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Insinuating Chinese American Consciousness in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

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Abstract

Maxine Hong Kingston is a versatile writer of The United States of America. She writes with a new perception and with an eclectic consciousness. She integrates personal elements with Chinese myths and fictionalized history to demystify cultural conflicts confronting Americans of Chinese ancestry. On the other hand, Gloria Chun remarks on those potential changes in Kingston: "The change that occurs, as China and Chinese Americans are described, defined, and appropriated by Kingston, makes the birth of a new identity for Chinese Americans" (Chun 90).

The study probes into the changing trends of the contemporary immigrant literatures, and hence, Kingston belongs to this congregation of new immigrant writers. Further an attempt is made to insinuate Chinese American mindscape by rereading one of her first novels as a principal source. The study would also zero in on how Kingston chooses to bury the Chinese sensibility with the hope of resurrection, implying feminist identity by evoking monocultural imperatives. Accordingly, how she would desensitize ghosts of fear, secrets and emotional disturbances in polycultural situations. Presumably, the paper concludes that Kingston's work serves as a model for minority discourse and is perceived as a generalised problem of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Keywords: Chinese American Consciousness, Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior, Migrant Sensibility, Feminist Identity.

Introduction

Over the years, the Chinese American writers have experienced positive transformation from negation to acceptance to integration. Contemporary immigrant literatures reflect this changing trend. Maxine Hong Kingston belongs to this congregation of new migrant writers. The entry of Kingston's works into mainstream public culture of America has given the Chinese Americans a newfound visibility. In this paper, an attempt is made to insinuate the Chinese American mindscape of the contemporary rereading of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. It is also attempted to showcase Kingston's narrative resistance to Chinese patriarchy in particular and universal oppression in general.

Kingston configures a new sensibility for the Chinese Americans based on hybridity and reciprocity. Firstly, she chooses to bury her Chinese sensibility with the hope of resurrecting it in a manner befitting her new Chinese American sensibility. Secondly, she makes multiple responses to the dialogic subversions of ethnic and feminist identity by evoking a world independent of imperatives and binary opposites. Thirdly, she desensitizes the ghosts in her—which are hallucinatory versions of her own fears, secrets, and emotional disturbances in a polycultural situation—by her wise decision to see the world "logically, logic the new way of seeing." Conclusively, it is asserted that Kingston's works serve as models for minority discourse and are perceived as resolutions to a generalized problem of race, ethnicity, and gender.

This work has been concentrated with three main objectives. Firstly, to define the contemporary Chinese American migrant/exilic sensibility by rereading Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Secondly, the dominant tone of her narratives is an antipatriarchal strain against the Chinese immigrants, in contrast to a mute, down-playing strategy to gender discrimination of white America. The transformation of the narrator in *The Woman Warrior* is from tonguelessness to expression, a symbolic change from Chinese to Chinese American. Thirdly, the ghosts that lurk in Kingston are virtual versions of her own fears, secrets, and emotional disturbances in a multicultural situation.

Maxine (Ting Ting) Hong Kingston—Ting Ting being her Chinese name—was born on October 27, 1940, in Stockton, California, to Chinese immigrant parents. Her father, Tom Hong, was brought up as a scholar and taught in his village of Sun Woi near Canton. He left China and migrated to America in 1924. While in America, he worked in a laundry, a gambling house, and eventually opened his own laundry to support his family. Kingston's mother, Chen Ying Lan, prototype for the domineering Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior*, was trained as a doctor in China, where she

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remained for fifteen years after her husband migrated to America. When she arrived in America, she worked as a domestic servant and factory hand. Maxine was the first of the six Hong children born in America; her two older siblings died in China years before her mother came to America. Kingston's first language was Say Yup, a dialect of Cantonese, the official language of the Chinese province from where her parents had emigrated. Other villagers from the same province had also settled in Stockton and used the laundry as the community gathering centre, so Kingston had many opportunities to absorb their Chinese heritage through the oral tradition of "talk story" that would eventually mould her own writing.

Kingston was a brilliant student, and was writing poems in English as early as when she was in grade school: "I began writing when I was nine. . . . I was in fourth grade and all of a sudden . . . poem started coming out of me. On and on I went, oblivious to everything, and when it was over I had written 30 verses" (qtd. In online source titled "Maxine Hong Kingston: American Writer"). Kingston received eleven scholarships to attend the University of California at Berkeley where she intended to study engineering; but on second-thought tried journalism, and then switched over to English, earning her degree in English in 1962. She married Earl Kingston, a fellow student and actor, in the same year. One year later, their only child, Joseph Lawrence Chung Mei was born. The family moved to Hawaii in 1967 where they remained for seventeen years, until they returned to California, where they have been ever since. For many years she has taught English at all levels from elementary school to college. During her sojourn in Hawaii, she wrote her first two books, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and *China Men*, almost simultaneously. In both these books, Kingston brings together Chinese myths and familial stories of her ancestors, and problematizes them to illustrate the puzzling present reality of becoming a Chinese American. In *The Woman Warrior*, she weaves together the life of a disgraced aunt who was almost obliterated from the family history, her mother's "talk stories," and her own experiences of growing up in search of a language in which to tell her stories. In *China Men*, she syncretizes the stories of the men in her family with the legacy of prejudice and discrimination against Chinese in America, reexamining American history and assuring a rightful place for the Chinese immigrants.

The Woman Warrior is the principal material for this study. Great attention was also given to critical trends and theories on post-colonial and immigrant literatures. Critical materials on Kingston and her works inundate the print and electronic media to separate the grain from chaff were hard but challenging tasks. The first section of *The Woman Warrior* is about a "No Name Woman" who falls into the family well along with her baby because of pre-marital sex. The second section, "White Tigers," is an often anthologized and discussed part of the book. It is a fantastic portrayal of a female avenger, derived from the myth of the legendary Chinese swordswoman Fa Mu Lan. *The Woman Warrior* not only chronicles the development of the daughter but also the mother's struggle for identity. The mother's story, "Shaman," is situated in the middle of the book.

"Shaman" records the mother Brave Orchid's rise from a traditional woman to a respectable doctor. In the fourth section of the book, "At the Western Palace," Kingston tells the story of another silent Chinese aunt Moon Orchid. The "thrice told tale"—told to Kingston by her sister, who in turn heard it from her brother—is the only third-person narrative in the book, and it communicates the hazards of poor-adjustment or non-adjustment to American and contemporary reality. Moon Orchid, whose name alludes to virtual or insubstantial presence, has lived comfortably in Hong Kong on the subsidy from her husband. Through the manipulation of Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid is made to come to America to reach her lost husband, a successful doctor, who has now married an English-speaking wife. Moon Orchid's traditional Chinese life based on an illusion of changeless stability is shattered. A victim of paranoid delusions and morbid fear of change, Moon Orchid makes repeated claims that she is pursued by foreign "ghosts." She is finally sent to a mental asylum, where she dies. Her tragedy is because of her rigid traditionalism.

The last section, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," is concerned with the reconciliation of mother and daughter. Kingston recalls her resistance in a personal voice: "My silence was thickest —total—during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns . . ." (*WW* 165). The blackness of her paintings is not a sign of mental disturbance, as her American teachers had assumed but: "I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose" (*WW* 165). Once the curtain is up, there is "sunlight underneath, mighty operas" (*WW* 165). This transformation of blackness into carnivalesque drama provides an excellent metaphor for Kingston's metamorphosis as a writer.

However, Maxine Hong Kingston writes with new perception and eclectic consciousness. She integrates personal elements with Chinese myths and fictionalized history to demystify cultural conflicts confronting Americans of Chinese ancestry. Kingston belongs to that congregation of new migrant writers who do not take up the cudgels against their country of migration but preach sensible co-existence. In her art, space shrinks, differences dissolve, borderlines blur, complexities thaw, and flowers bloom and blossom. To her mother's sad remark "We have no more China to go home to" (*WW* 106), referring to the fact that she would never be able to visit China, her daughter in the story answers, "We belong to the planet now, Mama. Does it make sense to you that if we're no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet? Wherever we happen to be standing, why, that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot" (*WW* 107).

Two important autobiographical forms emerged from early Chinese American writers namely "paper son" stories and "confessions" (Guerin 268). Paper son stories are carefully woven stories by Chinese immigrant men to make the authorities believe that their American sponsors were really their fathers, when in fact they were surrogates. Confession stories are fabricated by Chinese American women rescued by missionaries from prostitution in California's mining towns and migrant labour camps. Chinese American women make up the largest and most influential group of Asian American writers. Ironically, given the silencing of Chinese women—as witnessed by foot-binding, slavery, and ritual suicide—they have managed to produce an amazing repertoire of literary works, greatly outnumbering the male writers.

Chinese American literary history can be said to begin with two sisters, Edith and Winniefred Eaton, who emigrated with their parents to the United States. Edith Eaton's stories, published as *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912), present Chinese as fully developed, enviable, wholesome people. Jade Snow Wong's female *Bildungsroman* entitled *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is an epic tale of the American dream. This

autobiography of Wong serves Kingston as a literary predecessor and saves her from the feeling of being "pushed out of literature." Kingston calls Wong her "literary mother" (qtd. in Feng 111). Everybody knew that the Chinese people had a superior culture. Her ancestors had created a great art heritage and had made inventions important to world civilization" (68). This disappointing, arrhythmic trend in Chinese American literature reflecting chasmic Sino-American relationships during the postwar period is understandable. America of the nineteen-sixties was turbulent with racial and social revolts: Vietnam War, African-American problem, Women's Liberation Movement, and Hippie revolution; added to this is the American sneer for Communist controlled revolutionary China. The dominant literature of this period is seen to be spiced with acrimonious remarks and teasers on Chinese life and culture. Two such satirical caricatures, for example, are Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Lula in *Dutchman*.

This changing trend is beautifully fictionalized in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) where the old and new generation Chinese women react differently to America. This novel describes a group of four Chinese immigrant women's lives and relations with their daughters. The mothers meet in the Joy Luck Club to tell each other their stories of life in China; their daughters' vignettes alternate with the mothers' narration. The conflicts between the generations and the problems they share are built up in the novel.

The situation is not very different with contemporary British immigrant writers, a widely imaginative and inventive group that grapples with the clash of cultures, from Hanif Kureishi and Meera Sayal to Bernandine Evaristo, Zadie Smith, and Monica Ali. Monica Ali, in her debut novel *Brick Lane*, caused furore among the Bangla Deshis settled in Britain over her portrayal of London's Bangla Deshi community as uneducated and backward. Back in America, Bharati Mukherjee dismayed many Indian readers by her stark counterpoising of a vibrant America to a backward India that she fictionalizes in her novel *Jasmine* (1991).

Bharati Mukherjee had chosen to present herself as an enthusiastic American and tended to answer in the affirmative with regard to the option of assimilation to America. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist leaves the constricting orthodoxy of India for the freedom and opportunity of America. Jasmine's experiences in America are not completely pleasant; nevertheless, at the end of the novel, Mukherjee has Jasmine driving from Iowa towards California, going west in pursuit of her future in a recognizably American way, eager to reinvent herself yet again as an American. Kingston belongs to this sect of American neo-immigrant writers which includes such progressive people like Frank McCourt, Sandra Cisneros, and Jamaica Kincaid who have softened their attitude from isolation to acceptance to integration.

The entry of Kingston's works into public culture of America gave Chinese America an official literary visibility. Her writings have contributed a lot and have changed the countenance and status of contemporary Chinese American literature. *The Woman Warrior*, her pioneer work, remains the first text in the field of national culture describing the interpretive differences over an instant power contestation between the dominant culture and the ethnic community for both the authority and agency of Chinese Americans. All her works reveal the representation of an immigrant Chinese American culture.

Kingston's themes reveal her dual heritage—being both Chinese and American—and the resulting issues of identity formation, discrimination, generational conflict, and voicing of the immigrant experience. Kingston's characters are modified by their Chinese heritage but rejoice in their contributions to American history, culture, and language. She writes also about contemporary issues such as misogyny within the Asian American culture. After rejecting the negative gender stereotypes from traditional China and contemporary America, Kingston aspires to integrate the positive elements of Chinese culture, such as talk story, with the powerful tools she acquired in America, specifically the written English language. In such a way, she became a "word warrior," whose writing would affect the same revenge and change as did Fa Mu Lan's weapons in *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston believes that the way to change people's standardized conventional culture is through literature.

The central metaphor for *The Woman Warrior* is a Chinese knot in which various strands of textuality are interwoven to create a work of folk art. Through her revolutionary talking story, she successfully builds a matrilineage as a "counter-lineage" to the patrilineal descent line and unravels a personal yet rooted voice for her woman artist. But not everyone treasures her work or is touched by its serenity. She has her critics, and they are often harsh and vocal. Generally, their disagreement is on three aspects. Firstly, Asian American writers such as Ban Tong, Frank Chin, and Jeffrey Chan have questioned the validity of labelling *The Woman Warrior* as "autobiography." They call it a marketing strategy and accuse Kingston of falsely presenting her experiences as being representing those of the majority of Chinese Americans.

However, a great number of literary scholars have defended Kingston saying that she had in fact helped to re-define, if not altogether obliterate, the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction (Chun 86). Secondly, critics, including the workshop critic Frank Chin, have accused her of negative portrayals of Chinese male characters. This is, perhaps, because they employed androcentric interpretive strategies; or else they were not aware of the currentness and people's general passion for feminist issues over others in the seventies.

Evidently, Kingston has not negated Chinese male problems, but the male problems have not been taken too seriously by the readers. Bradley Winterton has this to say: *China Men*, dealing with the lives of the males in her family . . . had little success. Male problems didn't have the same sort of appeal that those of women had, apparently. So whereas there is today a massive bibliography of books and learned articles analyzing *The Woman Warrior*, its successor has received scant attention.

Thirdly, critics have argued that Kingston has distorted traditional Chinese myths by rewriting history according to a feminist ideology upholding the mainstream whites. Benjamin Tong writes: "Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is a fashionably feminist work written with white acceptance in mind" (6). Suzanne Juhasz remarks: "Establishing herself [the narrator Kingston] as a talker in opposition to her mother—as American instead of Chinese, a truth teller instead of a liar—makes it possible for her to define herself as separate from her mother" (183).

Kingston showcases the generational conflicts in sensibility between the mother and the daughter also. Gloria Chun remarks of these perceptional changes in Kingston: "The change that occurs, as China and Chinese America are described, defined, and appropriated by Kingston, marks the birth of a new identity for Chinese Americans" (Chun 90). In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston buries the familial myth of the No Name Aunt and the Moon Orchid aunt; so does she of the

myth of the legendary Fa Mu Lan. She thereby forges a matrilineage and asserts the centrality of her relationship with the mother in shaping her identity and the text. In *China Men*, the buried facts are dug out. It shows how the Chinese men were a major force in building modern America, yet they are neglected and considered aliens in America. As a child, Kingston had commonly heard sayings such as, "Girls are maggots in the rice," and "It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters" (WW 43).

Kingston's Chinese culture has imposed internal constraints upon her like other Asian American women. These cultural characteristics are explained by Kai-yu Hsu as features of a given, traditional culture or as characteristics which have been created as a result of contact with American society. Hsu writes: The ethic of hard work is intensified when [first generation emigrants] move from a society where they have little control over their own lives and where even survival may be tenuous, to a society where opportunities are plentiful, relatively speaking, and where there is the hope that hard work will bring about a better life (Asian-American Authors 160). "Night after night," Kingston writes, "my mother would talk story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep" (WW 19).

The stories are powerful lessons in proper Chinese values and behaviour, but they are confusing to Kingston because they are concerned with her parents' lives in China, a world she has never known. At the other extreme, Kingston must puzzle out and unravel for herself the details of her parents' lives and the particulars of Chinese customs because "adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask." Furthermore, she writes:

> They hit you if you wave brooms around or drop chopsticks or drum them. They hit you if you wash your hair on certain days, or tap somebody with a ruler, or step over a brother . . . You figure out what you got hit for and don't do it again if you figured correctly . . . I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along. If we had to depend on being told, we'd have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death. (WW 185)

In recounting the lives of her ancestors in China, Kingston relies heavily on her mother's tales, but she fictionalizes many details in order to make sense of all that she has not been told. Thus, her works are not purely memoirs; they select events, weave together fact and fiction, real lives and mythological lives. Kingston's own struggle to bridge the chasm between her parents' culture and her own American childhood is a heroic act in a modern age. In "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," Ts'ai Yen, a poet of the first century, is sold to barbarians and carried off to a far-off land. She suffers greatly from loneliness and is misunderstood in her new surroundings. Kingston wanted only to bury her cultural biography; she never wanted to bury her ethnicity. She herself has observed that, "when people come to ethnic writing, they have such a reverence for it or are so scared they don't want to laugh" ("Cultural Misreadings" 61). In the story of Moon Orchid, Kingston's persistent mother forces her own frail, elderly sister, newly arrived in the United States, to search for her long-absent, Americanized husband and his second wife in order to demand her rights. She reinstates herself in both traditions by redefining fable, dream, and fantasy—thereby evoking a world independent of tiresome rules, monocultural imperatives, and binary opposites. Kingston reinforces her migrant sensibility with hybridity and reciprocity.

The Woman Warrior openly and even stridently expresses feminist messages which would most often be veiled in other women's fiction. Her texts imply that the hidden injuries to race are even harder to bring to the surface than female repression. Furthermore, insofar as the vision of a so-called insider can be shaped and distorted from the outside, the narrator's stated point of view should not be taken for an objective critical explanation of her culture. The reader must instead attend to the incongruent positions of the narrator and the author and to the contradictions within the text. While an explicitly anti-patriarchal strain, voiced most vocally against the Chinese immigrant community constitutes the dominant chord in The Woman Warrior, a muted, silent strain indicates the gender discrimination of white America. As Kingston seeks to give voice to those male ancestors silenced by white history, she cleverly exposes patriarchal abuses by drawing parallels between the degradation of Chinese men in white America and the suppression of women in traditional Chinese society.

In *The Woman Warrior*, for instance, the antifemale prejudice of the Chinese immigrant community and the narrator's internalization of the perspective of the dominant culture have produced a narrative that seems predominantly anti-Chinese. Yet, the structure of the book—reflecting the author's sensibility—undercuts the "truth" of the narrator's explicit statements. In her works, the narrator ultimately fractures Chinese and white American orthodoxies to make room for renewed gender and ethnic identities and for sexual, racial, and cultural freedom grounded in reciprocity rather than in domination. Young Maxine's valorization of speech may show her to be domineering and unquestionably accepting the American norm sacrificing her ethnic identity. But the paradox is true. It has to be understood that Kingston's alienation from her Chinese heritage is aggravated by political reasons and her aspiration for survival. This is exemplified in the recollection of her school life. In a harrowing scene, she tries to force a quiet Chinese classmate—her alter ego—to speak by torturing her. She pulls her hair, twists her nose and ears, punches her cheeks, and tortures her with words:

> Do you want to be like this, dumb (do you know what dumb means?), your whole life? Don't you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompom girl? What are you going to do for a living? Yeah, you're going to have to work because you can't be a housewife. Somebody has to marry you before you can be housewife. And you, you are a plant. Do you know that? . . . You've got to let people know you have a personality and a brain. (WW 180)

The other girl cries but refuses to speak, inciting Maxine to even greater desperation and violence. If this incident is simply read as reflecting young Maxine's intense desire to explode the stock image of the quiet Oriental girl, it would obscure the extent of her indoctrination: silence equals a zero intelligence quotient, "If you don't talk," Maxine threatens the silent girl, "you can't have a personality" (WW 180). The incident involving the mute girl has a political implication. It takes place "during the Korean War" (WW 174). The basement where Maxine tortures the mute girl is also where the students hide "During air raid drills" (WW 174). As a feminist, Kingston challenged Chinese culture as being patriarchal, even though she was fiercely proud of her heritage. The warrior woman of Maxine's imagination

avenges with her sword the injustices that a real little California girl can only throw tantrums about when other Chinese said, "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds," and "There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls." In China, she has heard, girls were often sold by their families. The Chinese word for the female "I" is "slave."

Like many other women authors, Kingston does not wish to reject female nature so much as the female condition, and at that she would reserve the female biological destiny: "marriage and childbirth strengthen the swordswoman, who is not a maid like Joan of Arc" (WW 48). But she is not without a sense of its difficulty:

> Do the women's work; then do more work, which will become ours too. No husband of mine will say, 'I could have been a drummer, but I had to think about the wife and kids. You know how it is.' Nobody supports me at the expense of his own adventure. Then I get better: no one supports me; I am not loved enough to be supported. That I am not a burden has to compensate for the sad envy when I look at women loved enough to be supported. Even now China wraps double binds around my feet. (WW 48)

Women may reject the culture that rejects them, but such brave and rare disassociations are not without serious cost. Kingston is dealing here with the fears and rebellions that recur in much women's writing, often displaced in other ways, and dramatized or actually experienced as suicide and catatonia, maladies common to many female protagonists, both fictional and alive, from Bronte's heroines to Sylvia Plath. In the traditional Chinese society, women were expected to behave silently with submission but act heroically with strength. The lowly slave-like daughter-in-law has to be miraculously transformed into the all-powerful matriarch, the mother-in-law. As a young girl, Maxine was keenly aware of this almost impossible demand: "When we Chinese girls listened to the adult talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen" (WW 19). She was aware of her role as a Chinese woman:

> After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father's place in battle. Instantly I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village. . . . I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (WW 20)

Unlike either Fa Mu Lan or Brave Orchid, both of Maxine's aunts were silent, shadowy figures, manipulated and victimized by immutable traditions and incomprehensible chances. They were the sub-humans whose fates were dictated by forces beyond their control. Maxine recalls the sexual impropriety of No Name Woman as:

> My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family. Perhaps she had encountered him in the fields or on the mountain where the daughters-in-law collected fuel. Or . . . in the marketplace. He was not a stranger . . . She had to have dealings with him other than sex. Perhaps he worked an adjoining field, or he sold her the cloth for the dress she sewed and wore. . . . She obeyed him; she always did as she was told. (WW 6)

The plight of the forgotten aunt became the fate of the majority of the women in China. Silently and obediently, they bore their tragic destiny and accepted their sub-human status. Without voice, the No Name Aunt could not turn to anyone for help. She was forced to take the course of suicide. Her spiteful suicide eradicated her forever from the traditional family commemoration. But to Maxine the fate of her aunt becomes a part of her own—"My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her" (WW 16). By speaking out on her aunt's plight, she also examines her own consciousness. The implicit image of the subservient and non-vocal Chinese American, together with the discrepancy between the idealism of equality and the lack of it in practice, confounded Maxine's subconsciousness so much that she refused to speak English altogether as a youngster. As she reveals the readers, her mother had cut her tongue, and this conspiracy of silence penetrated into aspects of her life:

> A dumbness—a shame—still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say 'hello' casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver. I stand frozen, or I hold up the line with the complete, grammatical sentence that comes squeaking out at impossible length. . . . A telephone call makes my throat bleed and takes up that day's courage. It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open. (WW 165)

Suffering the fear of expression and the pain of silence, Maxine realized at the same time that the acquiescence to silence was not unique with her alone—"The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (WW 166). The soft, demure, doll-like image of the Chinese girl prevailed and in seeming conformity and confusion she accepted that stereotype as her proper shape: "We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans" (WW 172). Understandably, Kingston had to forge an identity between two cultures that do not completely accept her, by dismissing the ghosts in each culture.

Her mother's ability to fight ghosts and to call people's spirits back when they had been frightened by ghosts is some consolation to her daughter, for America is full of ghosts:

> Machines and ghosts—Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts. Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe; I could hardly walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts and their cars. There were black ghosts too, but they were open eyed and full of laughter, more distinct than White Ghosts. (WW 96-97)

In so far as Maxine refers to the various non-Chinese in her environment as ghosts of one kind or another—"newboy ghosts," "druggist ghosts," "mail ghosts," "grocery ghosts," "milk ghosts"— the term has a more figurative meaning referring to "shadowy figures from the past" or unanswered questions about unexplained actions of Chinese, White, and

Chinese in America. The argument is that this literary usage does not really convey the emotionally laden feelings of fear, uneasiness, and resentment that filter encounters with the outer world of non-Chinese. Rather it divorces the term from its original social context and meaning, obfuscating the truth of racism. Deborah Madson opines that: "Whites were not felt as mysterious and shadowy presences, but as real sources of trouble, evil, and grief to our people. The word 'ghost' becomes 'demon' when we speak of the white person. This is a language that has reason and real, logical history" ("(Dis)Figuration" 240). Further she reasons that Kingston's own psychological blind-spots are due to the debilitating effects of racism, and that the consequence has been to internalize rather than externalize the problem: "It is racism that has stunted Kingston's reach, the demons encouraging her to feel fear—and ultimately to feel frustration, shame, and hatred toward her own" (243).

Sau-ling C. Wong, on the other hand, has a somewhat different reading: "As protagonist, Maxine does, indeed, experience frustration, shame, and hatred towards her own. But as author, Kingston observes a higher necessity for the sake of which she withholds cruder if more immediately tangible judgements on the sources of injustice" ("Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?" 250). Critics, however, have called for more explicit exposition of socially relevant history and attending factual details. As Wong points out, "there is little tolerance for creative styles which leave certain facts ambiguous" (266). In Maxine's imagination she is herself a ghost, a swordswoman, a female avenger. She has been given hints of female power, and also explicit messages of female powerlessness, from her mother, who in China had been a doctor and now toiled in the family laundry where they wore masks and burned candles to

avoid "the germs that fumed out of the ghosts' clothes." Kingston writes: "She said, I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the story of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (WW 20).

Kingston's stories reveal the difficulties of growing up as a first-generation Chinese-American. The book exposes feelings of displacement and alienation from both societies. Kingston is caught between two very different cultures with very different values, without truly belonging to either. She does not feel completely American, because she has to go to Chinese school and is obliged by her mother's pressure to conform to Chinese customs, but she does not feel completely Chinese, either. Even the parents of first-generation Chinese-Americans saw them this way:

> There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China. Sometimes I hated the ghosts for not letting us talk; sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. . . . They would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves ghost-like. (WW 183)

Thus Kingston, like so many other immigrant children, has to forge an identity for herself between two worlds that do not completely accept her. She has to adopt the austere customs of her Chinese heritage as well as the more liberal, lenient aspects of America. Thus, Chinese Americans have to search to find themselves and their place in society. Truly, Kingston's story is a search for her own voice and an attempt to reconcile the two different cultures dispelling the ghosts in each culture. Kingston's path to assimilation is paved with the discovery of certain subjective, phenomenological truths which are not necessarily sociological truths. Kingston's writings rely heavily on memory and imagination. She uses various unique narrative styles. In her art, dream-like recollections, legends, and folk-lores merge with nonlinear progression of events of actual reality. By using words and literary structure she has brought clarity and sense and incandescence to the world.

To sum up: Kingston's life's ambition is to get happiness for self and society. Writing became for her a process of healing. Her art is a continuum. The *Woman Warrior* is the women's story. *China Men* is the men's story. What happens when they grow up is *Tripmaster Monkey* and *The Fifth Book of Peace*. Critical materials on Kingston confront her on three aspects, firstly, identifying *The Woman Warrior* as autobiography, secondly, negative portrayal of Chinese male characters in *China Men*, thirdly, misrepresenting traditional myths to pamper mainstream white feminist ideology. Kingston's reply to these criticisms is that myths have to change like the people who carry them across oceans. Both the Asian American and feminist movements of the late sixties have attempted to counter extant stereotypes. The conflicts between American men and women have been all the more pronounced in the wake of the two movements. In the last two decades, many Chinese American men have begun to correct the distorted images of Asian males projected by the dominant culture. Kingston herself seems to be in the grips of these conflicting emotions. Kingston's perspective fluctuates between Chinese and American identity is clearly visible in her shifting choice of personal pronouns. Sometimes she identifies with the Chinese, using the first person plural "we" or "us"; at other times, she is distanced, referring to the Chinese as "they." Near the end of the first chapter, The Woman Warrior, she admits:

In an attempt to make the Chinese care for people outside the family, Chairman Mao encourages us [emphasis mine] now to give our paper replicas to the spirits of outstanding soldiers and workers, no matter whose ancestors they may be. My aunt remains forever hungry. Goods are not distributed evenly among the dead. (WW 16)

Not only is Kingston here assuming the perspective of her father's extended family in China, but, against her frequent assertions of her Americanness, she here identifies with the Chinese living in the People's Republic: "Chairman Mao encourages us." In the second chapter, "White Tigers," in the voice of the woman warrior nearing the end of her glorious career, Kingston writes:

> I stood on top of the last will before Piping and saw the roads below me flow like living rivers. Between roads the woods and plains moved too; the land was peopled—the Han people, the people of One Hundred Surnames, marching with one heart, our [emphasis mine] tatters flying. The depth and width of Joy were exactly known to me: the Chinese population. (WW 42)

Again, the narrator's expression of pride in the land and unity with the people of China are emphasized; she is the general and though her army has suffered, their tatters are hers. Kingston problematizes existing definitions of genre. *The Woman Warrior* is published as an autobiography, the subtitle proclaims it as memoir, critics call it a novel.

Chinese Americans, like all Asian Americans, exist in a state of multiple consciousness. Their hybrid position should be

textualized not in terms of outside/inside duality (double consciousness) but as a web of multiple intersecting and shifting strands (multiple consciousness). Kingston effectively describes the shifting positionality of the self when she asks:

> Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (*WW* 5).

There is, then, no pure, essential, or authentic Chinese American self. Chinese American sensibilities vary in accordance with region, birthplace, age, social background, and individual endowment. Subject positions cannot be ascertained by standard, bar-code determinants but are culturally acquired and socially strengthened, a dynamic, complex, and continuous process that
Kingston explores through her writing.

The Woman Warrior reflects problems a woman writer of color faces culturally and historically. It can be seen as a self-inscription of Chinese American women's sensibility in mainstream culture. Kingston's narrator engages in an imaginative reconstruction of the lives of Chinese American women in a symbolic region that the female narrator of her autobiography seeks to enter through linguistic constructs. It would be an interesting exercise to trace the process of negotiation in Kingston's narratives and formulate a theory of exilic cultural assimilation from a feminine perspective.

The book ends harmoniously with scenes of negotiated tension which enact dialogism. Maxine negotiates a balance between her mother and her newly independent self through the story of Ts'ai Yen, "a story my mother told me . . .
Recently, when I told her I also talk-story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (*WW* 206). The sensibilities of mother and daughter merge and mingle here, but neither dominates or assimilates the other; instead, they enter into dialogue, seeking identity in difference, through the heterogeneity and hybridity of multiple, shifting positionalities. Intense and insightful, Kingston has seen the Orient and Occident merge and mingle. Since then, enacting dialogism based on mutually negotiated tension has become the standard conclusion of almost all ethnic woman autobiographies.

The popularity of *The Woman Warrior* among mainstream readers raised charges of misreading and exploitation by Kingston. Kingston was read as both anti-Orientalist and neo-Orientalist, and charged of distorting traditional Chinese myths by recreating history according to a feminist ideology. Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan and others, taking the latter point of view, were vocal in attacking *The Woman Warrior* as a representation of a 'false' Chinese American tradition—misogynist, exoticized, and politically suppressed. With her desire to claim America for Chinese Americans, Kingston is seen to have aligned herself with Melville and Whitman. With similar intentions, Kingston massively incorporates western materials that likewise emerge from both popular and educated culture.

The findings of the study are reported in this paper at different levels. At first, Kingston was introduced as a syncretic writer integrating personal elements with Chinese myths to solve the conflicts confronting Chinese Americans. Migrant or exilic sensibility was shown as a process of progression from longing to belonging through negotiation and aspiration for assimilation. Next would be distorting Chinese myths to pamper mainstream white feminist ideologies. Kingston's reply to these critics is that myths have to change like the people who carry them across oceans. Further, Kingston's attempts to negotiate with native Chinese and adopted American cultures for survival. She shuttles between facts and fantasies; she commutes between cultural burials and rebirths. She chooses to bury her Chinese sensibility with the hope of resurrecting it in a manner befitting her new hybrid migrant sensibility.

Kingston's multiple responses to the dialogic subversions of ethnic and feminist identity. While an explicitly antipatriarchal strain voiced most vocally against the Chinese immigrant constitutes the dominant tone in her work, a muted silent strategy indicates the gender discrimination of white America. But by putting the Chinese and American ideologies side by side, she implicitly undercuts the authority of both. The qualities in Kingston's narratives are not because of postmodern tendencies but because of her involvement with Chinese folklorist, operatic tradition. Kingston's position is mapped as an ethnic writer on par with Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Her works are celebrated as model minority discourse and perceived as resolutions to a generalized problem of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Kingston and her narrators forge an identity between two cultures that do not completely accept them by dismissing the ghosts in each culture. This she does by "seeing the world logically, logic the new way of seeing" (*WW* 204). At last, Kingston and her Chinese American sensibility is triumphant—being able to assimilate with dominant American culture.

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