

An Analysis of the Family Tragedy as a Historical Allegory in Zhang Yimou's *To Live*

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Abstract

Zhang Yimou's film *To Live*, adapted from Yu Hua's novel, explores the profound allegorical connection between family tragedy and national history by tracing the suffering of Fugui's family across pivotal periods from the land reform of the 1940s to the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s. This essay argues that Zhang's cinematic adaptation strategically emphasizes the explicit linkage between the tragic deaths of family members and specific historical events, thereby creating a symbolic framework of family-state isomorphism. Through detailed analysis of key narrative events, such as the historically inflected deaths of Youqing and Fengxia about the study illustrates the devastating impact of political movements like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution on ordinary lives. Moreover, by meticulously comparing narrative strategies, emotional tones, and historical perspectives between the film and Yu Hua's original novel, the essay highlights how Zhang deliberately foregrounds historical determinism, enriching the film's social critique and cultural introspection. Ultimately, the article articulates a profound philosophical stance inherent in the film: that individual fates are inevitably overwhelmed by historical forces, thus underscoring the tragic motif of parents outliving their children. Yet within this grim reality, the film simultaneously celebrates the quiet dignity and resilient spirit of ordinary individuals persisting amidst historical oppression.

Keywords

To Live; Zhang Yimou; family tragedy; historical allegory; family-state isomorphism.

1. Introduction

Zhang Yimou's film *To Live*, adapted from Yu Hua's novel of the same name, traces the rise and fall of Fugui's family, illustrating societal turbulence in China from the land reform movement in the 1940s to the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s through their personal tragedies. Compared with the novel, Zhang's cinematic rendition enhances historical allegories, turning a family into a microcosm of national destiny. In the film, each family tragedy corresponds explicitly to specific historical episodes, thus forming a symbolic framework that equates family with state. This essay will explore how the film portrays China's historical transformations through individual fates, examining interactions between family and society to reveal profound historical metaphors embedded within the narrative.

2. Family as a Mirror of History

Although Yu Hua's novel is titled *To Live*, it poignantly illustrates the tragedy of parents outliving their children. After a series of accidental deaths, only Fugui and an old ox named after him remain alive. The film adaptation, however, reduces the number of deaths yet retains the

profound sense of tragedy, artfully blended with Zhang Yimou's characteristic dark humor. Zhang has described his approach to filming *To Live* as "pretending not to know how to shoot a movie, simply following the characters, following the story," [1] thus authentically presenting ordinary people's lives. This section links individual family tragedies to broader social realities. Initially, Fugui's gambling addiction causes him to lose the family fortune, indirectly killing his father. Subsequently, he is forcibly conscripted into the Nationalist army during the Chinese Civil War of the late 1940s. Returning home after the war, he finds his mother dead and his daughter, Fengxia, rendered deaf and mute due to a severe fever. Here, the fragmentation of Fugui's family mirrors the fragmentation of China itself amid civil conflict.

Further, Zhang explicitly aligns the deaths of Fugui's children—Youqing and Fengxia—with the political turmoil of their respective eras, shifting their demise from random accidents in the novel to consequences of historical circumstances. In the film, Youqing dies crushed beneath a collapsing wall, accidentally toppled by Chunsheng's vehicle, due to extreme exhaustion from laboring in the Great Leap Forward's backyard steel furnaces. This seemingly random accident vividly underscores the absurdity and recklessness of the Great Leap Forward. Visually, the exhausted child curled in a corner starkly contrasts with the fiery furnaces in the background. This tragic scene sharply critiques the blind enthusiasm and superficial activism of the era, symbolizing countless innocent lives lost to misguided government policies.



Figure 1. Screenshot Selection from the Film *To Live*

Fengxia's death in the film carries intense symbolic weight. While the novel attributes her death merely to postpartum hemorrhage without explicit causes, the film portrays a detailed scenario during the Cultural Revolution, where hospitals are overrun by Red Guards, and medical experts are imprisoned as "reactionary academics." The nurse attending Fengxia's delivery is, ironically, an inexperienced revolutionary youth, while the seasoned physician Dr. Wang tragically chokes to death from ravenous eating after three days of starvation. Fengxia ultimately dies from excessive bleeding amid her mother Jiazhen's desperate pleas and propaganda slogans blaring from loudspeakers. Through this scene, Zhang vividly exposes how political purges decimated intellectual resources, directly endangering ordinary lives. Fengxia's death thus symbolizes the absurdity and fanaticism of the Cultural Revolution, highlighting the devastating social collapse wrought by political turmoil. In a powerful overhead shot of the hospital hallway, characters rush aimlessly beneath oppressive Maoist slogans and portraits, capturing the era's chaotic, surreal madness.

In conclusion, rather than explicitly judging historical rights and wrongs, Zhang uses the tumultuous backdrop of political campaigns to reflect ordinary people's helplessness in the face of history. The family's tragedy profoundly illustrates the impact of political decisions on everyday lives.

In the film, the character Chunsheng embodies profound historical allegory through his own tragic fate. Chunsheng, originally Fugui's comrade from wartime who survived the fires of battle, unintentionally causes the death of Fugui's son, Youqing, in a peaceful era. This tragedy is not merely the consequence of an individual mistake but a reflection of how personal intentions

are distorted and overwhelmed by historical forces. Upon realizing he has inadvertently killed his friend's child, Chunsheng experiences a mental breakdown—a vivid representation of the helplessness and pain individuals endure when confronting collective historical tragedies, as emphasized in trauma theory.



Figure 2. Screenshot Selection from the Film To Live

According to Cathy Caruth, traumatic events are often too overwhelming and abrupt to be fully assimilated by the individual, repeatedly tormenting those who experience them. Chunsheng's tragedy lies precisely in his inability to escape from his personal trauma, which is inextricably linked to the broader societal and historical trauma. His overwhelming guilt carries the burden of an era's collective mistakes. Moreover, the film deliberately portrays Chunsheng's confusion and escape following the accident, illustrating how political pressures completely break him, rendering him yet another silent victim of historical trauma. By focusing on Chunsheng's perspective, the audience gains a deeper understanding of how ordinary people become involuntary bearers of historical tragedy during turbulent times. The perpetuation of trauma and unspoken suffering profoundly enhance the film's expression of the complex interaction between history and individual destiny.

3. Symbolic Allegories of Family and Nation

Through detailed characterization and symbolic objects, Zhang Yimou elevates the family's story beyond personal tragedy, transforming it into an allegory of national destiny.

Firstly, Fugui himself embodies an ironic contradiction; his name signifies wealth and happiness, yet his life starkly illustrates poverty and sorrow. Fugui's transformation from a privileged youth to impoverished farmer, and ultimately to an elderly man bereft of his loved ones, mirrors the shifting roles of ordinary Chinese people throughout modern history. He is simultaneously a witness, victim, and survivor of historical upheaval. In the film's closing scene, Fugui tells his grandson, "Chickens grow into geese, geese grow into sheep, sheep grow into oxen, and oxen represent communism." Although seemingly absurd, this statement illustrates how ordinary people internalized and reinterpreted political discourse, subtly highlighting a collective confusion under historical pressures.

Secondly, Fengxia, the only child of Fugui's family who reaches adulthood, is deaf and mute, symbolizing the silenced majority deprived of their voices, particularly during intense political

campaigns. Her wedding scene, featuring a Mao badge from Chunsheng as a symbolic gift and newlyweds bowing reverently to Mao's portrait instead of traditional ancestors, poignantly illustrates the comprehensive infiltration of political symbolism into private life. The contrast between Fengxia's voicelessness and the noisy slogans vividly underscores the pervasive silence of genuine human experiences amid the clamorous political theater.



Figure 3. Screenshot Selection from the Film *To Live*

Finally, the recurring image of "shadow puppets" profoundly symbolizes the family's plight. Puppet characters manipulated by the puppeteers vividly represent individuals helplessly controlled by historical forces. Fugui's fate, like a shadow puppet, is passively manipulated by the tides of history. Initially a tool of entertainment, the shadow puppets become Fugui's means of survival following his financial ruin. Later, during the Cultural Revolution's purge of traditional culture ("Destroy the Four Olds"), the puppets are forcibly burned, symbolizing cultural devastation. Yet, even the empty puppet box survives, eventually sheltering chicks—a symbolic rebirth and continuity of hope within tragedy. The evolving symbolism of the shadow puppets—from entertainment to livelihood, then silent annihilation—poignantly encapsulates Fugui's familial suffering.[2] This imagery silently condemns the Cultural Revolution's assault on tradition, reflecting personal loss as well as a collective spiritual demise. Zhang uses the puppets' transformation to subtly express how cultural memory endures, albeit hidden and wounded, under oppressive historical circumstances [3].

Thus, through this complex symbolic system, *To Live* successfully constructs a narrative framework equating family with nation. Fugui's family tragedy becomes not an isolated occurrence but a distilled collective national memory. Zhang's brilliance lies in naturally embedding these allegories within the narrative, ensuring that historical metaphors are subtly communicated alongside the unfolding familial drama.

On a deeper analytical level, the shadow puppetry in *To Live* transcends merely symbolizing individual manipulation by historical forces; it profoundly embodies the intricate interaction between cultural memory and collective trauma. Drawing on trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's insights, trauma events resist complete assimilation into consciousness, returning repeatedly in subtle yet persistent forms to haunt individuals and entire communities. The evolution of shadow puppetry depicted in the film—from prosperity to violent destruction—mirrors how traumatic memories resurface repeatedly throughout historical upheavals, only to be continually suppressed and damaged anew.

The emotional bond that Fugui's family shares with shadow puppetry symbolizes both the tenacity of traditional culture and the covert persistence of traumatic memory. During the Cultural Revolution, shadow puppetry is violently destroyed as part of the "Destroy the Four Olds" campaign, symbolizing traumatic ruptures within contemporary Chinese collective memory regarding cultural traditions. However, the film's final scene, in which an empty puppet box is repurposed as shelter for chicks, subtly conveys the director's profound reflection

on cultural memory and resilience. This subtle transformation implies that traumatic memories are never entirely erased; instead, they persist secretly yet resiliently, re-emerging in new forms within everyday life. This repurposing of the puppet box suggests that while cultural trauma can never be fully healed, it achieves symbolic rebirth, quietly influencing contemporary spiritual states and cultural identities.

From this perspective, shadow puppetry surpasses being merely a cultural artifact; it becomes a vessel for memory and symbolic resilience, representing how cultural memory can persist implicitly after historical trauma.

4. Narrative Differences between Novels and Films and the Strengthening of Historical Metaphors

To deeply understand the historical allegories in the film *To Live*, it is crucial to compare it closely with its original novel by Yu Hua. The novel and Zhang Yimou's film adaptation differ significantly in narrative strategies and the expression of historical metaphors. Yu Hua's novel narrates with a detached, stark tone, underscoring the fragility and randomness of human existence against the backdrop of history. Through the recurring motif of death, Yu Hua highlights life's absurdity and the uncontrollable nature of fate. The deaths in Fugui's family, such as Youqing dying from donating blood to the county magistrate's wife, and Fengxia's accidental medical tragedy, emphasize life's inherent vulnerability and arbitrariness, resonating strongly with existentialist notions of absurdity.

In sharp contrast, the film explicitly connects these deaths to specific historical incidents, creating a stronger sense of historical determinism and social critique. Zhang Yimou selectively altered certain death scenarios from the novel to intensify historical allegories. For instance, Youqing's death in the film, crushed beneath a wall toppled by Chunsheng's truck during the Great Leap Forward, was not accidental. Instead, this adjustment deliberately underscores how historical forces decisively shaped individual fates. Similarly, Fengxia's death is depicted as directly resulting from the breakdown of the medical system during the Cultural Revolution rather than simply from postpartum hemorrhage. Clearly, Zhang's narrative strategy adopts a more critical historical perspective, stressing individual helplessness and passivity within specific historical periods.

Furthermore, subtle emotional differences distinguish the novel from the film. The novel's restrained, bleak narration evokes profound despair and existential nihilism. In contrast, the film integrates warmth and dark humor into the tragedy—such as the nuanced interactions between Fugui and Jiazhen, and Fugui's resilient optimism amidst suffering—rendering the film's tragic elements richer and more complex. Consequently, the film transcends simple historical reflection, evolving instead into a profound exploration of human complexity.

From the perspective of cultural studies and film narrative theory, the shift from novel to film involves more than a mere change of medium; it reflects a deeper transformation in historical narrative perspective. The novel emphasizes existential absurdity and individual insignificance in the face of history, while the film clearly demonstrates how individuals are shaped, oppressed, and even destroyed by their historical context, thus highlighting the intertwined destinies of history and individual lives. These distinctions reflect Zhang Yimou's unique understanding and portrayal of the relationship between history and individual experience, offering fertile analytical ground for studies of historical trauma and film narrative.

Thus, examining these significant narrative differences in approach, historical perspective, and emotional nuance between the novel and the film allows for a clearer understanding of the complex historical allegories embedded within the film *To Live*. This differentiated treatment not only imbues the film with unique artistic power but also opens new avenues for reflecting upon historical tragedies and human destiny.

5. Conclusion

Through portraying Fugui's family tragedy, Zhang Yimou's *To Live* subtly mirrors the profound political turmoil and social upheavals of modern Chinese history. In Zhang's narrative, personal destinies are inevitably swept up by historical currents, and families become casualties of their era. The central tragedy—the poignant theme of parents outliving their children—vividly illustrates the cruel reality of tumultuous times. Fugui's passive suffering, marked by repeated losses, underscores the film's emphasis on an environment that supersedes individual agency. Thus, the film shifts its focus from individuals to the broader era, highlighting the overwhelming power of historical context. Despite enduring multiple tragedies, even heartbreaking bereavements, life stubbornly continues—as poignantly depicted in the serene final family meal. This quiet resilience becomes the film's most profound metaphor and emotional power, articulating both humanity's helplessness in the face of history and its unyielding determination to survive.

From a philosophical-historical perspective, *To Live* reveals a profound historical viewpoint in which individual fates are predominantly determined by the environment. In the film, history is depicted less as a realm shaped by individual choices and actions, and more as an unstoppable current overwhelming individual autonomy and agency. Nevertheless, the film is not entirely pessimistic; through the depiction of ordinary people's resilience, Zhang Yimou expresses reverence for human dignity and the fundamental power of survival. Fugui's persistence in simply "living," despite profound adversity, becomes itself the quietest yet strongest protest against historical oppression.

References

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