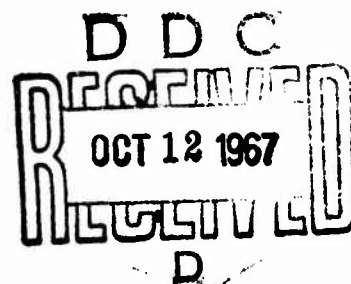CONFLICTS BETWEEN LOVE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS
IN CHINESE FILMS

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Technical Report #2

Office of Naval Research,
Group Psychology Branch
Contract No. N00014-66-C0310
NR170-703

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CONFLICTS BETWEEN LOVE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN CHINESE FILMS

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This paper is specifically based on several years of intensive study of Chinese motion pictures - that is, fictional feature films - from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and especially from Communist China. The viewpoint embodied here, however, also relates to extensive prior experience in studying Chinese socal behavior - especially the basic conceptions and premises which underlie and structure overt behavior - in a variety of other forms, including direct anthropological field observation and interviewing in Chinese communities in the United States, in Hong Kong, and in Taiwan, plus other work at second hand, both in trying to make more unified sense of the reports of other professional or lay observers, and in studying projections of various aspects of the culture in the productions of Chinese artists, writers, dramatists, and actors.

Any attempt at discussing my current film studies in a brief compass faces the important difficulty of an embarrassment of riches. I have now viewed and considered at some length 21 films made in Communist China, six films made in Hong Kong under Chinese Communist influence, 12 other Hong Kong films, and five Taiwan films, in addition to secondary accounts of many other films from these sources. Any single one of these films is a mine of information on Chinese social behavior - visual information, verbal information, and information from the interrelations of these two modes of communication. Of course the depictions in these films are not "real" everyday behavior,

but they have their own special value as artistic projections; as Mao himself says, in Problems of Art and Literature, "the creative forms of art and literature supersede nature in that they are more systematic, more concise, more typical, and therefore more universal." Such systematization - and these films are unified wholes to a high degree - in a way compounds the selection problem of choosing a limited yet significant area for isolated and brief discussion that is posed by the amount and detailed richness of the film data.

Given a number of films, however, certain main themes which are often repeated may be discerned, and these become possible topics for somewhat separate discussion. Of many such possibilities, that of conflict between love and family relationships has been chosen here, as relevant both to the general topic of Chinese social behavior and to the broad interest of psychology in family relationships, while at the same time it is significant for the currently insistent and fascinating problem of understanding Chinese politics. Three aspects of this overall theme will be considered: The depicted nature of such conflicts, the sources to which these are ascribed, explicitly or implicitly, and their typical denouements or resolutions. At this level of overt themes, film analysis is mainly a relatively simple matter in principle, based on close observation to discern repetitive main elements of content and relationships as the films present them, classification and labeling of these elements, and comparisons between films of different sources. The main comparison here is of Communist Chinese and Taiwan films, with some supplementary information on Hong Kong films.

In the first place, it is striking how much both Chinese Communist and Taiwan films focus on conflict between parents and children in the tradi-

tional Chinese family system. Of the 21 Chinese Communist films studied
(dating from 1949 to 1962), 16 were concerned at least in part with images
of "Old China," and only five entirely with "New China." Among these 16,
eight emphasized conflict between parents and a child or children, and one more
similarly involved a young widow in conflict with her mother-in-law. Of the
five Taiwan films (all from the 1960's), three emphasized conflict between
parents and children. Of the 12 non-Communist Hong Kong films, seven dealt
with this theme (Table I).

It is still more striking to note that in all three groups of films such
conflicts consistently had one main focus. The children involved were all in
their late teens or early twenties, and the conflict centered on parental
opposition to romantic sexual attachments, or, from a slightly different
viewpoint, conflict between love and family-arranged marriages or betrothals.
This was the central point of the parent-child conflicts in all instances
for the Communist and Taiwan films, and for six of the seven Hong Kong cases.
In a few instances some of the other possible sources of conflict - such as
money, education, careers, or political views - did appear, but in a secondary
way.

Beyond this consistency, however, are significant differences - in
attribution of source or cause for the original conflict situation, and in
its resolution. To obtain a clear picture of these differences and how they
co-exist with the similarities mentioned, it is necessary to look at the
film patterns in more detail. The Communist image may be examined first,
since not only is this still relatively unfamiliar and of special interest
socio-politically, but the depiction of patterns is most consistent and clear
there, since these films have been deliberately shaped in relation to a

dominant ideology; any similar political control of Taiwan films seems less thorough, narrow, and consistent.

There are essentially two groups of Chinese Communist films, one showing the evils of "Old China" and another showing the benefits of "New China" (plus a few transitional films); thus one group presents the Communist picture of this problem, and the other their picture of its solution.

Little more need be said about the nature of the recurrent conflict between youthful romance and parentally arranged matches in the "Old China" films except perhaps to emphasize its intensity - for example, it often leads to suicide attempts or flight from home by the child involved - before going on to the depicted source of such powerful conflicts. These films strongly support, overtly, the cause and viewpoint of the young lovers. They are depicted as right and good, while the parents are labeled as wrong and bad, as "feudalistic" parents who, typically, cause the conflicts by making and insisting on these arranged matches, in many instances ignoring their children's protests, in order selfishly to increase family wealth, position and power.

In these "Old China" films the young heroes or heroines may struggle hard, but they are always defeated, except in a few cases of obvious fantasy solutions, such as the reunion of separated lovers after death as a pair of butterflies in the film Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai. The clear implication is that there is no resolution possible within the old system; within it the parents will not change and the children cannot. The resolution envisioned outside that system is depicted in the "New China" films. In these films we do indeed see young people get together and marry those whom they wish to, but only under certain significant conditions. First, the love involvements never appear intense to begin with - the great romances of the old days are

absent. Second, although this aspect is so de-emphasized in presentation that
it is easy to ignore, the marriages in large part are still arranged. Only
now the arranging, which is depicted largely as a matter of facilitating the
young people's getting together, is done by government officials or Party
leaders; they take over much of the former parental role, but are shown as
helping set up only good and desirable unions. Third, even after marriage,
the couple is linked mainly by a common and parallel interest in socially
productive work, rather than personal love, and indeed they may appear to have
minimal contact with each other. This is neatly exemplified in the film
Singing Above the Reservoir, in which Party leaders arrange for a village girl
to join her fiance at the Ming Tombs Reservoir construction site, since she
will gain valuable knowledge there, and for them to be married in the con-
struction headquarters. Immediately after the ceremony, he and she go out
to work on the night shift - in the men's and women's construction teams,
respectively.

Within the limits of the small sample so far available, the Taiwan films
put no less emphasis on the difficulties within the family around arranged
marriages, in spite of Chinese cultural myths of family harmony. They too
vividly show much suffering and frustration among the young. But they also
show frustration among their elders, and the depiction of causes of the conflicts
is quite different than in the Communist films. The causes also are less easy
to describe clearly. Largely, things just seem to happen that way. This in
itself is probably significant; taken together with certain more specific
indications, it suggests that basically these problems are ascribed to fate -
that's just the way life is. (In one film, however, the Communists get a
large share of the blame, being shown as ordering a Communist girl to seduce
the married son in the family; this leads to many of the subsequent family

difficulties). One major difference is clear, although it must be stated
negatively; the parents are not overtly blamed, even though on looking at the
film depictions of their behavior from an outsider's viewpoint, they might well
be judged as at least partly responsible for the conflicts. This exculpation
of the parents is quite consistent with the Taiwan films' prescription for
resolution of these conflicts. Again, this appears more variable in detail
than the simple line of the Communist films, but highly consistent in basic
elements. The three Taiwan films all propose that the young should adapt
to the status quo, by various combinations of: 1) Fortitude and endurance,
oriented toward accepting continuing performance of one's given social role
despite its difficulties. In the Communist films, fortitude and endurance are
also valued highly for youth, but are to be used in a struggle against one's
given role - in the old system only; but not in the "New China," where
there again is struggle to fulfill one's social role, though its definition
now is different. 2) Avoiding disruption of family ties, or their
reestablishment if disrupted. 3) Service to a social group beyond oneself,
which may involve the family, wider social organizations, or especially the
country.

Two examples will illustrate how these elements appear in different
combinations. In Four Loves, a family of the 1920's is disrupted when all its
three sons fall in love with a beautiful orphan girl who was raised in the
household and betrothed to the eldest son by the parents. This parental order
is resisted, yet the young people cannot resolve the problem even among
themselves - the sons all try to defer to each other, and the girl cannot make
any decision among them. Finally, one by one, they leave, but eventually
send word home of their involvement in the Nationalist Revolution; they devote

themselves to country instead of love. In <u>Days of Cheer and Sorrow</u>, a
complex plot involves love relationships between two children of a man's
original family and two of a second family he established after becoming
temporarily involved with the Communists, leaving home, and losing track of
the original family. When the man finally finds his first wife again - the
second is now dead - the young people are shocked to find that they are related
to each other. Only they then discover they are really not related,
biologically; the second two children were adopted. Yet the final outcome
is not resumption of their love relationships, but the joining of all together
as brothers and sisters in one big family under an old grandfather.

It thus appears, in summary, that both Communist and Nationalist Chinese
films strongly emphasize the existence of conflicts between parents and
children over love and marriage in the traditional family system, but that their
ascriptions of cause and prescriptions for resolution of these conflics differ
markedly in ways which are quite consistent with the radical and conservative
political stances of the respective societies - that is, the Communists
advocate change in the traditional family system while the Nationalists advocate
its maintenance and adaptation to it. Yet although these differences are so
marked at the level of relatively speci. c images of the proper kind of core
social organization and personal goals that are promoted, there remain major
similarities at a more basic and general level. Neither Communist nor
Nationalist films suggest that love should conquer all, as American films
might. Instead both, in the different forms described, ultimately advocate
tranditional Chinese values such as acceptance of authority - even in matters
of marriage, faithful performance of one's given social role, anc sub. 'ination
of personal love to wider social ends seen as more important and desirable.

More broadly, this study, limited as it necessarily is, has significant implications for the thorny general problem of exploring and understanding social change. This old yet increasingly important problem has always been beset with difficulties both as to empirical observation - the scale is so large - and as to conceptualization - there has been little serious thought about the fundamental nature of change in complex yet unitary systems of social interaction, which involve the close interrelation of many elements at many different levels of thought and behavior. Thus in the usual case statements about social change still tend to be either oversimplified yes-or-no characterizations or detailed accounts that provide no basis for discriminating specific or superficial and basic or general changes. For revolutionary situations, the problem of studying social change is compounded in difficulty at the same time that it is increased in urgency. The speed and extent of overt change involved, its practical political significance, and the heavy investment of various parties in rapidly and firmly affixing their own labels and definitions on the revolutionary developments all tend to restrict and obscure any systematic and objective viewing of such change. The chief significance of this brief study, and the matter which most needs to be followed up in further work both for the case of Chinese Communism and more widely, lies in its indication, by analysis of a limited but significant body of concrete data, how the essential problem must be viewed not as one of change or continuity, but as one of change and continuity, and the ways in which these are interrelated. The continuities with traditional Chinese culture observable in Communist films, such as the covert continuation of marriage arrangement by authority figures, and general similarities of attitudes and values depite new specific content or contexts, begin to demonstrate and clarify how particular changes not only co-exist with continuities at other levels or in other areas, but are dependent on them.

Table I

Chinese Films and Family Conflicts

Title	Parent-Child Conflict	
	Occurrence	Arranged matches focus
1. Chinese Communist Films - 21		
a. "Old China" (at least in part) - 16		
Daughters of China	-	-
The White-Haired Girl	-	-
The Scholar and the Fairy Carp	x	x
The Letter with Feathers	-	-
Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai	x	x
The Family	x	x
New Year Sacrifice	x (Mother-in-law)	x
Hua Mu Lan	-	-
Woman Basketball Player #5	x	x
Lin Tse-hsu	-	-
Song of Youth	x	x
Cool Mountain's Bright Pearl	-	-
Women Generals of the Yang Family	-	..
Dream of the Red Chamber	x	x
The Jade Hairpin	x	x
Yang Nai-wu and Hsiao Pai-tsai	x	x
	9	9
b. "New China" - 5		
Young Footballers	.	-
Flames on the Border	-	-
Singing Above the Reservoir	-	-
Blossoms in the Sun	-	-
New Story of an Old Soldier	-	-
	0	0
2. Taiwan Films - 5		
No Greater Love	-	-
Lady General Red Jade (Joint Taiwan - HK)	-	-
Four Loves	x	x
The Silent Wife	x	x
Days of Cheer and Sorrow	x	x
	3	3
3. Hong Kong (non-Communist) - 12		
Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai*	x	x
Hua Mu Lan*	-	-
Dream of the Red Chamber*	x	x
Yang Nai-wu and Hsiao Pai-tsai*	x	x
Empress Wu	x	- (Power
Rear Entrance	-	- struggle)
The Female Prince	x	x
Stranger than Fiction	..	-
The Golden Buddha	-	..
Come Drink with Me	-	-
Temple of the Red Lotus	x	x
The Twin Swords	x	x
	7	6

*Films of certain stories have been made both by Communists and Hong Kong producers.

DOCUMENT CONTROL DATA - R & D		
(Security classification of title, body of abstract and indexing annotation must be entered when the overall report is classified)		

1. ORIGINATING ACTIVITY (Corporate author)	2a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION
Mental Research Institute 777 Bryant Street Palo Alto, Calif. 94301	Unclassified
	2b. GROUP

3. REPORT TITLE

CONFLICTS BETWEEN LOVE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN CHINESE FILMS

4. DESCRIPTIVE NOTES (Type of report and inclusive dates)

Technical Report

5. AUTHOR(S) (First name, middle initial, last name)

John H. Weakland

6. REPORT DATE	7a. TOTAL NO. OF PAGES	7b. NO. OF REFS
September 25, 1967	9	0

8a. CONTRACT OR GRANT NO. N00014-66-C0310 NR170-703	9a. ORIGINATOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
b. PROJECT NO.	Technical Report No.2
c.	9b. OTHER REPORT NO(S) (Any other numbers that may be assigned this report)
d.	

10. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Distribution of this document is unlimited.

11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES	12. SPONSORING MILITARY ACTIVITY
	Group Psychology Branch Office of Naval Research Washington, D.C.

13. ABSTRACT

The content of a number of fictional feature films from Communist China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong has been examined and compared, focusing on the theme of conflict between love and family relationships.

This theme is very prominent in all three groups of films, and consistently centers around conflicts between love relationships of young people and parentally-arranged marriages or bethrothals. In the Communist films, parents are blamed for the conflicts, and resolution is portrayed as only possible through radical social change. In the Taiwan films, parents receive no blame, and resolution is depicted in terms of adaptation by the young to restore family unity.

At a deeper level, however, Communist as well as Nationalist films uphold traditional values such as acceptance of authority and subordination of personal love to wider social goals, in ways that help to clarify the interrelations of social change and continuity even in revolutionary situations.

DD FORM 1473 (PAGE 1)
1 NOV 65
S/N 0101-807-6811

A-31408

14 KEY WORDS	LINK A		LINK B		LINK C	
	ROLE	WT	ROLE	WT	ROLE	WT
Chinese Culture						
Chinese Politics						
Communist China						
Film Content Analysis						

DD FORM 1473 (BACK)
1 NOV 65

S/N 0101-807-6821

Unclassified
Security Classification

A-31409