

## ON THE SCREEN

### WIFE, VAMP, CHILD

A summary of recent Chinese film productions shows that they are practically all on the subject of love, love which leads to respectable marriage. This is a topic that has also monopolized the older fields of Chinese entertainment since time immemorial. Political topics are rarely favored because our private lives are already packed full of politics, while an economic or social slant on the romances may incur the loss of their universal appeal to all classes of society.

In order to provide a love romance with the conflict essential to all drama, the movie makers have to resort to the vamp, usually a professional entertainer. The family is so great an institution in China that we see in the films the omnipresence of the negative influence that tends to upset it: the women of doubtful establishments. This is also the case with the two films reviewed below.

Both films touch upon the subject of wifely virtues, particularly that of being able to remain cheerfully monogamous with a polygamous husband. In *The Song of Mei Nian* the husband frequents a house of the type which enlists the services of respectable women looking for a little extra pocket money and excitement. The favorite nightmare of visitors to such houses is that of meeting their own wives or daughters there. This shattering encounter has tickled the imagination of two generations of Chinese novelists, although this is its first appearance on the screen. Through an accident, Mei Nian's husband finds her there and, without allowing her a word of explanation, divorces her.

Indeed, the question of whether the wife of a philanderer has the right to be unfaithful is not foreign to the mind of Chinese women. With the slightest provocation they threaten to take revenge in this manner; but whatever they say in this strain is always taken half in fun. In an unreflective, bantering mood, Chinese men may find acceptable the crude sense of justice inherent in their women's proposition. But if one can persuade a Chinese to be serious on this subject—which is difficult, for he considers nothing more hilarious than adultery, unless it happens in his own family—he would veto it, not because of any ethical theory about two blacks not making a white, but because he believes it is not to the wife's advantage to carry out her threat. Even if he granted her this right theoretically, he would consider it unwise on her part to insist upon it.

In the style of after-dinner repartee, a bit player in *The Song of Mei Nian* wittily defends her right to visit the house of ill fame. But no such idea has ever entered the head of the heroine. Taken to the place by a designing male, she is under the impression that he wants her assistance for founding a charity school. Then comes the husband and with him the fatal misunderstanding. She never has an opportunity even to consider her right to misbehave, being thrown off her balance before she ever arrives at the rim of the question.

In Nancy Chen's new film *The Struggle for the Spring*, Nancy's husband succumbs to temptation when under the influence of alcohol and regrets it bitterly ever afterwards. But this alibi is presented exclusively for the benefit of the audience. Nancy is never told the details, nor does she ever display the slightest curiosity. All she is interested in is to keep the fraction of him that falls to her share—in the event of his death, the part of him that survives in his child, even if it is a child by another woman.

*The Struggle for the Spring*, though adapted from the American film *The Great Lie*, is close to the Chinese heart. The wife who undergoes all manner of unpleasantness to safeguard the child of her husband's mistress is fundamentally Oriental in spirit because of our traditional emphasis on the importance of keeping up the family line. She is possessed by one idea—to get the baby born. She has considerable trouble stopping her husband's mistress from having an abortion. As to what to do with the child once it falls into her hands, she appears to have very vague ideas beyond watching it grow.

Both films seem blissfully unaware of their possibilities as interesting side lights on momentous issues. Mei Nian is hurried from situation to situation in the tragedy of the divorced wife familiar to us all: she stumbles in the rain, kisses her child across the windowpane, and dies at length in the arms of a repentant husband. The film has all the tried-and-true elements of legitimate melodrama but is affected by incredibly poor lighting.

Owing partly to this lighting, the atmosphere in the pleasure haunt is surprisingly bleak and constrained. The acting of Ma Chi, the owner of the establishment, suffers from her stereotyped, artificial little laugh. Yen Djuen, celebrated for his villainish portrayals, feels equally at home in a straight role. Wang Hsi-chuen as the wife has partially overcome her usual frigidity, an inheritance of her former years at the Peking Opera, which imposes iron-bound restrictions on physical expression. Tsong Ing-chiu does a brilliant satirical portrait of a school principal and nearly steals the picture—or rather, what is visible of it.

*The Struggle for the Spring* takes too much for granted and sees no call for explanation in the hazy inner lives of the wife and the mistress. However, though lacking in psychological depth, the story is very winningly told by Li Ping-chen, a well-known weaver of airy romances. Particularly gratifying to male members of the audience is a scene showing the wife and the mistress asleep in each other's arms, in perfect accord.

In her vigorous portrayal of the heroic wife Nancy Chen tends to be too school-girlishly effusive. Pai Kwong does the most strenuous vamping in Chinese film history. Between the two ladies Hsu Li seems to be overshadowed and ill at ease.—Eileen Chang.