To Live
A Novel

By Yu Hua
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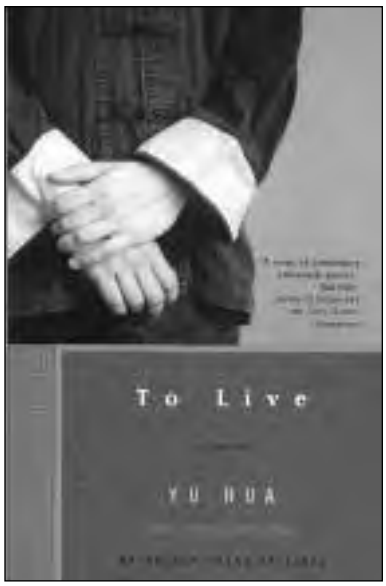

Yu Hua is one of the leaders of the post-Mao generation of writers struggling to find a voice for their experiences in a literary world whose perspectives had been warped by the constraints of socialist realism and which could voice criticism only in a veiled historicism that located exemplary mistakes in the experiences of figures associated with dynasties well removed from the present. The results of that search led young authors to experiment with a variety of genres—science fiction, surrealism, "misty" poetry, avant garde use of language, and the "scar literature" that provided intensely personal memoirs of the abuses of the Cultural Revolution years. As a fledgling writer and an apparently voracious reader of international literature, Yu Hua explored many of these literary devices. His short story, "The Past and the Punishments," is an almost Kafkaesque attempt to explore the problem of historical memory in China in the aftermath of the Maoist excesses. Other short stories are remarkable for their striking and graphic depictions of violence.

When Yu Hua turns to the novel, however, there is a notable change in his writing style. The language is spare but the storytelling becomes at once gentler, more first person, and more revealing even though violence and tragedy are never far from the surface. Stories of life in China are told through families and across generations . . . across decades of history and across the political movements of the twentieth century. Yu Hua's novels of life in rural China echo the familial sagas of Faulkner or Steinbeck in the American context. Yu Hua himself has indicated that the inspiration for *To Live* came from the American folk song entitled "Old Black Joe" about an elderly slave "who experienced a life's worth of hardships, including the passing of his entire family—yet he still looked upon the world with eyes of kindness, offering not the slightest complaint."[1] The life of a black slave in antebellum America and the life of a rural peasant in twentieth century China are worlds apart, yet there is a common theme of suffering and quiet nobility in struggling simply to survive and in discovering the small joys of shared life in the midst of recurring pains.

Yu Hua's title, *To Live*, is both a narrative statement and an exhortation. The novel is the story of a single family told through the eyes of Xu Fugui—a profligate son, an uncertain husband, an adoring father, and a doting grandfather—who lives to see every one of his family members die, leaving him utterly alone, finally to find company in an ox that he saves from the butcher's knife and comically names after himself. "Fugui is a good ox. Of course he gets lazy sometimes, but even people drag their feet from time to time—how can you expect an animal not to? I know when to make him work and when to let him rest. If I'm tired, then I know he must be tired, too. When my energy returns, then it's time for him to get back to work" (p. 234). The identity between man and beast is Yu Hua's metaphor for the human condition, and it is the vehicle that opens and closes the story, told through the mechanism of a double narration: one narrator is a young student wandering the countryside collecting songs and folk stories from the peasants and "learning from the people" in ways quite different from the enforced rustication of Mao's Cultural Revolution; the other is the aged Fugui and his ox recounting their story to the wandering student. For Yu Hua and for Fugui, the