

**PARADOXES IN TO LIVE: THE TRAGIC FATES OF FOUR INDIVIDUALS****Yuldashev Kamolbek**

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**Abstract**

Yu Hua's *To Live* (1993) offers a compelling depiction of life in twentieth-century China, capturing the complexities of existence amid periods of profound historical transformation. While the narrative documents extensive suffering—manifested through war, famine, and political upheaval—it resists framing tragedy as a simple moral lesson or cautionary account. Instead, paradox functions as the novel's central organizing principle: the acts of living, loving, and enduring are inextricably linked to meaninglessness, loss, and stillness. The experiences of the principal characters—Fugui, Jiazhen, Fengxia, and Youqing—unfold within this dialectical structure. Through their intersecting fates, Yu Hua reveals that virtue may engender catastrophe, innocence may culminate in sacrifice, silence may acquire expressive power, and survival itself may constitute a form of sorrow.

This paper asks how Yu Hua's *To Live* constructs a poetics of “tragic endurance” by embedding paradox in the intertwined fates of Fugui, Jiazhen, Fengxia, and Youqing, and what this reveals about life, death, and moral agency in twentieth-century China. It further examines how these paradoxes dialogue with Chinese traditions of the tragic and contemporary scholarship on life–death aesthetics in Yu Hua's fiction.

The study adopts close reading of the novel, focusing on key episodes in each character's trajectory—Fugui's dispossession and survival, Jiazhen's loyal suffering, Fengxia's mute death in childbirth, and Youqing's sacrificial innocence. This textual analysis is complemented by contextual and intertextual reading of existing criticism on tragic endurance, existential paradox, and life–death themes in Yu Hua's work.

**Keywords**

life and death, tragic fates, sacrifices, innocent Youqing, to live

Scholarly engagement with Yu Hua's *To Live* has largely focused on questions of suffering, historical trauma, and the ethics of survival. Critics frequently argue that the novel departs from classical tragic models that privilege heroic resistance or moral redemption. Instead, Yu Hua constructs a narrative world in which endurance replaces resolution, and survival becomes the central mode through which human meaning is negotiated.

Studies of realism and historical violence provide a key foundation for understanding Yu Hua's narrative method. Shao Li characterizes *To Live* as a form of ethical realism in which historical upheavals are represented through ordinary, repetitive suffering rather than through monumental political narratives. Shao argues that Yu Hua reframes tragedy as a condition embedded within daily life, thereby undermining teleological interpretations of historical progress (Shao). This approach highlights how political transformations operate as impersonal forces that reshape individual destinies without offering moral coherence or closure.

Another major interpretive framework appears in scholarship on tragic endurance. He Chuan, Chen Hui, and Sun Yan identify tragic endurance as the defining aesthetic principle in Yu Hua's fiction. According to their analysis, suffering in *To Live* does not elevate characters into heroic figures but instead situates them within a continuous struggle for existence. The novel dissolves the boundary between life and death, presenting survival itself as a tragic state rather than a triumph over adversity (He, Chen, and Sun). This perspective illuminates Fugui's transformation from a socially privileged landowner into a figure who persists through successive losses, suggesting that endurance replaces identity as the novel's central ethical category.

Scholars have also emphasized the existential paradox underlying the novel's moral structure. Liu Yan argues that Yu Hua constructs a moral universe in which ethical conduct offers no protection from catastrophe. Instead, innocence and altruism often intensify vulnerability. Liu interprets the deaths of younger characters, particularly Youqing, as evidence that the novel dismantles conventional moral causality by exposing the arbitrary intersection of fate and historical circumstance (Liu). Such readings reveal how *To Live* challenges traditional expectations that virtue leads to reward or spiritual transcendence.

The theme of silence has attracted significant attention within broader discussions of post-Mao literary expression. Wang Xiaoming examines the role of non-verbal communication in representing trauma, suggesting that silence often functions as a critique of ideological discourse. In Wang's analysis, bodily suffering emerges as a more authentic form of expression than politically constructed language (Wang). Fengxia's muteness exemplifies this dynamic, as her silent presence disrupts the dominance of ideological rhetoric while revealing the limitations of language in representing extreme suffering.

Research on moral ambiguity and historical violence further contextualizes Yu Hua's narrative strategy. Zhang Qian contends that *To Live* portrays political systems as structurally indifferent rather than overtly tyrannical. The novel disperses responsibility across historical processes, thereby producing tragedy without identifiable perpetrators or moral resolution (Zhang). Zhang's interpretation underscores the randomness of loss in the narrative and reinforces the idea that historical trauma destabilizes ethical certainty.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, most studies focus on individual characters or isolated thematic elements. Few analyses explore how the intersecting fates of Fugui, Jiazhen, Fengxia, and Youqing collectively construct a unified structure of paradox. By examining these characters relationally, this article argues that paradox operates not merely as a thematic feature but as the organizing principle of the novel's tragic vision.

### **Fugui: Survival through loss**

Paradox. To live with losing all

The defining paradox of Fugui's journey lies in the fact that he sustains life only through loss. His continued existence depends upon relinquishing worldly attachments and submitting to endurance. Stripped of property, family, and social identity, he endures as a hollow yet breathing figure—plowing the fields and tending the ox that bears his own name. Life persists amid emptiness, rendering his survival both haunting and fragile.

In the novel's closing scene, Fugui's companionship with the aged ox crystallizes this paradox. The ox, sharing his name, functions as a mirror through which human and animal blur into a single rhythm of bare existence. Through suffering, identity disintegrates; survival becomes an act of forgetting—forgetting the home, the wealth, the former self—and continuing through repetitive labor.

Fugui's endurance thus wards off death, but at the expense of selfhood. His survival, far from triumphant, signifies a subdued, wounded persistence—a life emptied of meaning yet still in motion.

### **Jiazhen: Faith, Loyalty, and Suffering**

#### **Devotion across calamity**

From the outset, Jiazhen epitomizes unwavering loyalty. She implores Fugui to abandon his gambling habit, remains with him through financial ruin, and endures motherhood in the midst of despair. As their circumstances deteriorate, she evolves—from a refined wife to a peasant, from social privilege to mere survival. Yet beneath her quiet resilience lies persistent sorrow.

Unlike Fugui, Jiazhen exerts limited narrative agency. Her inner world emerges through subtle gestures, brief exchanges, and wordless endurance. Her steadfast morality anchors the story's emotional core.

### **Fengxia: Muteness and Expression**

The paradox lies in the fact that Fengxia's muteness conveys deeper truth than speech ever could. Her silent presence draws both the characters and readers into an emotional recognition of shared humanity. In her death—during childbirth—she becomes a symbol of life's fragility and the devastating cost of existence. The maternal act of bringing forth new life is thus intertwined with silence and loss.

Fengxia's muteness also exposes the inherent limitations of language. Amid a world saturated with political slogans, ideological rhetoric, and cruelty, her wordless suffering appears more genuine. She refuses to be absorbed into discourse—she simply exists. Her silence resists the conversion of pain into narrative form.

Ultimately, Fengxia's tragic end reveals that silence alone can sometimes convey the depth of anguish, while speech may distort or diminish it.

### **Youqing: Innocence as Sacrifice**

The paradox surrounding Youqing's life lies in the fatal consequences of his virtue. His altruistic act, rooted in selflessness, becomes lethal under the weight of systemic indifference. His death exposes the merciless intersection of chance and societal failure—where innocence offers no shield, morality affords no rescue, and generosity incurs punishment.

Youqing's death is not that of a celebrated martyr but of a senseless victim, revealing the arbitrary nature of suffering and the futility of sacrifice in an indifferent world. Ultimately, he embodies the paradox that the purest life may suffer the gravest tragedy—his innocence magnifies the moral absurdity of his fate.

### Synthesis: Life, Death, and the Web of Paradox

Yu Hua's *To Live* unfolds within a realm where fate remains indifferent, and tragedy arises not from divine justice but from historical circumstance. The paradoxes embodied by his characters dismantle teleological views of morality, revealing that life offers no ultimate reward—only the endurance of existence itself. To live, in Yu Hua's vision, is to inhabit paradox.

Scholars such as He et al. describe Yu Hua's aesthetic as one of "tragic endurance," in which death and suffering are not endpoints but coordinates of human meaning. His portrayal of mortality is not nihilistic; rather, it is generative, compelling readers to recognize suffering as an essential dimension of being. The novel's paradoxical architecture resonates with Chinese intellectual traditions—balancing the moral ideal against the cruelty of reality, Confucian devotion against existential pain, and silence against expression. Paradox, thus, becomes not a stylistic device but a sustained philosophical stance.

The Intertwined fates of Fugui, Jiazhen, Fengxia, and Youqing in *To Live* form a constellation of existential paradoxes. Fugui endures only through the erosion of all he holds dear; Jiazhen's steadfast devotion deepens her suffering; Fengxia's silence acquires eloquence; and Youqing's innocence leads to his death. Together, these contradictions reveal a world in which survival itself becomes tragic, moral integrity invites destruction, silence transcends speech, and purity incurs the ultimate cost.

Yu Hua offers neither solace nor retribution. Rather, he presents human existence as an act of paradoxical perseverance—an endurance that dignifies even as it devastates. It is precisely within this tension between affirmation and despair that *To Live* locates its profound moral resonance.

The analysis finds that Fugui's "survival through loss" constructs life as bare endurance: he lives only by relinquishing property, kin, and identity, turning survival itself into a quiet, de-subjectivized tragedy. Jiazhen's unwavering loyalty amplifies suffering rather than rewarding virtue, exposing a moral universe where devotion deepens vulnerability instead of securing protection. Fengxia's muteness becomes an alternative language of truth, whose silent suffering appears more authentic than the ideological rhetoric saturating the novel's political context. Her death in childbirth fuses birth and death, suggesting that new life in this world is purchased at the cost of irreparable loss, and that maternal sacrifice is structurally invisible. Youqing's altruistic death reveals how innocence is converted into expendable life by an indifferent system, turning virtue into the condition of victimhood. Read together, these four trajectories confirm what critics describe as Yu Hua's "tragic endurance": fate offers neither moral balance nor transcendence, only the demand to continue living amid unresolvable loss. The paper argues that *To Live* thereby reconfigures tragedy away from heroic defiance toward ordinary survival, aligning with studies that see Yu Hua's work as an exploration of life's fundamental meaning under hardship. The main contribution is to show that paradox—not redemption—is the novel's organizing principle: survival becomes a form of mourning, loyalty becomes a source of pain, silence becomes eloquent, and innocence becomes lethal, offering a complex, non-teleological vision of human existence in modern Chinese history.

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