

ON THE SCREEN

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW

In an eighteenth-century Chinese book *Microscopic Sketches in a Thatched Parlor*, we read of a beggar woman crossing a stream, carrying on her back her child and her aged mother-in-law. The water was deeper than she thought. Overpowered, she only had enough strength to swim to the other shore with one of the two burdens. She chose to save her mother-in-law. Once they reached land the mother-in-law poured abuse on her. "Why did you give up the boy for my sake? I am old. Soon I shall be in the grave. The boy was the only surviving male of the family. You are going to let our ancestors starve on the feast days and anniversaries when the dead are remembered?" The woman knelt weeping for hours, but the mother-in-law would not spare her. They both died of grief. Most scholars believe that the beggar woman did right.

The matter has remained a controversial subject in China. Filial piety frequently conflicts with other things because its exemplification tends to be a whole-time job. A model son is thought to be justified if, in diligently attending to the comforts of his parents, he neglects his duties as a citizen, husband, or father. The origin of life is valued above life itself. Filial duties being so much emphasized, they naturally collide with romantic love—the predominant theme of Chinese movies. In a recent film, *The Soul of Liberty*, the mother severs relations with her son for living with a cabaret girl. When he is dangerously ill and needs money for an operation, the girl goes to the mother for help. The mother makes her promise that she will give him up if he is cured.

The mother here keeps a vigilant watch over the son's reputation so that she can face her deceased husband and, through him, his ancestors. Her son's future is a mere continuation of the family's past. The Chinese are as yet unable to see the significance of children as children. Parents are careful to conceal their affection for their children lest the youngsters take advantage of it. The Chinese are somehow embarrassed by their unworthy emotion toward their children—theoretically the lowest of the low in the house. In a well-mannered family the parents seldom even touch their children, except to punish them.

And yet the children are expected to know that they are surreptitiously loved and treasured and to love in return a thousandfold. The Chinese, naive in this respect, are eternally surprised and distressed if their sons do not react so favorably. The Chinese domestic system is only kept going by a flamboyant overexpression of filial affection and the corresponding understatement of parental love.

The jealousy between mothers and daughters-in-law is more of a problem in China because here the mother's claim on her son is recognized by society. A boy is tied down by a family and handicapped in his developments even before he marries. When he does, the wife's position is almost as difficult as that of a concubine. On the other hand, the socially acknowledged status of the mother in the life of the married son makes it easier for the mother and daughter-in-law to behave according to a set pattern and thus renders their relations less strained and awkward than in the West. A woman in love gladly subordinates herself to her husband's mother in an effort to fit herself into every cranny of her husband's life. Fragile Yuan Mei-yuen in *The Soul of Liberty* repeatedly tries to attach herself to her mother-in-law: "Let me stay with you. I shall willingly slave for you like a horse—like the cattle in the field."

The film *Two Generations of Women*, starring Violet Koo, puts forth the situation more crudely. There the mother can find nothing objectionable in the daughter-in-law except that she takes up too much of her son's time and thought. The film suffers because the scenario reads as if it were written by a sulky boy of seventeen.

In another film, called *Mother*, Violet Koo, this time unhampered by poor dialogue, scores a triumph under the excellent direction of Shu Shih who, like Wang Ing, the director of *The Soul of Liberty*, was formerly an actor and now gives his films a rare touch of intimacy.

Mother goes to the root of the trouble by trying to educate the parents in the education of children. Rebellious against the family system, the film swings to the other extreme. With a puritanical distrust of blood relations, it denies the social worker love and marriage and private motherhood because millions of children need the attention of one disinterested mother.

Whether the panacea of modern psychology offered by *Mother* would work any radical change in Chinese domestic ethics is another question. The important thing is the awakening of the Chinese mind to the obligations rather than the privileges of parenthood. The mother in *Mother* is fully conscious of her responsibilities; in *The Soul of Liberty*, she feels them only in relation to the family dead; in *Two Generations of Women* she shamelessly hoards up man power in accordance with the proverb: "Rear a child to guard against old age; store up cereals to guard against a famine." —Eileen Chang.