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**Breaking boundaries: The autobiographical revolution in Jade Snow Wong's Fifth Chinese Daughter, Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior, Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club and Edna Wu's Clouds & Rain**

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**Breaking Boundaries:  
The Autobiographical Revolution  
in  
Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*,  
Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*,  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*,  
and Edna Wu's *Clouds & Rain***

A Thesis  
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and the  
Faculty of the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in English  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by  
Jacqueline P. Franzen

April 1996

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## THESIS ACCEPTANCE

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### Committee

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Franzen, Jacque. University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE 68182. *Breaking Boundaries: The Autobiographical Revolution in Jade Snow Wong's Fifth Chinese Daughter; Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior; Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club; and Edna Wu's Clouds & Rain.*

Jade Snow Wong's Fifth Chinese Daughter, Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior, Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club, and Edna Wu's Clouds & Rain break the boundaries between autobiography and fiction forging a new vision in literary tradition. They create works that reflect the complexity of their search for self: how in every generation each individual must reinvent and reinterpret her cultural heritage (Fischer 195). Their works are a montage of patterns, inherited from tradition and interwoven with their unique conventions to create an autobiography inclusive of their identity, their culture, and their new vision.

In an attempt to express their unique realities, these Chinese American women writers experiment in form (Kim 214). They defy the definitions of autobiography and fiction, and create blended genre forms which include fiction, nonfiction, autobiography, biography, poetry, letters, diaries, and even history. The search for identity as a Chinese American woman is at the forefront of each of these works. They must untangle what it means to be Chinese and what it means to be American, and resolve a “double consciousness,” existing as simultaneously an insider and an outsider (Wong 265). They must tell their stories, their mothers' stories, and their culture's stories to understand who they are and where they belong. Their works partake of the “mood of metadiscourse” and encourage reader participation in the production of meaning (Fischer 232). They want their readers to learn and develop their own means just as they must do. Their stories end without closure—the work is in progress just like the self.

Moving from silence to voice, victim to victor, their stories support their status as Chinese American women, and thus invent “new and empowering traditions for their (literary) daughters” (Lionnet 53). Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Edna Wu are part of a revolution toward multiplistic autobiography—a tradition that allows for cultural and gender differences, and differences in tradition. The multiplicity of form speaks for a new vision, a tradition that is evolving to enable a change in perception about Chinese Americans, women, and the very genre in which they inscribe the self.

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## Chapter 1: Challenging Autobiographical Tradition

The desire to tell one's story has long been a part of American heritage. People have long attempted to record and share their lives through such means as oral tradition and the written word. The Pilgrims, Puritans, and Quakers were the first to lay the literary foundations for what would become known as the American autobiography (Holte 4). Churches increased membership with "conversion narratives in which aspiring members of the community rendered in public a formulaic account of God's saving grace in their lives" (Culley 10). Over one-third of American autobiographies prior to 1850 were religious narratives (Cooley 5). Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography, deemed the "prototype" of American autobiography by critic Elizabeth Aldrich, is described by another scholar James Holte as "both a culmination of the colonial spiritual narratives that precede it and the first modern American autobiography" (17;4).

Terminology such as "personal narrative," "life," "confession," "reminiscence," and "memoir" was used to describe the genre until the late eighteenth century (Cooley 4-5). Memoir, the most frequently used label, carried "the connotation of informality, a casually constructed affair and not a serious literary effort" (Bruss 7). The Oxford English Dictionary first listed "autobiography" in 1809 (Aldrich 17).

Autobiography began as a predominantly male genre, thus its traditional form was based upon male ideologies. Beginning with Saint Augustine, this "masculine tradition of autobiography . . . had taken as its first premise the mirroring capacity of the auto- biographer: *his*



universality, *his* representativeness, *his* role as spokesman for the community,” and also assumed “the conflation of masculinity and humanity, canonizing the masculine representative self of both reader and writer” (Brodzki and Schenck 1-2). Early narratives written by such men as Saint Augustine, as well as later biographers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Walt Whitman, and Henry Adams served to affirm “the Western, transcendent, and masculine norm of autobiographical selfhood” (Brodzki and Schenck 4). Because men and their philosophy dominated autobiography, criticism aligned itself to their standards: “exclusively on content and the morality of the autobiographers themselves” (Jelinek 1).

Four major bibliographies of American autobiographies provide evidence for this view of a masculine-dominated genre. Louis Kaplan’s A Bibliography of American Autobiography contains 6,377 entries published in America before 1945. Russell C. Brigano’s Black Americans in Autobiography lists 710 entries. Fewer than twenty percent of the autobiographies in these bibliographies were written by women. American Autobiography 1945-1980 records similar data: of 5,008 entries, slightly more than twenty percent were by women. From roughly the same period, Through a Woman’s I: American Women’s Autobiography 1946-1976 cites 2,217 entries written by women. However, this bibliography includes letters and travel narratives in its calculations, and does not document men’s texts for comparison. Overall, American women have published notably fewer autobiographies than their American male counterparts, but whether women actually write fewer is another question yet to be determined (Culley 5-6). Statistics compiled in the 1970s in Tillie Olsen’s

book Silences, reveal that four to five books are published by men for every one by a woman (24).

Scholars believe that black women writers have a strong claim to being the founders of the American women's literary tradition (Foster 8). In general women were writing personal pieces; however, the literary climate was very restrictive to women especially before the eighteenth century. Culture expected women to be silent and to remain in the domestic sphere (Foster 12). When they did write, critics often dismissed their works as "sentimental chronicles" and "their authors branded as libertine women" (Stanton 6). Family and religion were perhaps the only areas in which a woman could speak with some tone of authority (Heilbrun 25). However, the weight of that authority was seriously diminished as a result of Enlightenment ideology which preached "that a woman's brain was smaller in capacity and therefore inferior in quality to that of a man" (Foster 12). The nineteenth century marked the publication of a significant number of women's autobiographies, and their work increased in numbers as literacy and educational opportunities improved (Jelinek 5).

From the onset women's autobiography challenged the established patriarchal conventions (Jelinek 5). Critics conceded a "good" autobiography focused on the author, the author's connection to society, and represented the times (Jelinek 7). As scholar Estelle Jelinek points out:

. . . women's autobiographies rarely mirrored the establishment of their times. They emphasize to a much lesser extent the public aspect of their lives, the affairs of the world, or even their careers, and concentrate instead on their personal lives—domestic details,

family difficulties, close friends, and especially people who influenced them. Even in the autobiographies by women whose professional work is their claim to fame, we find them omitting their work life, referring obliquely to their careers, or camouflaging them behind the personal aspects of their lives. (7)

This emphasis by women on personal rather than public lives “clearly contradicts the established criterion about the content of autobiography,” but not the established criterion about being female (Jelinek 10).

Male autobiographers tend to idealize or make heroic their lives (Jelinek 14). They projected self-confidence no matter what the difficulties they encountered (Jelinek 15). Again, this is contrary to the self-image reflected in women’s autobiographies:

What their life stories reveal is a self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding. The autobiographical intention is often powered by the motive to convince readers of their self-worth, to clarify, to affirm, and to authenticate their self-image. Thus, the idealization of aggrandizement found in male autobiographies is not typical of the female mode. (Jelinek 15)

The final autobiographical feature Jelinek compares is the notion of objectivity, “that autobiographers consciously shape the events of their life into a coherent whole” (17). Objectivity suggests that “life can be understood as the cumulation of objective experiences” (Fong 124). By contrast, women writers like Anaïs Nin recognized the futility of such an attempt: “We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are” (Quotable). Instead, women

sought an understanding of themselves that defied the usual sequence of time:

. . . irregularity rather than orderliness informs the self portraits by women. The narratives of their lives are often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self sustained units rather than connecting chapters. The multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and adversity when they write their autobiographies as well, and so by established critical standards, their life studies are excluded from the genre and cast into the "non-artistic" categories of memoir, reminiscence, and other disjunctive forms. (Jelinek 17)

As scholar Paul Eakin asserts, "The exercise of language is necessary to the realization of the self" (256), and these women sought to create a new form that would embody the woman's life.

Distinctive patterns mark women's autobiographies. Among developing motifs are a theme or method of silence, a distrust of inherited language, a decline in asserting their voice as truth, and an embracing of openendedness and diversity (Chueng 4-5). Women tend to "reinscribe" their gender and/or race in the title of their texts (Culley 7). In the modern period, one out of five white women used some sign of gender in their title by repeating their name or representing themselves in relationship to others, for example Memories of a Catholic Girlhood , Unfinished Woman , Wyoming Wife , Daddy's Girl , and Lady Lawyer (Culley 7). In black women's autobiographies, race seemed to override gender as "the

foundational category for self-organization” (Culley 8). Black and white American male autobiographers inscribe gender in the titles of their texts much less often than do women (a ratio of one to ten), and male and female white American autobiographers virtually never inscribe race in their titles (Culley 8). All of this evidence sustains “the obvious point that the construction of self in the American context (and any other one) begins within one or more given and heavily ideological categories” (Culley 9).

Contemporary ethnic autobiographies by women continue to challenge these male ideologies of the traditional genre. Fiction, poetry, myth, history, oral tradition, folklore—many different categories of literary composition are spilling over into autobiography. Ethnic autobiographies are also identified as partaking “of the mood of metadiscourse, of drawing attention to their own linguistic and fictive nature,” and encouraging reader participation in the production of meaning (Fischer 232). These “out-law” works blur definitions and standard boundaries, and “challenge us to recognize their experiments in subjectivity and account for their exclusion from ‘high’ literature” (Smith and Watson xviii).

Chinese American women autobiographers Jade Snow Wong and Maxine Hong Kingston exhibit patterns in their work not easily categorized. Instead, Wong’s Fifth Chinese Daughter and Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: Memories of a Girlhood Among Ghosts assimilate traits from the male tradition, the female tradition, and their own self-created tradition to produce a representative piece of multicultural literature. Chinese American women fiction writers also borrow from this melting pot method of autobiography. Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club contains

autobiographical elements. Edna Wu's Clouds & Rain: A China-to-America Memoir uses a similar pattern to create a fictional autobiography. Wong, Kingston, Tan, and Wu offer alternative structures and patterns to the traditionally masculine criteria of autobiography, and promote a new vision for the American woman writer. Their works serve to bring the world of the ethnic woman into the literature of autobiography, a world long considered outside of the "true" American culture.

The existence of Chinese American women's autobiographies is remarkable considering the historical restraints. Three Chinese immigrated to California in 1848; by 1851, the state had 25,000 Chinese; and in 1884, half of California's farm workers were Chinese (Chua 34). The first Asians to come to America were laborers in the California gold fields and on the Central Railroad in the 1850s and 60s, and they came without women (Lim 254). Exclusionary acts in 1882 made immigration more difficult, and laws prohibited intermarriage and denied citizenship (Lim 254). Such legislation served to keep Chinese American women and men socially in the underclass, "a position in which writing and publishing were not generally available cultural productives" (Lim 254).

Cultural restraints existed as well. Popular fiction and autobiography held no place in the traditional culture of the first Chinese immigrants. They did not have privileges of schooling, many were illiterate, and many did not speak, much less write, English. They rarely expressed themselves through the written word, and autobiographical writing was deemed egotistical and fiction frivolous. Writing was considered to be the domain of the "literati" (Kim 24).

Additionally, Chinese tradition and values supported the patriarchy. The family and community considered men valuable assets. They were the heads of households, the authority figures, and the decision makers. The view on women differed: "Girls are maggots in the rice. It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters" (Kingston 43). Women belonged in a limited domestic sphere, one that did not include voicing their own opinions. A woman voicing her emotions or advocating individualism broke taboo. Speaking out was a culturally disrespectful act.

Amazingly, literature was produced under these conditions. Research in Asian American literature is extending historically backwards as scholars discover neglected texts:

. . . writings in Asian languages, numerous accounts of Asian visitors to the United States, autobiographies by privileged and educated first generation Asian Americans, work songs by Chinese immigrant laborers, poems by Angel Island detainees . . . (Lim and Ling 3)

Other overlooked writings include Chinese newspapers, English-Chinese phrase books that became strategy manuals for Chinese American survival, and Cantonese rhymes (Li 321-22).

Immigrant Chinese women authored the early autobiographies written in English. They reflected the privilege of a sufficient education in the language and represented those "whose lives were supposed by mainstream publishing houses to hold a high interest for their chiefly white American audience" (Lim 254). On January 21, 1909, the first autobiographical writing by a Chinese American was published, "Leaves

from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” by Edith Eaton (Sin Far Sui) appearing in The Independent. Her sister Winnifred Eaton (Onoto Watanna) published her life story, Me: A Book of Remembrance, in 1915. Yun Tan’s (Adet Lin and Anor Lin) Our Family was printed in 1939; and Hui-lan Koo, an oral autobiography told to Mary Wan Rensselaer Tahyer, was published in 1943 by Hui-lan Koo (Lim 254). Jade Snow Wong’s Fifth Chinese Daughter, which came out in 1950, is the best known and most financially successful book by a Chinese American (Kim 59).

Some Chinese American autobiographies played too largely on their American audiences and produced propagandistic and nonrepresentational pieces. An example of “autobiography” produced under these circumstances is Anna Chennault’s A Thousand Springs (1962). Critic Shirley Goek-lin Lim cites her organization of material as clearly showing

. . . a privileging of the American general boyfriend over her self. Her self-portrait is dimmed by the presence of the white male whose adventures and exploits are foregrounded, so that the book becomes actually a biography of a white male under the guise of an interracial love story. (254)

Cynthia Chou’s My Life in the United States, published in 1970, does similar side stepping. Emphasizing American superiority and immigrant naiveté, her work serves as yet another example of those “who wish to present an uncritical and much varnished global portrayal of twentieth-century American superiority” and, much worse, fails to portray



accurately the life of a Chinese American woman in a genre relatively absent of her voice (Lim 254-55).

The second generation of Chinese women like Wong, Kingston, Tan, and Wu—the ones who grew up surrounded by two cultures, the Chinese tradition and the American way—were able to tell their stories. The straddling of ethnicities allows these women writers to accept and discard customs of both cultures, to emerge with a unique Chinese American voice. This voice demands that the restrictive nature of traditional autobiography undergo a transformation that will be inclusive of the Chinese American woman's "I." Critics and readers alike need to reject the models of "East and West" or the idea of "dual personality" and instead create a new vision, a synergistic vision (Cheung 4).

This new vision means innovative critical approaches to multicultural literature. "Universal" critics assert that works must appeal to a universal audience and that any barriers to ready intelligibility are flaws. Academics praise Third World writers who address a "universal audience" and commend avoiding barriers. Both schools are still utilizing white, European standards of comparison (Dasenbrock 13). These critics are more comfortable with an assimilationist ideology—they like the stories that confirm the "melting pot," where one loses the "taint" of ethnicity.

Feminist critics have attempted to create a new critical approach for ethnic autobiography. Feminism is defined as "the wish to articulate a self-consciousness about women's identity both as inherited cultural fact and as process of social construction and to protest against the available fiction of female becoming" (Heilbrun 19). Feminist critics recognize that to write as

a woman is to question truth, cultural norms, and institutions. New Third World feminists, challenging the presupposition of a singular voice of womanhood, insist there are many voices, and their idea is to refrain from creating a singular definition (Schueller "Questioning" 21).

Many critics assert that we cannot use these old, traditional male standards of theory for viewing multicultural literature. Scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson contend that "Different texts from different locales require us to develop different theories and practices of reading, what we might call 'standpoint' reading practices" (xxviii). James Payne advises readers "to keep in mind Albert E. Stone's reminder that 'the whole oratorio [of American autobiography] is . . . composed of separate Songs of Myself'" and that we must "learn to read these scores as individual stories and cultural narratives" (xvii). Multicultural literature requires a theoretical approach not limited to one school of thought or confined to traditional conventions. Rather, scholars and readers alike must implement a new approach that accounts for differences in perspectives, the existence of multiple realities, and a literature that defies categories.

Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Edna Wu utilize autobiographical techniques that defy any singular pattern of autobiographical and fiction autobiographical writing. Rather, the works are a montage of patterns, inherited from male and female traditions, and interwoven with self-created tradition to form a narrative inclusive of their identity, their culture, and their new vision. These Chinese American women writers challenge traditions, critical approaches, and the very genre to bypass the restricted "I" for the multiplistic "I."

## **Chapter 2: Forging New Traditions in Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter***

Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) is a Chinese American woman's reflection on growing up in a fragmented, confusing world that straddled two cultures. Wong blends the most meaningful elements of men and women's autobiographical tradition with conventions of her own making to create her unique quest for identity. Chinese American women autobiographers like Wong forge a new tradition for autobiography, one that is as diversified as the autobiographers.

Although Wong's book is the "best known and most financially successful book by a Chinese-American," only recently has it been a focus of literary criticism (Kim 59). The 1977 publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* resulted in an analysis and comparison of Wong's early autobiography. Scholar Patricia Lin Blinde strongly criticizes Wong for her static response to the world, for merely repeating conventions and expectations, and for accepting norms and values with very little thought (58; 60). Blinde concludes that "*Fifth Chinese Daughter* thus in no way adds anything in terms of real knowledge where the general public's picture of Chinese people are concerned" (58). The Asian American editors of *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* denounce Wong "for reinforcing the stereotypically unmanly nature of Chinese Americans" (xxxi) and the more serious charge of "subscribing to the psychological notion of divided or dual identities" (Chin xxiv-xxv).

Other critics such as Shirley Goek-lin Lim and Margo Culley only touch on Wong's linear and chronological form in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* as a

comparison to Kingston's The Woman Warrior. Only two scholars, Kathleen Loh Swee Yin and Kristoffer Paulson, take a specific, positive focus on Fifth Chinese Daughter. They praise Wong's book as an achievement: "a foundation stone for ethnic literature, for feminist literature and for American literature" (59).

No study exists of the autobiographical techniques exhibited in Chinese American women's works. These techniques do not follow any singular tradition, but rather are a montage of traditions composed of elements of old tradition and new convention that the author herself creates. Blinde judges Wong's book against Kingston's as "far easier to evaluate . . . the reader is able to refer the works to all the standard criteria required of a good autobiography" (53). However, a close analysis of Wong's text proves Blinde's evaluation to be untrue.

Wong adapts the autobiographical tradition much like she adapts Chinese and American traditions to fit her vision of self. She breaks men and women's autobiographical tradition by writing Fifth Chinese Daughter in the third person. Wong explains her choice: "The third-person-singular style in which I told my story was rooted in Chinese literary form (reflecting cultural disregard for the individual)" (vii). Wong's third-person construction reflects her struggle for identity: how does she find a voice in a culture that does not value individuality or women?

The third-person persona also serves to create a constant awareness of "Wong as simultaneously the protagonist and the author" (Yin and Paulson 57). Scholars Yin and Paulson call this paradox the "genius" of Wong's form: "The constant tensions reinforce the dual nature of the narrative

voice and constantly make the reader aware of the fragile balance between author and character within one dual but identifiable human being” (58). The third- person form also compels Wong to “examine her individual character and her society from without, from an objective and aesthetic distance, as well as from an inner and individual point-of-view” (Yin and Paulson 58). Thus, Wong employs one of the characteristics of women’s autobiographical tradition by utilizing a form not easily categorized, “because we have no name, no term, to identify the contradictory third-person autobiography” (Yin and Paulson 58).

Wong breaks male autobiographical tradition by writing in the third person and by writing with a lack of objectivity. This mentality of “seeing things as we are” follows the tradition of women’s autobiography. The narrator provides editorial insight into Jade Snow’s thoughts and feelings. Also in alignment with women’s tradition is Wong’s choice of titles. Fifth Chinese Daughter reinscribes Wong’s gender, race, and ranking in the family. However, Wong tells her story in chronological order, a quality that marks men’s tradition and breaks from women’s more fragmented style.

Traditionally, men and women alike have chronicled their life events in the form of an autobiography. However, unique to Fifth Chinese Daughter, The Woman Warrior, and other multicultural works is the struggle and search for identity at the forefront of the autobiography. Wong’s autobiography is more than a retelling of her life; it is her search for cultural identity. Her personal search requires a new tradition, a combination of old and new tradition, in order for Wong to find her place in the world:

It is a matter of finding a voice or style that does not violate one's several components of identity. In part, such a process of assuming an ethnic identity is an insistence on a pluralist, multidimensional, or multifaceted concept of self: one can be many different things, and this personal sense can be a crucible for a wider social ethos of pluralism. (Fischer 196)

Autobiography is the means for Wong to find her place, for women's autobiographical tradition has long been the medium for them to search for understanding or explanation.

A normal part of identity formation for children involves sifting through parental values and then making their own determinations of the world. For Wong parental issues and cultural issues interweave. This complex design must be made sense of and untangled simultaneously. Scholar Shirley Goek-lin Lim represents this division between *Jade Snow* and her parents as "a crack between Chinese and American, oppression and freedom, patriarchy and female autonomy, home and outside, past and present" (258). Thus, a feature of Chinese American autobiography is a strong emphasis on parental relationships and an in-depth exploration of what it means to be Chinese and what it means to be American.

*Jade Snow's* relationship with her Father is central to her evolving cultural identity (Fischer 203). Father came to America and learned new Western philosophies. They did not bind their daughters' feet: "Here in America is an entirely different set of standards . . . Here in Golden Mountains [America], the people, and even women, have individual dignity and rights of their own" (72). Yet, Father still held strongly to Chinese

tradition: “The daughters of the Wong family were born to requirements exacting beyond their understanding. These requirements were not always made clear, until a step out of bounds brought the parents’ swift and drastic correction” (67). The possibility of loss of respect or obedience limits Father and Jade Snow’s relationship, and early on she learns the Chinese creed, “Respect and order—these were the key words of life” (2).

Often Chinese tenets were passed down through talk-story, another pattern that appears in Wong and other Chinese American women’s writings. Talk-story is a life lesson, a story from which a moral can be drawn. Such narratives preserve Chinese tradition and culture in a strange land and serve to model cultural values. “Grandmother was full of wonderful surprises and delightful stories from another world—the world she called ‘back home in China,’” and Father tells talk-stories while teaching Jade Snow Chinese (29). He teaches her the talk-story of Wellington:

. . . an example of a small boy who followed absolutely the instructions of his father. He was told to guard the gate which opened into their grain fields, and he carried out the order to the point of defying a group of soldiers who wanted to take a short cut across these fields. He stood his ground with such determination that the calvary would have had to trample him before they could trample the grain crop. Of course Wellington won out. Thus, duty to one’s father came before the duty to one’s army. (5)

The talk-story encodes traditional Chinese values. Father also tells Jade Snow a talk-story appropriate for her first job outside the family factory:

When my father began his business training as an apprentice, one of the duties assigned to him was to sweep the floor daily. At times, he found a coin on the floor. Without a word, he picked up the coin each time and put it away. After many months, his employer complained. 'I do not know who can be trusted around here. I have been missing some coins.' Whereupon your grandfather calmly went to his quarters and produced all the salvaged coins, each wrapped carefully in a memorandum dated with the time your grandfather found it. He effectively proved himself to be trustworthy. (104)

Father again provides Jade Snow doctrines to pattern her life after. Within the autobiographical form, the talk-story shows "how stories can become powerful sources of strength, how they work differently for each generation, how they are but fragmentary bits that have to be translated, integrated, and reworked" (Fischer 210). In order to find her self, Wong must draw from these stories and create a new story.

Ritual proves another important way to reconstruct Chinese heritage and is another feature found in Chinese American works. When a turkey scares Jade Snow and she has nightmares, the family performs an established ceremony "to out the scare" (10). After candlelight chanting, Jade Snow drinks something mysterious: "It was an herb tea brewed in a pot from which she saw Grandmother remove her jade pendant, a piece of gold ore, and a pearl brooch. The presence of jewelry assured a 'calming' and 'precious' tea, they told her" (10). That night Jade Snow slept well.

When Jade Snow's baby brother is born, the family sends out Chinese baby announcements consisting of paper bags filled with "red eggs, a



section of chicken, and some slices of pickled white ginger root” (25). Guests bring money wrapped in paper for good luck. During the Chinese New Year celebration, callers stop by each day and avoid “unpleasant subjects, such as death, for that would also bring bad luck; therefore visitors uttered the most exaggerated flattering remarks and offered exaggerated good wishes”(37). Even the foods hold symbolic meaning: “In a Chinese gathering melon seeds took the place of cigarettes . . . The red and green colors, the fruit, the green plants, the flowering branches, the seeds, the sweets—all were propitious: they meant life, new life, a fruitful life, and a sweet life” (39). Callers give children coins wrapped in red paper for good luck. Firecrackers welcome spirits and scare away other evil spirits. During the Moon Festival the Wongs make and then eat special thick, sweet cakes. Father also teaches Jade Snow another important ritual—cooking rice.

Explaining Chinese customs and rituals makes Wong’s work readily intelligible to all audiences, a quality of men’s autobiographical tradition. Women authors, and particularly ethnic women authors, do not always conform to writing to a universal audience thereby avoiding any barriers to ready intelligibility. They write for themselves—it is a highly personal act. Maxine Hong Kingston does not explain every Chinese reference in The Woman Warrior, which acts to simultaneously draw those that are Chinese closer while excluding those that are not. Scholar Michael Fischer views the fragmentary or unexplained context of stories as part of the silence that traditionally shrouds Chinese custom (210). Deborah Woo

identifies the barriers to communication as a recurrent theme in Kingston's work—the reader experiences what Kingston herself does (190).

Wong's inclusion of rituals allows her audience to understand her Chinese heritage and compare it to American customs, just as Wong herself must do on her quest for identity. Wong encourages participation of the reader in the production of meaning by forcing the reader to make connections—"it is not merely descriptive of how ethnicity is experienced, but . . . activates in the reader a desire for *communitas* with others" (Fischer 233). Reader participation is another characteristic of Chinese American autobiography.

Silence as a theme is typical in women's autobiography; however, in Wong's and other Chinese American women's works, there is a thematic movement from silence to sound. Jade Snow starts to discover her voice. At Chinese night school, her teacher Mr. Dong catches her passing a note in class. He takes out a cane switch:

Jade Snow was terrified. Then indignation routed terror as it suddenly occurred to her that she need not necessarily submit . . . It was one thing to be stood out as a martyr for her friends, but nobody should whip her for it. According to Mama's and Daddy's instructions, she had never before argued with a teacher . . . 'Yes, I did pass a note, and for that perhaps I deserve to be stood out. But I am no more guilty than the girl who passed it to me, or the girl who had passed it to her, and even less fault are we than the girl who started it. If you whip me, you should also have here all the girls

from my row, with their palms outstretched. And I won't hold out my hand until I see theirs held out also!' (64)

Her words stunned them both. She did not know where they had come from, but she went on:

The new Jade Snow spoke again, "I speak only for what is right, and I will always question wrong in the way my Daddy has taught me. I am willing to bring him here to submit this matter to his judgment. Until then, I hold out no hand." (64)

Mr. Dong dismisses her. As Jade Snow goes home, "She was struck with this new idea of speaking for what she knew was right" (65).

Jade Snow begins to find her voice and assert her own individuality. However, this idea is against Chinese tradition which considers the family more important than the individual. Her desire for independence goes against her Chinese heritage: "In Chinese names, one's family name or 'last' name appears first, then the middle name, and one's given or 'first' name comes last" (78). Her struggle for identity creates family friction: "The difficulty centered around Jade Snow's desire for recognition as an individual" (90-91). But Jade Snow finds the hard work worth the opportunity "to be free of seething, undefined emotions which must be bottled up because they were not permitted" (114). Jade Snow wants to take part in social activities, but is not allowed. Even "Friendships were not carried on without their difficulty" (91). Father forbids Jade Snow to see her friend Gold Spring because "such companionship absorbed time from more worthwhile pursuits" (92). Jade Snow questions "the right of her parents to

demand unquestioning obedience from her at all times” (Yin and Paulson 54).

Jade Snow’s search for identity requires her to come to terms with a Chinese heritage that devalues women, a process that Kingston must also sort through. Although her Father learns some new philosophies, he still holds onto some old Chinese beliefs. He tells Jade Snow the importance of educating women: “If nobody educates his daughters, how can we have intelligent mothers for our sons?” (15). But it is not until Father gives a speech after the birth of a new baby boy that Jade Snow thinks more deeply about his prejudice:

Just one remark she had heard, however, marred the perfect celebration, and remained in her mind as she lay in bed after the guests had departed . . . “This joyfulness springs only from the fact that the child is at last a son, after three daughters born in the fifteen years between Blessing from Heaven and him. When Jade Precious Stone was born before him, the house was quiet. There was no such display.’ Under the comfortable warmth of her covers, Jade Snow turned over restlessly, trying to grasp the full meaning of that remark. Forgiveness from Heaven, because he was a brother, was more important to Mama and Daddy than dear baby sister Precious Stone, who was only a girl. But even more uncomfortable was the realization that she herself was a girl and, like her younger sister, unalterably less significant than the new son in their family. (27)

Jade Snow becomes “aware of the injustice of her apparent insignificance as a girl,” but her internal conflict over these values boils over when her

father will not support her higher education (Yin and Paulson 54). Wong decides to ask for help with college tuition because Father financed Older Brother's education. But her Father's answer is not what she expects:

You are quite familiar by now with the fact that it is sons who perpetuate our ancestral heritage by permanently bearing the Wong family name and transmitting it through their blood line, and therefore the sons must have priority over the daughters when parental provision for advantages must be limited by economic necessity. Generations of sons, bearing our Wong name, are those who make the pilgrimages to ancestral burial grounds and preserve them forever. Our daughters leave home at marriage to give sons to their husbands' families to carry on the heritage for other names. (108-9)

Father tells Jade Snow if she has talent then she can provide for herself. Jade Snow is left with some bitter questions:

How can Daddy know what an American advanced education can mean to me? Why should Older Brother be alone in enjoying the major benefits of Daddy's toil? There are no ancestral pilgrimages to be made in the United States! I can't help being born a girl. Perhaps, even being a girl, I don't want to marry, just to raise sons! I have a right to want more than sons! I am a person, besides being a female! Don't the Chinese admit that women also have feelings and minds? (109-10)

To gain her identity, Jade Snow questions these traditions that surround her. She feels trapped in a mesh of tradition woven thousands of miles

away by ancestors who don't know her. But at the same time, Jade Snow acknowledges that she owes much of her being and thinking to those ancestors and their tradition, and cannot believe that her background was meant to hinder her development in America or China. Jade Snow feels a middle ground exists for her, that her identity can be inclusive and reflective of her Chinese American heritage.

In order for Jade Snow's identity to include both of her heritages, she must compare and analyze Chinese and American ways. From the time she was a young girl, Jade Snow noticed differences between American and Chinese ways. At home, art was carefully practiced, correct calligraphy strokes. In American third grade, art expressed independence, and teachers encouraged free drawing. Jade Snow also found these differences in books: "Temporarily she forgot who she was, or the constant requirements of Chinese life, while she delighted in the adventures of the *Oz* books, the *Little Colonel*, *Yankee Girl*, and Western cowboys, for in these books there was absolutely nothing resembling her own life" (69).

As Jade Snow grows up, she gains practical experience of Chinese and American differences. One day Jade Snow hurts her hand on the playground, and her teacher holds her while she cries: "It was a very strange feeling to be held to a grown-up foreign lady's bosom. She could not remember when Mama had held her to give comfort. Daddy occasionally picked her up as a matter of necessity" (20). Jade Snow starts to compare American and Chinese ways, "and the comparison made her uncomfortable" (21).

Jade Snow seeks to discover the American world and found a room-and-board job in an American household to “at least escape from some of the continuous family friction” (103). She desires recognition as an individual, something she cannot gain in her Chinese family. Jade Snow’s “need to separate . . . to move from a received identity to an independent adult identity . . . is necessary as part of the normal identity-forming process” (Barker-Nunn 59). She makes her own decisions: “At no time did she consult her family about the various jobs; she simply told them when her mind was made up” (103). This job provides Jade Snow a first hand look at how an American family interacts:

For a considerable period of time, she was an intimate member of an American household, where she observed its occupants early and late, moving in a pattern completely different from her own Chinese background. It was a home where children were heard as well as seen; where parents considered who was right or wrong, rather than who should be respected; where birthday parties were a tradition, complete with lighted birthday cakes, where the husband kissed his wife and the parents kissed their children; where the Christmas holidays meant fruit cake, cookies, presents, and gay parties; where the family was actually concerned with having fun together and going out to play together; where the problems and difficulties of domestic life and children’s discipline were untangled, perhaps after tears, but also after explanations; where the husband turned over his pay check to his wife to pay the bills; and where, above all, each member, even down to including the dog, appeared to

have the inalienable right to assert his individuality— in fact, where that was expected—in atmosphere of natural affection. (113-14)

Wong discovers freedoms that do not exist in her own family life. Affection, unity, equality, these were all a part of an American family. Individuality was a right, even for children.

Sociology class shatters what is left of Jade Snow's "constructed conception of the order of things" (125). Her instructor educates her on how in America today children are recognized as individuals. Parents can no longer demand unquestioning obedience because children have their rights too. Wong attempts to translate this idea into her own life experiences. Her parents and Older Brother demand unquestioning obedience, but by what right? Jade Snow affirms her own rights: "I am an individual besides being a Chinese daughter" (125).

Education and experience cause Jade Snow to reevaluate her own relationship with her family and her Father. This reevaluation leads to a clash over Jade Snow's desired independence. Her new world views conflict with her Father's, who wonders "What would happen to the order of this household if each of you four children started to behave like individuals?" (128). Wong attempts to explain her search for autonomy to her parents:

Both of you should understand that I am growing up to be a woman in a society greatly different from the one you knew in China . . . Of course independence is not safe. But safety isn't the only consideration. You must give me freedom to find some answers for myself. (129)



The Wongs do not understand Jade Snow's longing for independence, her quest for her own life. Jade Snow struggles with her own desires for selfhood and with her parents' beliefs that what she seeks is a mistake. Jade Snow cannot discard everything her parents stand for and substitute American philosophy. Deciding for herself is not such a simple thing: "It took very little thought to discover that the foreign philosophy also was subject to criticism, and that for her there had to be a middle way" (130-31). Jade Snow discovers that the middle way means an identity inclusive of her Chinese and American roots: "There was good to be gained from both concepts if she could extract and retain her own personally applicable combination" (131).

For Jade Snow the pursuit of her Chinese American identity means a fulfillment of her dream for higher education. She wins a scholarship to attend Mills, a private women's college. Education reinforces her vie for independence. On campus she discovers "that she was accepted as an equal wherever she went" (157). Again, Jade Snow learns her thoughts hold value: "She was being led gradually to reverse her lifelong practice, enforced by her parents, of keeping to herself what she thought" (163). At home Jade Snow slips back into "the role of the obedient Chinese girl. But now she no longer felt stifled or dissatisfied, for she could return to another life in which she fitted as an individual" (168). Wong's multiplistic "I" allows her to reconcile and sustain her self in the old world of her parents and her new world of independence and individuality.

While in college, Jade Snow takes a pottery making class and instantly falls in love with the art. Art provides a connection between Father and

daughter, and marks a turning point in their relationship. He shares a talk-story of his own father:

You may not know this . . . but my father, your grandfather, was artistically inclined and very interested in handwork. He always said that a person who knew a craft trade would be a better person, for he would have the assurance of never starving. When I was only a young boy he made me apprentice in a slipper shop for three years to learn to sew on slipper soles by hand, to be sure that I knew at least one handcraft well. I received no wages but paid fourteen dollars a year for instruction. Your grandfather thought that slippers would be an item always in public demand. He would have been happy to see your work. (179-80)

Jade Snow and her Father find a bridge in their relationship, a place where they can learn to respect each other as individuals.

After Jade Snow completes school, she decides to make a contribution by getting a war job. This is the only world event Wong portrays in her autobiography. Women's autobiographies have traditionally emphasized world events far less and instead focused on their personal lives and, in the process, have ignored their careers. Wong does indeed emphasize her personal life more, but also focuses on her career aspirations. Her identity directs her goals and her future.

College placement advises Jade Snow to find a job among "her own." Alienation is another motif that marks Wong and other Chinese American's works. These women suffocate under the constraints of Chinese life, a heritage they are outsiders to growing up in America. At

the same time, they suffer the prejudices of being Chinese in America. Cultural barriers, whether they are Chinese or American, will not hold her back.

Shortly after Jade Snow finds a job, she discovers that her mother is pregnant. Their relationship begins to change as Jade Snow sees that Mother needs her companionship and support. At the same time that Jade Snow welcomes the change, it is also very disconcerting. She is shocked to witness their humanness and their need for her. As Jade Snow creates and seeks her identity, her relationship with her parents also has to be refashioned.

When Jade Snow wins a statewide essay contest, she feels the pride of her Father and her community. For the first time Father “held out his hand in a sincere gesture of respect for his daughter” (196). The Chinese community offers their congratulations to Father for Wong’s “actions require that her family and her community recognize her independence and that Chinese American women can be persons in their own right” (Yin and Paulson 55).

Jade Snow delights in her new found Chinese American identity. She moves “with increasing confidence and pleasure in the Western world, but she was also taking pleasure in rediscovering her Chinese community” (211). She decides to make pottery for a living, a living that would mean independence: “She could call her soul her own, strike her own tempo as she carved her own niche. How far she would get would depend on how hard she wanted to work, not on anyone else’s whims or prejudices” (236). Jade Snow sets up a small pottery studio at home and begins to throw pots.

Mother ignores Jade Snow and Father silently supports her efforts by giving her a motor and cabinets.

After she has over three hundred pieces, Jade Snow decides it is time to start her pottery business. She rents out a storefront window in a Chinatown shop. Jade Snow sits in the front window attracting passersby as she throws pottery. This image of Jade Snow in the window is a visual metaphor for her creation of a Chinese American identity. She sits upon the potters wheel with her hair braided in traditional Chinese fashion, “the way they wear them in Shanghai” (244). She works with California clay to create a finished product traditional of Chinese pottery. Chinese and American elements come together to create something beautiful and unique.

Jade Snow moves from victim to victor, another element of Chinese American autobiography. Jade Snow knows what it is like to live without independence, without being valued as a woman, without racial equality. She desires her individuality and her rights, and she goes after them persistently. The old stories, no longer valid, give way to the new story, the articulation of Jade Snow’s victorious pursuit for identity.

Jade Snow’s search for identity and zest for independence finally alter her relationship with her parents: “Where there was formerly only tolerance toward their peculiar fifth daughter whom no one could understand, the tolerance was now tinged by an attitude of respect” (245). Her parent’s regard strengthens Jade Snow’s belief in herself and her identity as a Chinese American woman. Appropriately, Wong’s autobiography ends with her Father’s talk-story:

When I first came to America, my cousin wrote me from China and asked me to return. That was before I can even tell you where you were. But I still have a carbon copy of the letter I wrote him in reply. I said, You do not realize the shameful and degraded position into which the Chinese culture has pushed its women. Here in America, the Christian concept allows women their freedom and individuality. I wish my daughters to have this Christian opportunity. I am hoping that some day I may be able to claim that by my stand I have washed away the former disgraces suffered by the women of our family . . . And who would have thought that you, my Fifth Daughter Jade Snow, would prove today that my words of many years ago were words of true prophecy? (246)

Jade Snow's search for identity shifts some of her Father's perceptions. Her questioning and rejecting "Chinese conventions which no longer apply in the context of the duality of experience she faces" challenges her Father to reexamine his own beliefs (Yin and Paulson 56).

Ending with this talk-story leaves the reader with the impression of a work, a life, in process. Jade Snow has only just started to come into her own and enjoy herself and her new business. Wong's autobiographical form serves as a guide on her quest for self, a quest for "A Person as well as Female" to borrow chapter thirteen's title. She selectively repudiates outmoded or irrelevant norms from both cultures and adapts tradition to encompass her unique identity as a Chinese American woman. Wong recognizes the paradox that "ethnicity is something reinvented and

reinterpreted in each generation by each individual,” and she seeks an identity inclusive of both her cultures (Fischer 196).

The new patterns of autobiography that weave through Wong’s Fifth Chinese Daughter emerge, as well, in the autobiographical literature of later Chinese American women. Both content and form do not subscribe to any singular tradition, consequently their autobiographies often defy categorization. Other genres frequently spill over, and talk-story pervades the text as they search for identity as Chinese American women. This search is at the heart of their autobiographies. It is more than a retelling of their lives; it is an active quest for their place in a world where they straddle two cultures, and belong to neither. Alienation and a movement from silence to voice are two strongly present themes. Not only must these women find a separateness and individuality from their parents, but at the same time they must unravel what it means to be Chinese and what it means to be American. They must sort through, compare, analyze, and then draw from these traditions elements supportive of their identity as Chinese American women. The story these women tell also moves from victim to victor. They progress beyond the devaluation of women by the Chinese culture, the prejudices of the American world, the binds of their parents’ strict values, and discover their own inner warriors. They achieve an identity self-sustaining of their status as Chinese American women. Chinese American writers leave the reader with the impression of a work, a life, in process. The conclusion of the autobiography is open-ended providing no definite closure, just like life. They create a new tradition by weaving together elements from both men and women’s autobiographical

tradition. Thirty years after Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston continues the foundations of a new literary tradition.

### Chapter 3: New Autobiographical Traditions in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography The Woman Warrior reveals the importance of her Chinese roots, the American transformation of these roots, and her own human identity. This first book by Kingston is a talk-story combining legend with reality. Like Jade Snow Wong's text, Kingston's book is not easily categorized or recognized as an autobiography: "Kingston breaks up the usual distinctions between fact and fantasy, and so separates the book from traditional chronological autobiography" (Homsher 93). Kingston weaves old autobiographical traditions with her own unique conventions to reach her unique Chinese American identity.

Some scholars find fault with Kingston's lack of standard autobiographical tradition, and the consequent difficulty in correctly categorizing The Woman Warrior (Wong 249). Critic Frank Chin attacks Kingston for the way she distorts Chinese folklore and legends (Wong 252-53). However, most scholars celebrate Kingston's performance as an autobiographer. Scholar Shirley Goek-lin Lim labels the text as feminist due to its "persistent constructions and reproductions of female identity, the continuous namings of female presences, characters, heroines, and figures" (Lim 261). Paul Eakin calls her book "a complex mixture of deference and defiance" (259). Suzanne Juhasz names Kingston's story as an embodiment of "the search for identity in the narrative act" (173).

Regardless of the critical controversy over Kingston's style, she "has become the first Asian American writer to become accepted into the American literary canon. According to the Modern Language Association



of America, The Woman Warrior has become the most widely taught book by a living writer in the U.S. colleges and universities” (Chun 85). The difficulty in classification is part of the book’s wide appeal:

In its exploration of the shifting line between history and memory, fiction and on-fiction, dream and fact, Kingston challenges western rational ways of seeing, classifying, ordering. Indeed, the very difficulty of categorizing Kingston’s work (fictive autobiography) may cause us to question the very notion of categories, the dichotomous classifications upon which our systems of logic depend. (Johnston 136)

The combination of reality and myth is only one element in Kingston’s autobiographical technique. Kingston, like Jade Snow Wong, creates her autobiography by utilizing a montage of old traditions and new conventions.

Kingston similarly follows women’s autobiographical tradition by writing subjectively, defying categorization, and reinscribing race and gender in the title of her book. But unlike Wong, Kingston also employs other traits from women’s autobiographical tradition by writing in a non-linear, fragmented style and blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. Kingston’s use of Wong’s techniques creates a tradition of Chinese American women’s autobiography.

The intermingling of dreams and stories describes Kingston’s own style in The Woman Warrior. Memories, legends, and fiction are masterfully woven together so that the reader must share the untangling and understanding with Kingston. Kingston expects her audience to have to think: "Readers ought not to expect reading always be as effortless as

watching television" (Kingston "Cultural Mis-readings" 65). Kingston admits to including puns for Chinese speakers only, visual puns for those who write Chinese, and even private jokes only she understands in the hope that her writing "has many layers, as human beings have layers" (Kingston "Cultural Mis-readings" 65). At the same time that this format draws reader participation and offers different meanings for each reader, it creates barriers to ready intelligibility breaking men's autobiographical tradition.

The search and struggle for identity is at the heart of Kingston's autobiography just as it is in Wong's. Kingston poses her questions to readers like herself:

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? (5-6)

Kingston's search for identity involves awareness of both her Chinese and American backgrounds as well as a sense of gender—what it means to be a woman straddling these two cultures.

As young girls, both Wong and Kingston learn their status as Chinese women in their culture and their family. Kingston realizes her Great-Uncle's shame of having nieces. On Saturday mornings when he did the shopping he would yell, "Get your coats, whoever's coming," only to roar "No girls!" if he heard the answering voices of girls. Later the boys would return with candy and toys. At her Great-Uncle's funeral, Kingston

“secretly tested out feeling glad that he was dead--the six-foot bearish masculinity of him” (47). Years from then she still feels the inequality:

I went away to college—Berkeley in the sixties—and I studied, and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy. I would have liked to bring myself back as a boy for my parents to welcome with chickens and pigs. That was for my brother, who returned alive from Vietnam. (47)

The devaluation of Kingston’s gender by her own culture, as well as by her own family, was a painful realization—one that spun Kingston into questioning her own identity as Chinese and female for many years. Like Wong, Kingston must come to terms with her heritage, sort through what it means to be Chinese and American, and forge a more supportive middle ground.

Kingston’s mother builds China, and the culturally imposed silence, around her with talk-stories just as Wong’s Father did. Each night her mother would talk-story until she 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” (19). Like Wong learns to live inside and outside her family and culture, Kingston must also resolve how to remain connected and yet separate from her mother.

Brave Orchid tells the story of the No Name Woman, Kingston’s Aunt, who becomes the basis for Kingston’s reflection on Chinese culture and on her role as a woman. The Aunt becomes pregnant when her husband has been away for years. But no one said anything. It was not discussed. The villagers raided the Aunt’s house on the night the baby was to be born.

They threw mud, rocks, and eggs, slaughtered the stock, and destroyed the furnishings and clothing inside. The Aunt gave birth in the pigsty, then drowned herself and the child in the family well. Brave Orchid ends this cruel tale with her lesson: "Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are very watchful" (5). Her mother intends the story to be warning about sexual behavior, but Kingston interprets the story as cultural intimidation of a woman. She takes it as a warning to resist being victimized because of gender by her Chinese culture.

Kingston's Aunt continues to be punished by her people through their silence, for "The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her" (16). In The Feminist Dictionary, Adrienne Rich defines silence: "In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence" (Kramarae 418). The family's silencing of the Aunt's story strips her of name, family, and life, something she cannot escape even in death. Only the No Name Woman's talk-story lives on, a story Kingston "devote[s] pages of paper" to telling; it is the life story of a Chinese woman that should not be forgotten.

As a woman and an artist, Kingston feels compelled to give voice to her Aunt's story:

What I am doing as an artist, a writer, and a human being, is saying I am going to give her back her life. I'm bringing her to life and I'm going to make all of us face her. We're going to find meaning for her

life and rescue her, give her life and immortality by writing it down.

(Kingston Interview)

Moving from silence to voice is another reappearing element in Wong and Kingston's autobiographies. Even though *Brave Orchid* warns Kingston not to tell anyone the stories, Kingston gives up her silence empowering herself and the women before her.

Kingston grows up with the ghost of the No Name Woman in her nightmares, but also learns and dreams about heroines and swordswomen. It was not until later that Kingston remembered she had heard the "chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father's place in battle." She had followed her mother around the house, the two of them singing Fa Mu Lan's glory. It is this very story that empowers Kingston:

I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (20)

In the next section of the book, Kingston herself becomes the Warrior.

The Woman Warrior's talk-story is told in first person, as if functioning like Kingston's brave alter ego. In men's autobiographical tradition, they often idealize their lives or make themselves appear heroic. Kingston distorts this tradition in order to create a myth more supportive and self-sustaining of her status as a Chinese American woman.

An old man and woman train her from the age of seven to become a warrior. One day they take her to the mountains of the white tigers, a place

where the "mountain peak [was] three feet high from the sky" (24). There they leave her alone without water or a weapon. It was then that Kingston knew, "I would have to survive bare-handed" (24). In an act of conflation, Kingston, now allied with the woman warrior, becomes a survival artist, facing nature the same way she must face her own untamable Chinese culture.

Kingston's quest for self takes form as the Woman Warrior's story. She successfully makes her way back to the old people who feed her "hot vegetable soup." The soup becomes a metaphor for the many talk-stories her mother feeds Kingston's well-being. Her journey down the mountain is the ultimate obstacle course through nature, often harsh and cruel yet full of miracles. Similarly on her journey, Kingston must fight off old beliefs and old stories that do not apply to her as a Chinese American woman, while simultaneously allowing her ancestors and her culture to feed into her identity.

As the Woman Warrior, Kingston trains mentally: "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes" (29). Kingston must wrestle with paradoxes in her search for identity. One critic, Linda Hunt, illuminates her quest:

How does she reconcile her loyalty to a heritage that devalues, insults women? She has been raised to experience and to require a powerful identification with her family and community and yet as a woman cannot simply accept a place in the culture that calls people of her sex maggots and slave . . . If she identifies with the community she must accept and even endorse her own humiliation . . . Try as she

does she cannot simply overlook patriarchal biases of Chinese culture. (3-4)

Kingston's unique positioning as a Chinese American woman requires new myths, for she must make peace with her heritage. As the modified woman warrior, Kingston can have revenge against her background and honor it (Hunt 11).

Kingston again modifies myths when the Woman Warrior is called to battle in place of her father. Donned in men's clothes and armor with her hair tied back, Kingston becomes in a sense "unisex," able to exhibit virtues considered manly and retain her womanhood. Kingston at last has her wish to be a boy and experience a boy's privileges. But she alters history, "My army did not rape, only taking food where there was an abundance. We brought order wherever we went" (37).

In this newly-created order, she marries and becomes pregnant. During the last four months, she wears "armor altered so that I looked like a powerful, big man" (39). The Woman Warrior is a respected leader in battle and able to experience motherhood. This conjoining surpasses those mythical boundaries of male/female, where each has a proper place and role. In Kingston's world, with the Woman Warrior as her role model, she can have it all.

When the woman warrior reaches the enemy baron, Kingston must face her own culture's devaluation of girls. The unknowing baron attempts to appeal for his life man-to-man, "Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them. 'Girls are maggots in the rice.' 'It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters'" (43).

Transformed by the Woman Warrior, Kingston demands that he regret what he has done before she kills him but he says he has done nothing wrong. The Woman Warrior cuts off his head, and, in the process, Kingston literally allows herself to disconnect from this part of her self-depreciating Chinese heritage.

In Kingston's real life there occurs such a war on her "village." Like Wong, Kingston must fight for her individuality and identity. She rebels by trying not to be a girl. She stops earning A's "for her future husband's family," refuses to cook, and cracks dishes. Her mother would yell, "Bad girl," and for Kingston "that made me gloat rather than cry. Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?" (47).

Kingston wants to be a boy, to live the appreciated, valued boy's life. The Woman Warrior gives her the power while remaining a woman. Kingston tests this power in the real world. At her job in an art supply house, the boss asks her to order more "nigger yellow" paint. Kingston tries to wield her sword: "I don't like that word, I had to say in my bad, small-person's voice that makes no impact. The boss never deigned to answer" (48). Later when she works at a land developer's association, the boss purposely plans to hold a banquet at a restaurant that bars ethnic customers. Kingston refuses to type the invitations and is fired. Although Kingston fails to deal with oppressors, she accomplishes something by speaking out in the silence.

The Woman Warrior is evolving within Kingston, breaking silence and calling attention to injustice. Kingston admits to herself, "I mustn't feel bad that I haven't done as well as the swordswoman did; after all, no bird



called me, no wise old people tutored me. I have no magic beads, no water gourd sight, no rabbit that will jump in the fire when I'm hungry" (49). She lacks the magical inspiration and intervention of her mythical hero, the Woman Warrior, but she continues to wrestle with important issues that an obedient Chinese woman would discard as inappropriate. Kingston feels the Woman Warrior inside, struggling to understand, to find her identity and find her place in the world around her.

Kingston needs to hear the old sayings and stories. She must deal with the contradiction that her own parents love her, and yet can say, "When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls,' because that is what one says about daughters" (52). Both Wong and Kingston must untangle parental and cultural issues simultaneously to find their identity. Kingston is slowly piecing together her own existence, facing the puzzling realities of past and present, China and America, woman as slave and woman as warrior, and finding glimmers of her own identity and her own voice (Wang 28). Her power, her vengeance comes in the form of words: "I have so many words--'chink' words and 'gook' words too—that . . . do not fit on my skin" (53).

This long journey of words leads Kingston into the next section of her book, "Shaman." Here she relives the past, her mother's life in China, and her father's life alone in America. Wong and Kingston must tell the their stories and their family stories, "they need to tell the one to tell the other; individual lives appear to have little meaning out of the context of history and family" (Barker-Nunn 57). Kingston learns that her mother was a

doctor in China, and spins a talk-story that fills in the gaps with her imagination.

Kingston makes her a descendant of the Woman Warrior—smart and strong. Her roommates dare Brave Orchid to sleep in the haunted dormitory room. As the Warrior, Kingston's mother "may have been afraid, but she would be a dragoness. She could make herself not weak. During danger she fanned out her dragon claws and riffled her red sequin scales and unfolded her coiling green stripes" (67). The ghost had "no power over strong women" (70).

The tale of Brave Orchid fight against the "Sitting Ghost" contains many rituals. Wong and Kingston use rituals as another important way to reconstruct Chinese heritage in their autobiographies. Brave Orchid has her roommates tweak her ears and call her name in case she has lost any of her self. To drive out the ghost, they fill the room with smoke and their chanting.

Kingston creates a talk-story utilizing Chinese ritual in which Brave Orchid is a warrior, a woman she can use as a role model. Her mother is strong, brave, intelligent, and powerful enough to chase away a ghost. Kingston chases her own ghosts, trying to find her place in a society where the Chinese culture and even her parents devalue being female. Brave Orchid's Sitting Ghost murders unjustly, as society unjustly confines and murders females. Kingston draws on her mother's warrior qualities and talk-stories searching for her own unique identity and voice. But at the same time, Kingston must face the paradoxes of Brave Orchid's personality and the Chinese society that created her.

The next section of the book, "The Western Tradition," is the story of Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid's sister, and what can happen to a woman when she doesn't find the warrior within. Kingston again relates her talk-story as if she were her mother. Moon Orchid's husband never sent for her from China, so Brave Orchid arranges for her to come to the United States and face her husband. Moon Orchid brings Kingston a gift from China, a paper-doll of Fa Mu Lan, the Woman Warrior, garbed in robes that swirled about her as she drew her sword. By the end of this section, it is clear that although Kingston's mother understands the significance of the Woman Warrior, her Aunt—Moon Orchid—does not. After months of living in a strange land and facing the rejection of her husband, Moon Orchid retreats into madness. Brave Orchid explains her sister's insanity: "The difference between mad people and sane people is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over" (159). Kingston learns that stories change from telling to telling according to the needs of the listener, the needs of the day. Part of writing this book and discovering Kingston's own identity was to keep her sanity: "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity" (186).

Kingston's own assimilation is the focus of the final section, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe." As a young girl, Kingston attends American school during the day and Chinese school in the evening. Caught up between these two cultures, Kingston has a hard time finding her voice, "Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine.

Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans” (172).

Kingston finds a voice, however faltering, as do most of the other children, except for “one girl who could not speak up even in Chinese school” (172).

Kingston decides that she hates the girl, “the quiet one,” and she must help her.

One day after American school, Kingston meets up with the quiet girl and tells her “You’re going to talk.” Kingston circles the girl, hating her fragility, her silence. She pinches her cheeks, pulls her hair, and demands for her to tell her to stop. The quiet girl’s silence infuriates Kingston:

Why won’t you talk? . . . I want to know why. And you’re going to tell me why. Don’t you see I’m trying to help you out, do you? Do you want to be like this, dumb . . . your whole life? . . . What are you going to do for a living? Yeah, you’re going to have to work because you can’t be a housewife. And you, you are a plant. Do you know that? That’s all you are if you don’t talk. If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality . . . You’ve got to let people know you have a personality and a brain. (180)

Kingston thinks she can teach the girl a valuable life lesson she herself has learned—to stand up and not be a victim. She pushes too hard, too aggressively, just as Brave Orchid pushes her sister Moon Orchid into facing her husband and the American community. Kingston discovers that she must manifest the Woman Warrior in herself with wisdom and control, be assertive without being aggressive, and devise a creative form that can help her shed light on her identity.

The day comes when Kingston must separate from her parents and forge her own identity. She tells her mother that she can and will carve her own destiny: “I can make a living and take care of myself . . . I won’t let you turn me into a slave or a wife” (201). Kingston and Wong face their parents with her desire for independence and freedom. Similarly, Kingston leaves home in order to “sort out what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (205). Kingston has set out to carve her own destiny, one that need not be ineffectual like Moon Orchid’s. Kingston seeks a life in which she can sort out the value of her mother’s talk-stories without being hampered by her.

To achieve this, Kingston must tell one last talk-story, the story of the ancient Chinese poetess, Ts’ai Yen. When she was twenty years old, Ts’ai Yen was kidnapped and held for twelve years. During this time she sang songs of China and her family. After the poetess was ransomed and married, “She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is ‘Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,’ a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well” (209). Kingston ends her book here with the important message Ts’ai Yen sent to her—she must pass on her own songs in her own creative way: writing. Kingston and Wong’s texts end with a talk-story, creating the sense of more to come, that there is more yet to learn. Kingston has many more stories to share, her life and her search is an ongoing process.

Ts’ai Yen is a survival artist, as are the Woman Warrior and Brave Orchid. She is another marvelous Chinese role model amidst a traditional

Chinese culture that devalues girls and women. As the Woman Warrior is assertive, the early Chinese poetess is creative, demonstrating to Kingston the art of survival through assertiveness and creative expression. Kingston pieces herself together as warrior, poetess, woman, Chinese, and American. She creates for herself an identity that will allow her to construct “memories and stories into a pattern that will educate her to come to terms and go on” (97). Kingston has created for herself a valued, reconstructed identity as a Chinese American woman.

Kingston and Wong move from victim to victor in their texts. Kingston is able to move beyond the victimization represented in the stories of Chinese women. She emerges a warrior, in control of her own life and destiny. The Woman Warrior is Maxine Hong Kingston’s quest for identity, to “figure out what was [her] village” as a Chinese American woman (45). Armed with Brave Orchid’s talk-stories of Fa Mu Lan and of her own similar warrior-like life, Kingston learns that she, too, can be a warrior. But first, Kingston had to “pilgrimage” to find a balance between community and an autonomous identity much like Jade Snow Wong sought to do (Rose 7). Through her book, Kingston works her way to comparable enlightenment. The tale of the ancient Chinese poetess Ts’ai Yen, raises a new issue for Kingston, that of the value of creative expression. Kingston can be a creator. She can write her own story, and The Woman Warrior is that story of Kingston's struggle for identity as a Chinese American woman. She ends this struggle with her refusal to become a victim. Kingston survives her "tests," and "surviving is the other side of being a victim" (Kramarae 471).

“Kingston breaks traditions/taboo of both cultures in order to create her own unique cross-cultural Chinese/American reality/myth,” and to achieve her identity as a Chinese American woman (Rose 11). She uses the narrative process “to refuse the cultural negations she describes and to claim her femaleness as a source of strength both rooted in her cultural heritage and affirmed beyond that heritage. In doing so, she enriches her bi-cultural literary heritage and makes it truly her own” (Frye 300). Wong and Kingston draw from men and women's autobiographical tradition and combine them with their own conventions to forge a new autobiographical tradition—a tradition more representative of their unique heritage as Chinese American women.

**Chapter 4: Autobiographical Elements in the Fiction of  
Edna Wu's *Clouds & Rain: A China-to-America Memoir* (1994) and  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)**

“Good fiction is true and good biography is true.”  
Maxine Hong Kingston

Believability is often what makes a novel successful. Being able to make the story and the characters come to life for the reader is the art of creative writing. Just as Jade Snow Wong and Maxine Hong Kingston blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club* and Edna Wu in *Clouds & Rain: A China-to-America Memoir* achieve “realistic fiction” by blurring those same boundaries. Amy Tan and Edna Wu parallel elements and structure similar to that in the autobiographical works of Kingston and Wong. As critic Carolyn Heilbrun notes, the literary world is “only just beginning . . . to understand the way autobiography works in fiction, and fiction in autobiography” (118). As scholars begin to acknowledge autobiography as creative fiction, they must also acknowledge the existence of fiction as creative autobiography (Yin and Paulson 59).

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* exhibits close structural and stylistic elements to the autobiographies of Kingston and Wong. Tan clearly overlaps fiction and autobiography by weaving in her and her mother's life stories throughout the novel. Not only do the lines between fact and fiction blur, but also the very definitions of genre—what is fiction and what is autobiography.

The novel is a series of talk-stories told in first person through multiple narrators, four sets of mothers and daughters. The existence of multiple narrators, mother-daughter relationships, and talk-story are key elements



which reappear in the works of Chinese American women. Scholar David Leiwei Li cites a dual purpose for the existence of multiple narrators:

Together, the multiple stories unfold a message that the ethnic woman cannot authorize herself without a full recognition of the shared stories of her gender and her race. The multiple narration also encourages the reader to participate in the narrative acts creating a talk-story community in which both the speaker and listener are involved in a powerful creation of themselves. (329)

Identity is a communal construction. To find themselves, these daughters must first understand their mothers and their Chinese ways. In that search for understanding, each woman is then able to gain a better understanding of herself.

The chapters switch narrators as they tell their life stories, resulting in a “cyclical rather than linear form” as in Kingston and Wu (Pratt 11). Of course experimentation in narrative technique and order are much more acceptable in the genre of fiction. What is unusual, and challenges literary criticism and the genre, is that both Chinese American women’s autobiographies and fiction use similar structural and narrative elements blurring the boundaries between fiction and autobiography.

Tan spills over into autobiography by incorporating her and her mother’s life stories into her novel. The story revolves around the death of Jing-mei “June’s” mother and her dying resolution to find the babies she left behind in the war. It is up to June, who coincidentally or not is a copywriter, to meet her Chinese sisters and find closure for her mother. Tan’s mother, Daisy, actually did flee China and her abusive husband leaving behind her

little girls (“Tan” 559). After a brush with death, Daisy made the trip with Tan to see them. So both Tan and June did travel to China to meet their half-sisters for the first time. Tan felt an instant bonding: “There was something about this country that I belonged to. I found something about myself that I never knew was there” (“Tan” 561). The novel ends with June’s similar thoughts: “And now I see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go” (Tan 288). These final words leave the impression of a work in progress —June’s awareness will lead her to enrichment and experience.

In another talk-story, the mother An-mei Hsu tells about her childhood in China. Her mother’s name was Jing-mei, Tan’s grandmother’s name. In the story, a wealthy merchant rapes Jing-mei and forces her to become his fourth wife. Jing-mei returns home for her mother’s death and leaves taking her child, An mei, back to her husband’s household. Deeply unhappy and painfully aware of her circumstances, Jing-mei commits suicide by swallowing raw opium buried in New Year’s rice cakes. This is Tan’s grandmother’s story as told to her by her mother (“Tan” 559). Jing-mei’s story is similar to the No Name Woman’s in Kingston’s novel who also escapes by committing suicide. Tan and Kingston give voice to their forgotten stories.

Telling the stories was cathartic for Tan and her mother: “It was a way for her to exorcise her demons, and for me to finally listen and empathize and learn what memory means, and what you can change about the past”

(Yall 4E). Her mother's stories also form the basis for Tan's second book, The Kitchen God's Wife.

In addition to crossing the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, Tan's novel also exhibits similar structural elements. Ritual is an important element that ties the story to the book's title, The Joy Luck Club. June's mother started the Joy Luck Club during the war. She invited three other women to gather with her at each corner of the mah jong table. Each week one of them would host a party to raise money and to raise spirits. The hostess would serve special foods to bring good fortune: "dumplings shaped like silver money ingots, long rice noodles for long life, boiled peanuts for conceiving sons, and of course, many good-luck oranges for a plentiful, sweet life" (Tan 23). After eating, the women would play mah jong and talk about good times and the good times yet to come. The ritual kept out the bad thoughts of the war, and gave the women hope: ". . . each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy. And that's how we came to call our little parties Joy Luck" (Tan 25).

When June's mother tells her the stories of the Joy Luck Club and her life in China, she believes most of them are fairy tales because the endings always change. Like Kingston, June's mother adapts her stories. She wants to educate her daughter about more than her life, but about China and growing up, what Tan identifies her parents as wanting for her: "They wanted us to have American circumstances and Chinese character" ("Tan" 560). June's mother, and the other mothers, do not want their daughters to be alienated from China and their heritage. But it is not just their country that the daughters are alienated from, but their mothers too. And they both

feel that separation: “I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese” (Tan 34). The framework of the novel also emphasizes their multiple realities: “Each section of the novel actually creates a different version of femininity and ethnicity” (Schueller 80). As the novel progresses, each daughter must learn about herself, her heritage through her mother’s eyes, and her own identity as a Chinese American woman.

Edna Wu’s Clouds & Rain is a fictitious autobiography about Yun’s search for identity in America. Told in first person, the book opens with an admission from Yun:

After a few weeks of tears and pain, I finally killed the angel of love in me and was able to reconstruct this damned funny book. Really, I have no talent for writing. Sometimes, I stood aside, trying to view myself as a cool outsider; but most of the time I simply threw in my fragments of diary. (6)

This preamble establishes the format of the autobiography—a loosely configured memoir pieced together from diary entries, dreams, poetry, and Chinese myth. This format is very similar to Kingston’s in that the story is told through many media, and does not follow any chronological order. The narrator also shifts between first person and third person, creating an awareness of Yun as simultaneously an insider and an outsider in her own story, a technique similar to Wong’s autobiography. Yun involves the reader much like Kingston by addressing them as “you.”

Also similar to the works of Kingston, Wong, and Tan, the search for identity is at the forefront. This theme echoes strongly throughout the novel with key references to the title, Clouds & Rain. The first page of the book

quotes Joseph Brodsky, “In the new life, a cloud is better than the bright sun. The rain, akin to self-knowledge, appears perpetual.” Yun writes in a diary entry that she “wanders lonely like a cloud” (Wu 24). Later in the work, it is revealed that Yun means cloud, “that’s me, either a dustball along the street or a cloud wandering in the sky” (Wu 116). Yun is searching for self-knowledge, to find her identity as a Chinese American, as a woman and as a sexual being.

Yun comes to America to attend college, and realizes that here, as a citizen, she “should have some identity” (Wu 129). And with that comes some reevaluation: “In China every citizen is taught to become the master of the country by strangling the master of the self; but in America there is no master of the country but the master of the self” (Wu 220). Yun, like Wong, Kingston and the character’s in Tan’s novel, grew up translating what is American, what is Chinese, and their own human identity in their struggle to become liberated beings (Wu 36).

For Yun the struggle for identity and assimilation differs from both Kingston and Wong’s, but aligns closely with the mothers’ experiences in Tan’s novel. Yun grew up in China, not among American customs. And she grew up learning that, “A married daughter is like water poured outside - no longer belonging to the family” (Wu 68). She must resolve her fear of losing her Chinese self and her fear of her changing self. After not speaking Chinese for a month, Yun thinks she must be forgetting her mother tongue. That night she dreams of this fear, which appears in the book in the form of a poem. In it, Yun keeps reverting back to English while speaking to a Chinese colleague and he finally walks away “like a

stranger” (Wu 65). The poem tells the story of Yun’s fears, of losing part of Chinese tradition and her self.

In order for Yun to face her fears she has to find her voice, just as Kingston and Wong did before her. In China, Yun writes of how women would mutilate themselves as a form of speech: “To prove her determination, she shaves off her ears and blinds her eyes. Then people can hear through her body” (Wu 24). In America, Yun has the freedom to express her thoughts and feelings and pursue them. Yun moves from silence to voice and discovers “Articulation helped her gain a new equilibrium” (Wu 41).

Just as Kingston, Wong, and Tan utilize talk-story and myth to tell their stories, Wu also incorporates dreams, poems, and metaphors. Wu utilizes Chinese metaphors such as “Like Cowherd and Weaving Maid, they were eternally separated by the Pacific Ocean” (Wu 74). Unlike Kingston, who leaves some Chinese references unexplained, Wu provides a footnote on the meaning of the Chinese folktale. Disclosing this information allows the reader to participate in Yun’s story.

Yun’s search for identity is much more complex than Kingston and Wong’s, in that she also explores her identity as a sexual being. Yun flashes back and tells the story of her husband Long, and how according to Chinese custom, going to his village indicates a relationship (Wu 212). In the present, Yun and Long are separated and Yun explores her feelings for Ramon, a married college professor. Again, Yun writes a poem to express her love for Ramon and the complications of a relationship. The lines again reference the title of the book: “Without clouds and rain / the

friendship won't last long / With clouds and rain / the friendship won't last long" (Wu 19). In Chinese custom, it is a Catch 22—"without getting sexually involved, a woman cannot achieve full friendship with a man; getting involved, her friendship with him cannot last long" (Wu 19). Although her relationship with Ramon does not come to fruition, Yun approaches and interacts with other men with this tenet in mind.

In America, Yun wants the freedom to experience and love. She relates her feelings using Chinese myth:

Bo Ya was the best musician of the Spring and Autumn period (221-722 B.C.). What he played on the string instrument was lofty and profound, above common understanding. Only one person, Zhong Ziqi, could comprehend the musical message . . . captured perfectly the soul of Bo Ya's music. Later, Zhong Ziqi died. Losing his only communicative listener, Bo Ya smashed his instrument and abandoned playing. (Wu 44)

Thus, the Chinese understand the importance of a unique friend who is able to appreciate the music of the soul (Wu 44). Yun searches for such a connection, one that transcends physical and emotional boundaries.

Further creating complexity to Wu's novel, is Yun's daughter, Mei, struggling for independence at the same time. Yun and Mei's mother-daughter relationship represents yet another similar element among the works of Chinese American women. Mei shows the same signs of struggle that Kingston, Wong, and the daughters in Tan's novel experience, except that Yun feels relief that at her young age Mei already recognizes her right to autonomy.

The novel ends without closure, a work in progress like her Chinese American women counterparts. Yun's stream of consciousness crosses time and literary boundaries, to end with her illness. Is she dreaming? Does she die? Are the drops that fall on her face tears, or rain? It is no coincidence that Yun's journey for self ends with an ambiguous reference to water - the symbol of cleansing, purifying, and self-knowledge.

Among the many differences Yun discovers in American and Chinese thought is the way to read a poem. In China, "Everybody reads themselves or their own situations into poems or poetic catchwords. Do we ever care much about what their authors originally meant? What we care about is how an ancient line can still convey the new meaning of today" (Wu 106). Edna Wu's Clouds & Rain is such a vehicle, a piece of multi-faceted literature open to many interpretations and many meanings. Just as Kingston and Wong use creative fiction in autobiography, Wu draws upon similar stylistic elements to produce fiction as creative autobiography.

The search for understanding and identity is a theme that carries through Edna Wu's and Amy Tan's fiction, as well as the autobiographies of Maxine Hong Kingston and Jade Snow Wong. Perhaps it is in the expression and revelation of the self that these Chinese American women writers draw upon similar structural and narrative elements and blur the boundaries of genre. Scholar Elaine Kim supports the theory that they must "experiment for forms expressive of their unique realities" (214). Françoise Lionnet points toward a revolution where Wong, Kingston, Tan, and Wu face fictional categories of the literary world. He asserts this is the legacy Chinese American women writers face head on in order to "start



writing and rewriting their selves, thus inventing new and empowering traditions for their (literary) daughters” (Lionnet 53). Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Edna Wu challenge any singular pattern of autobiographical writing, blend male and female traditions, and cross the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. These Chinese American women writers forge a new vision in literature: a vision that reflects differences in perspectives, the existence of multiple realities, unique cultural heritage, and an identity that reflects the ethnic “I.”

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### **The Evolution of a Multiplistic Autobiographical Tradition**

Jade Snow Wong and Maxine Hong Kingston challenge the boundaries of traditional autobiography. They do not fit neatly into categories. They do not subscribe to any singular autobiographical definition or tradition. Instead, Wong and Kingston create unique representations inclusive of their identity, their culture, and their vision. They create works that reflect the complexity of dual ethnicity: how in every generation each individual must reinvent and reinterpret her cultural heritage (Fischer 195); and in doing so, how that journey is different for every individual. According to scholar Shirley Rose, “By writing one constructs one’s reality. In examining pasts, autobiographers re-affirm their power and determine

their futures” (3). For Wong and Kingston, the future depends on knowing themselves.

Wong and Kingston employ many elements in their search for understanding of self, forging a new tradition in writing. Their tradition challenges the limitations and definitions of the genre and promotes an approach supportive of a communal identity. They invent their own strategies and produce their own tradition to meet the needs of our time, and to create a meaningful representation of themselves (Li 329).

Wong and Kingston exercise some similar techniques in their writing. Critic William Fischer emphasizes the importance of these similarities:

There does seem to be some connection between particular experiences of ethnic groups and the techniques used to capture, reveal, or exorcise those experiences. This does not mean that any tactic or technique is used exclusively by writers of a given ethnicity. (202)

Indeed, the connection does go deeper. The autobiographies of Wong and Kingston also exhibit patterns found in the fiction of Edna Wu and Amy Tan. They share strategies and in doing so, blur the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. These Chinese American women are not the first to challenge these boundaries. Women autobiographers such as Kate Douglas Wiggin, Mary Casal, Margaret Anderson, Helen Keller, and Mary MacLane crossed the lines between fact and fiction (Culley 18). But this spillover of genres is not the only connection that binds the works of these Chinese American women writers.

The search for self, for identity as a Chinese American woman is at the forefront of each of these works. They must resolve a “double consciousness,” existing as simultaneously an insider and an outsider (Wong 265). Working through the problems unique to dual ethnicity and discovery of who and where they belong, demands a style representative of this complexity.

A large part of their stories is storytelling. Wong, Kingston, Wu, and Tan share their stories, their mother’s stories, and even their culture’s stories in a variety of forms. In either first or third person, through one narrator or multiple narrators, the stories are conveyed through talk-story, myth, dreams, and poetry. Only Wong’s story follows the traditional chronological order, whereas the other women writers follow a non-linear structure.

Female and ethnic identity is integrally linked through the mother-daughter relationship (Schueller 80). In each of the four works, the author or main character seeks to understand her mother and resolve her relationship. The mother is part of the key to discovering themselves: “The return to the mother is also the return to cultural roots; separation from the mother is separation from one’s own cultural origins” (Schueller 80).

These women must also come to terms with their cultural heritage, one that historically has degraded women and rendered them voiceless. Wong, Kingston, Wu, and Tan find their voice and power as authors. They write their stories, they tell. They must exorcise the old stories, acknowledge and give voice to the women who suffered in silence. They face old tradition by “writing and rewriting their selves, thus inventing and empowering

traditions for their (literary) daughters” (Lionnet 53). Moving from silence to voice, victim to victor, they create new stories that are more supportive of their status as Chinese American women. They participate in what Stephanie Demetrakopoulos calls the power of models, “becoming a model itself . . . [by] making old myths available in new forms” (181).

And in finding that voice, the author engages the reader in dialogue: “that ‘other’ through whom she is working to identify herself” (Smith 50). Reader participation is another element that ties the works of these four women. By addressing the audience, the author has in essence made the reader a character on her journey to identity. Wu speaks directly to her reader in a conversation by calling them “you,” and seemingly answering their questions that arise as they read her text. Wong, Kingston, Wu, and Tan all provide the reader “insider information” into Chinese tradition and ritual, allowing the reader to learn and participate right alongside of them.

In an attempt to express their unique realities, these Chinese American women writers experiment in form (Kim 214). They defy the definitions of what is autobiography and what is fiction, and create blended genre forms which can include fiction, nonfiction, autobiography, biography, poetry, letters, diaries, and even history. Scholar Malini Schueller asserts that this blending “suggests that ethnic origins are always created and recreated in the complex process of social representation” (82). Regardless of the reasoning, Reed Dasenbrock believes that this spillover must be respected by the literary canon, otherwise “our cultural categories will be reinforced, not challenged” (19).

Literary critics are beginning to acknowledge the need for “standpoint” reading practices, going beyond the limited lenses of the Western world (Smith and Watson xxviii). Scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson assert that the literary is starting to recognize and reevaluate women’s works: “Piece by piece, there is being written a literary history of women’s self-representation that explores the relationship between women’s text and the development of the genre” (17). Wong, Kingston, Wu, and Tan are part of the evolution and revolution toward multiplistic autobiography—a tradition that allows for cultural and gender differences, and differences in tradition. The multiplicity of their form speaks for a new vision, a tradition that is evolving to enable a change in perception about Chinese Americans, women, and the very genre in which they inscribe the self.

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