



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

# Reader Resources

## To Live

by Yu Hua



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“Just as a mother beckons her children, so the earth beckoned the coming of night.”

### Preface

Yu Hua is one of China's most well-known authors and his bestselling novel, *To Live*, has been named one of China's ten most influential books of the last decade. The novel was made into a critically acclaimed film of the same name with China's best-known actress. It tells the poignant tale of a man's transformation from the spoiled son of a rich landlord to an honorable and kindhearted peasant as he and his family endure the ravages of war and starvation. Yu explains in a postscript that the idea for the novel came after he was deeply moved by an American folk song called "Old Black Joe" about a slave who lived through decades of hardships yet was still kind. "Though unmistakably Chinese," writes author Ha Jin, Yu's novels "are universally resonant."

### What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



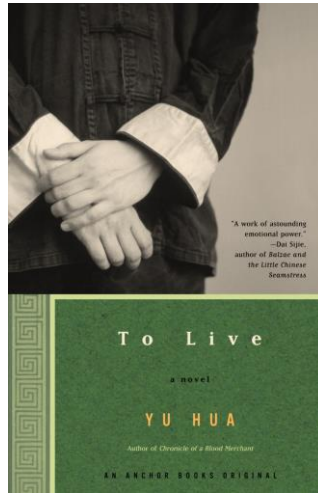
# About the Book

"When I write there is a constant voice in my ears. Sometimes I hear laughter, sometimes I hear sobs, sometimes I hear sighs, sometimes I hear myself." — Yu Hua in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*

Although it was initially banned in China, the internationally award-winning epic novel *To Live*, which was first published in 1992, is now considered to be one of the country's most influential books, with millions of copies in print. Called a "Chinese Book of Job" by the author Wang Ping, it tells the poignant story of a man's transformation from a mean, selfish wastrel to a devoted husband and father trying desperately to keep his family alive during the worst famine in Chinese history and a time of dramatic political and social change. Spanning four decades of modern Chinese history and written in stripped-down prose with a sensitivity to the dialogue and details of everyday life, the novel is tragic and filled with pain, but it is also a tale of endurance, humility, beauty, love, and ultimate redemption.

Fugui is the brash son of a wealthy land-owning family who, at the beginning of the novel, is unfaithful and cruel to his wife, Jiazhen. When he gambles away his family's entire fortune, dragging his mother, father, pregnant wife, and young daughter into poverty, he sets into motion a lifetime of suffering that will soon illuminate for him the error of his ways. He is forced into the Nationalist army, whisked away to fight with no opportunity to tell his family where he has gone. Much later, he returns home to find that his mother has died, and that his beloved and spirited daughter, Fengxia, has been stricken with a fever rendering her deaf and unable to speak. Now a poor peasant farmer, Fugui struggles to understand his sensitive son, Youqing, and as time passes and the family endures more and more hardships, Fugui comes to be filled with gratitude and respect for his stoic wife. Yet, as Fugui's capacity for love and his understanding of others grow, calamities continue to strike.

Fugui's story is told in his own voice to a traveling folk song collector, whom he meets later in life while working with his ox in the fields. In a postscript to the book, Yu says that he was inspired to write *To Live* after hearing "Old Black Joe," an American folk song about a slave who lives a harsh life but still views the world kindly. Old Black Joe and Fugui



could not be more different given their cultural experiences, he explains, but they are both human. This is what makes literature magical, he says, adding that he learned about himself from reading novels by William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Despite its epic breadth and the harrowing tragedies at its core, *To Live* is fast-paced, laced with Yu's signature humor and frankness. Prior to being published in book form, *To Live* was serially published in the Shanghai literary journal *Harvest*, which is where the famed Chinese film director Zhang Yimou first came across it. After staying up all night to read it, Zhang resolved to make *To Live* into a film, which premiered in 1994 to international acclaim, winning the Grand Jury prize and the Best Actor award at that year's Cannes Film Festival. The book was also adapted into a television miniseries entitled *Fugui* in 2005, and brought to the stage in a production by influential Chinese avant-garde theater director Meng Jinghui in 2012. "The theme which is central in much of my writing is ... Chinese people can overcome any difficulty presented to them," Yu told *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*. "The Chinese character remains strong."

The book's translator, Michael Berry, was 22 and a senior at Rutgers University when he sent a fax to Yu Hua requesting permission to translate *To Live* into English. To this day he feels a great sense of gratitude to Yu for entrusting his masterpiece to a young aspiring literary translator.

# About the Author

## Yu Hua (b. 1960)

"Yu Hua writes with a cold eye but a warm hand." — Ha Jin, award-winning poet and author of *Waiting*

One of the most well-known authors in China today, Yu Hua (Yu is his surname, Hua his given name) grew up in the eastern coastal province of Zhejiang, just south of Shanghai. After high school he received rudimentary training in dentistry and spent five years as a practicing dentist. It wasn't, he discovered, well-suited to him. As he puts it: "The inside of the mouth is one of the ugliest spectacles in the world" (New York Times Magazine).



Yu Hua  
(photo: Michael Lionstar)

The government was in charge of assigning professions, but Yu made it a goal to become a state-salaried artist at the local Cultural Bureau, having observed with envy the liberty these artists seemed to have in determining how they spent their days. To show he was qualified, he wrote in his spare time—when he wasn't pulling teeth—and the government granted his request. The new position gave Yu what many writers will say they covet: time to write when the mood strikes, a flexible schedule, and the ability to sleep in. He was so happy that he would wake up smiling, he told *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*.

Yu spent much of his youth roaming the halls of a hospital where his parents practiced medicine. He still associates the smell of Lysol with his childhood. Because their home faced the morgue, Yu would frequently hear the sounds of people weeping. It wasn't unusual for Yu and his brother to see their father coming out of the operating room with his smock covered in blood, or to witness a nurse carrying a bucket of bloody extractions to the nearby pond to be discarded.

This was during the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when, at the behest of Chairman Mao Zedong, traditional culture was shunned and objects, including books, were destroyed. People were encouraged to denounce those they felt had wandered from the Socialist path. His town's walls were covered in "Big Character" posters with slogans and denunciations issued by one person to another. With almost no access to books, reading these posters became one of Yu's first experiences with literature. "I remember carrying my book-bag on my way home from school and reading each poster as I walked along," he said. "I wasn't

interested in the revolutionary slogans. I was interested in the stories" (*Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*).

Though Yu was fascinated by the posters, he often worried that he'd see his father's name in a headline. His fear was well-founded, as one day his father was called out as a "runaway landlord" and "capitalist roader." The accusations stemmed from Yu's family history: his grandfather's family had once owned many acres of land and held a landlord pedigree. But Yu's grandfather—a slacker, Yu calls him, and a partier—sold off the property bit by bit to pay for his extravagant lifestyle until, by 1949, he had squandered just about everything and lost his landlord status. Other than the public shaming, Yu's father faced no further consequences.

Yu's writing career began just after the Cultural Revolution ended. His controversial early work—described as surreal and avant-garde, and often violent—drew from both his vivid childhood experiences and his desire to help Chinese literature evolve after a period during which literature was, as he has said, virtually nonexistent. Some of his early influences were Franz Kafka, Bruno Schulz, Jorge Luis Borges, and Yasunari Kawabata, whom he read when translations of their work came to China in the 1980s. Yu's later influences include V.S. Naipaul and Toni Morrison.

Yu's "novels are ingeniously structured and exude a mythical aura," writes author Ha Jin. "Though unmistakably Chinese, they are universally resonant." The first Chinese novelist to win the James Joyce Foundation Award, Yu is the author of the novel *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*—also referred to (along with *To Live*) as one of the most influential books in China—as well as the novels *The Seventh Day*, *Cries in the Drizzle*, and *Brothers*, which was a finalist for the Man Asian Literary Prize. His books also include *Boy in the Twilight*, *Stories of the Hidden China* and *China in Ten Words*, a book of essays. His work has been translated into more than 20 languages, and he is the recipient of France's Prix Courier International and Italy's Premio Grinzane Cavour. His works continue to be adapted for film, theater, and television.

Having lived through two radically different periods in Chinese history, Yu often feels that he has the soul of a hundred-year-old man, something he thinks is good for his writing (*Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*). He is "very different from any of the characters in his novel," says his translator, Michael Berry, who first met Yu in the late 1990s. Yu has a "sharpness, a satirical wit, an observant gaze, and a childlike curiosity. I still remember his ecstatic reaction to seeing the neon lights on Broadway" and "his excitement when I took him to his first jazz performance." Today, Yu lives in Beijing with his wife, the poet Chen Hong.



## About the Translator

Michael Berry is the translator of several novels, including *Remains of Life* by Wu He (Columbia, 2017), *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (with Susan Chan Egan) by Wang Anyi (Columbia, 2008), *To Live* by Yu Hua (Anchor, 2004), *Nanjing 1937: A Love Story* by Ye Zhaoyan (Anchor, 2004), and *Wild Kids: Two Novels about Growing Up* by Chang Tachun (Columbia, 2000). He is a contributor to the ChinaFile and his popular essays in Chinese have been published in the weekly Friday supplement of *The Beijing News*. He is currently a professor in the Department of Asian Languages & Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles.



Michael Berry (photo: Zheng Ye)

## Discussion Questions

1. Fugui's story begins with devastating consequences caused by his cruel and selfish behavior. As his life unfolds and his humanity reemerges, what did he learn to value in life? Do you think he ever forgave himself for his actions?
2. There are two narratives in *To Live*: Fugui's story and the story of the man who meets Fugui while traveling through the countryside collecting folk songs. How do these two points of view affect your reading experience?
3. Is Fugui a good father? A good husband? A good citizen? A good community member? What does it mean to be good in these roles during difficult times?
4. Were you surprised by the actions and reactions of Fugui's family throughout the story – his wife, Jiazhen; his daughter, Fengxia; and his son, Youqing?
5. Did you know much about Chinese history and culture before reading *To Live*? If not, what did you learn? If you knew some or much of it, was your understanding of it challenged or expanded by Fugui's story? What conclusions might you draw about the author's view of China's history?
6. Throughout Chinese history, there has been a strong patriarchal tradition. After 1949, Mao Zedong enacted policies that were meant to create more equity between the sexes. Did you see these changes reflected in the novel? How did you react to the novel's portrayal of gender roles?
7. In what ways does the story resonate with traditional Buddhist philosophy?
8. The novel moves through four decades of modern Chinese history marked by war, famine, political turmoil, and natural disasters. How does the author manage this pacing and still include details of everyday life? What is the effect of a story that covers so much? What are some of the details that surprised you?
9. *To Live* was originally published in serial form in a literary journal. How would your reading experience have been different if you encountered it this way?
10. What is significant about the ox that Fugui is left with to plow his fields? What other animals are symbolic of the Xu family and its history and how so? Can you find other examples of symbolism in the novel?
11. *To Live* is a book in translation (from Chinese into English). What might you imagine are the difficulties in bringing a story from one language into another?
12. In 1994, Zhang Yimou directed a major motion picture adaptation of *To Live*. While some elements were faithful to the book, many details were altered. What elements of the story are different in the film? How do these changes affect the overall tone and themes of the story?
13. The song collector tells us that Fugui enjoyed thinking about his past, reliving his life "again and again" (p. 45). Why do you think this might be when his life was filled with so much sadness and hardship? If you were Fugui, would you be telling these stories?
14. What does it mean to Fugui and his family to live? What does it mean to you?

# Credits

*To Live* discussion questions provided courtesy of Amy Stolls and Michael Berry.

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The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.



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