

活着

Huó zhe (To Live) 1994

director: Zhang Yimou

starring: Gong Li, Ge You

film studios: (co-production) Era (Hong Kong); Shanghai Film (PRC)

This film is directly comparable to Lanse de fengzheng (The Blue Kite), directed by Tian Zhuangzhuang (1993) in that both films attempt to retell recent Chinese history through the eyes of their central characters. Whereas The Blue Kite begins with Stalin's death in 1953 and ends with the onset of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966), To Live starts just prior to the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and ends after the Cultural Revolution is over (1978).

Fugui (prn. "Foo Gway"), a rich man with a gambling problem (his name is a homonym for "rich and illustrious") loses all his money, his mansion and his wife on a bad night at the gambling tables. His pregnant wife simply takes their daughter and leaves. The victor, taking pity on him, gives him a set of shadow puppets (pi ying), telling him that he himself was once a puppeteer and that if Fugui can learn the trade, he will never starve.

During World War II Fugui serves first with the Kuomintang National Army and later with the Communist forces during the Civil War. After Liberation (the Communist take-over in 1949), when the class origins of everyone are being determined and recorded, the cadre who interviews him discovers he was with the Communist troops during the revolution and therefore assigns him the class-identity of "poor urban dweller" instead of landlord (his original and actual legal class). Soon he witnesses the man who won his house and fortune at the gambling table being executed as a landlord by the Communists and exclaims to an acquaintance: "That man died in my place!"

Fugui initially is able to help his family survive in the new society, but during the Great Leap Forward (1957) their exhausted son is run over and killed by the car of a cadre. Life becomes even more arbitrary during the Cultural Revolution, when their daughter dies in childbirth because the one doctor who is qualified to help has been starved out of his wits by the young Red Guards now in charge of the hospital.

Despite all this, Fugui assures his infant grandson that things will get better for them as they leave the graves of Fugui's daughter and son.

questions for discussion

1. Are there elements of the absurd in the film? If so, where?
2. Judging from what we have seen in the film, what worldview is being projected?

3. Will things get better for these people, or is Fugui's optimism unjustified?