



# "Crossing the Sun and Lifting into the Mountains?" The Eccentric Subject in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

**Pirjo Ahokas**

University of Turku

Appearing only two years after the publication of the controversial anthology of Asian-American writing entitled *Aiiieeeee!* (1974), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) has managed to provoke a long and heated debate in the Asian ethnic community. Comparable in its intensity, for instance, to the controversy created by the publication of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982) and the reception of the subsequent film version by Steven Spielberg (1985), the conflict has centered around questions of "authentic" ethnic representation. Moreover, it has given expression especially to the anxieties of some male members from the Asian-American community over the "correct" representation of Chinese-American gender relations.

Kingston's critics have felt that her exposure of anti-female prejudices as well as her unflattering depiction of Chinese-born men are a betrayal of her own group.<sup>1</sup> Like in many other marginalized cultures, the under-

<sup>1</sup> For an analytical summary of the controversy, see King-Kok Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 238-239 and passim; Deborah Woo, "Maxine Hong Kingston: The Ethnic Writer and the Burden of Authenticity," *Amerasia*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1990), pp. 173-200. See also Jacqueline Bobo, "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers," in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deidre Pribram (London & New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 90-93.

lying assumption of some of Kingston's Chinese-American readers has been that ethnic authors should speak for the communities they come from as if they were their delegates to the mainstream culture. Instead of appreciating the rich complexities of Kingston's writing, these male as well as female readers have based their expectations on their preconceived notions of fixed and ethnically homogeneous identities.

Although it was still difficult for Asian Americans in the 1970s to find mainstream publishers, the process of charting of the cultural and literary traditions had already begun. As in other marginalized cultures, this stage also involved challenging the ethnic stereotypes of the dominant culture. For the male pioneers of Asian American literary scholarship claiming an American identity meant attempts to destroy the unmanly and foreign stereotype of Asian culture along with the new, seemingly "favorable" image of the 1960s of Asian Americans as an upwardly mobile "model minority."<sup>2</sup> Like them, Kingston was also confronting and breaking harmful stereotypes in *The Woman Warrior*, a book that has been enjoying a great fame ever since its publication. Nevertheless, Frank Chin, Kingston's most malicious critic and one of the editors of both *Aiiieeeee!* and its companion volume *The Big Aiiieeeee!* has, for instance, charged her as late as 1991, for attacking no less than Chinese civilization "with a stroke of white racist genius."<sup>3</sup>

The 1970s Asian-American male critique was directed against the idea of the doubleness of ethnic identity. In contrast to emphasizing the Asian Americans' American birthright, the editors of *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991), however, went in the opposite direction and underlined their heroic Chinese inheritance. In both cases, they stressed masculinity and showed a willingness to essentialize as well as homogenize Asian American culture. In the meantime, the 1980s, however, had turned out to be the start of the golden age of Asian American writing in the United States. It was also only then that anthologies of Asian American women's essays and fiction began to be published. Continuing into the present, Asian American women's writing shares Kingston's profoundly

2 See Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong, "Preface" and "Aiiieeeee! Revisited Preface to the Mentor Edition," in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, ed. Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong (New York: Penguin Books/Mentor, 1991) xi-xli.

3 Frank Chin, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, ed. Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong (New York: New American Library/Meridian, 1991), p. 27.

oppositional enterprise, joining the author in her concern for the complexities of biculturalism and the inequalities of gender relations.<sup>4</sup> While insisting on a unitary pan-Asian identity was an important strategy at the early stages of resisting otherness and marginality in the dominant culture, by and large, binary thinking has by now been replaced by a new, heterogeneous concept of ethnicity. It acknowledges the hybridity of Asian American identities by calling attention to "particularities and incormensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians."<sup>5</sup> To use Barbara Johnson's terms, the "differences between" have given way to the "differences within." Challenging the very notions of identity and singularity, Kingston's autobiographical *The Woman Warrior* participates in an active cultural construction of a new, heterogeneous subjectivity, molded by a notion of layers of oppression imbricated into one another and reaching across languages and cultures.

The publication of *The Woman Warrior* and its companion volume entitled *China Men* (1980)<sup>6</sup> roughly coincides with the time when several minority feminist discourses began to question the centrality of a unitary concept of womanhood both in feminist theory and feminist literary criticism. Instead of espousing the white feminists' ideal of a universal sisterhood, ethnic and postcolonial feminists, for instance, wanted to confront the boundaries that separate mainstream academic feminists from all women of color and to examine how the experience of gender is inextricably linked with race relations. Concentrating on the intersection of gender oppression and racial discrimination, Kingston's books recognize and address the presence of a simultaneity of oppressions, an important concept coined by black American feminists to refer to multiple interlocking and mutually determining systems of oppression.<sup>7</sup>

4 Cf. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Fall 1993), p. 577-578. According to Lim, the 1991 *Big Aiiieeeee* "is even more severe in its exclusion of Chinese American women writers, who are entirely unrepresented." *Ibid.*, p. 575.

5 Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1991), p. 26.

6 Indeed, Kingston notes: "To best appreciate *The Woman Warrior*, you do need to read *China Men*.... *China Men* was almost part of *The Woman Warrior*; I wrote much of those two books at the same time. I once meant for them to be one large book." Maxine Hong Kingston, "Personal Statement," *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's "The Woman Warrior"*, ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1991), pp. 23, 24.

7 Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983), pp. 272-82.

While *The Woman Warrior* portrays a female coming of age story against the backdrop of the misogyny of the Chinese heritage, *China Men* writes the silenced history of Chinese men's oppression in the United States. Taken together, in their implicit plea for Chinese-American solidarity, the two books by Kingston are suggestive of many black feminists' conviction, succinctly formulated in the statement of the Combahee River Collective: "We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism."<sup>8</sup> Valerie Smith's insightful comments on black feminist criticism equally apply to Kingston's writing: "And as gender and race taken separately determine the conditions not only of oppression but also of liberation, so too does the interplay between these categories give rise to its own conception of liberation."<sup>9</sup>

The continuity between *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* not only lies in their focus on the same family's history but they are also told by the same first person narrator: depicted as a young girl in *The Woman Warrior*, she achieves an adult woman's voice in *China Men*. As the narrative of *The Woman Warrior* progresses, the protagonist herself is multiplied, split into several selves living in different periods of time. The ways of her constituting an "I" are related to questions of national and racial identity, on the one hand, and to questions of female and ethnic identity, on the other hand. Although the conjuncture between gender and ethnic identity has rarely been dealt with in the existing body of criticism on *The Woman Warrior*,<sup>10</sup> in two short passages, the nameless Chinese-American narrator epitomizes the presence of the most central power relations and dislocations affecting her life. Moreover, the first quotation implicitly alludes to the double meaning of the word 'subject' as referring to somebody subjected to somebody else or acting as an empowered agent of her own life, a focal point in Kingston's narrative:

8 The statement is dated April 1977. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings of Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983), p. 213.

9 Valerie Smith, "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other,'" *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 47.

10 See Malini Schueller, "Questioning Race and Gender Definitibns: Dialogic Subversions in *The Woman Warrior*," *Criticism*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Fall 1989), p. 421.

There is a Chinese word for female I—which is "slave." Break the women with their own tongues!"<sup>11</sup>

I could not understand "I." The Chinese "I" has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American "I," assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness; "I" is a capital and "you" is a lower case (WW 193).

With their references to writing, the passages intimate that Kingston's narrative constructs a new form of female self. Defined by a consciousness of a multiple and shifting identity, this emerging self is suggestive of Teresa de Lauretis's concept "the eccentric subject."<sup>12</sup> According to de Lauretis, the term is linked to the epistemological shift that has dispelled the view of feminism as unitary and called into question the notion of a coherent, historically continuous, stable identity. Related to many other feminist scholars' redefinitions of the new subjectivity, the term has both personal and conceptual aspects. Constituted in a process of struggle, the eccentric subject is a rewriting of self "in relation to a new understanding of community, of history, of culture."<sup>13</sup>

De Lauretis compares the new self with the conception of the subject advanced by neo-Freudian psychoanalysis and poststructuralist theories, but like many other feminists, she emphasizes the difference: "it is not the fragmented, or intermittent identity of a subject constructed in the division of language alone."<sup>14</sup> Emphasizing the new identity's contradictory nature, de Lauretis claims that "it is rather at odds with language" and therefore also capable of re-emerging as a tool of personal and social change.<sup>15</sup> It is important that the eccentric subject is

11 Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1977), p. 56. Subsequently "WW" denotes this edition. The accompanying page numbers refer to this edition.

12 Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring 1990), pp. 131-137 *and passim*.

13 de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects . . .," p. 144. For an array of terms available to describe alternative figurations of the new feminist subject, see, for instance, Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 3.

14 See Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts," *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 9; cf. e.g. Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, pp. 106-107; Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 139.

15 de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies . . .," p. 9.

defined as a position of resistance and agency.<sup>16</sup> Kingston's book ultimately resists sexism and racism by contesting the hierarchical oppositions of "center" and "margin,"

The hybridity of Kingston's choice of genre is linked with the destabilizations of all categories of fixed identity in *The Woman Warrior*. Frequently treated as an autobiography, Kingston's first book challenges generic distinctions among autobiography, novel, mythology, and sociological essay. Moreover, it also resists conventional distinctions between fact and fiction. Much of this seeming uncertainty stems from the author's willingness to play with different kinds of boundaries. Most significantly, a similar tendency is apparent in the narrational shifts between traditional story-telling and the scenes from the narrator's daily life.

According to Jay Clayton, American novelists have increasingly employed conventional narrative forms, such as oral, folk, or traditional storytelling, since the mid-seventies, and he goes on to claim that "the rich mixture of traditional narrative forms and contemporary political concerns found in minority writing represents the most important force transforming the North American novel of the eighties."<sup>17</sup> In addition to depicting an eccentric subject, Kingston's novel produces an "eccentric" "backward-and-forward motion by juxtaposing traditional talk-stories, instructive oral narratives, with the narrator's own memoirs from at least four different time periods. Abruptly shifting from childhood to adulthood and back again, these reminiscences are tucked in the interstices of the other women's stories. Importantly, Clayton also argues that "the pragmatics of traditional narrative creates interdependence, an intersubjectivity that exists not only among but within every member of the community."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the mother's talk-stories set the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* searching for their interconnections with her own life. Awakening her intersubjectivity, they finally become a source of empowerment for her.

While earlier feminist scholarship has paid much attention to women's invisibility and silence in literature, Patricia Yaeger has mapped the potential alternatives to women's silencing in the dominant culture and

<sup>16</sup> See de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects . . .," pp. 137, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Jay Clayton, "The Narrative Turn in Recent Minority Fiction," *American Literary History*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Fall 1990), pp. 376, 379.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.

explored a theory of women's writing as an emancipatory practice. One of the useful strategies proposed by Yaeger is women's play as a way of "lightening the weight of custom and making it open to change."<sup>19</sup> In an interview, Kingston deplors the fact that one of the stereotypes of Asian Americans is their lack of a sense of humor, and points out that she has tried to correct this stereotype in *China Men* as well as in her first novel *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989).<sup>20</sup> Like humor, irony has hardly been discussed in Kingston's works. Nevertheless, it appears to be one of the primary modes in which the nexus between gender and ethnicity is explored in *The Woman Warrior* both in the dominant culture and in the Chinese-American community. Furthermore, humor and irony play an important role in Kingston's free renderings of Chinese myths as well as in her revisionary rewriting of American history in *China Men*.

### **"Where the stories left off and the dreams began"**

War, poverty, and European colonialism in China were some of the most important reasons that led the first Chinese immigrants to leave their country in the mid-nineteenth century for the "Gold mountain," as North America was called by them. To begin with the Chinese-American experience was nearly exclusively male: most often wives and children were left home. In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act barred Chinese laborers' entry to the United States and helped to create Chinese bachelor societies. In telling about the Chinese-American men's experience in *China Men* Kingston had to break a cultural silence. Using William Carlos Williams's work as a model, she turned the official version of North American history inside out. Identifying not only with the feminist but also with the ethnic cause, Kingston was attracted to Williams's

19 Patricia Yaeger, *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 231.

20 Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston," *American Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter 1991), pp. 788.

radical retelling of the American myth as well as to his breaking through of the gender constraints in his *In the American Grain* (1925).<sup>21</sup>

Conscious of his Spanish-speaking mother's inheritance, Williams's strategies of resistance to the dominant discourse include his imaginative reintroduction of contradictions and thus an acknowledgement of the existence of differences.<sup>22</sup> Drawing on the Icelandic sagas is part of Williams's strategy for unsettling the received version of New World history and the American literary tradition.<sup>23</sup> Instead of Columbus whose writings are essential to the myth of America, Williams's book starts with the defiant first-person narrative of Eric the Red, the father of Leif Ericsson, which is juxtaposed with the third-person story about his equally violent daughter. Kingston joins Williams's playful reinvention of America in *China Men* by adding more uncertainty and dating back the discovery by five centuries: "Some scholars say that that country was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694-705), and some say earlier than that, A.D. 441, and it was in North America."<sup>24</sup> Addressing her work to a general American audience, Kingston takes her cue from the stories about the voyage of Hui shen, a Buddhist monk, to Fusang<sup>25</sup> and ultimately gives Chinese men their due in the building of the United States.

As King-Kok Cheung correctly maintains, white feminists "are often oblivious to the fact that there are other groups besides women who have been 'feminized'<sup>7</sup> and are puzzled when women of color do not readily rally to their camp."<sup>26</sup> Born in the United States to Chinese immigrant parents, Kingston is painfully aware of this fact. For Williams, the reiterated figure of woman is representative of the silences that constitute cultural subtexts.<sup>27</sup> His playful textual process of subversion culminates in his imagining Lincoln as a motherly woman: "The least pri-

21 *Ibid.*, p. 784; Timothy Pfaff, "Talk with Mrs. Kingston," *New York Times Book Review* 15 June 1980, p. 25.

22 Cf. Vera M. Kutzinski, *Against the American Grain: Myth and History in William Carlos Williams, Jay Wright, and Nicolás Guillén* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 34.

23 See *ibid.*, p. 23-26.

24 Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1989), p. 5. Subsequently, "CM denotes this edition. The accompanying page numbers refer to this edition.

25 See, for instance, J.M. Davis, "Evidence of Early Buddhist Presence in Pre-Columbian America," *WFB Review*, May-June 252211979, pp. 19-27; Stan Steiner, *Fusang: The Chinese Who Built America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 3-9.

26 Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific," p. 145.

27 Kutzinski, *Against the American Grain*, p. 46.



vate would find a woman to caress him, a woman in an old shawl—with a great bearded face and a towering black hat above it, to give unearthly reality.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Kingston calls attention to the constructedness of gender categories. In her two autobiographical books, however, femininity also has the conventional negative connotations of passivity and powerlessness imposed by patriarchal society.

Significantly, *China Men* opens with Kingston's retelling of the legend of Tang Ao's coercive transformation into an Oriental courtesan in the Land of Women.<sup>29</sup> Defamiliarizing patriarchal practices, Kingston, contravenes, according to Cheung, "the commonplace acceptance of Chinese women as sex objects by subjecting a man to the tortures suffered for centuries by Chinese women."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, reversing the power relations between men and women as well as making the "masculine" women of the dominant culture victimize the unsuspecting Tang Ao "not on guard against ladies" (CM 3) are other ironical twists that remind the reader of the constructedness of gender. Epitomizing the oppressive stereotyping of Oriental men in Western culture, Kingston's version of the legend prefigures the feminization of immigrant Chinese men in the United States. As the rest of the book shows, this process was reinforced by the racist job market that allowed Chinese men mainly to work in "feminized" jobs that could not be filled by women. Consequently, the women in the Chinese community have often had to bear the brunt of the men's victimization by the dominant culture.

Kingston refers to Chinese women's traditionally subjugated position both in China and in the United States by quoting misogynist proverbs like "'Girls are maggots in the rice' and 'It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters'" (WW 51, cf. WW 54). Echoed from the evil baron's insults in the popular song about the woman warrior to the

28 William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain*, with an introduction by Horace Gregory (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1925), p. 234.

29 The legend is an adaptation from a satirical Chinese novel *Flowers in the Mirror*, Kingston's Chinese precursor text written by Li Ju-chen (c. 1763-1830). Lin Tai-yi, the translator and editor of the English translation, comments in the introduction: "The book is essentially a social commentary and a human satire. But it is also a historical romance, a fairy tale, an allegory, and its original form, a built-in anthology of expertise in various fields of the author's interest, was linked together by sheer outrageous invention. Lin Tai-yi, "Introduction," in Li Ju-chen, *Flowers in the Mirror*, trans. and ed. Lin Tai-yi (London: Peter Owen, 1965), p. 6.

30 King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 103.

curses of the narrator's father in California, the condescending words undermine the female protagonist's sense of self-worth.

Like the legend of Tang Ao, the story of Fa Mu Lan, the cross-dressing episode in *The Woman Warrior*, is an example of Kingston's conscious strategy to subvert monolithic ideas of the Chinese and Chinese-American gender norms in a playful manner. Centering around the mother's retelling of the story about the woman warrior, the chapter entitled "White Tigers," teaches the Chinese girls "that we failed if we grew up to be but wives and slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen" (WW 24). The persuasiveness of the mother's talk-story about the woman warrior is enhanced by its closeness to the unconscious, identified by feminist theoreticians as one of the potential "point of resistance"<sup>31</sup>:

Night after night 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 24)

At the beginning of the empowering fantasy, the girl-narrator's and Fa Mu Lan's voices blend as if they were the same person. Moreover, in the same scene, freedom is playfully symbolized as a magic bird showing the way to the seven-year-old protagonist:

The call would come from a bird that flew over our roof. In the brush drawings it looks like the ideograph for "human," two black wings. The bird would cross the sun and lift into the mountains....(WW 24)

Although contrary to the misogynistic proverbs, the mother's instructive talk-story about the woman warrior nevertheless presents problems of interpretation to the adult narrator.

Cross-dressing has often been seen as a means of exposing the constructed nature of gender categories. Significantly, Kingston's books share the motif with a contemporary Chinese-American play, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1989). In her study of cross-dressing, Marjorie Garber argues that in Hwang's play, the male cross-dressers "are emblematic of cultural crisis (or even of the 'human condition')," whereas the cross-dressed woman is ridiculed as a sign of failed

31 See, for instance, de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects ...," pp. 125-26.

"femininity,"<sup>32</sup> In the Tang Ao episode as well as in "White Tigers," Kingston employs the transgressive motif of cross-dressing, but in each case she uses the changes of costume almost for opposite purposes from those in *M. Butterfly*.

Critics of contemporary male transvestite theatre have emphasized the fact that male cross-dressers often appear as more successful "women" than women themselves.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Tang Ao's emasculation, involving the brutal binding of his feet and of piercing of his ears, deviates from these models in only connoting his degradation:

He served a meal at the queen's court. His hips swayed and his shoulders swiveled because of his shaped feet. "She's pretty, don't you agree?" the diners said, smacking their lips at his dainty feet as he bent to put dishes before them. (CM 5)

On the surface at least, the Fa Mu Lan legend seems to be the opposite of Tang Ao's story. In it, a young Chinese girl successfully replaces her aging father in the army and becomes a victorious general.

Some scholars have viewed the image of the woman warrior only in positive terms. Thomas J. Ferraro, for instance, writes: "the story can be read as a testament to the possibility of transcending gender hierarchies without being forced to embrace outlaw status."<sup>34</sup> This is certainly true about the poetic vision that the young protagonist has while she is being trained in martial arts in the mountains of the white tigers.<sup>35</sup> In it, an old couple, the woman warrior's spiritual mentors, are constantly in the pro-

32 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992) 249.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 249.

34 Thomas J. Ferraro, *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 171.

35 The only passage in a well-known version of the orally transmitted legend to inspire the fantasy are the last lines that simply say:

For the male hare tucks its feet in when it sits,  
And the female hare is known by her bleary eye.  
But when the two hares are bounding side by side.  
How can you tell female from male?

The passage has been interpreted to mean that only in a time of war a woman can pass as a man, but Kingston's imagination seems to have seized a much wider range of implications concerning gender differences. J. F. Frodsham ed., trans. and annotated by with the collaboration of Ch'eng Hsi, *An Anthology of Chinese Verse: Han wei Chin and the Northern and Southern Dynasties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 106, 106n.

cess of changing into each other. Indeed, the androgyny of the vision as well as the couple's gender-free behavior seems to promise gender equality. Moreover, the utopian vision enhances the interconnection between gender and ethnicity: dancers from different countries and representing different ethnicities embody a dream of inter-ethnic solidarity.

However, there is much irony in the author's handling of her seemingly subversive materials. To begin with, for Fa Mu Lan, transvestism is an instrumental strategy and not a means of resistance. It is deeply problematic because "fighting like a man," the woman warrior's self-transformations and masquerades, as Garber argues about other similar cases, ultimately reaffirm the binary opposition by reinscribing the "male" and the "female."<sup>36</sup> In fact, after fulfilling her obligations to her family and community, Fa Mu Lan returns to her parents, leaves behind her glorious military career and resumes her life as a traditional Chinese wife. Kingston's retelling seems to capture the irony of the traditional ending of the legend about filial piety.

Furthermore, it is important that the narrator distances herself from the mother's talk-story. Instead, her process of understanding its practical applicability is premised on historical specificity: "Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations" (WW 46). In reality, transferring the usable elements of the Chinese tradition to the American soil is one of the major difficulties. As Malini Schueller notes, "Kingston writes polemically against the subjugation of women and the racial hostility experienced by Chinese Americans, but she does not do so from a position of stability or unity."<sup>37</sup> Many of the complexities of Kingston's position are refracted through the narrator's shifting perceptions. For instance, on the basis of her experience in the Californian ghetto where her family lives, she is disillusioned when it comes to the woman warrior's use of violence for just causes: "What fighting and killing I have seen have not been glorious but but slum grubby" (WW 61). Moreover, peaceful means of protesting against social injustice do not seem to get the narrator very far either. Some of her speculations are set against the background of the American sixties. "I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy," (WW

36 See Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 70.

37 Schueller, "Questioning Race and Gender Definitions," p. 123.

56) the grown narrator sarcastically remarks on the activities of her student days at Berkeley.

### **"Her life branching into mine"**

In Asian American fiction as well as in other ethnic literatures, the loss or transmission of the "original" culture has frequently been studied in terms of a generational conflict. In *The Woman Warrior*, the distinctions between "home" and America are clear for the parents' generation: "Whenever my parents said 'home,' they suspended America" (WW 116). This is true in spite of the fact that China, as Suzanne Juhasz argues, is not so much a physical place as "a construct used by her parents to define their own identities."<sup>38</sup> Even in California the parents manage to keep their sense of security by not moving beyond the confines of the Chinese enclave, and fittingly, the father calls the laundry, the family's stable hub, "The Center." For the younger people, however, painful tensions arise between China and America, the traditional Chinese-American community and American society at large:

Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America. (WW 6)

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 6)

Unlike the older people, the protagonist explores the constructedness of ethnicity. From her position of marginalization or ex-centricity to use Linda Hutcheon's term,<sup>39</sup> she suggests that like gender identity, ethnic identity is also constituted within representation.

<sup>38</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, "Narrative Technique & Female Identity," *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, ed. Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985), p. 174.

<sup>39</sup> See Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 5, 17.

In her article on the eccentric subject, Teresa de Lauretis refers to Minnie Bruce Pratt's well-known autobiographical narrative "Identity: Skin Blood Heart" as a particular account of a series of successive displacements that call into question "any unitary notion of self, home, race or community."<sup>40</sup> Structured through memory like *The Woman Warrior*, Pratt's text about a white subject's struggle for a "reanchoring" of the dislocated self is built on a tension between "being at home" and "not being at home." Constantly moving from position to position, Pratt reflects on the costs of the security of an identity based on racist and heterosexual privileges. Kingston's complicated working out of the relationship between home, identity, and community begins with the narrator's revisionary reading of the mother's story about the "No Name Woman," the father's sister who has committed suicide. Giving birth to a child years after her husband and other men in the family have left for America, her family has been cruelly punished by the villagers who thought that she had been acting "as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them" (WW 14). Because the aunt has not kept the patrilineal line of descent, she has been excluded from the family narrative.

Due to the aunt's transgression against the patriarchal sexual norms of her native village in China, the overt meaning of her harrowing story is to set boundaries to proper Chinese female behavior in America. However, as Ferraro argues, "in the sense dictated by the story's own terms of value, Mu Lan's adventure is less transgressive than the adultery of the aunt."<sup>41</sup> Told as a tale warning to the young narrator who has just entered puberty, the story is not taken at its face value. Even as a child, the protagonist tries to adjust to the new conditions of America: "The other troublesome was 'here,' no strong consonant to hang on, and so flat, when 'here' is two mountainous ideographs" (WW 193-194). Intuitively, she also understands that the value of oral narratives is in their usefulness. Gradually, the aunt's story is turned into a narrative about a female precursor and thereby it becomes an emancipatory strat-

40 Cf. de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects . . .," pp. 134-135.

41 Ferraro, *Ethnic Passages*, p. 169. Amy Ling points out that the Mu Lan story is an example of filial piety. It is meant to inculcate a great social good in Chinese children from their earliest years. While Fa Mu Lan gives her father "face" by taking his place in battle, the aunt's behavior causes her husband and her family to lose "face." My thanks to Amy Ling for calling this difference to my attention. Amy Ling, personal communication to the author, September 28, 1994.

egy: "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (WW 10).

In alternative versions of the story, invented by the young narrator, the aunt is imaginatively endowed with romantic and rebellious qualities. Moreover, like the unruly narrator, she becomes a person who "reaped a reputation of eccentricity" (WW 10). Breaking the rules of women's obedience and submission in a society governed by Confucian ideology, the aunt is, for instance, seen as a kindred spirit to the daring men who went to look for a better life in America: "But the rare urge west had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space" (WW 9). Furthermore, while making the aunt into a female precursor, the narrator also exposes the violence implicit in the negations on which narrow definitions of gender and ethnic identities are ultimately based. The story of the family's and the aunt's collective punishment not only makes her perceive the price at which the security of home was bought in China, but she also becomes aware of the monstrousness of her mother's and other relatives' complicity in the aunt's and her child's death. Most importantly, however, looking at the story from the vantage point of twenty years later, the protagonist finally realizes that, in spite of her sympathies for the haunting victim of patriarchal Chinese society, by maintaining silence, she has also participated in her aunt's punishment. Like Pratt, she no longer submits herself to limits of the home. In the process of figuring out and writing down the conflicting meanings of the family secret, the protagonist makes the reader conscious of the fact that her awareness of women's oppression is constructed at various levels of experience.

### **"Two old women—with faces like mirrors"**

Marianne Hirsch points out that even though women's writing and feminist scholarship have explored mother-daughter relationships, so far the daughter's narrative has dominated and the mother's story has largely remained unheard. However, she mentions black women's writing of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s as one of the exceptional traditions where the mother has been able to tell her story in complex and multi-

ple ways.<sup>42</sup> A similar tendency manifests itself in Asian American women's writing. Although the mother's narrative is refracted through the daughter's consciousness in *The Woman Warrior*, it contains many first person quotations, and as Marina Heung indicates, the mothers are allowed to tell their own stories in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989).<sup>43</sup> The black women writers' craving to discover their matrilineal heritage has been attributed to race and class oppression.<sup>44</sup> No doubt, the double bind of race and gender oppression also intensifies female Chinese-American authors' need to define themselves in relation to a maternal past. However, as in the case of black American families, whose history has been distorted through slavery, Chinese mother-daughter relationships cannot be understood in terms of white, middle-class and Western paradigms. The major complication they present is linked with women's provisional status in Chinese households. In traditional Chinese society, the mother-daughter relationships were shaped by the fact that women's fates often fluctuated according to their families' economic circumstances.<sup>45</sup> The idea of the daughters' expendability also figures in *Brave Orchid's* relationship to the narrator and her sisters.

The most powerful and ambivalent figure in *The Woman Warrior*, *Brave Orchid*, the narrator's energetic and obstinate mother fully lives up to her oxymoronic name. She manages to overcome her provisional status in the extended family in China by studying to be a medical doctor on the money her husband sends from America. As a paragon of the modern Chinese woman in the small villages, Moon Orchid has much in common with the woman warrior.<sup>46</sup> Like Fa Mu Lan: "She had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous like the ancient magicians who came down from the mountains" (WW 90). In many ways, however, the mother also represents women's heterogeneous subjectivity and multiple identity. Coming to America in 1940, three years before the

42 Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 176.

43 Marina Heung, "Daughter-Text/Mother-Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Fall 1993), especially 599.

44 Diane Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston," *Signs*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1985), p. 5.

45 See Heung, "Daughter-Text..." p. 601.

46 Cf. Margaret Miller, "Threads of Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*," *biography*, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 23.



Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed, for instance, entails a complete change of status for Brave Orchid and her husband. Formerly a scholar's wife and a doctor, she no longer is a member of the professional class, and like her husband, she has to toil at their Chinese laundry. Losing her status and profession, Brave Orchid clings to old world customs as if she never "stopped seeing land on the other side of the oceans" (WW 70).

Undoubtedly, Brave Orchid is a paradoxical figure in Kingston's narrative: as we have seen so far, she both supports patriarchy and provides an emancipatory role model. Although the story about Brave Orchid's medical career in China instills an admirable example of independence into the daughter's mind, it is not without its ironies. The mother's bravery, for instance, is tampered by her circumspection: she is praised for her healing skills, precisely because she refuses to see patients who she thinks are dying. Moreover, Brave Orchid takes advantage of the pattern of radical rupture within Chinese families caused by the fact that daughters were regarded as dispensable property.

During times of dire poverty, parents used to sell their daughters. In the story about Brave Orchid's independent life in China, the narrator describes how she bought herself a slave girl from a seller of little girls, inspecting her at the market like any other piece of merchandise. Pleased with her purchase, the mother explains to her own daughters: "I would not have sold a daughter such as that one" (WW 94). The story makes the narrator, when still a child, fear that she could also be sold if the family returned to China. The mother/daughter bond in *The Woman Warrior* is ambivalent at best.

Much of the ambivalence is related to the radically shifting images of the mother. While a student at the medical school, Brave Orchid is regarded as a heroine because she fearlessly exorcises from her dormitory the Sitting Ghost, whose paralyzing weight threatens the active young women students. Nevertheless, the older generation's life in California is full of evasions and attempts to mislead not only the Chinese ghosts of the past but also the prying Caucasian ghosts of their life in America. Multiple mirroring devices characterize the structure of *The Woman Warrior*. One of the incidents that proves the impracticality of Brave Orchid's old world perceptions in the new is her sister's visit. While the story about the woman warrior reflects Brave Orchid's idealized self, her aged sister provides a more realistic likeness: "And at last Moon Orchid looked at her—two old women with faces like mirrors" (WW 137). Even

if Brave Orchid's life has been full of disappointments in America, she reveals her frustrated wish to benefit from the promises of the Gold Mountain through her sister. In addition to questioning the hierarchies between Americans and the Asian immigrants, between immigrant men and women, Kingston also uses the episode to question the unity of Chinese-American culture.

Although Moon Orchid has been abandoned by her Americanized and very well-to-do husband for decades, Brave Orchid takes her recourse to the tradition and forces her sister to confront him with the intention of reclaiming her position as his wife. Safe in her immigrant enclave, Brave Orchid is totally unprepared for the successful and remarried husband's high degree of assimilation into mainstream America. Reminiscent of numerous Americanized men of immigrant fiction, the husband, who ironically enough is a successful surgeon, appeals to the cultural chasm separating his new and old life: "It's as if I had turned into a different person. The new life around me was so complete; it pulled me away. You became people in a book I had read a long time ago" (WW 179). After her failed attempt, Brave Orchid does everything to "anchor her sister to this earth" (WW 182), but the cultural shock of meeting the dismissive husband with "the rude, American eyes" is devastating to the weaker Moon Orchid. Moving back in time, the next chapter depicts the narrator's ferocious act of toughening up a Chinese school mate in the school lavatory.

### **"The curtains were swinging open"**

In de Lauretis's words, individual experience can be understood "as the result of a complex bundle of determinations and struggles, a process of continuing renegotiation of external pressures and internal resistance."<sup>47</sup> *The Woman Warrior* primarily deals with the narrator's relationship with the varying definitions of Chineseness and Chinese womanhood, but in addition to generational or "vertical" relationships, it also focuses on some "horizontal" relationships between American-born children.

<sup>47</sup> de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies," p. 14.

One of the earliest stories about the narrator's attempt to cross the cultural boundaries is about her silence at the English school where she has been sent without knowing any English:

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, and when I drew on the blackboard, I put a layer of chalk on top. I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose.... My parents took the pictures home. I spread them out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas. (WW 192)

Even if the intimidating American teachers have no understanding of the promising clue of "the moment before the curtain parted or rose" in the painting, perhaps some other racially oppressed students are receptive to the protagonist's tentative gesture.

Contrasting the loudness of the Chinese culture around herself to her silence at the American school, the narrator realizes that like gender, the ethnicity of the dominant culture is also a construction that can be imitated and performed. Inventing "an American speaking personality" after they have learnt enough English to use it as a means by which they can begin to affirm an American identity, the Chinese-American girls start whispering "to make ourselves American-feminine" (WW 200). However, turning herself "American-feminine" offers such an insecure position that the protagonist constantly fears that the denied Chinese identity symbolized by her double, the only Chinese-American girl who is not able to break her silence, will ultimately engulf her.

Stereotyping has always been part of a generalized ideology of domination. Corresponding to the Western image of the "angel in the house," the "positive" stereotype projected on Asian American women has been that of the Shy Lotus Blossom or China Doll: a sweet, silent and subservient woman without a will of her own.<sup>48</sup> The young protagonist's victim whom she brutally harasses epitomizes this image for her, and tellingly the quiet girl also has a hated China Doll haircut. Paradoxically, the narrator's increased sense of self-worth and self-contempt go together in *The Woman Warrior* to reveal on how shaky a basis her newly-won Americanness lies. In retrospect the older narrator sheds light on the psychological phenomenon of compensation: "that year I

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), p. 11.

was arrogant with talk, not knowing there were going to be high school dances and college seminars to set me back" (WW 202).

Some of the most pervasive images in the last chapter are drawn from war. Ostensibly, the cruel scene between the two Chinese girls not only takes place during the Korean war but the girls' playroom at the school is also "army green." Glimpses of inter-ethnic solidarity throw light on the fact that one can learn from other racially oppressed students' survival strategies: "I liked the Negro Students (Black Ghosts) best because they laughed the loudest and talked to me as if I were a daring talker too" (WW 192-193). Interestingly enough even the narrator's choice of female role models reveals that deep down she is toughening up herself. She names girls from the two ethnic groups most used to physically defending themselves: "I walked around her, looked her up and down the way the Mexican and Negro girls did when they fought, so tough" (WW 204). Moreover, the confrontation happens after the narrator has crossed the carefully policed gender lines at the school by running across the boys' yard. Looking at the dominant culture from the Asian "other's" point of view obviously renders America a highly masculinized counterpart of the long-standing Western tradition of feminizing the Orient.

Brave Orchid comically mixes up cowboys and boy scouts, whereas the adolescent narrator sets American cheerleaders and pompon girls as her highest female ideals. Her attack on the other girl can be seen as an attempt to establish herself as not-you, as an all-American girl with "a personality and a brain" (WW 210). Ultimately, the scene in which the protagonist torments the defenseless friend invokes Audre Lorde's essay entitled "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger" in which Lorde attributes black women's difficulties to connect with one another to the results of sexism and racism "internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another."<sup>49</sup>

Kingston's conscious play with stereotypes goes even further. In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator's militancy consigns her to mysterious illness that requires her to be confined to her bed for the next eighteen months and "to live like the Victorian recluses I read about" (WW 211). No wonder she later on understands her aunt's dislocation in a wider cultural context: "Within a few blocks of our house were half a dozen

49 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), p. 147.

crazy women and girls, all belonging to village families" (WW 216). Reminiscent of the rebellious "madwomen in the attic," the protagonist talks to people inside her head and turns into a self clearly distinct from her Chinese double: "I was white and had red hair, and I rode on a white horse" (WW 221).<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the new self is far from empowering: in the Chinese context, the color white symbolizes death. Recovering from the illness caused by her brutality towards the other girl, the protagonist is finally ready to give up on her monolithic idea about Chineseness and to admit that ethnicity is not an essence but something that is constantly being created: "I do not 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" (WW 216).

Ultimately, the narrator takes her stance against Brave Orchid and her talk-stories. Confused even about her mother's intentions, the protagonist leaves her home to gain a clarifying distance to her past: "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing" (WW 237). The narrator's departure has been seen as an "outright rejection of ethnic culture" meaning that she prefers a stereotypically white lifestyle.<sup>51</sup> However, the lines that have been used to support such a reading are full of irony:

Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, TV dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots" (WW 237).

Echoing the last five lines from Emma Lazarus's sonnet "The New Colossus," inscribed on the Statue of Liberty,<sup>52</sup> the words can be read as a contemporary parody of the false promises of the Gold Mountain.

<sup>50</sup> The sentence may contain an intertextual reference to Anzia Yezierska's "fictionalized" autobiography called *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950). Yezierska's title is taken from an old "ghetto" proverb: "Poverty becomes a wise man like a red ribbon on a white horse."

<sup>51</sup> Cheung, *Articulate Silences*, p. 93.

<sup>52</sup> Cf.: With silent lips, "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breath free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, these homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my land beside the golden door!"

Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," *Jewish-American Literature: An Anthology*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library/Mentor Book, 1974), p. 308.

The book offers very few glimpses into the adult narrator's life. Following the Fa Mu Lan legend, a passage describes two incidents from the work place. Like the evil barons in the mother's talk-story, the protagonist's enemies in the outside world are easy enough to recognize: "business-suited in their modern American executive guise, each boss two feet taller than I am and impossible to meet eye to eye" (WW 57). But, in an ironic contrast to the baron who wanted to draft Fa Mu Lan's brother, the racist bosses seem to be invincible. Each time the protagonist's lonely crusade against blatant racism is met with indifference and mockery, and ultimately thwarted by her disadvantageous position at the intersection of race, class, and gender. Standing up for minority rights, she is fired from her job.

Clayton argues for the political usefulness of traditional storytelling in contemporary ethnic fiction because it assists in forming communities and forging social bonds.<sup>53</sup> Kingston deliberately grafts into the Fa Mu Lan legend another Chinese story of filial obedience: words of revenge have been carved on the woman warrior's back by her parents. Identifying Fa Mu Lan's cause of revenge with her own keen sense of racism in America, the narrator recognizes the similarities: "What we have in common are the words at our backs....And I have so many words—'chink' words and 'gook' words too—that they do not fit on my skin" (WW 62-63). Identifying with the legendary warrior woman, she draws upon the talk-story to assume social responsibility for her people.

When outlining the new notion of identity embodied by the eccentric subject, de Lauretis maintains that identity is no longer "the goal but rather a point of departure of the process of self-consciousness, a process by which one begins to know how the personal is political, that and how the subject is specifically and materially en-gendered in its social conditions and possibilities of existence."<sup>54</sup> Like Pratt's essay, *The Woman Warrior* prefers the uncertainty of the move to settling down in one world or another—even to the extent that "home-sickness" begins to signify the sickness one has at home. However, as Jonathan Rutherford argues, "cultures and identities can never be wholly separate, homogeneous entities, instead the interrelationships of differences are

53 Clayton, "The Narrative Turn...", p. 389.

54 de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies ...," 9.

marked by translation and negotiation."<sup>55</sup> This is as evident in the depiction of the graying narrator's recent visit to the aging parents' house in the middle of the book as in the talk-story at the end of the last chapter in which: "The beginning is hers [my mother's], the ending, mine" (WW 241).

Gradually, a gently teasing, reciprocal relationship emerges between the mother and the daughter in both scenes. The mother's story is about her grandmother's cunning move of going to the theater with her entire household when bandits were known to be robbing houses, whereas the daughter's talk-story is about a woman in exile. Retelling the fate of the female poet Ts'ai Yen, the narrator tries to make sense of her own shuttling between two cultures. Kidnapped by the "barbarians," the poet spent twelve years among her captors, but she never stopped regarding China as her home. Hearing the barbarians' flutes greatly disturbs her until she begins to sing about China and her family, her song matching the flutes. When the poet returns home, the song transcends the cultural barriers and the Chinese begin to sing Ts'ai Yen's "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" to their own instruments. It is crucial that from her doubly disadvantageous position, the poet manages to transcend the binary oppositions and to form new alliances. As Rosi Braidotti notes, "writing is not only a process of constant translation but also of successive adaptations to different cultural realities."<sup>56</sup> Through the powers of storytelling and imagination, the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* also finds an empowering social bond that links her to the dynamics of Chinese-American women's intergenerational and inter-ethnic communities.

55 Jonathan Rutherford, "A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference," *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 26.

56 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 16.