to be what Jung refers to as "... a conflict of duties between the two diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive attitudes of knowledge on the one hand and understanding on the other" that shapes the human spirit. In *To Live*, we see human propensity to moralize the world, idealize humans as rational beings, and intellectualize human existence; and at the same time, we also see the wisdom not to build the tower of Babel, and the humility to own up to human limitations. In fact, the conflict exercises itself regularly in the way philosophy, religion, and literature have developed in the world. Many details in *To Live* reflects a pessimistic view of man that "The fortuitous play of circumstances, or chance, guides him more than he guides himself." Such a moral pessimism can be found in the *I-Ching (The Book of Changes)*, one of the very first Chinese attempts to make sense of the world.' Within the context of this "I"-philosophy, human events are often understood in terms of "meaningful coincidence"; man is neither the creator nor the diviner of the universe, but a product of chance, although the issue of the will and morality does arise in so far as man is conscious of the limited extent to which he can act to make a difference in life. From this ancient divination book, there has developed the concept of man as created out of the five natural elements (iron, wood, water, fire, and dirt), as are dogs and cats, quite different from the Christian creation myth where a divine being already existed prior to the universe.

This Taoist perspective, which is holistic rather than anthropocentric, is concerned with relationships among all sorts of beings of which humanity is not necessarily the most significant. We find some remnants of this ancient worldview in Fu-gui's self-reflection after he gives steamed buns and then water to Professor Wang, rendering

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him incapacitated just when he is needed to attend Feng-xia's complication in giving birth which killed her: "People say that once you drink water, one man-tou (steamed bun) in the stomach turns into seven. Professor Wang ate seven man-tou, Seven times seven is forty-nine. That'd knock anyone out of action." On learning that Professor Wang now eats only rice, which is more expensive than wheat-based food, Jia-zhen remarks, "What a food bill he must have every month!" These comments, while absurd to make about the lives of people in the middle of the Cultural Revolution deemed necessary from the perspective of scientific rationalism, reveal relations or associations which have become more or less unconscious to the enlightened and civilized. In this context, the phobia, anxiety, mass hysteria, and hero-worship of the revolutionary masses are juxtaposed side by side with the fear, fetishes, spirits, and gods of the "primitive" peasants. For fear that their grandson may again fall victim of social unrest, Fu-gui and Jia-zhen contemplate calling him "little-bun" (*man-tou*) since it is not a real name for human beings, and therefore Death will not be able to list and find him. The old couple thus represent primordial and archaic patterns of ideas or mythological symbolism in which the conscious activity of the modern man is rooted and from which its dynamism is derived."

Fu-gui is quintessentially Chinese as his way of thinking is characteristic of Confucianism and Taoism, both recognizing man's social responsibilities, but differing greatly regarding the efficacy of human endeavors, namely, the extent to which human affairs are interpreted either as a result of the way nature operates or as a direct consequence of human actions. Although this difference is less pronounced than the complementarity or even union of the two philosophical schools," we often see their polarity when one set of attitudes is preached to the exclusion of another. The father in the myth of *sai wong shi ma*, for example, acts more like a Taoist than a Confucian when he is vigilant against the view of man at the center of the universe. In the midst of human concerns, he waits patiently for nature (the Tao) to act through Chance. Likewise, Fu-gui is also kingly outside and sagely inside (*nei sheng ivai wang*) who stays engaged with life but does not try to reconcile life with morality. Although he has a stake in the way ethics is developed, he does not feel it is his duty to preach morality. He resists the temptation of self-righteousness and awaits patiently the moment when nature brings balance and order back to the chaotic human world. This Taoist concept of man which he embodies is found in Zhuang-zi's chapter entitled "The Sage King,"<sup>12</sup>

The ruler of the South Sea was called Light; the ruler of the North Sea, Darkness; and the ruler of the Middle Kingdom, Primal Chaos. From time to time, Light and Darkness met one another in the kingdom of Primal Chaos, who made them welcome. Light and Darkness wanted to repay his kindness and said, "All men have seven openings with which they see, hear, eat, and breathe, but Primal Chaos has none. Let us try to give him some." So every day they bore one hole, and on the seventh day, Primal Chaos died.

The reason Primal Chaos dies is the same why Xu Fu-gui lives to tell his story. A Taoist sage is always wary of moral and philosophical postulates (e.g. Light and Darkness) through which life is made comprehensible, because he understands that

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the world is by nature chaotic and undifferentiated, and that scientific knowledge (e.g. see, hear, reason, subjectivity) which brings so much to light does not change the metaphysical foundations of human existence. Although successive social and political changes in China have converted the masses from ancient mysticism to such political beliefs as socialism (by worldly promises about equal distribution of material wealth, freedom from care for one's daily bread and universal prosperity upon communism) chaos still rules in most situations in the film. So, it is not ironic that Fu-gui's real fortune and wealth (his name in Chinese means "fortune and wealth") are his many losses that result in his disillusionment and his personality as a man of instincts-the only available source of religious experience. He preserves his dignity, not by whole-heartedly jumping on the bandwagon of socialism as town chief Niu, but by being an individual and by resisting the blandishments of the world. His personality, revealed through his quick recovery from the loss of his house and possession in gambling, is his only fortune and wealth, although comically he never realizes this and remains an enigma to himself. He carries within him the duality of the modern man: "The ordered cosmos he believes in by day is meant to protect him from the fear of chaos that besets him by night-his enlightenment is born of night-fears!"

The worldview and attitude exemplified by Fu-gui are of a different order than the moral discourse of "sin" or "evil." Although in China there is never a shortage of austere moral philosophers like Confucius, Mencius, Hsuntzu who tend to narrowly interpret human affairs in terms of their moral precepts, the concept of evil ("e") does not entail, as it does in Western philosophy, ". . . the concept of moral autonomy... [which] involves distinguishing morality proper from conventional mores." "E" never functions completely independently of a larger cosmology, as is duly pointed out by Frederick W. Mote:

The late Dr. Hu Shih, eminent historian of Chinese thought and culture, used to say with sly delight that centuries of Christian missionaries had been frustrated and chagrined by the apparent inability of Chinese to take sin seriously. Were we to work out fully all the consequences for Chinese society of the model offered by an organismic cosmos functioning through the dynamism of harmony, we might well be able to relate the absence of a sense of sin to it. For in such a cosmos there can be no parts wrongfully present; everything that exists belongs, even if no more appropriately than as the consequence of a temporary imbalance, a disharmony. Evil as a positive or active force cannot exist; much less can it be frighteningly personified. No devils can struggle with good forces for mastery of humans and the universe, and people's errors, unlike sin in other worlds, can neither offend personal gods nor threaten a person's individual existence.<sup>15</sup>

Such a cosmology is the main source of Fu-gui's experience as an urban hermit, away from many of China's political killing fields while in the midst of the social upheavals that make up temporary cosmic disharmonies. Unlike in the Book of Job in which Satan personifies the "evil" and is ultimately responsible for Job's losses, in *To Live* evil only denotes the undesirable outcome of a given situation. Of course, Fu-gui could have viewed Long-er as evil who won over his family mansion through gambling and threw

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him and his mother out (although he later also loans Fu-gui the props of a puppetshow which enable him to survive many perils to come). Fu-gui also has every reason not to forgive Chun-sheng who, in spite of his good intention and friendship through peace and war, killed his son when he is too exhausted to drive and knocks down the wall under which You-qin is asleep. He would also have been in the right to be rancorous toward those young nurses whose pomposity and lack of medical training directly results in his daughter's death at childbirth. But if he were to do all that, he would have only satisfied the subjectivity of his thought and willfulness of his morals; he would have reduced the universe to a world of moral postulates such as good and evil. What redeems Fu-gui's suffering is his ability to understand how intricately human events and natural events impact on one another, and to empathize with many people even when he has personal reasons to dislike them. (In fact when Long-er is executed shouting, "I am dying for you!" Fu gui really feels the bullets struck him instead of Long-er and urinates in his pants.)

To the Chinese mind, the film has both ethic and aesthetic appeals. I do not mean the colorful spectacles that are signatures of Zhang Yimou as a film director. The montage that puts images of joy and sorrow, life and death, loss and gain, in a sequence to represent life as rhythms and cycles, is a part of Chinese moral imagination. Zhang's cinematic discourse is rooted in Chinese narrative tradition in which events are often conceptualized and interpreted to honor Nature, and in which there is little room for anthropomorphism or subjugation of Nature. Fu-gui's problems are therefore meant to confirm the domination of man by Nature as has been a convention in Chinese literature. "The Chinese tradition," says Andrew Plaks,

... has tended to place nearly equal emphasis on the overlapping of events, the interstitial spaces between events, in effect on non-events alongside of events in conceiving of human experience in time. In fact, the reader of the major Chinese narrative works soon becomes conscious of the fact that those clearly-defined events which do stand out in the texts are nearly always set into a thick matrix of non-events: static description, set speeches, discursive digressions, and a host of other non-narrative elements. . . . The ubiquitous potential presence of a balanced, totalized, dimension of meaning may partially explain why a fully realized sense of the tragic does not materialize in Chinese narrative. Such characters as Prince Shen-sheng, Hsiang Yu, Yueh Fei, and even Chia Pao-yu clearly possess the qualities of the tragic figure to one extent or another. But in each case the implicit understanding of the logical interrelation between their particular situation and the overall structure of existential intelligibility serves to blunt the pity and fear the reader experiences as he witnesses their individual destinies. In other words, Chinese narrative is replete with individuals in tragic situations, but the secure inviolability of the underlying affirmation of existence in its totality precludes the possibility of the individual's tragic fate taking on the proportions of a cosmic tragedy. Instead, the bitterness of the particular case of mortality ultimately settles back into the ceaseless alternation of patterns of joy and sorrow, exhilaration and despair, that go to make up an essentially affirmative view of the universe of experience."

That affirmative view of life which the viewer is called upon to identify is what

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sustains Fu-gui and allows him to remain happy and hopeful in the face of hardship, the same view, I might add, that is ridiculed by many May Fourth generation intellectuals who held traditions responsible for China's stagnation and backwardness. In the post-Mao era when the grim reality of the communist revolution and its gruesome practices finally caught up with people and when the Chinese began to question and discredit Marxism, the time was ripe again for a resurgence of the "traditional" and "conservative" values that had been considered earlier as incompatible with social progress. The "I"-philosophy comes alive in *To Live* and brings to the viewer a life as it made sense in Taoist tradition with an "essentially affirmative view of the universe of experience."

The film validates the traditional worldviews held in contempt by earlier radical and iconoclast intellectuals. This reversal is achieved through Fugui's utter failure to comprehend the changes taking place in the name of communist revolution. What Fu-gui goes through makes the viewer aware of the indignities and atrocities the Chinese have committed and endured, and of the narrow and simple ways history has been interpreted by the state. The narrative of social progress is parodied and satirized as a pipe dream when Fu-gui prophesies for his son, You-qin, and grandson, Man-tou, who, on different occasions, ask him to predict the future, "when chicks grow up, they'll turn into geese; when the geese grow up, they'll turn into sheep; when the sheep grow up, they'll turn into cows, and you will ride on their backs and enter into communism when everyday there are dumplings to eat." What happens in the Civil War and the land reform in the 1940s, the socialist collectivization and the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, and the Cultural Revolution that lasted from 1966 to 1976, may be "progress" for some, but for Fu-gui, they are just recurring human and natural situations represented by the 64 hexagrams that have evolved and collapsed from one to another in dynamic and complex ways in the past millennia. The only internal logic one can detect is that of chance and meaningful coincidence.

Fu-gui's story must be understood in relation to a spiritual imagination that allows life to be seen in all of its richness, complexity, and wonders. His life cannot be reduced to a set of philosophical or moral postulates or made worth living through a set of qualities or purposes. Punctuated by the nuisance or danger of chance, Fu-gui's life underscores the Taoist belief that "Heaven and Earth are inhumane; they view myriad creatures as straw dogs." We recognize ourselves in Fu-gui because he reminds us of our primitive self whose sufferings are imbued with meaning, and because he represents the mythic world in which human affairs and natural events are mysteriously intertwined and interconnected, similar to the wonders captured in Lawrence Kasdan's 1992 film *Grand Canyon*. Fu-gui's life is filled with moments which "...encompass everything down to the minutest nonsensical detail, because all of the ingredients make up the observed moment. "The emphasis on chance and on the unexpected details that significantly change people's lives is part and partial of a narrative technique with which Zhang Yimou is able to translate the modern Chinese political experience into the mythic language of the past. In other words, modern China's social and political events are reconstructed in the film, not as how the state would like to historicize them, but as psychic experiences of the individual person, who had been used as a pawn by ideologists and whose voice was silenced by tyranny. The film depoliticizes Chinese

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experience and re-establishes the individual person's relation with the human psyche. That relationship materializes for us in the twists and turns of Fu-gui's life. Twice, he comes close to being an involuntary murderer of his own children. The first time is when he wakes up You-qin from his much needed sleep and carries him on his back to the smelting work site where he is later killed, by none other than Fu-gui's good friend Shunsheng. The second time is, as I have already discussed earlier, when he feeds Professor Wang steamed buns and water only to cause shocking, incapacitating him at the precise moment when he is needed to save the daughter Feng-xia from bleeding to death while giving birth. That Fu-gui is an enigma or mystery to himself brings to mind Jung's idea of the modern man as a divided and disturbed person whose ". . . psychic disturbances and difficulties are occasioned by man's progressive alienation from his instinctual foundation, i.e., by his uprootedness and identification with his conscious knowledge of himself at the expense of the unconscious." Such a prognosis is true not only with regard to Fu-gui's personal situation, but also with regard to modern China as a whole when revolution after revolution turn people, even family members, against one another in the name of social progress.

Understood as attempts to give expression to psychic wholeness, the film renders ineffective such terms as "good" and "evil," or "gain" and "loss." Almost everyone we see is a person affected by the split between knowledge and instincts, whose left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. The characters all pay dearly for their one-sidedness because what people choose to ignore does not cease to exist. The viewer comes to appreciate psychological equilibrium when he sees the conscious life of the characters gets disrupted by the contents of the unconscious. When Long-er takes possession of Fu-gui's family mansion, he is unaware of the extent to which he is possessed by his inner demon-greed-which causes his death in the Communist land reform movement. What looks like the work of chance often becomes the agent of psychological equilibrium. When Fu-gui lets go of his conscious ego by involuntarily joining the rank of the homeless and the "proletariat," he comes in touch with the instinctual side of himself as he tries desperately to support his family. His experience as a puppet-master exposes him to a life more authentic than the one he lived before as a playboy. Fu-gui's foolish remark made when he has lost everything to Long-er in gambling-"Don't leave, I'll play you and bet my life"-proves to be prophetic in a profound way: the life that is lost in this bet is that of Long-er because, what he loses to Long-er is not just a house, but also his identity as a landlord that warrants persecution in the communist revolution ahead. Their identities and destinies change places when the dice are cast in that tea house, and so do the psychic energies of Fu-gui and Long-er as each other's alter-ego and shadow. For winning Fu-gui's house, Long-er gets death; by becoming homeless and by borrowing Long-er's puppeteer's props, Fu-gui gets to live a new life. Chun-sheng's passion for cars, evident in his innocent remark, "I'd give up my life to drive," is balanced by the loss of a life, that of You-qin whom he kills in an auto accident. On that fateful day, Fu-gui, knowing the county head is coming to inspect his village and wishing to ingratiate his family to the people in power, wakes up his son and, against his wife's strong objection, carries him on his back to the smelting work-site only to place him where he later is killed when a wall is knocked down by Chun-sheng's jeep. The death of his son (his own flesh and blood) wakes him up from his

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ego trip. Chun-sheng's guilt and desire to expiate for his sin sustains his will to live when he is being purged by his party during the 1960s' Cultural Revolution and seriously contemplating suicide. These coincidences counter-balance and compensate for our one-sidedness to which we are prone when we try to organize our lives by rational ideas. Zhang Yimou makes the viewer aware of the human psyche as a relatively self-contained field of experience that cannot be reduced to anything else. Zhang introduces life as duration, succession, and space the way Bergson understands it, in which "... we can thus conceive of succession without distinction, and think of it as a mutual penetration, as interconnection and organization of elements, each one of which represents the whole, and cannot be distinguished or isolated from it except by abstract thought." <sup>20</sup> Life as a continuous flow and dynamic process blurs the distinctions of good and bad. Debts are owed and paid off in mysterious ways as things keep turning into their opposites. The psychic wholeness is possible only when we allow ourselves to get into the flow of life and let go of our obsessions. Like the useless tree of the Taoist legend, Fu-gui gets to live to an old age.

By removing the privilege of a scientific rationalism as the key to the individual perception of the Real, the film undercuts the view of life as merely a tool which derives its meaning only through its connection with other ends. Here, relationships and human interactions are not to be understood merely in terms which an individual finds easiest and most exciting to describe reality. For Fu-gui, reality is far from being a pure product of his own conceptual mythology or his obsession with good and evil, justice and equality, characteristic of egotism prevalent in European philosophy." Fu-gui's story is not a drama in which he alone pulls the strings, supplies its plot and moral, and possesses the freedom and actuality that others are utterly unaware of. He seems to be in charge when he works as a puppet-master and sings (provides narrative) to the play (spectacle) of his puppets. But his intention only limits his vision of the present and prevents him from realizing that a bigger drama is unfolding in which he himself is mercilessly played and displaced, just like his puppets, and in which his personal life is overtaken, hijacked, or subsumed by the drama of "meaningful coincidence" that squelches all subjectivity in thought and willfulness in morals. The village chief Niu, a diehard party hack who understands everything in terms of the communist revolution, is purged by the very party he would lay down his life to defend. Long-er is subjected to the same bitter irony when he, on the way to his execution, realizes that his scheme to win Fu-gui's house through gambling ends not when it is won but with his own death after he burns it to the ground. In Zhang's film, the individual self as the center around which the world becomes organized is shot through and through, to expose the limitations of human consciousness as Joseph Campbell understands the myth of the hero. "Nevertheless," says Campbell,

.... every failure to cope with life situation must be laid, in the end, to a restriction of consciousness. Wars and temper tantrums are the makeshifts of ignorance; regrets are illuminations come too late. The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale. Therefore it is formulated in the broadest terms. The individual has only to discover his own position with reference to this general human formula, and let it then assist him past his restricting walls. Who

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and where are his ogres? Those are the reflections of the unsolved enigmas of his own humanity. What are his ideals? Those are the symptoms of his grasp of life."

The failures on the part of Fu-gui, Long-er, Chun-sheng, and town chief Niu, to understand their lives represent the limitations and defects of an age. Collectively these characters not only make a compelling case for re-evaluating many political movements and enlightenment projects-civil war, land reform, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution-as forms of mass deception, but also bring to light "the manifestations of the collective unconscious [that] are compensatory to the conscious attitude, so that they have the effect of bringing a one-sided, unadapted, or dangerous state of consciousness back into equilibrium."<sup>23</sup>

To reintroduce the "I"-philosophy into current Chinese cultural life satisfies the need of the collective unconscious to express itself and compensates for the set of conscious attitudes that people have adopted to modernize China. The resurgence of the Taoist attitudes is almost to be expected if we understand that the direction in which China is to become modern also " . . . means exclusion of many psychic elements that could play their part in life but are denied the right to exist because they are incompatible with the general attitude."<sup>24</sup> Embedded in Taoism is a primordial vision of life bound to recur as compensatory adjustment to the conscious attitudes; whatever they may be. Although the tragedies that befall Fu-gui all appear to be the work of chance, they symbolize the failure to reconcile human experience with morality, and the failure to recognize the collective unconscious. Thus, what stays alive in the film, *huo zhe*, is not just the biological lives of the hero and heroine [read: Chinese people], but also what Freud called the "archaic remnants" of our psychic life, or what Carl Jung referred to as "....images and associations that are analogous to primitive ideas, myth, and rites" which [as appear in dreams] "... try to re-establish the equilibrium by restoring the images and emotions that express the state of the unconscious."" Zhang is a good filmmaker who keeps alive the forgotten language of the instincts; he is also a myth-maker who enables the Chinese to once again understand life as how they have imagined it in the distant past. The viewer is made to see the bias, prejudice, and psychic malaise of the Twentieth-Century once he is reminded of the symbols and rites through which life was understood and lived in ancient China and Asia. Fu-gui's precarious life is iconographically similar to that of Sakyamuni who, born the son of a petty king and brought up in relative luxury, abandoned his life, his wife and young son at the age of 29 to attain enlightenment, after six years of extreme self-mortification. The events in *To Live* are indicative of the Noble Truths in Indian Buddhism: (1) life is permeated by suffering and dissatisfaction; (2) the origin of suffering lies in craving; (3) the cessation of suffering lies in the cessation of craving. Every body in the film is visited by pain and suffering because they keep on hoping for chicks to turn into geese, geese sheep, sheep cows, and so forth; and their bitter disillusionment becomes a condition for their enlightenment and for the possibility of becoming a whole person with self-knowledge. What is "new" in *To Live* is a view of life many twentieth-century Chinese have been accustomed to discard and ignore as "old" and "archaic."

To fully realize the wide range of cultural issues that are meaningfully related to the film *To Live*, let me close by a brief review of the literary thought and sentiment voiced

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during the May Fourth Era (1919-37). When Chinese intellectuals were informed of the cultural developments in the West, most of them subjected traditional Chinese values to a critical scrutiny; from this scathing self-reflection many May Fourth luminaries such as Lu Xun (1884-1936) concluded that the Chinese soul, as represented in classical humanism and literary conventions, was dead or dying. The vitality of Western humanistic traditions, on 'the other hand, was evident in the way life was written and inscribed in many literary masterpieces. It was theorized that the Chinese needed to adopt Western literary conventions with which to transform society and reinvent the people. This general attitude was found in such typical writings as that of Zhou Zuoren, who believed that the Chinese have yet to produce a literature that was truly humane. "For instance," he explained,

... the Frenchman Maupassant's *Une vie* is humane literature about the animal passions of man; China's *Prayer Mat of Flesh*, however, is a piece of non-humane literature. The Russian Kuprin's novel *Jama* is literature describing the lives of prostitutes, but China's *Nine-tailed Tortois* is non-humane literature. The difference lies merely in the different attitudes conveyed by the work, one is dignified and one is profligate, one has aspirations for human life, and therefore feels grief and anger in the face of inhuman life, whereas the other is complacent about inhuman life, and the author even seems to derive a feeling of satisfaction from it, and in many cases to deal with his material in an attitude of amusement and provocation. In one simple sentences: the difference between humane and "non-humane" literature lies in the attitude that informs the writing, whether it affirms human life or inhuman life."

Whether Zhang Yimou was aware of such "Chinese" cultural defects when he shot *To Live*, it pays to familiarize ourselves with the issues by which the production of modern and contemporary literary works and films has been informed. It is important that the film be considered as a continuation of such cultural self-reflection. If anything, *Fu-gui* resumes the negotiation between a holistic tradition, perceived to be failing and dying, and a progressive historiography embraced by many in China for its logocentric and anthropocentric tendencies. *Fu-gui* is not a "nobody" as Zhang calls him, but one on whom the validity of the attacks on classical Chinese humanism depends, attacks like the one found in the writings of Chen Duxiu, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party:

In form, Chinese literature has followed old precedents; it has flesh without bones and body without soul. It is a decorative and not a practical product. In content, its vision does not go beyond kings, officials, spirits, ghosts, and the fortunes or misfortunes of individuals. As for the universe, or human life, or society-they are simply beyond its ken. Such are the common failings of these three kinds of literature."

The dissatisfaction with Chinese culture reflects the strong appeal of a European humanistic tradition, which is perceived to insist on locating the human and inscribing him, through art (film) and literature, at the center, rather than a part, of the universe. The

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sentiment that it is time for a new cultural model for China was widely shared among elite intellectuals throughout the last century. In his lecture on "Literature and Life," Mao Dun puts forth the qualifications and expectations for those who would study literature: they ". . . must at least possess a commonsense understanding of race, must at least understand the era and the environment that produced this type of literary work, must at least comprehend the *Zeitgeist* (*shidai jingshen*, spirit of the times) in which it was produced, and moreover must at least understand the life and mentality of the person who created this type of literary work."<sup>28</sup> In the last century, literature, especially realist works, has given ample expression to life as it is imagined and made sense in terms of the values imported from the West, (Mao Dun admits in the same talk, "The above is Western critical thinking, and this line of thinking was not to be found previously in China. democracy, and science, the Chinese are still at the point at which "... It can be argued that the Subject's loss of right and ability to choose is a significant spiritual phenomenon in twentieth-century China."<sup>29</sup> In an indirect way, Zhang's film calls into question the cultural analyses and reorientation that the above intellectuals tried to introduce. The life as mythically constructed through Taoism and Buddhism is not just an antidote to realism as a state discourse, or an act of subversion toward the official Chinese history, but also, more importantly, a reminder that "Civilization is a most expensive process and its acquisitions have been paid for by enormous losses, the extent of which we have largely forgotten or have never appreciated."To survive and truly benefit from another century of intense social and intellectual progress, people will also need Taoism and Buddhism as spiritual alternatives and as personal spaces in which to reach psychic wholeness and live beyond good and evil.

## Endnotes

1. Rey Chow. "We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance, and Zhang Yimou's To Live." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol.95, no.4. Fall, 1996. In her article on Zhang's film, Chow argues that ". . . In their discontent with current circumstances, Chinese intellectuals seem to be seeking in the ordinary folk a source of knowledge that has remained uncorrupted by lies and errors perpetuated in the decades of bureaucratized revolution. Inscribed in representations of China's remote areas and often illiterate populations, the search for such uncorrupted knowledge stems from a wish, in the post-Cultural Revolution period, for enlightenment through what is considered 'primitive' and 'originary.'" p.1041-2
2. Erwin Panofsky. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1955. p.31. Panofsky states, "Iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of art, as opposed to their form. . . . The discovery and interpretation of these symbolic values (which are often unknown to the artist himself and may even emphatically differ from what he consciously intended to express) is the object of what we may call iconology, as opposed to iconography."
3. *Bible*. The Book of Job. Job says, "He tears me in His wrath, and hates me; He gnashes at me with His teeth; My adversary sharpens His gaze on me. They gape me with their mouth, they strike me reproachfully on the cheek, they gather together against me. God has delivered me to the ungodly, and turned me over to the hands of the wicked."

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4. The source of this story known as "Sai wong shu ma, yan zhi fei fu" is the collection of historical records entitled "Huai nan zi"

5. Georg Lukacs. *The Theory of the Novel* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1971. p.56. In the same chapter, Lukacs says, "The epic individual, the hero of the novel, is the product of estrangement from the outside world. When the world is internally homogenous, men do not differ qualitatively from one another; there are of course heroes and villains, pious men and criminals, but even the greatest hero is only a head taller than the mass of his fellows, and the wise man's dignified words are heard even by the most foolish. The autonomous life of interiority is possible and necessary only when the distinctions between men have made unbridgeable chasm." It seems that the mythic world of Taoism that Fu-gui represents is one very similar to what Lukacs calls "integrated civilizations" which he describes as follows, "Our world has become infinitely large and each of its corners is richer in gifts and dangers than the world of the Greeks, but such wealth cancels the positive meaning-the totality-upon which their life was based. For totality as the formative reality of every individual phenomenon implies that something closed within itself can be completed; completed because everything occurs within it, nothing is excluded from it and nothing points to a higher reality outside it; completed because everything within it ripens to its own perfection and, by attaining itself, submits to limitation ..... Error, here, can only be a matter of too much or too little, only a failure of measure or insight. For knowledge is only the raising of a veil, creation only the copying of visible and eternal essences, virtue a perfect knowledge of the paths; and what is alien to meaning is so only because its distance from meaning is too great."

6. Xudong Zhang. *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997. p.43. "The defining character of the different opinions voiced during the Great Cultural Discussion under the banner of 'Chinese culture' lies in their common emphasis on identifying tradition as a vita, constitutive element in social and cultural reconstruction."

7. Carl Jung. *The Undiscovered Self*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990. p.7.

8. Paul Benechou. *Man and Ethics*. New York: Doubleday, 1971. p.99. In this book, Benechou discusses the destruction of the hero in the literature of French classicism. He points out that the notion of the hero as one who aspires to moral nobility and tries to achieve greatness in life is called into question and ridiculed in the seventeenth-century France, especially after the advent of Jansenism.

9. *The Book of Changes*, an ancient text used for purposes of divination and calendar, is often attributed to Fu Hsi (3000 B.C.) who is said to have discovered the eight trigrams and used them to represent natural phenomena. The yin-yang circle is "tai ji," the one, the ultimate, world as undifferentiated. The two lines, the dynamic and broken, represent yin and yang opposing forces; the four two-line formations represent four seasons. A third line was added later to represent man, in between heaven and earth. The eight trigrams and the subsequent formation of 64 hexagrams were perhaps the first Chinese attempts to mathematize nature and to represent basic human situations in some kind of an order. As a perceptual motif or paradigm, this I-philosophy is not fundamentally different from, say, the way Arthur Miller used the Salem witch-hunt that took place two centuries ago to frame McCarthyism in the 1950s as the recurrence of a deplorable human situation in *The Crucible*. Likewise, the vicissitudes in Fugui's "modern" experience are introduced as the basic conditions of life as understood in Taoist tradition.

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10. Carl Jung. *The Undiscovered Self* ( p.39. "The fact that our conscious activity is rooted in instinct and derives from it its dynamism as well as the basic features of its ideational forms has the same significance for human psychology as for all other members of the animal kingdom. Human knowledge consists essentially in the constant adaptation of primordial patterns of ideas that were given us as a priori."
11. Frederick Mote. *Intellectual Foundations of China*. New York: McGrawHill, 1989. p.60 "Their union as parts of one coin or one axis, as parts of one Chinese civilization, has been more important than hostility between them." 12. *Chuang Tsu; Inner Chapters*. Trans. Feng and English. New York: Vintage Book, 1974. p.161.
13. Carl Jung. *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1966. p.95
14. Chad Hansen. "Punishment and Dignity in China" in *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist values*. ed. Donald Munro. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985. p.362. 15. *Ibid.* Mote, p.21.
16. Andrew Plaks. *Chinese Narrative, Critical and Theoretical Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1978. p.352. 17. Lao Zi. *Dao De Jing*.
18. Carl Jung. *Psyche and Symbol*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991. One of the chapters in this collection of essays by Jung is an introduction to IChing (The Book of Changes). In it, Jung makes the generalization: "The Chinese mind, as I see it at work in the *I Ching*, seems to be exclusively preoccupied with the chance aspect of events. What we call coincidence seems to be the chief concern of this peculiar mind, and what we worship as causality passes almost unnoticed. We must admit that there is something to be said for the immense importance of chance. An incalculable amount of human effort is directed to combating and restricting the nuisance or danger represented by chance. Theoretical considerations of cause and effect often look pale and dusty in comparison to the practical results of chance The manner in which the *I Ching* tends to look upon reality seems to disfavor our causalistic procedures. The moment under actual observation appears to the ancient Chinese view more of a chance hit than a clearly defined result of concurring causal chain processes. The matter of interest seems to be the configuration formed by chance events in the moment of observation, and not at all the hypothetical reasons that seemingly account for the coincidence. While the Western mind carefully sifts, weighs, selects, classifies, isolates, the Chinese picture of the moment encompasses everything down to the minutest nonsensical detail, because all of the ingredients make up the observed moment.
19. Carl Jung. *The Undiscovered Self* p.44.
20. Henri Bergson. *Time and Free Will, An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. London: Allen Company, 1959. p.101 21. George Santayana. *Egotism in German Philosophy*. New York: Crowell, 1939. Santayana describes the egotist in the following way: "His family, his friends, his feelings were so many stepping-stones in his moral career; he expanded as he left them behind. His love-affairs were means to the fuller realization of himself. Not that his love-affairs were sensual or his infidelity callous; far from it. They often stirred him deeply and unsealed the springs of poetry in his heart; that was precisely their function. Every tender passion opened before him a primrose path into which his inexorable genius led him to wander. If in passing he must tread down some flower, that was a great sorrow to him; but perhaps that very sorrow and his remorse were the most needful and precious elements in the experience." 22. Joseph

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- Campbell. *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1973. p.121.
23. Carl Jung. *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966. pp.97-8
24. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
25. Carl Jung. *The Undiscovered Self* p.86, 89.
26. Zhou Zuoren. "Humane Literature," (1918) in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*. ed. Denton. Stanford University Press, 1996. p. 155-6
27. Chen Duxiu. "On Literary Revolution," in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*. ed. Denton. Stanford University Press, 1996. p. 144.
28. Mao Dun. "Literature and Life," in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*. ed. Denton. Stanford University Press, 1996. p. 195.
29. Liu Zaifu. "The Subjectivity of Literature Revisited" in *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China*. ed. Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993. p.59.
30. Carl Jung. *The Undiscovered Self* p.88.