To Live (Chinese: 活着; pinyin: Huózhe, Lifetimes in some English versions) is a Chinese epic film directed by Zhang Yimou in 1994, starring Ge You, Gong Li, and produced by the Shanghai Film Studio and ERA International. It is based on the novel of the same name by Yu Hua. Having achieved international success with his previous films (Ju Dou and Raise the Red Lantern), director Zhang Yimou's To Live came with high expectations. It is the first Chinese film that had its foreign distribution rights pre-sold. The film was banned in mainland China by the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television due to its critical portrayal of various policies and campaigns of the Communist government. Zhang Yimou was also banned from filmmaking for two years. To Live was screened at the 1994 New York Film Festival before eventually receiving a limited release in the United States on November 18, 1994.

The film is based on Yu Hua's novel To Live. The story begins some time in the 1940s. Xu Fugui (Ge You) is a local rich man's son and compulsive gambler, who loses his family property to a man named Long'er (S: 龙二, T: 龍二, Lóng'èr). His behaviour also causes his long-suffering wife Jiazhen (Gong Li) to leave him, along with their daughter, Fengxia and their unborn son, Youqing.

After he loses his entire family fortune, Fugui eventually reunites with his wife and children, but is forced to start a shadow puppet troupe with a partner named Chunsheng (春生 Chūnshēng), using puppets donated by Long'er to support his family. The Chinese Civil War is occurring at the time, and both Fugui and Chunsheng are conscripted into the Kuomintang during a performance. Eventually Fugui is able to return home and explain his absence, only to find out that Fengxia has become mute and lost most of her hearing due to a fever.

It is revealed that Long'er did not want to donate any of his wealth to the "people's government", and when they tried to pressure him to do so, they only enraged him further
so that he decided to burn all of his property instead of giving it away. He was designated an anti-revolutionary reactionary and executed. Fugui realizes the serendipity of losing their fortune to Long'er, for he could have been executed had he not lost it in their bet. The ending of this decade shows Fugui and Jiazhen locating the certificate Fugui earned after fighting in the war in the wash. It is symbolic of their family for the certificate is fragile, much like the family, and the two try to carefully unfold it so they can hang it in their house to show that they are a revolutionary family despite their past wealth.

The story moves forward a decade into the future, to the time of the Great Leap Forward. The local town chief enlists everyone to donate all scrap iron in their possession, including cookware, to the national drive to produce steel and make weaponry for retaking Taiwan. As an entertainer, Fugui performs for the entire town, and so is allowed to keep the small pins that hold his puppets together. The town, which has been devoted entirely to producing steel, also establishes a communal kitchen for everyone to get food from.

Soon after, some boys have begun picking on Fengxia, who cannot fight back or tell anyone since she cannot speak. Youqing, who adores his older sister, decides to get back at one of the boys by dumping a huge bowl of noodles and chili sauce onto his head at the public kitchen. In the fury afterward, one man accuses Youqing, and by default, Fugui, of trying to sabotage the kitchens. Since Youqing will not apologize, Fugui begins to paddle him. Later, when they have returned home, Fugui learns of the reasons of his son's actions, and tries to apologize, only to be rebuffed.

That night, when he is giving another shadow play to the workers, he asks Jiazhen to convince Youqing to come see it, as a way to make it better between them. In the end, Youqing does come, and with a bowl of tea for his father. But only because his mother has given him the idea of putting vinegar and chili sauce in it, as well as helped him, as a way of payback. In the end, Fugui ends up ragingly and eventually playfully chasing his son around the smelting area. The mother's actions also made it look like the child was just a prankster, and make the people no longer think Youqing's actions was sabotage set up by Fugui.

One day a while later, while Fengxia and Youqing are sleeping, several of Youqing's classmates come by to tell him that they have to go to school now, since the District Chief is coming. Still sleepy, Fugui carries him there, despite his wife wishing to let him sleep, since he has not been able to sleep well in weeks. Tragically, the boy falls asleep against a wall, which the District Chief's truck accidentally knocks over, killing Youqing.

At the grave site of the boy, his mother leaves for him a lunchbox of 20 stale dumplings, which were intended as his lunch for school that day, plus 20 newly made dumplings. The District Chief visits the family at the grave, only to be revealed as Chunsheng. His attempts to apologize and compensate the family are rejected, with Jiazhen declaring that he owed them a life.
The story moves forward again another decade, to the Cultural Revolution. The village chief advises Fugui's family to burn their shadow puppet drama props, which have been deemed as counter-revolutionary as they are representative of traditional Chinese culture. Fengxia is now grown up. Her family arranges for her to meet Wan Erxi, a local leader of the Red Guards who also has a disability. They fall in love and soon marry, and Fengxia becomes pregnant.

It is revealed that Chunsheng, the district chief, has been branded a reactionary and a capitalist. Throughout the years, Fugui had forgiven Chunsheng, but Jiazhen does not want to see him. He arrives late at night to inform Fugui and Jiazhen that his wife has committed suicide and implies that he plans to do so also as he was unable to cope with both losing his wife and killing Youqing. Chunsheng gives Fugui the bank certificate for all of his money as a form of his final apology and wished that they accept the money before his death. Fugui refuses to take it, and Jiazhen, who up to that point had refused to talk to Chunsheng, reconciles with him and encouragingly tells him to keep living, because "You still owe us a life!"

Months later, during Fengxia's childbirth, her parents and husband accompany her to the county hospital, where they find out that young medical students are in charge. Since all doctors have been sent to do hard labor for being "reactionary academic authorities", the students are left as the only ones in charge, despite being so young. The nurses tell the family that both the child and mother will be fine, but the family is skeptical. Wan Erxi manages to retrieve a doctor from confinement to oversee the birth. As the doctor has not eaten for several days, Fugui purchases seven steamed buns (mantou) for him. Fugui and Jiazhen decides to name the son Mantou, after the buns, or at least until he is born. Soon, a healthy baby boy is born, and everything seems to have gone perfectly.

However, Fengxia begins to hemorrhage, and the nurses panic, admitting that they do not know what to do. The family and nurses seek the advice of the doctor, but find that he has overeaten and is semiconscious. The family is helpless, and Fengxia bleeds to death. Her parents decide to keep the baby's name as Mantou, or "little bun".

The movie ends six years later, with the family now consisting of Fugui, Jiazhen, their son-in-law Erxi, and grandson Mantou. The family visits the graves of Youqing and Fengxia, where Jiazhen, as per tradition, leaves dumplings for her son. Erxi buys a box full of young chicks for his son, which they decide to keep in the chest formerly used for the shadow puppet props. When Mantou inquires how long it will take for the chicks to grow up, Fugui's response is a more tempered version of something he said earlier in the film, that the chickens would grow into geese, which would grow into sheep, which would grow into oxen. However, in spite of all of his personal hardships, he expresses optimism for his grandson's future, and the film ends with his statement, "and life will get better and better" (also mentioned earlier) as the whole family sits down to eat.

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