

Ten Thousand Businesses Would Thrive in a Harmonious Family: Chinese Conflict Resolution Styles in Cross-Cultural Families

Shaorong Huang

University of Cincinnati

Abstract

Traditionally, Chinese see a conflict as a deviation from harmony. They believe that *jia he wan shi xing* (ten thousand businesses would thrive in a harmonious family). This attitude toward conflict has its links with Chinese traditional concept of family, and traditional Chinese thought represented by Confucianism and Taoism. Both schools uphold that conflicts have no ontological basis, and that conflicts are avoidable and resolvable by human cultivation and human adjustment to nature. These beliefs have basically shaped traditional Chinese attitude toward conflict and Chinese conflict resolution styles that are featured by non-assertion, indirect communication, and avoidance. This paper investigates and analyzes the implication of these conflict resolution styles in the cross-cultural families depicted in Taiwanese film director Ang Lee's two movies, "Pushing Hands" and "The Wedding Banquet."

Introduction

For centuries Chinese have believed that *jia he wan shi xing* (ten thousand businesses would thrive in a harmonious family). This belief is the cultural resource and behavioral principle for family conflict resolution. Ting-Toomey (1985) points out, "What constitutes an appropriate conflict topic, whether the conflict should be overtly expressed or harmoniously sublimated, what serves as the proper conflict attitude, and how the conflict ultimately should be resolved—all of these take on particular nuances within the larger webs of a cultural system" (p. 72). In the center of the web of Chinese cultural system concerning conflict and conflict resolution is harmony. To the Chinese, harmony is an important value they constantly believe in, it is the utmost goal of all the human relations, and it is "the end rather than the means of human communication" (Chen & Starosta, 1997-8, p. 6). It has provided Chinese family members with a practical guidance for the prevention, avoidance, and resolution of family conflicts in cross-cultural settings depicted in Ang Lee's two movies.

Taiwanese movie director Ang Lee, a graduate from New York University's film school, became known to the West when his Taiwan-funded picture, "The Wedding Banquet," won the Golden Bear at the 1993 Berlin Film Festival and the best film and best director awards at the 1993 Seattle International Film Festival. The comedy with a cross-cultural theme was also nominated as Best Foreign Film of 1993 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Paddock, 1994). However, his first work, "Pushing Hands," according to Derek Elley (1993), the film critic for *Variety*, actually exceeded "The Wedding Banquet" in explicating cultural meanings. Both movies provide us with rich cultural artifacts in cross-cultural studies, especially in Chinese conflict resolution styles in cross-cultural families. In this paper, I will first briefly introduce Lee's two movies. Then, I will describe Chinese traditional concepts of family. Further, I will investigate the philosophical tradition that influences Chinese attitude toward conflict and conflict resolution styles. Finally, I will discuss Chinese conflict resolution styles in cross-cultural families depicted in Lee's two movies.

The Movies

"Pushing Hands" depicts conflict and conflict resolution within an interculturally married family. Alex Chu is a young man from Beijing, the People's Republic of China. He has a degree from an American university, has a job in a computer company in New York City, and has a happy family with a lovely son. He and his American wife Martha have been married for seven years when Alex invites his father, Mr. Chu, a widowed former Tai Chi (traditional Chinese shadow boxing) professor in Beijing, to live with them.

While the husband is busy with his company and the son is away at pre-school, the house is left to Martha and her father-in-law. With no verbal communication and very little non-verbal interaction, they are like two strangers living in two separated worlds. Ambitious to succeed as a free-lance writer, Martha feels increasingly

annoyed by the old man who practices Tai Chi in the small living room next to her study and enjoys Beijing opera in his bedroom. Living his Chinese-styled life in this unfamiliar world, the old Tai Chi master experiences extreme loneliness in his own son's house. The only escape for him is to teach a Tai Chi class on Saturday morning in a Chinese club, where he meets a widowed Taiwanese lady, Mrs. Chen. Mrs. Chen lives with her only daughter's family and expresses resentment toward her American son-in-law. She also retreats from her uncomfortable family to the Chinese club by teaching a cooking class there.

The resentment between Martha and the old Tai Chi master reaches a peak when the old man is lost during a walk around the community. Frustrated and exasperated, Alex lays the blame on his wife. Alex makes awful mess of the kitchen, rushes out of the house, gets very drunk, and punishes himself by banging his head against wall. When sober the next morning, he realizes that he must move his father out of the house to restore the tranquillity and harmony of his immediate family. He makes a face-saving plan with Mrs. Chen's daughter who might have the same desire to move her mother out. They hope that the old man and the old lady will be independent of their children if they form a family of their own. They plan a two-family picnic and deliberately leave the old man and the old woman alone by climbing very fast up a hill. Mrs. Chen who had overheard their plan suddenly bursts into tears. She tells the old man of their children's trick and laments over the uselessness of old age.

Deeply hurt, the disappointed old man flees his son's house to Chinatown. While refusing to be fired as a dishwasher at a Chinese restaurant, he has a severe conflict with his boss. As a Tai Chi master, he easily brings down several of the rough-necks hired by the boss, and remains standing firm when pushed and dragged by a dozen or so New York policemen. When the anxious son learns about the arrest through television news, he dashes to the police station. The regretful son kneels in front of his father and tearfully begs him to return home.

The end of the movie gives its audience some hints of the mutual cultural acceptance between the old Tai Chi master and his American daughter-in-law. While the former insists that his son should rent an apartment in Chinatown for him so that he can live independently, the latter respectfully hangs the old master's Tai Chi sword in their newly bought house. Mrs. Chen has also moved out of her daughter's house. The conversation between the old master and Mrs. Chen inside the Chinese club indicates that they will form a new family, and that the intercultural relations within the two families will improve.

"The Wedding Banquet" is a funny and poignant comedy that reflects traditional Chinese attitudes to sex and posterity. The central couple is Wai-tung, a Taiwanese real estate entrepreneur in Manhattan, and his white U.S. lover Simon, a physical therapist. To fend off his overbearing mom's nagging to get married, Wai-tung plans a phony marriage with one of his tenants, Wei-wei, an illegal immigrant from Shanghai, who wants to get a green card by "marrying" to this naturalized American.

The exciting parents who live for the day they will have a grandson suddenly fly over from Taiwan to attend the marriage. Witnessing their son's quickie wedding at New York City Hall, Mr. Gao, a retired Taiwanese army general, feels shameful and depressed, while Mrs. Gao breaks into tears. Invited by Simon, the family goes to a Chinese restaurant in Manhattan where the general runs into Old Chen, his former chauffeur in the army, who now owns this successful New York restaurant. Old Chen insists on giving the young couple a full-blown wedding banquet to satisfy the parents' expectations.

Chinese rituals fill the enormous wedding banquet, where "300 wedding guests gorge themselves on a sumptuous feast that leaves many of them literally retching from overindulgence," and where the "newly-weds are coerced into kissing ostentatiously and into drinking so many obligatory toasts that they are left reeling" (Holden, 1993, P. 118). At the end of a series of pranks, the boisterous wedding guests force the exhausted couple to take off all their clothes under their bedclothes and throw them on the floor. As a result, the half-drunken Wai-tung briefly slips off the sexual wagon and makes Wei-wei pregnant.

Simon becomes infuriated upon Wei-wei's pregnancy. He has a fierce argument with Wai-tung and Wei-wei at a breakfast table, knowing that General and Mrs. Gao do not understand English. Relations between the lovers become strained. General Gao gets a stroke and is sent to a hospital. Feeling increasingly guilty, Wai-tung confesses to his mom about his gay life and the fake marriage. The vulnerable mother's last hope is to keep the unborn grandson and hide all the truth from her husband.

After much hesitation, Wei-wei decides to have the baby and raise him with the help of Wai-tung and Simon. Meanwhile, General Gao reveals to Simon that he actually knows English and that he understands what is happening in the family. He also indicates that he accepts the relationship between Simon and his son by giving a generous money gift to Simon, telling him, "Wai-tung is my son, so you are my son also." Ironically, he insists Simon keep their secret from his wife, his son, and Wei-wei for the sake of the family. "If I didn't let them lie, I'd never have gotten my grandchild," says he. The ending "leaves the five main characters wiser and more compassionate than they started out" (Holden, 1993, p. 118).

Chinese Traditional Concept of Family

Lee's movies have portrayed cases of cross-cultural conflict within cross-cultural family settings. Since many times a conflict can be "viewed as cultural behavior reflecting what people in a society value," (Ross, 1993, p. 12) the conflict and conflict resolution in Chu's family and Gao's family explain the difference in cultural values each character holds. While there are universal values, which are coined by Boulding (1962) as "outer core" values, there must also be culturally different "inner core" values. The latter are the "unique epistemologies shaped by experiences of who we are, how we identify ourselves in the social universe, and how others have responded to us in that universe" (Sandole & Merwe, 1993, p. 187). Chinese traditional concept of family is one of such inner core values of Chinese culture.

Chinese family system has been the most complex and well-organized in the world. It served as one of the two roots for the development of Chinese humanistic thought. The other one was the concept of Heaven. Since China is a continental country, for thousands of years the Chinese people had to make their living by agriculture. They had to live on their land and confine themselves to the houses where their fathers or grandfathers lived and where their children would continue to live. For economic reasons, early Chinese families must live together. Thus, long before Confucius, there developed the Chinese family system, which provided Chinese philosophy with "a basis for regulating relationships between man and man" (Wang, 1968, p. 7). The complex and intimate family relationships were crucial to the Chinese people in pre-Confucius time. Fung (1958), a renowned Chinese philosopher, finds that in the *Erh Ya*, the oldest dictionary of the Chinese language dating from before the Christian era, there are more than one hundred terms for various family relationships (p. 21).

The Chinese family system was extended to the social system in China, and a great part of Confucianism is "the rational justification of this social system, or its theoretical expression" (Fung, 1958, p. 21). The Confucian "Five Code of Ethics" specifies five basic social relationships: between sovereign and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend. Among these relationships, the second, third, and fourth are clearly family relationships. The first, between sovereign and subject, can be conceived of in terms of that between father and son, while the fifth, between friend and friend, is regarded as a similar relation of that between elder and younger brother. Thus, all the five social relationships are actually the extension of family relationships, and a family is a miniature of the world. In order to maintain a peaceful world and a harmonious family, these relationships must be appropriately regulated, and conflicts should be avoided and resolved in line with the principles of these relationships.

These particularistic relationships are "unequal and complementary" (Chen & Starosta, 1997-8, p. 7). It is true even between two male friends, for each would refer himself as *da gou* (older brother) or *xiao di* (younger brother) according to his seniority. This unequal and complementary nature of human relationships is crucial to Confucianism because people all live in a hierarchical society. Believing that good social order could be obtained only when each individual recognized and accepted his/her place in a hierarchical society, Confucius advocated the theory of "Rectification of Names" (*zheng ming*). In response to Duke Qing's question about the characteristics of a good government, Confucius suggested, "Let the prince be as a prince. Let the minister be as a minister. Let the father be as a father. Let the son be as a son" (Ware, 1955, p. 79). In order to achieve and maintain stability in a society and harmony in a family, each individual should confine himself/herself in a hierarchical relationship. However, the Confucian family relationship, though characterized with dominance/ submissiveness and control/obedience, must be actualized with each member's commitment to certain moral and ethic responsibilities. The basis of these responsibilities is human love.

When Confucius started to teach his philosophy, he took the human heart as his basic concern. Believing that the human heart was the origin of the good, he proposed "a three-point program for the individual to follow: Toward the self, the moral goal of a person is to be a *chun-tzu* or gentleman; toward the family, to be a well-fitting member working for its prosperity and happiness; toward humanity at large, to be an active participant in a world society dedicated to the realization of the Golden Rule [Confucian principle of reciprocity]" (Wang, 1968, p. 17). In order to be a *chun-tzu*, one must possess *jen* (benevolence) which refers good-naturedness, cooperativeness, parental love, filial piety, and brotherly care and respect. Thus, a family "with a good husband, a good wife, good parents, and good children, who measure up to the *jen* standards, may be rightly called a *jen* family" (Chang, 1980, p. 184). Moreover, the sentiments of love, which exist within the family, could be extended to the society. Confucius believed that if people could be taught to enlarge the scope of filial love to include all humanity, the whole world would live as harmoniously and happily as a family.

Filial love is closely tied with human nature. Its implications including the tenderness, care, consideration, and affection for one another, are easily understood by anyone who has a family. Wang (1968) states:

No parent needs to be taught to love his or her children. Instances occur daily where a parent risks his or her life for the sake of the children. On the part of the children, to love their parents also comes naturally. Likewise the

affectionate ties which produce intimate concern over one another's welfare among brothers and sisters are also common in human society. It may take the preacher days, months, or even years to teach us to love one another, with doubtful results. But as to the love which exists among the members of the family, it is more a common reality than an exception. (p. 19-20)

With the observance of filial love as a starting point, one may be naturally directed to "be benevolent to all living creatures, affectionate toward mankind as a whole, loyal to his country and to the duties of a free citizen, faithful in keeping obligations, righteous in action, peaceful in behavior, and just in all dealings" (Hsieh, 1967, pp. 173-174). Clearly, filial love can be enlarged to human love. It is the root of all virtues.

To the Chinese, a family is a small society in which every member should recognize and accept his or her own place in the hierarchical structure. Harmony in the family is achieved by appropriately regulating each individual's behavior and the family relationships. Since "conflicts are not treated as problems of communication but rather as detractors from harmony," (Chen & Starosta, 1997-8, p. 6) they should be prevented and avoided at first place. If conflicts in a family do occur, they should be resolved according to the principle of filial love.

Chinese Attitude toward Conflict and the Styles of Conflict Resolution

Chen and Starosta (1997-8) rightly point out, "Culture and conflict management/resolution have an interdependent relationship with one another" (p. 1). Styles of conflict management/resolution with which people communicate during conflicts vary widely from one culture to another. Striking differences in people's attitudes toward conflict can be seen between a high-context culture and a low-context culture, and between a collective society and an individualistic society. Westerners believe that while some conflicts are harmful and dysfunctional, others can be beneficial and functional. A positive metaphor is "to view conflict as a kind of dance in which partners work together to create something that would be impossible without their cooperation" (Adler, Rosenfeld, Towne & Proctor II, 1998, p. 390). If handled or managed appropriately, conflicts can produce benefits. However, traditionally Chinese see a conflict as a deviation from harmony, an evil which should be avoided, or a problem which should be resolved in order to retain harmony. This attitude toward conflict has its cultural and philosophical root.

The two foundational schools of Chinese thought, which have laid the basis for Chinese culture and philosophy, are Confucianism and Taoism. Cheng (1991) states, "Nobody can deny that Confucianism and Taoism more than any other philosophical schools have shaped the mind of the intellectual *class* in China through the Classical Period up to the early 20th century" (p. 187). While Taoism believes that the preservation of life comes with following Nature and Confucianism believes that the fulfillment of life comes with the full development of man, the main interest of both schools "is life" (Chan, 1967, p. 32). Cheng (1991) further speculates that "Confucianism and Taoism are themselves historically derived from the same fountainhead of Chinese cosmological experience and thus answer to the same *problematik* of Chinese thinking in the very beginning" (p. 187). By a close study of Confucian views primarily in terms of the text of the *I Ching (Book of Changes)* and the Taoistic views as expressed in the writings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, Cheng finds that the two schools agree with each other on the issues of conflict and harmony.

For an intuitive point of view, harmony and conflict are two mutually defining concepts. Cheng (1991) indicates that, according to Confucianism, harmony is the basic state and the underlying structure or reality whereas conflict does not have roots in reality, but rather represents an order of unnatural imbalance or a disorder of no lasting significance. Hence, although there may appear difference, tension, opposition, and even conflict in the process of change of the world, the overall tendency of the cosmic and social processes and individual life conduces to unity and harmony. The *I Ching* makes it clear that the world is a generative unity, that the process of change is natural, and that things begin with harmony and aim at harmony as their goal. During the process of change, conflicts may appear, but they are regarded as misconceived and incomplete sub-processes of interaction of polarities. Since polarities are ultimately identical with the *Tao*, even the *yin* and the *yang* do not exhibit any genuine opposition or antagonism. They are only opposite as far as they are complementary. Because all forms of interaction of polarities are symbolic of harmony, there is neither tension nor hostility between the *yin* and the *yang*, if they are allowed to proceed in their inherent naturalness and simplicity (pp. 188-189).

Cheng (1991) has noted two important points about conflict in the *I Ching*. First, conflict is a matter of man's inability to conform to reality. Second, conflict can always be avoided if one strives to conform with nature by cultivating one's understanding and adjusting one's action in a proper way (pp. 190-191). If harmony is related as good, and conflict as bad and evil, Confucianists believe, conflicts can and should be avoided or resolved by each individual cultivating himself/herself into *chun tzu* and harmonizing himself/herself with the world.

Harmony in the Taoistic sense is the natural unity of human, things and nature. As in the *I Ching*, the *Tao Te Ching* affirms the oneness and all-comprehensiveness of the ultimate reality, namely the *Tao*. It maintains that

the polarization and interpenetration of the *yin* and the *yang* exist as essential functions of the *Tao* in the Taoistic metaphysics of harmony and conflict (p. 191). Since things in the world are mutually dependent and mutually conditioned, Chuang Tzu believes, all things are parts of the one. Chuang Tzu says, "Nothing is not a That, nothing is not a This. From the viewpoint of That, one does not see This, but from This point of view, one can see This itself. Thus we say: That is derived from This, and This is also dependent upon That" (quoted in Cheng, 1991, p. 192). Because there are no distinction and differences between things, and that all things are mutually transformable, there is virtually no conflict existing. Cheng (1991) argues:

For all things in the *Tao* are constituted by relatively and mutual transformability and thus are reducible to oneness and identity at the same time. Distinction and differences between things being ontologically transcendable, conflict, antagonism or hostility arising from distinction and difference are naturally ontologically transcended and absorbed into the *Tao*. Consequently there is no ontological status for conflict and antagonism in the enlightened eyes of the *Tao*. (p. 193)

Hence, conflict and antagonism are just complementary form of harmony. With the spirit of the *Tao*, a man will not encounter conflict and will eliminate conflict wherever and whenever conflict arises.

Both Confucianism and Taoism uphold that the world is a harmony, that conflicts have no ontological basis, and that conflicts are avoidable and resolvable by human cultivation and human adjustment to nature. These beliefs have basically shaped traditional Chinese attitude toward conflict and conflict resolution styles that are featured by non-assertion, indirect communication, and avoidance (Ting-Toomey, 1985). In the cross-cultural families depicted in Ang Lee's two movies, these styles are frequently used in avoiding and resolving family conflicts.

Conflict Resolution Styles in Cross-Cultural Families Depicted in Lee's Movies

"Pushing Hands" depicts two cross-cultural families. While the widowed Mr. Chu's only son married to an American girl, widowed Mrs. Chen's only daughter married to an American man. In both families, there are visible conflicts caused by different cultural values held by each family member, and both Mr. Chu and Mrs. Chen feel unhappy in their families. Instead of confronting the conflicts assertively, both of them choose to avoid the conflict and retreat from their families to the Chinese club on weekends.

Mr. Chu has practiced Chinese marshal arts all his life. Yet, the "pushing hands" he practices as a form of Tai Chi is not aggressive by nature. As his son Alex explains to his wife, "You know, for dad it was a way of escape from reality. Even when he did pushing hands, for him it was a way to avoid other people." Actually, to avoid conflict and confrontation has become Mr. Chu's way of life. Living in his own son's house, he feels lonely and unwelcome. His American daughter-in-law Martha does not treat him friendly. She may believe in her cultural norm that marriage "inevitably means the complete displacement of the parent by the spouse," (Hsu, 1953, p. 131) and that her father-in-law's stay is an interference to her immediate family and an invasion of her private space. She has no intention to communicate with him, and there is never a smile on her face. The old man just quietly retreat to his small bedroom, watching video-taped Beijing opera with earphones. On one occasion, Martha shouts at him because he has used aluminum foil to cover a bowl of food and put it into a microwave oven to warm. The angered old man says nothing. He intends to go to the other room to eat his meal. But after a moment of hesitation, he comes back to sit at the same table with Martha. By doing so he has prevented the embarrassment, saved Martha's face, and avoided a conflict.

Although he is unhappy with his daughter-in-law and his life in his son's family, the old man still chooses not to let of steam. He only indirectly expresses his ill feelings by saying "*me jing*" (feeling meaningless in life). He feels that it is pointless for him to learn English and fit the new culture, and pointless for him to go back to China, either. "My life is going no where," says he. Once when he doesn't feel well and his son insists to call a doctor, he says, "The vital organs are not in harmony. That's why I'm sick." He continues, "I feel stifled. Let me tell you something. Persecution is easy compared to loneliness." This is his indirect expression of his resentment toward the family environment. Later, when he realizes that his stay will continue to harm the harmonious life in his son's family, he decides to leave his son's house and live alone in Chinatown. When his son begs him to return home, he insists that his son should rent an apartment in Chinatown for him, and that the family can pay him a visit there from time to time. He explains that it is the best way to keep harmony in his son's family and to improve the relations between him and his son's family. Mrs. Chen has also moved out of her daughter's house, probably to avoid more conflicts and to allow a harmonious life in her daughter's family.

Alex Chu is a character in "Pushing Hands" who lives in the whirlpool of family conflicts. To invite his aged father to live with his family is a fulfillment of his filial duty. Unfortunately his father's stay has caused unhappiness and conflicts in his family. On the one side, his father feels uncomfortable in a house in which his daughter-in-law treats him as a stranger. On the other side, his wife constantly complains about the old man's interference to her life. The tension in the house is obvious, and the atmosphere affects their marital relations, and

even their sexual life. To avoid possible confrontation and maintain harmony, he tries very hard to pacify both his father and his wife. After a busy day's work, he finds time to chat or play chess with his father. Then, after his father goes to bed, he pares an orange and offers it to his wife who is writing in front of a computer. He tells his father that American democracy means no status difference between the old and the young in a family, hinting that his father should tolerate Martha's seemingly non-filial behavior. To his wife, he explains that in his culture a man should care for his parents the way they care for him, and that his father is a part of him, indirectly asking Martha to accept his father.

Despite of Alex's effort, the conflict in the family reaches its peak when the old man has been lost while taking a walk in the neighborhood. Although he blames his wife for not taking care of his father, he does not lash out at her. He avoids the direct confrontation by getting himself drunk and bumping his head against wall as a sign of self-punishment. Ignoring both his father's and his wife's offer to help, he let his five-year-old son, Jeremy, to attach a strip bandage on his wounded head. He says to his son, "Jeremy's the good one. He knows better than Mommy and Grandpa how to care for Dad." Indirectly, he is blaming both his father and his wife for the damage of family harmony.

Alex finally realizes, not without pain, that in order to maintain peace and harmony in his small family, his father must go. However, he can not directly ask his father to leave his family and live in an apartment all by himself. So, he secretly hopes that his father would fall in love with Mrs. Chen. If his father marries Mrs. Chen, the old couple will no longer live with their children's families. To Alex, that is the best indirect approach to resolve the conflict in his family, as well as that in Mrs. Chen's family. Therefore, confrontation and embarrassment in the two families can be avoided, and everybody's face can be saved.

The Gao's family in "The Wedding Banquet" is an interesting cross-cultural family. Wai-tung is a naturalized American who was born and raised in Taiwan. His phony wife, Wei-wei, is from Mainland China, and his gay lover, Simon, is a white American. He has not expected that his parents would fly over from Taiwan to attend the phony marriage and get themselves involved in the entangled family conflict.

Understanding that his son and his daughter-in-law were born and raised in different social environments and cultures, the retired Taiwanese army general sincerely admonishes the bridegroom prior to the wedding banquet: You two grew up differently. But fate has united you together here so far from home. It's something you should treasure. In your marriage, if differences arise in opinions and habits, you must work to resolve them through mutual concerning and mutual understanding. Always be thoughtful of each other. That's the key to a successful marriage.

General Gao's words represent the principle of Chinese attitude toward family conflicts. However, he may have never dreamed that his short stay in his son's family should be filled with conflicts.

Upon their arrival, the excited parents are led to Wai-tung's gay partner Simon's house. Very soon, they are told that their son and Wei-wei are going to have a quickie wedding at New York City Hall. They feel shamed, depressed, and maybe frustrated. Yet, they hold their anger and avoid blunt confrontation. When Mrs. Gao blames her son and tries to reason with him, Mr. Gao stops her by saying, "Very well. They're adults. We'll do what they want." Only his angry voice and stern facial expression suggest that he is indirectly accusing his son for letting them down and causing the family to lose face.

When Simon learns that Wai-tung has accidentally made Wei-wei pregnant, a fierce verbal fight between Simon, Wai-tung, and Wei-wei breaks off at a breakfast table. They all speak English, not knowing that the old man understands the language. Though shocked and sad, the old man still remains silent. But he gets a stroke and is hospitalized.

In order to understand the pain in General Gao's heart, let's have a look at a particular Chinese traditional concept of filial piety. Mencius said, "There are three things which are unfilial and to have no posterity is the greatest of them" (Dawson, 1939, p. 163). To have posterity is one of the obligations a filial son has to his parents because he "has a debt to his parents and his ancestors which demands not only his respect to his progenitors both living and dead, but also that he transmits that life to other generations who shall perpetuate the family line from age to age" (Rudd, 1928, p. 119).

The family line is just like a rope which began somewhere back in the remote past and which stretches into the infinite future. Sociologist Hugh D. R. Baker (1979) calls it "Continuum of Descent." Once the rope is cut in the middle, both ends (ancestors and unborn descendants) fall away from the middle, and the whole Continuum of Descent no longer exists. A Chinese Confucian scholar explains the importance of having posterity: "To Confucians, one's offspring are the continuation of his own and also of his ancestors' lives. With such continuation, his and his ancestors' lives are looked upon as being immortal. Therefore, anyone who has cut short the flow of his ancestors' lives would be condemned as having committed the gravest sin of being unfilial" (Hsieh, 1967, p. 181).

General Gao has learned from a relative that the rest of the Gao family in Mainland China is gone, and that it is up to him to continue the family line. The last thing he is willing to see is that the rope of the Continuum of Descent will be cut in the middle. With his son being a gay, a harsh reality appears in front of him: he is going to witness with his own eyes the end of the Gao family. The only hope for him, however, lies in the unborn baby Wei-wei carries. That is the last straw for a drowning person. Mr. Gao realizes that assertive communication and direct confrontation will carry him to nowhere. The only thing he can do, and should do, is to keep himself quiet, to avoid any open conflict, and to maintain the existing situation in the family.

It is really a strange family, a family Mr. Gao would never expect to have. Nevertheless, in this peculiar family lies his last hope. So, harmony is still the goal of this family, and any openly expressed conflict in the family will pose a threat on Mr. Gao's hope for continuing the family line. Using his powerful position in the family hierarchy, he carefully plans a scene to symbolically hold the family together. He declares at a dinner that he is going to do the dishes because Simon has done the cooking. While he does dishes with his inflexible and weak hands due to the stroke, all the other family members, Mrs. Gao, Wai-tung, Simon, and Wei-wei, are on tenterhooks, watching every clumsy move of the old man.

Avoidance and indirect communication have helped Mr. Guo and his family to deal with the severe conflicts and relations not seen in a normal family. Mrs. Gao is assured that Wai-tung and Wei-wei will "hide the truth" about Wai-tung's being a gay from her husband. Wei-wei promises to give birth to the child. Simon agrees to be one of the fathers of the unborn son. When the depressed old couple leave for Taiwan, they have at least two things: a photo album which records their son's phony marriage to be shown to their friends and relatives in Taiwan, and a hope that the Gao's family line will continue. Obviously they are not happy with the reality, but they have to keep silent about what they know so that harmony can still be maintained in the family. On the airport, Mr. Gao tells Simon, "Sam, thank you. Thank you taking care of Wai-tung." To Wei-wei, he says with heart-felt emotions, "Gao's family will always be grateful to you." The last scene of the movie is really symbolic. While being checked at the gate by an airport security person, Mr. Gao raises up both his arms, a gesture symbolizes that the proud general and dignified father finally has to surrender himself for the sake of his family.

Conclusion and Implications

Chinese family is a hierarchy with power distances between parents and children, and between elder brother/sister and younger brother/sister. However, the personal relationships between family members are characterized with intimacy, mutual care, and mutual support. A family is an inseparable unit, and the members in the family form an "in group" with the "we feeling" which "greatly reduces the possibility of confrontation or conflict" (Chen & Starosta, 1997-8, p. 7). This "we feeling" coincides with the lack of privacy within a Chinese house. Hsu (1981) finds that in many well-to-do families of north China, the rooms in a house are arranged "in rows like the cars of a train," so that "the occupants of rooms A and E will have to pass through rooms B, C and D in order to go in and out of the house" (p. 79). This arrangement represents a traditional Chinese concept of home, which recognizes all within the four walls as being one unit. Within this unit, members should live harmoniously, and there is no legitimate status for tension, hostility, or conflict.

Of course, no Chinese family can be immunized from occasional tension and conflict between its members. Some families may experience severe confrontation and even physical fight from time to time. However, the mainstream Chinese cultural belief is that conflict is detrimental in nature, that harmony is the goal of life and all the human relationships, that "ten thousand businesses would thrive in a harmonious family," and that family conflicts should be avoided at first place and be resolved when they occur with non-confrontational conflict resolution styles such as avoidance, non-assertion, and indirect communication. This belief has its roots deep in the unique Chinese family system and the traditional Chinese culture, which is based mainly on Confucianism and Taoism. The Chinese attitudes toward conflict and their conflict resolution styles depicted in Lee's two movies have exactly reflected this belief.

However, the cultural beliefs and the conflict resolution styles depicted in Lee's movies can only reflect a fictional reality, a reality reconstructed by the movie director. Although movies and other kinds of literature can be useful artifacts in cross-cultural studies, real life conflicts and conflict management/resolution styles in cross-cultural families are influenced by variables such as members' education, their degree of involvement with the guest culture, their links with their home culture, and their interpersonal relations with other members of the family. Further research on Chinese conflict management/resolution styles in cross-cultural families should take these variables into consideration.

First of all, new comers and the more culturally assimilated American-born Chinese (like those in "Joy Luck Club") have a different understanding and experience of their cultural heritage and belief. Thus, their conflict

management/resolution styles may not be identical to each other. Secondly, as Chen & Starosta (1997-8) indicate, overseas Chinese from different localities like Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Mainland China may have some differences in retaining traditional conflict management/ resolution styles owing to the differences in geography, political system, and cultural experience. Researchers should consider these differences. Finally, since in-group/out-group distinction is an important factor in the study of Chinese conflict management/resolution styles (Chen & Starosta, 1997-8; Hwang, 1997-8), special attention should be given to the differences in managing conflict in nuclear and extended cross-cultural families.

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