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To Live: Huozhe, Fate and Daoism

To Live, released in 1994, directed by Yi-mou Zhang, highlights the progression of one individual's life with the major events of Chinese history showing in its background. The film presented to the audience what a typical life of a person living during that time looked like. It showed the contrast between the wealthy and the poor prior to the end of the Chinese Civil War in a creative way, so that the audience gets a view of both extremes. From being wealthy to becoming poor and from just living life, the main character, Fugui cannot be considered as fortunate. The goal of life for him was "huozhe," and he did it by believing in fate and through the deep rooted daoism ideas in Chinese culture.

Being the title of the film, the term "huozhe" was mentioned several times throughout the film. As Liang Shi said in the article "The Daoist Cosmic Discourse in Zhang Yimou's 'To Live,'" houzhe, has several interpretations. It could mean to live, living or to remain alive. In a broad sense, from start to end, Fugui and Jiazhen live just for the sake of staying alive. Neither of them had a big dream of living a wealthy life or fulfilling a destiny. Other than living to support their parents and children, they did not have any other goals. This demonstrates the ideology of most people during that time. Because of how strict the government was at the time, there was no room for dreams

and goals of an individual. Therefore, the general definition of houzhe in the film is to remain alive. A scene of the movie that supports this statement is when Fugui saw the dead bodies of many Nationalist soldiers. At that point, he realized how easily life can be lost. It was then, when he said to Chunsheng they must “好好活着” or live well. Furthermore, when Lao Quan was shot, and Fugui felt the life leave his body, they ran. It's a natural instinct to run away from danger in order to stay alive. This is worth mentioning because their original plan was to raise their hands to show that they surrender.

Another instance huozhe was clearly stated was when Chunsheng went to Fugui and Jiazhen's home wanting to give all his savings to them in order to ease his conscience. It was implied that he was giving up on life because of guilt and also because his wife left him. Here, Fugui and Jiazhen both told him to keep living and declined his offer. It could be that they understand how hard life is and how a life lost can never be back again that they kind of forgave Chunsheng for killing their son.

Fugui's life continues to get worse as life moves on. He was born in a wealthy family, married a great wife, and had a son and a daughter. From there, this life turned downward; he lost his fortune, lost his son through an accident caused by a friend, lost his daughter to a hemorrhage, and his wife is ill at the end of the film. Despite everything, he still lives life as normal. It could be argued that it is because he believes in fate. Believing in fate gives one the power of moving on. Stopping life to ask questions that are too big for anyone to answer is pointless. Instead, Fugui accepts the tragedy and moves on. Maybe it is due to the way the film was presented, the characters' response to tragic events are fairly short. For instance, Youqin passes away,

the family has a funeral, the family occasionally brings him up. Death of a child is such a major loss that some families cannot get past it, especially since Fugui has some responsibilities for Youqin to be where he was in the first place. It could be that the director wanted to only show their lives in broad strokes that not all the reasoning behind moving on with life is shown.

Lastly, the film projects many influences of daoism. One example shown in the film is the concept of balance. Like in the story about the old man and the horse from the article, life gives and takes. What may seem terrible could be a blessing in disguise. An example from the film would be Fugui's loss of the family fortune saved him and his family from a tragic death by the hands of the communist party. The film presents these deep rooted daoist ideas most likely unintentionally. The daoist way of thinking has been around for so long that it is integrated into Chinese civilization. Another daoism idea that appeared in the film is the idea of letting fate take its course. Everyone in the film seems to have their reason for existence and follow their dao or fate. Although the way people live in the film was dominated by the government, no one thought that the government was controlling. It could be that they believe the daoism idea that trying to take control of something too big would just lead them to the opposite direction.

In conclusion, *To Live* is a film that presents a typical life of a common person who lived during the time when China was at war and later reconstruction. Yimou Zhang's way of presenting, showing just the main concept and skipping the detail, leaves a lot to self interpretation. Yet, he managed to convey the concepts of huozhe, fate and daoism influences bundled all together in Chinese culture clearly through the film.

Works Cited

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