

To Live Unhistorically, the Phenomenology of Chinese Spirit

Yu Hua's novel *To Live* (1992), adapted into a historical film by Zhang Yimou (1994), is like a window into the Chinese psyche. Jia Zhen and Fugui as characters represent the psychic events in China to regain human wholeness. The ups and downs of the Xu family defamiliarize the reader's views of history like John Cage's music piece 4'33" that tunes the music lovers to the ambient noise of real life. To the extent that the story is surreal, it interrogates the existing knowledge of reality just like Zhuangzi's butterfly dream parable. As a metafiction, the story subverts the conventional relationship between art and reality, and asks: "Does history make sense?" the title of Terry Pinkard's article.

To me, the story gives the times of history back to China. Fugui and Jia Zhen live in the shadow of China as a republic when the nation officially switched from its traditional sexagenary calendar to Gregorian calendar, which also happened in Japan in 1873 and in Korea in 1896. To live in modern China, Japan and Korea means therefore to live in someone else's time and be part of someone else's history from which Asia can be written off as unhistorical. In *Philosophy of History* (1837), Hegel argues:

"...But in India, it [despotism] is normal: for here there is no sense of personal independence with which a state of despotism could be compared, and which would raise revolt in the soul; nothing approaching even a resentful protest is left, except the corporeal smart, and the pain of being deprived of absolute necessities and of pleasure. In the case of such a people, therefore, that which we call history is not to be looked for. ... This [Hinduism] makes them incapable of writing history; all that happens is dissipated in their minds into confused dreams.

To Hegel, China and India lie outside the world's history, mere presupposition of elements whose combination must be waited for to constitute their virtual progress. In other words, India and China exemplify "unhistorical history."

That "unhistorical history" is the realm where women and children in Yu Hua's story live. Adult men represent "the waking consciousness" that Oswald Spangler talks about when elucidating the problems of European history in his *The Decline of the West* (1918).

This, then, is our task. We men of the Western Culture are, with our historical sense, an exception and not a rule. World-history is our world picture and not all mankind's. Indian

and Classical man formed no image of a world in progress, and perhaps when in due course, the civilization of the West is extinguished, there'll never again be a culture and a human type in which "world-history" is so potent a form of the waking consciousness. Fugui and Jia Zhen can never be that human type or appreciate that European exceptionalism. They are figures of the primitive who have no sense of time, and they belong, in Hegel's words, to "mere space" as do India and China to the Europeans.

As a woman and wife, Jia Zhen never overlooks life's intrinsic values: food, her family, her husband and children. She embodies life-instincts and couldn't care less about the politics of social progress that consumes the men in the story. In vain, she tries to stop Fugui from gambling away the family mansion. The lives of You Qing and Feng Xia are both cut short in war and revolution. Jia Zhen's maternal instincts are willfully ignored by Fugui taking You Qing to the very site where he is later killed. Like the mythological Cassandra, her forebodings about imminent danger always go unheeded.

The men in the story, on the other hand, represent the death instincts. A compulsive gambler, Fu Gui is unable to resist the temptations of wealth, pleasure, and power that drive the modern Chinese who are psychologically predisposed to self-destruction. Fugui's army friend Old Quan is killed along with thousands in the bloodbath of the Civil War. His friend Long'er is executed in the communist land reform. Town Chief Niu is purged from the CCP as a capitalist roader in the very revolution to which he gives his total devotion. His friend Chun Sheng is persecuted in the CR despite his political loyalty to Mao. You Qing in the novel dies donating too much blood during the Great Leap Forward. Wan Erxi is crushed to death in an accident during the period of high socialism. All these personal calamities are attributes of Maoist fanaticism that resulted in the deaths of millions.

These dramatic details may seem gratuitous, but they are meaningful details seen through the lenses of Taoism and Buddhism that reject a set of one-sided rational attitudes and values. In other words, the works by Yu Hua and Zhang Yimou "restore the times of history to China" as called for by historian Rebecca E. Karl. The story reconstructs history to question the dominant narrative of social progress. What is being discredited in the story is a philosophy of history that privileges the West as the center of human developments, a point not lost to Wang Gengwu, the Singaporean historian (王赓武):

Modern China has been torn between affirming the integrity of its history despite the Sinocentric biases and accepting world history in the Eurocentric tradition. This ambivalence has not helped other people to understand China's position in world history. Why this ambivalence? China obviously does not wish to accept a narrative that reads history backward, to take European history since the 17th and 18th centuries as norm. Together with other peoples with a strong heritage of their own past, the Chinese think it is unhistorical to impose one dominant narrative upon everyone's past.

What exactly is wrong with this European norm? As is implicated in the novel and film, the metrics of progress can be sets of contradictions that Horkheimer and Adorno outlined in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. "The fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant." *Fugui's* final disillusionment illustrates precisely that dialectic, namely, social progress is as inevitable as it is catastrophic. The lives of Jia Zhen and *Fugui* allegorize the fate of China being brought into the progressive narrative of the West. As man and wife, they lend expressions to the pathos of modern Chinese history. The couple become estranged from their traditional gender roles, not unlike the Chinese state circumscribed by the international laws that the West imposed. In their respective domestic roles, Jia Zhen and Fu Gui represent the psychic elements being ignored and reveal the psychological meanings of history as a neurosis or psychosis.

The novel and film are important for Asian Studies in the sense that the drama records the process of what Japanese scholar Takeuchi Yoshimi referred to as "Modernity for the Orient [that] is primarily its subjugation to the West's political, military and economic control. The modern Orient was born only when it was invaded, defeated, and exploited by the West." Jia Zhen and *Fugui* are direct ramifications of a new reality which, according to Bertrand Russell, is incomprehensible to the Orientals.

Progress and efficiency, for example, make no appeal to the Chinese, except to those who have come under Western influence. By valuing progress and efficiency, we have secured power and wealth. ... Our industrialism, our militarism, our love of progress, our missionary zeal, our imperialism, our passion for dominating and organizing, all spring from a superflux of the itch for activity. ... They [Chinese] have not the ideal of progress which dominates the Western nations and affords a rationalization of our active impulses.

Conversations between Fu Gui and Jia Zhen are also dialogs between incompatible cultures, or negotiations between reality and ideas. A sense of the absurd descends upon Fu Gui and Jia Zhen as they march to the utopian land of communism, littered with the carcasses of their friends, children and loved ones. The novelist and filmmaker reject a revolutionary romanticism for the same reason George Santayana rejects “Both Christianity and Romanticism [that] had accustomed people to disregard the intrinsic value of things. Things ought to be useful for salvation, or symbols of other greater but unknown things; it was not to be expected that they should be simply good in themselves.”

Jia Zhen and Fugui are then to be seen as primitives for whom, in the words of Oswald Spangler, “...Time can have no meaning.” They are the mere elements of caprice. Their serendipitous lives are devoid of the sense of time that is the spirit of world history to Hegel and the Europeans. “Our history is that of great connections,” says Spangler, “classical history is that of anecdotes and plastic details”. This is precisely what Jia Zhen, Fugui, Feng Xia and You Qing are, anecdotes to the world history for modern man as an agent of change. As different temporalities converge in the story, we see depths and richness of human existence. In Western production of knowledge, China and greater Asia are important only as reminders of who the Europeans had been before becoming modern, despite the carnage and devastation that decimated Europe and Asia during the World Wars and political violence.

Yu Hua’s literary aesthetics and Zhang Yimou’s film aesthetics restore the times of history to China and make China comprehensible again according to her own intellectual traditions, just as the works of Shakespeare are ageless to Professor Harold Bloom who said in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, “Our supposed advances in cultural anthropology or in other modes of ‘theory’ are not advances upon him.” Fugui and Jia Zhen are reincarnations of the Chinese spirit which often appears ahistorical in the West. Let me conclude with a quote by Sociologist Fei Xiaotong, “Each culture is beautiful by its own aesthetics, each also finds beauty through the aesthetics of the other; when different aesthetics coexist, there is great harmony.” This is the best and only way to understand world history.