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Surviving the Cultural Revolution: Resilience and Ideology in *To Live* and *Serve the People*

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Abstract
Cultural Revolution made a huge impact on Chinese society from every aspect. Literature is also no exception. It reflects the profound impact of the Cultural Revolution on people's lives. This can be seen by exploring two novels—*To Live* by Yu Hua and *Serve the People* by Yan Lianke. Through the stories of everyday individuals caught in political chaos, the analysis highlights themes like personal suffering, survival, and resistance. It compares how each author uses different literary tools—such as satire, irony, and emotional storytelling—to criticize the state's control and show the human side of historical events. By examining characters, power struggles, and family ties, the analysis uncovers how the Cultural Revolution shaped individual identity and society. The analysis also shows how fiction can go beyond history books to offer a deeper and more personal understanding of this period. Both novels are powerful examples of how literature can express the emotional truth behind political change.

Keywords: Cultural Revolution, Chinese Literature, Yu Hua, Yan Lianke, Resilience, Ideology, Literary Analysis

Introduction

The Cultural Revolution, spanning from 1966 to 1976, stands as one of the most radical socio-political movements in modern Chinese history. Initiated by Mao Zedong, the movement aimed to solidify communist ideology by purging the capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society. This period, characterized by widespread persecution, destruction of old cultural heritage, and profound disruption of social order, had a profound impact on the nation's intellectual and cultural spheres. Literature during and after the Cultural Revolution became an important medium through which the societal division, personal suffering, and ideological clashes were documented and reflected. Authors from this era often grappled with themes of trauma, disillusionment, and survival as they navigated the oppressive ideological environment.

Among the significant literary works that provide a lens into this turbulent period are Yu Hua's *To Live* (活着) and Yan Lianke's *Serve the People* (为人民服务). *To Live* shows the life of Fugui, a man whose personal tragedies mirror the political upheavals of modern China[1], while *Serve the People* explains the interplay between personal desires and political duty, offering a satirical critique of the absurdities of Mao's ideology[2]. These novels, while distinct in their narrative styles and approaches, both explore the devastating impact of the Cultural Revolution on individuals, families, and society at large. Through their protagonists, both authors shed light on the resilience of the human spirit amidst the ideological ethos of that time. For a better understanding of this paper, the simple timeline to understand here is:

[1] Zehua, Zheng, "Huozhe zhongde shengming zhexue: Beiju xingcun zai jiqi chaoyue" "The Philosophy of Life in "To Live": Tragic Existence and Its Transcendence" 《活着》中的生命哲学：悲剧性存在及其超越, 世界文学研究,Aug 2024, Vol.12, No. 4, pp.262-269.

[2] 《为人民服务》读书笔记与心得体会" "Reading Notes and Reflections on "Serve the People" http://cll.newdu.com/m/view.php?aid=92015, Accessed on July 16th 2025.

Year	Literary Milestone with Historical Events
1966	Beginning of the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命), where the Revolutionary literature (革命文学) dominates the literary scene.
1976	End of the Cultural Revolution with Mao Zedong's death. The beginning of Reform Era under Deng Xiaoping and initiation of 'Emancipation of Mind'(解放思想).
1980	Gradual loosening of literary censorship and the rise of "Scar Literature" (伤痕文学).
1993	Publication of *To Live* (活着) and it got banned shortly after adaptation to movie due to politically sensitive content (1994).
2005	Publication of *Serve the People* (为人民服务), also banned due to satirical portrayal of Mao's ideology.

Yu Hua's *To Live*: A Reflection of Trauma

In interviews, Yu Hua has expressed how his early exposure to death and suffering, as the son of a medical professional, deeply influenced his writing style and narrative choices. He stated, "I grew up during the Cultural Revolution. Childhood experiences greatly impact the rest of a person's life. To me, the bloody struggle at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution and the oppressive atmosphere at the end were both forms of violence."[3] In this sense, Yu Hua's intent appears deeply rooted in not only personal reflection but also a broader cultural commentary.

"*To Live*" tells the deeply emotional story of Fugui, a once-rich young man whose life is turned upside down by fate, personal choices, and China's turbulent history. The novel follows him from his youth to old age, showing how he loses everything—his wealth, family, and stability—but still finds a way to keep going. The story begins with Fugui as a spoiled and irresponsible landowner's son who squanders his family's fortune through gambling. This reckless lifestyle drives his family into poverty. His transformation begins after this fall—he must learn to survive without privilege. Yu Hua uses this dramatic shift to show how fragile human lives can be when shaped by both personal flaws and larger social changes. Fugui is later forcibly enlisted into the Nationalist Army, where he endures the brutal realities of war. Separated from his family for years, he witnesses death and violence. This part of the novel exposes the suffering ordinary people experienced during China's civil war, showing how individuals were caught in the middle of forces beyond their control. After returning home, Fugui finds that his mother has died and his wife, Jiazhen, has been struggling to hold the family together. Together they try to rebuild a simple life. However, the family faces more tragedy as the years pass. Their son dies due to a blood loss mishap in a hospital, their daughter (who is mute) dies during childbirth, and other loved ones pass away one by one. Through these painful events—many of which are tied to political campaigns like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution—Yu Hua shows how state policies, medical negligence, and blind obedience to ideology can have deadly effects on innocent people. Despite losing almost everyone dear to him, Fugui continues to live. He ends up alone, raising an old ox that shares the name of his lost son. The story ends with Fugui reflecting on his life—not with bitterness, but with a quiet acceptance. This ending emphasizes the novel's central message: to live is not just to survive physically, but to carry on despite grief, to keep going when everything seems lost. Yu Hua doesn't paint Fugui as a hero, but rather as a symbol of ordinary resilience—someone who represents millions of Chinese people who endured pain silently during times of great national upheaval.

> "*To Live talks about the friendship between a person and his fate. It is a moving relationship because they appreciate each other and hate each other at the same time. They can't get rid of each other and they can't complain about each other. When they live, they walk together on the dusty roads. When they die, they turn together into rain and mud. To Live talks about how humans endure abysmal suffering, like a Chinese saying: To hang by a thread. You let a strand of hair withstand 30,000 jin and not break. It talks about the capacity and multitude of tears, talks about the absence of desperation, talks about people living because they must. They live to live and for nothing else.*"[4]
>
> --(Yu Hua Interview with EAA, Winter 2003)

Yu Hua uses a plain, direct storytelling style, often with dark humor, to portray the quiet strength of those who are typically forgotten in grand historical narratives. He avoids melodrama, instead focused on the emotional endurance of his characters. The novel criticizes the destructive effects of political ideology when it ignores the value of individual lives.When Fugui loses everything—his wealth, his family members, and his dreams. Yet, he keeps living. He accepts the pain and continues forward with quiet strength. His story shows that survival is not always heroic—it's often just about holding on, even when life is unfair. Fugui's resilience is not loud; it is slow, painful, but strong. A line from the novel says:

> **"像我这样，说起来是越混越没息，可寿命长，我认识的人一个挨着一个死去，我还活着."[5]**
> (*A person like me, the longer I drag through life, the duller I seem to become. Yet while time shows me no mercy, it let me to watch everyone I've ever loved disappear, one after another, while I alone remain, alive and forgotten.)*

This line depicts that no matter how much suffering there is, continuing to live is a form of strength. Fugui becomes a symbol of ordinary people who survive through great suffering without giving up. The author shows that survival itself becomes an act of resistance. The novel's exploration of loss and suffering can be seen as a literary mechanism to highlight the relentless forces of political upheaval. Yu Hua's focus on the fragility of human existence mirrors the

[3] "Stranger Than Fiction: A Q&A with Yu Hua", https://www.chinafile.com/stranger-than- fiction, Accessed on July 16th 2025.

[4] Yu Hua. "EAA Interview with Yu Hua, Author of To Live (Huo Zhe)." Interview conducted by Helen Finken. Translated by Nancy Tsai. Education About Asia, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 20-22.

[5] 余华《活着》 (Yu Hua: To Live) (武汉:长江文艺版社) 1993.

larger existential questions that arose during and after the Cultural Revolution. Despite its realist and sometimes minimalist style, *To Live* is not just a story of personal tragedy but a nuanced critique of the collective suffering imposed by ideological extremism.[6]

Yan Lianke's *Serve the People*: Reflection through Satire

In contrast, Yan Lianke's *Serve the People* imposes satire to critique the absurdities of authoritarian rule. The novel, set during the Cultural Revolution, explores the ideological fanaticism in everyday life, particularly within the military and political hierarchies. Yan Lianke has been vocal about his dissatisfaction with the constraints imposed by the Chinese political system, often referring to his work as an act of "mythorealism" (*shenshi zhuyi* 神实主义).[7] Through this lens, it is clear that *Serve the People* is more than just a satirical novella—it is the reflection of the mechanisms of power during the Mao's era.

The story is set in China during the Cultural Revolution. The main character is Wu Dawang, a young soldier in the Chinese People's Liberation Army, who is a model worker, always following the Communist Party's rules and trying to be loyal to the state. He works hard, avoids trouble, and believes in the slogan "Serve the People," which means putting the people and the country before personal desires. One day, Wu Dawang is asked to do a special task: to serve the wife of his commander, Mrs. Liu, while the commander is away. At first, he treats this job seriously, just like any other order. But slowly, Wu Dawang and Mrs. Liu start a secret love affair. This relationship goes against everything the Party teaches—self-control, loyalty, and discipline. They hide their affair and even use Party slogans and symbols, like breaking the "Serve the People" sign, to make their relationship more exciting. As the story goes on, the line between public duty and personal desire becomes blurred. Wu Dawang becomes more obsessed with Mrs. Liu and starts to forget his loyalty to the army. He stops caring about his work and begins living only for their meetings. Eventually, their affair is discovered, and Wu Dawang is punished. Mrs. Liu, however, escapes any real consequences because of her social position.

The narrative's premise, which revolves around the subversive act of sexual transgression in the name of serving the people, is a direct commentary on the absurd lengths to which ideological submission was enforced. Yan's use of humor and irony allows him to explore sensitive topics like political corruption and sexual oppression without directly confronting the state's historical narrative. Thus, his writing aligns closely with the idea of using fiction as a form of resistance against political dogma.[8]

Yan Lianke uses this story to criticize the hypocrisy of the Cultural Revolution. On the surface, people were told to follow strict rules and sacrifice everything for the Party. But in reality, many broke these rules in secret. The story shows how ideology can be used for personal gain and how slogans like "Serve the People" can be twisted and lose its meaning. The love affair between Wu Dawang and Mrs. Liu is not just about romance—it's a symbol of the conflict between personal freedom and political control. Yan uses satire and irony to show the absurdity of the system and the emotional cost of blind obedience.

Despite the satirical nature of *Serve the People*, the novel is embedded in historical realities. Yan Lianke's portrayal of power struggles within the political elite and the repression of individual desires serves as a reflection of the larger ideological clash that defined the Cultural Revolution. The novel's critique of the absurdities of 'Chairman Mao's Thought' (毛泽东思想 *maozedong sixiang*)[9], places Yan's narration firmly in the realm of historical depiction, conforms with the added layer of literary subjectivity.

In *Serve the People*, Wu Dawang also shows a kind of survival, but in a different way. His struggle is not just physical—it's emotional and psychological. He tries to survive in a system that controls his desires and thoughts. When he falls in love with Mrs. Liu, he breaks the rules, but it is also his way of escaping a life with no feeling. His resistance is personal, not political, but it shows a human need to feel alive.

> **"他把印有毛主席头像的味精瓶子找来，把味精倒在一个小碗里，在那味精袋里装了一袋灰垃圾."[10]**
> (*He found the bottle of Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)with Chairman Mao's portrait printed on it, poured MSG into a small bowl, and put a bag of garbage in the MSG bag.)*

This line shows his quiet anger against the system. It means he no longer respects the Party's rules and symbols. This small act is his way of fighting back in a world where he feels trapped.

Reception of the Novels

Though based on strong themes of survival and resilience, both the novels received contradictory reception in China. It reflects the Chinese government's sensitivity to literature that critiques the Communist Party and its historical narratives. Both novels challenge dominant ideological constructs, portray the suffering experienced during the Cultural Revolution, and highlight themes of individual

[6] Shao, Lu. "The Rationale of Realism in Yu Hua's To Live (1993)." Journal of Modern Literature, vol. 44, no. 2, 2021, pp. 134-152.

[7] Liu, Yang & Wang, Shouren, Mythology, history, and reality: Mythorealism in Yan Lianke's The Explosion Chronicles. Orbis Litter. 2021; Vol 76, Issue 4, pp. 180-190.

[8] Yingjin, Zhang, "Yan Lianke yu shijie wenxue shiye zhong de zhongguo xiandai wenxue" Yan Lianke and Chinese Literature in the Perspective of World Literature " 阎连科与世界文学视野中的中国现代文学", *文学理论研究*, Jul 2015, Vol.35, Issue 4, pp.57-64.

[9] 'Mao Zedong Thought' is the political and ideological concept created by Chairman Mao Zedong, blending Marxism-Leninism with China's socio-economic conditions. It emphasizes the idea of continuous class struggle, even within a socialist society, and urged people to actively fight against "bourgeois" (capitalist) elements and "counter-revolutionaries" who might weaken the communist zeal. For more, see "Mao Zedong Thought", https://chineseposters.net/themes/mao-thought, accessed on 16th Jul 2025.

[10] 阎连科《为人民服务》, (Yan Lianke: Serve the People) (香港:香港文化艺术出版社), 2005.

struggle against oppressive state mechanisms. The reasons for their banning come from various aspects, including political dissent, critiques of socialist ideals, and concerns over sexual content.

To Live was banned shortly after its adaptation into the movie by director Zhang Yimou in 1994, primarily due to its portrayal of the immense suffering and absurdities faced by individuals during the Cultural Revolution. The narrative, which follows the life of Fugui as he experiences profound personal loss and societal upheaval, poses a direct challenge to the glorified depiction of the Communist Revolution. The portrayal of exploration of human resilience amid relentless suffering in the movie contrasts sharply with the Party's narrative of revolutionary triumph and progress. The Chinese authorities viewed the themes in *To Live* as potentially destabilizing, particularly as it emphasizes the repeating nature of suffering and death in the context of political oppression. The depiction of the suffering of ordinary people serves as a critique of the state's failure to protect its citizens, which runs counter to the Communist Party's portrayal of itself as the guardian of the people. This critique of the state's authority and the focus on individual agency are particularly problematic for the Party, leading to the novel's suppression.[11]

Similarly, Yan Lianke's *Serve the People* was banned due to its provocative exploration of sexual themes intertwined with political satire. The novella critiques the rigid ideological constructs of the Communist regime, particularly through its protagonist Wu Dawang, who grapples with his desires against the backdrop of political loyalty. The explicit sexual content, including Wu's affair with his superior officer's wife, was deemed inappropriate and subversive by the authorities, reflecting a broader discomfort with literature that challenges traditional values and ideological norms. Yan is of the view that:

> *"As it happens, the first work of mine that Western readers were able to access was my banned novel Serve the People! Regardless of how you might assess this work, however, I don't believe it is particularly significant within the context of my overall oeuvre. It is merely a mark event, and memory within my life and work, and it is definitely not a masterpiece."*[12]
> (*My Thoughts on Literary Censorship and Controversy*).

The combination of political and sexual transgression in *Serve the People* serves to highlight the absurdities of blind loyalty to the state. Yan's satirical approach exposes the hypocrisy inherent in the Party's promotion of self-sacrifice and collective loyalty, making the novella a potential source of unrest among readers. The government's reaction to the sexual elements of the story illustrates its broader concern over any narrative that questions state- sanctioned morality and ideology.[13]

The commonality in the reasons for banning both novels lies in their challenge to the ideological underpinnings of the Communist regime. Both works reveal the human cost of political ideologies and confront the state's portrayal of historical events, ultimately questioning the legitimacy of the Party's narrative. The portrayal of suffering, loss, and individual resilience in the face of ideological oppression resonates with readers, making these novels potential catalysts for critical thought. Their bans reflect the ongoing tension between individual expression and state control, highlighting the precarious nature of artistic freedom in China.[14] Through their explorations of suffering, political oppression, and personal agency, both novels stand as significant works that question the legitimacy of state-sanctioned ideologies.

Conclusion

Both "*To Live"* and "*Serve the People"* offer powerful critiques of the Chinese Communist Party's ideological control during and after the Cultural Revolution. By exploring personal loss, political satire, and the clash between individual desire and state expectations, Yu Hua and Yan Lianke reveal the deep psychological and social impact of revolutionary ideology. Their works highlight the tension between artistic expression and censorship, portraying how individuals endure and resist systemic oppression. Drawing from personal memories and historical realities, these novels serve not only as acts of resistance but as enduring testimonies to human resilience under authoritarian rule. These novels remind us that survival during the Cultural Revolution was not just about staying alive, but about holding on to one's sense of self. Through Fugui's quiet endurance and Wu Dawang's silent rebellion, we see how people found strength in small acts. Together, their stories show how literature can speak the truth when history stays silent.

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