

Document Citation

Title	Cannes reviews : To live
Author(s)	Derek Elley
Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1994 May 18
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Huozhe (To live), Zhang, Yimou, 1994

CANNES REVIEWS

To Live

(Chinese — Drama — Color)

A Samuel Goldwyn Co. release for an Era Intl. (H.K.) production, in association with Shanghai Film Studios. (Intl. sales: Era Intl., H.K.) Produced by Chiu Fu-sheng. Executive producers, Christophe Tseng, Kow Fu-hong. Directed by Zhang Yimou. Screenplay, Yu Hua, Lu Wei, from the novel by Yu. Camera (color), Lu Yue; editor, Du Yuan; music, Zhao Jiping; art direction, Cao Jiuping; costume design, Dong Huamiao; sound (Dolby), Tao Jing; assistant directors, Zhang Xleochun, Wang Bin; associate producer, Barbara Robinson. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 17, 1994. Running time: 125 min.

Fugui	Ge You
Jiazhen	Gong Li
Town chief	Nio Ben
Chunsheng	Guo Tao
Erxi	Jiang Wu
Long'er	Ni Dabong
Fengxia, as an adult	Liu Tianchi
Youqing	Deng Fei

(Mandarin Chinese dialogue)

A family drama set across 30 years of modern Chinese history, Zhang Yimou's "To Live" is a well-crafted but in no way earth-shaking entry in the helmer's oeuvre. Topped by finely judged perfs by Gong Li and Ge You as an average couple tossed like corks in a storm by civil war, revolution and political strife, the pic will draw core auds for quality Chinese fare but lacks the special smarts to go as far into the marketplace as showier items like "Farewell My Concubine."

Given that a lot of the background is familiar from recent pix, like "Concubine" and "The Blue Kite," Zhang's movie could also run up against the problem of audience burn-out on Chinese hops through 20th-century history. Good reviews and marketing will be crucial in overcoming such resistance.

Story, pruned down by Yu Hua and Lu Wei from a long novel by new wave writer Yu, opens in the '40s in a small village in northern China. Fugui (Ge), eldest son of a prominent family, is hooked on gambling. Wife Jiazhen (Gong) leaves him when Fugui loses the

ancestral home to local smoothie Long'er (Ni Dabong), but she returns.

In the second of the movie's five segments, Fugui is now a soldier in the Nationalist (KMT) army fighting the Communists in the late-'40s civil war alongside his buddy Chunsheng (Guo Tao). Pic opens out visually at this stage with several striking set pieces involving troop movements and mass carnage that matures the indolent main character.

Postwar, Fugui returns to his now-communized native village. In the first of several twists of fate, Long'er gets his comeuppance by being executed as a capitalist. Next jump is to 1958 and the so-called Great Leap Forward, with the whole population mobilized to supply iron for mass industrialization.

Flash forward to 1966, start of the Cultural Revolution, and town chief (Niu Ben) introduces a prospective husband to Fugui's grown daughter, Gengria (Liu Tianchi, strong in a wordless part).

After the 90-minute mark, the movie starts to develop true clout with the news that Fugui's buddy,

Turn to page 8

2p # 41398

CANNES REVIEWS

To Live

Continued from page 2

Chunsheng, has been branded a "capitalist roadster." What will probably become the movie's most-discussed sequence, for its meld of drama and black comedy, is Fugui's daughter giving birth in a hospital where Little Red Book-bashers misrun the show.

Scripters Yu and Lu have cut out many of the novel's peripheral roles to throw the central relationship into clearer focus. But in doing this and adopting a relatively cool photographic look and distanced shooting style, Zhang rarely develops a head of steam to roll the story over the political and social changes that impinge on the characters.

Result is a finely but undramatically lensed pic (by cinema-

tographer Lu Yue, rather than Zhang's earlier collaborator, Gu Changwei) that more often parades by rather than actually engages the emotions for any significant period.

Though most non-Chinese viewers will be drawn by Gong's name, most of the acting honors go to Ge (the epicene aesthete in "Concubine"). He often brings a quirky, ironic edge to the dialogue that makes one think the picture could also be read as a deep satire on China's recent political history rather than pure (melo)drama.

Pic has yet to get official approval by the Beijing authorities, after sneaking out to Japan for post-production just before the authorities decreed negs on foreign-funded films should first get local approval. In a tip of the hat to

Beijing, Zhang, who's due to start rolling on the foreign-financed "Shanghai Triad" this fall, stayed away from the Cannes fest.

For the first time in a Zhang movie, Gong plays second fiddle to a strong, accomplished actor. She's very good in a supportive role, but her character doesn't develop many wrinkles or depth.

Supporting perfs, including the children, are all fine, with special mention to Niu Ben as town chief who makes even the Cultural Revolution seem like everyday event.

Pic lensed over the second half of last year in a variety of Mainland locations on a reported budget of \$3 million to \$4 million, from the same Hong Kong affiliate of a Taiwan-based company that funded Zhang's earlier "Raise the Red Lantern." Chinese title literally means "Living"; a recent English title, "Lifetimes," has now been ditched.

—Derek Elley