

# 家

## The Family

Scenes from a recent Chinese film, reviewed in this issue, which tells the story of four generations of a Chinese family



The Kao family on New Year's Eve



Taoist priest staging a ghost hunting ceremony is thrown out by the radical third grandson. "There is no ghost in my room," he says, and the priest agrees diplomatically

The rebellious younger generation. The second grandson visits Ching, his beloved (standing in the door), who after having clipped her hair and refused the Governor's son is hiding in the home of her schoolmate



## ON THE SCREEN

*Beginning with this issue we shall present reviews of films which we believe to be of special interest to the readers of this magazine either because of their subject matter or because of their manner of handling important issues of our time.—K.M.*

### *The Family*

Produced by the Hsin Hwa Motion Picture Company, Director S. K. Chang.

In 1937 Pa Chin published a novel, *The Family*, which soon became a Chinese best-seller and is now in its twenty-second edition. The author had earned his fame long before through a number of popular works, but *The Family* became his greatest success. Since then he has written two sequels, first *Spring*, which tells of the revolt of the younger generation in the Kao family against the older generation with its deep-rooted Chinese traditions and conventions based on a narrow interpretation of Confucianism; and the second, *Autumn*, describing the downfall of the older generation. A third sequel is in preparation.

It has been said that the novel is the author's autobiography. He is supposed to be one of the grandsons depicted in the novel, struggling against the old generations and obsolete traditions. One of the author's uncles, in fact, wrote to the author complaining about the veiled attacks against him in the novel. Pa Chin, in a preface to the tenth edition of the book, emphatically denied that allegation. He admitted, however, that his earlier life in Chengtu gave him his inspiration.

The scene is laid in the Chengtu of twenty or thirty years ago, and the story that of four generations of the Kao family. There is grandfather Kao who, as the patriarch, rules his large family with an iron hand. There are his sons, two of them good-for-nothings, growing up in the shadow of the old man without rights or responsibilities, behaving like schoolboys, gambling, and fooling around. There are the three grandsons, two of whom represent the new China while one, the oldest, is trying to bring about a compromise in his life between old and new. And there are the first great-grandchildren. The grandfather as well as his sons and grandsons have their wives or concubines or lovers. Most of them live in the same great house, and the drama of their lives is the story both of the novel and the film.

While the novel attacks old China on a broad front, the film concentrates its main fire on one old Chinese custom, the matchmaking by the elders for their young ones. This tradition, the film tries to show, is nothing but bad, for it leads in almost all cases to unhappiness and disaster. The eldest grandson loves a girl whom he is not allowed to marry and who dies of consumption. The slave-girl whom his brother loves drowns herself when she is forced to become the concubine of a fat and elderly rascal—and so on.

There are also some side-attacks against other old traditions, such as a Taoist priest's hocus-pocus, and the custom that no child may be born in a house containing an unburied corpse. This leads to the death in childbed of the first grandson's wife due to the neglect she suffers when she is rushed off to some other house.

Against everything old there rise the young heroine and hero of the novel and film: the girl Ching, loved by the second grandson, who shows her attitude by cutting off her hair and refusing to marry the Governor's son; and the youngest grandson, who decides to leave backward Chengtu for modern Shanghai.

Except for two minor digressions the film is a fairly faithful reproduction of the novel. In producing the picture, the Hsin Hwa Motion Picture Company, one of the largest in Shanghai, China's Hollywood, broke a record established some fifteen years ago, when a now defunct picture company gathered all available stars and produced a star-studded picture known as *The New Family*. Curiously enough, that picture was an attack on the "small family" system, while the current production, also an all-star picture, may be called a scathing attack on the old "big family."

Billed as an "extra-super-production," *The Family* has in its cast practically all of the currently favorite movie stars, such as Miss Yuan Mei-yuan, who handles the role of Cousin Mei; Miss Chen Yung-shang as Cousin Ching; Liu Chung, "China's Clark Gable,"

as the second grandson; and Miss Koo Lan-chung in an impressive performance as wife of the first grandson.

In order to muster all available talents, the company went so far as to shoot part of the picture in Hongkong where they enlisted the services of two of the veteran movie stars of China—Miss Butterfly Wu, known as "China's Movie Queen," and Wong Yuan-lung, once the most popular leading man. As a result, the sets in Shanghai and Hongkong, though purporting to depict the same house, are not identical.

The company also mustered a number of well-known directors to work on the picture, each directing a section of the film under the supervision of the head of the company, S.K. Chang.

The acting and the stage sets of the film are excellent. To be sure, for western taste some of the scenes are too drawn-out—the whole film lasts three full hours. But the clever change from comedy to tragedy and to lyrical love-scenes holds the interest of the spectator throughout.

As is the case with every film with a "message," this one also has some exaggerations, and too much of a black-and-white manner of presenting things. There are some exceedingly powerful scenes of stark realism, particularly the distorted features of the first grandson's wife, when, assisted by the old-fashioned midwife and a young girl, she gives birth to a child and dies in the process.

*The Family* is a typical drama of emancipation and reminds one of a certain type of European literature of the nineteenth century. Its message is that everything will be fine once the old traditions, laws, and ways of life are overthrown. The world today and China in particular have proved that the real trouble only began with emancipation. Emancipation does not tend to lead individuals and nations straight away to the happiness which they expected, but rather into an inner and outer chaos, at least until new traditions, laws, and ways of life have been found to provide the frame-work within which man can find the necessary happy mean between the two extremes of slavery and anarchy.

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### *The Fifth Ocean*

Produced by the Kiev Studio, Director I. Annensky. In the leading parts: A. Abrikossov (Leonty Shirokov), E. Gorkusha (Sanya), I. Novoseltsev (Kirillov), A. Garder (Natasha).

The Soviet film *The Fifth Ocean*, shown recently in Shanghai, was advertised as "a

new artistic film about the life of Far Eastern aviators." But to those who expected to see a film of the Soviet air force on the shores of the Pacific, along the lines of the recent American picture *Flight Command* about the life and training of the American air force on the West Coast, this film is a disappointment. That the plot is supposed to take place in the Soviet Far East is not apparent from the film: it might just as well have been any other place in the large Soviet Union, or even in any other country. For apart from Soviet uniforms and Russian dresses there is nothing particularly Sovietic about the film.

The plot is very simple. Leonty, a strong, healthy, but independent and self-willed hunter, decides to become an aviator in order to travel in what he calls the "Fifth Ocean," that is, the air. He joins a flying-school and falls in love with Natasha, the fiancée of his instructor. At the same time another candidate for the school, the girl Sanya, has been refused admission because of her youth. Having fallen in love with both Leonty and flying, however, she sticks around the airport as a servant in the restaurant. Leonty has all the qualifications to become an excellent aviator; his independent and undisciplined personality, however, worries his superiors. For example, when Natasha returns from leave he lands his plane on the square outside the railway station in order to be the first to greet her, a breach of discipline for which he is punished. The whole film seems to be designed to impress upon young Russians the importance of discipline, and *disciplina* is the word most used throughout the film.

In the end, of course, Leonty reforms. During a test flight he has a crack-up because the airport mechanic had bungled his job. Yet Leonty's newly-won self-discipline leads him to take the blame upon himself in order not to implicate the mechanic. It almost looks like the end of his flying career; but the mechanic steps forth and confesses his guilt. Leonty becomes a great aviator and returns several years later with the decoration of "Hero of the Soviet Union" to visit his old flying-school. Natasha and the instructor are married, and Sanya has in the meantime become a pretty pilot. The spectator is left with the impression that a second marriage is in the offing.

There are many humorous lines in the dialogue. Leonty's carefree song is cleverly used as a leitmotiv that accompanies his self-willed actions and gradually develops—parallel to Leonty's own evolution—into a powerful marching tune. But as regards the photography and acting the film is considerably below the high standard frequently found in Soviet films.—K.M.