

The Woman Warrior



Creating a Self Through the Stories of Others

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Preface

Even though the writing of this thesis has taken some time, I have never grown tired of *The Woman Warrior*. With every reading, new layers emerge, and the magical world Kingston creates acquires more depth. I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who have helped me in the process of writing.

Derek Rubin's suggestions have helped me to conquer the enormity of my subject, and his endless patience has given me the inner peace to persist. Roselinde Supheert and Alana Gillespie have, each in their turn, given me extremely helpful advice on the structure of my writing.

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Introduction

From the moment the first Chinese immigrants entered the United States, around 1840, the Chinese were seen as different from other fortune seekers. They were supposed to be “sojourners,” only temporary visitors, Ronald Takaki explains (10). This description, innocent as it may sound, signaled a deeply embedded hostility to the Chinese. They were initially invited to America to fill up a temporary shortage of labor, but when the shortage changed into an excess of workers, they were no longer welcome. Distrust of the different-looking men with their strange habits and traditions became discrimination; the Chinese immigrants were accused of stealing American jobs, and law upon law was constructed to prevent the Chinese from settling in America (11-13). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 put a stop to the free flow of Chinese immigration, and as the Chinese community at that point primarily consisted of men, the Chinatowns remained “bachelor societies” (245). Of course, the immigrants did try to find openings in both America’s law and borders, but every newly discovered gap was closed down by new legislation. It was not until the Civil Rights Movement of the African Americans in the 1960s that the position of the Chinese in America changed. In 1965, the Immigration Act put an end to the control of immigration based upon the country of origin, and the Chinese were finally able to form families and feel at home.

The turbulent history of the Chinese in America has left its mark on Chinese American literature. Shirley Geok-lin Lim shows that “Asian-American writing, from its earliest expressions [. . .], shows a strong concern with its immigrant history” (“Twelve” 57). This theme is present in the writings of all generations Asian Americans, albeit in different forms. Lim sketches a development in Asian American writing, in which early works tend to define Asian Americans in correspondence with the “dominant stereotypes of their racial history.” More recent works freely “construct the fiction of a memory that never took place” (74). Through writing without the premise of factuality, these writers

slowly loosen themselves from the expectations that their ethnicity gives rise to, thus being able to fully make use of the possibilities their double backgrounds provide them with. A well-known example of the latter is Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, first published in 1976. In her debut, Kingston sketches the attempts of her protagonist Maxine to create a sense of belonging to either the unknown and therefore abstract China of her immigrant parents, or the concrete yet equally incomprehensible American world outside the family home. *The Woman Warrior* crosses borders in many ways: Kingston blends fact and fiction, memory and myth, and Chinese and American culture in a hybrid tale of maturation.

The Woman Warrior is often praised because of its creative form, but is perhaps even more discussed. Kingston's work is, according to Gloria Chun, embraced as a classic by both instructors and students of university departments "ranging from Comparative Literature, Sociology, Anthropology, Rhetoric, History, Political Science, to Ethnic Studies" (85). However, as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong points out, "*The Woman Warrior*, by its very commercial success and its popularity with the literary establishment and the mainstream audience, seems to have become ideologically suspect to some Asian-American critics" ("Necessity" 3). Chun's recognition that Kingston is praised by many is thus not automatically positive. She is only one of the many critics who are extremely displeased by Kingston's success, in particular by the fact that the imaginative *The Woman Warrior* has been published under the label "autobiography." What Chun really objects to is, of course, not that Kingston evades the restrictions of a genre, but that identifying this book as an autobiography gives "*The Woman Warrior* the appearance of being an actual representation of Asian American experience in the broader public sphere" (86). Chun, also a Chinese American, protests Kingston's creative style of writing because most Western readers lack basic knowledge about Chinese culture and tradition and will, because *The Woman Warrior* is presented as an

autobiography, easily accept Kingston's fantastic vision as a representation of the experience of all Chinese-Americans (90). Because Kingston also shows some of the less-appealing sides of Chinese American life, Chun feels misrepresented.

However, the criticism on Kingston and her work is even more serious. Frank Chin, Kingston's most aggressive critic, claims that by telling her story in a form that appeals to Western readers, Kingston betrays the Chinese-American community and gives in to white supremacy. In his essay "This is Not an Autobiography," which is directed primarily at Kingston, he describes autobiography as a "Christian literary weapon" (109). He even goes as far as stating that a "Chinese Christian is like a Nazi Jew. Confession and autobiography celebrate the process of conversion from an object of contempt to an object of acceptance" (122). Kingston herself is described as a sell-out, who,

in addressing her Western audience, [...] often utilizes popular images of the Chinese already floating in the mainstream culture, [who then] dresses them up with imaginative elaboration and throws them back into the mainstream. [...] Unfortunately, this places her, knowingly or unknowingly, at the service of Orientalism. (Chun 88).

These are serious accusations. The term "Orientalism" refers to the Western discourse which portrays Asia as its weak, silent and passive opposite.¹ In both Chin and Chun's view, Kingston has internalized the stereotypical image of the Chinese American as the exotic and inscrutable Other, and through writing *The Woman Warrior*, "she only perpetuates the very racism she purports to challenge" (Chun 89). The authenticity of Chinese culture is at stake, and Kingston, because of her fantastic representation of Chinese-American life, is seen as fake. Frank Chin asserts, "you might see Kingston's

¹ For an extensive discussion of Orientalism see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

Chinese Americans are really Greeks holding their eyes slanty (sic) with two fingers” (124).

What most critics fail to see, however, is that Kingston does not claim to be a representative of the Chinese-American community, who has written a well-documented “Chinatown Tour.” On the contrary, on one of the first pages of the book, Kingston lets her protagonist Maxine ask her fellow 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?” (13). Maxine studies dictionaries and even closely examines popular Kung fu movies to find out about her Chinese heritage. The prime source of Maxine’s knowledge about China is her mother, with whom the communication is difficult because of both language and culture. The fact that Brave Orchid’s English is not very good, and Kingston’s Chinese equals a “seventh-grade” (184) level suggests that the women are unable to completely understand each other, and this complicates Kingston’s interpretation of Brave Orchid’s motherly advice.

The subtitle of *The Woman Warrior, Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, only emphasizes the protagonist’s insecurity. The word “Ghosts” refers to both the unknown country of the immigrant parents and to American society, in which it is possible to live without having to integrate or even communicate: to Maxine, the inhabitants of both are as hazy and abstract as these elusive creatures. This all-encompassing description stems from her mother, who describes America as a land “full of [. . .] ghosts” (90), people whose individuality and humanity she refuses to acknowledge. Brave Orchid holds on to the thought that she and her family will “*return* to China” (73, emphasis added), although her three daughters and one son are all American-born and have never even been to China. This attitude has its effect on the way Brave Orchid raises her

children. Through “talking-story” (25), as Brave Orchid describes her way of teaching her children about life, she tries to instill a feeling of being Chinese in her children. However, because her life lessons do not match their everyday experiences, her children feel more bewildered than prepared. *The Woman Warrior* is Maxine’s exploration of the two cultures she lives in, yet one in which the mother’s judgment, as the starting point for a young child, is dominant throughout.

Brave Orchid’s “talk-stories” thus have a prominent position in the book. The first two chapters of *The Woman Warrior*, “No Name Woman” and “White Tigers,” contain two stories that effectively summarize the advice that Brave Orchid wants to give to her daughters. The first is the story of “No Name Woman,” as Maxine calls the aunt whose name she does not even know. The fact that this aunt ever existed, that in China, Kingston’s father had a sister, is a big secret, because No Name Woman has brought disgrace upon the family. She became pregnant years after her husband left China for the United States, and gave birth to an illegitimate child. The community punished her for breaking the unwritten social codes, and No Name Woman committed suicide by drowning herself and the baby in the village well. Her story, through which Brave Orchid warns her daughters about how they should not behave, contrasts strongly with the second chapter, which offers the girls a more positive role-model. “White Tigers” retells the “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan,” Maxine’s mother sang to her when she was little. In the original ballad, the heroine Fa Mu Lan takes her father’s place in battle, and revenges the wrongs that have been done to her family. With this story, Brave Orchid attempts to teach her children the importance of filial piety. Although the women seem to be opposites of each other Maxine feels connected with both No Name Woman and Fa Mu Lan. Maxine, like these women, is also extremely aware of her position in the tight social web of her community, and the social rules to which she has to live up to. To Maxine, these rules are represented by her mother.

Next to Brave Orchid's morally loaded stories, Maxine's mother herself has been an equally important example, so inevitably, her life story is also subjected to investigation. In the middle chapter, "Shaman," Brave Orchid is a young woman, left behind in China by her husband like No Name Woman was. However, in contrast to her pitiful sister-in-law, Brave Orchid takes her life in hand. She uses the money her husband sends home to finance a medical education, and becomes a successful doctor. Brave Orchid's inventiveness also manifests itself in the fourth chapter "At the Western Palace," when she succeeds in bringing her sister Moon Orchid to America. Her efforts, however, stem from more than the wish to have her sister near. Moon Orchid is the third woman in the book who has been left behind in China by her husband, yet in contrast to Brave Orchid's husband, Moon Orchid's husband never comes back for her. Although he keeps sending her money, he marries another woman and becomes a successful brain surgeon. Brave Orchid forces her sister to confront him with his past, but the visit is a disaster: the husband does not even recognize his first wife, and the old and submissive Moon Orchid is unable to scold her husband for what he did. In both chapters, Brave Orchid is portrayed as a strong woman who asks a lot of her nearest and dearest.

Brave Orchid expects the most from her children. She raises them as if there were no ocean between her little circle of family members and the rest of her village in China, as if they were fully participating members of the community "back home." Amy Ling explains how "Minority parents' own fear of losing their cultural heritage is intensified by the fear of losing their children to the 'foreign' culture, and therefore they insist with greater vehemence on their children's acceptance of family traditions and Old World ties" (123). Yet, Brave Orchid's emphasis on sustaining the contact with the family and village in her home country stems from more than a fear of change; a deeper reason is found in the way she defines herself. In "The Self in Cross-cultural Perspective"

Francis Hsu explains how the concept of identity is defined differently in China. The word “man” (*jen*), for example, has a different connotation in Chinese:

Jen contrasts sharply with the concept of personality, which refers primarily to what goes on inside the individual. [. . .] [T]he central focus of the concept of *jen* is the place of the individual in a web of interpersonal relationships, while his wishes, predilections, and anxieties are judged according to whether they contribute to or destroy his interpersonal relationships. (33, emphasis in original)

In other words, the meaning of the word “person” is much broader according to Confucian tradition than according to any Western tradition. The Chinese believe that a person’s relation with society is as much a part of his or her identity, as personal traits or a self-image are. Identity is thus not merely an individual matter, but a collective one. This extended notion of identity influences the way Brave Orchid raises her children, as “fitting in,” conforming to a predetermined identity instead of freely developing their individual personality, seems to have the highest priority. The Kingston children are to become dutiful and modest adults. Thus, Hsu explains, “the intimate relationships of [the Chinese are] characterized by more ritualization, role playing, hierarchical relationships, repression of negativity, and repression of personal spontaneity when compared to western ideals” (48). Brave Orchid’s identity is a collective identity, and the unity of the collective stems from the sharing of Chinese culture. To Maxine, her mother translates this Chinese collective identity into “a Chinese tradition which demanded the repression and subordination of the individual will” (126), as Ling argues.

It almost seems as if Brave Orchid is the most important character of the book, but Maxine is never forgotten. Throughout the stories, Kingston makes sure to insert comments that cannot belong to anyone other than her young protagonist. In the rewriting of the “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan,” for example, Maxine asks for chocolate chip cookies instead of the rice that is traditionally offered to a visitor (26). More importantly,

every story in *The Woman Warrior* is linked to the reality of Maxine's day to day life. After imagining herself as Fa Mu Lan, the heroine, Maxine sighs: "My American life has been such a disappointment" (47). When she comes home from school with high grades, all her mother can say is "Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village," because "You can't eat straight As" (47). Brave Orchid does not recognize her daughter's achievements because they belong to a world whose values she does not share. Maxine, on the other hand, feels intimidated by her mother's stories. She is aware that they contain life lessons, but is unable to understand, let alone live up to them. The relationship between Maxine and her mother is characterized by a mutual lack of understanding, and the resulting tension builds up towards the end of the book.

Maxine's problems are, of course, not only caused by her mother's uncompromising upbringing. At home, at school, and at work, Maxine is forced into different roles, and these roles confront her with her insecurity constantly: "*The Woman Warrior* is about trying to be an American, when you are the child of Chinese emigrants; trying to be a woman, when you have been taught that men are all that matter; trying to be a writer, when you have been afraid to speak out loud at all" Suzanne Juhasz summarizes in her essay "Towards a Theory of Form in Feminist Autobiography" (231). Maxine's mother tries to mold Maxine into the ideal Chinese daughter, but this is not easily combined with growing up in the United States. Maxine, "Like all youngsters educated in the American public schools, [. . .] was given heavy doses of the American ideals: democracy, freedom, equality, the primacy of the individual, [and] the inalienable rights and freedom of expression," Veronica Wang signals (28). She is expected to think and act "Chinese," but at the same time, she cannot deny the influence of American individuality, which inevitably leaves a mark on all growing up in the United States.

The final chapter, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," shows what effect the seemingly oppositional worlds of the Chinese family home and American society have

on the young protagonist. From the moment Maxine goes to kindergarten, she is unable to express herself in English, and she becomes silent. Maxine is so confused and frustrated that she vents her anger on an equally silent Chinese classmate. Despite Maxine's rather aggressive stimulation, the girl does not speak. It takes a confrontation with Brave Orchid before Maxine is able to solve her dividedness stemming from her double cultural heritage. How this is possible, becomes clear through reading the book as an autobiography. *The Woman Warrior* is both a description of Kingston's dilemma, and the solution to it. Kingston reconciles the Chinese collective identity and American individuality through reinventing the autobiography: she creates herself through (re)creating the stories of others.

From Storytelling to the Construction of Identity

To demonstrate how influential her mother's storytelling has been for Maxine's connection to Chinese culture, *The Woman Warrior* opens with two "talk-stories." The first chapter tells the story of No Name Woman, Maxine's father's anonymous sister, and is told to the protagonist when she starts menstruating. Maxine never knew her father had a sister, so at first, she is puzzled. There appears to be, however, a good reason why this is a secret: long after No Name Woman's husband had left China to seek his fortune in America, No Name Woman gave birth to an illegitimate child. Brave Orchid does not tell, and probably does not know, whether the pregnancy was an unforeseen effect of either a secret crush or a traumatic rape. However, regardless of the cause, in her telling of the story Brave Orchid places great emphasis on the punishment the aunt received for her shameful state. During the night of the birth, the villagers reacted by raiding her family's house. The community was merciless, the narrator tells us:

The frightened villagers, who depended on one another to maintain the real, went to my aunt to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she had made in the 'roundness'. [. . .] The villagers punished [No Name Woman] for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them. [. . .] Adultery, perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the village needed food. (19)

The community back in China was closely bound to each other, because they depended on each other to survive. Unspoken, yet strict rules served to keep the relationships in the village healthy. The villagers kept a close eye on one another, so that every threat to the unity of the community could be eliminated. No Name Woman's situation was particularly damaging to the community's wellbeing, because she became pregnant when food was scarce. The illegitimate child, which, even worse, turned out to be a daughter, not only meant another mouth to feed, but also humiliation for a traditional

family. No Name Woman, who was sent away from her in-laws to her parental home because of the scarcity of food, pulled her whole family with her into her disgrace.

Brave Orchid tells the anonymous aunt's story to warn Maxine: "what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. [. . .] The villagers are watchful" (13). However, although few parents would wish for their daughter to become pregnant from a man who is not her husband, Brave Orchid's warning does not merely concern the illegitimate pregnancy. The aunt, overtaken by despair, drowned herself and her baby in the village well, but this proved to be not enough to end her punishment. After death, the aunt is denied the offerings that are traditionally dedicated to deceased family members. She is erased from memory, and never spoken about again. This is considered to be the real punishment: "People who can comfort the dead can also chase after them to hurt them further – a reverse ancestor worship. The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her" (22). Without anyone remembering her, it is as if No Name Woman never existed, as if she never was a part of the community. Woon Ping Holaday explains: "As in an oral culture, the figure of the aunt functions as a mnemonic device—to transmit, albeit negatively, the rules of Chinese behavior. [. . .] [Her] expression of sexuality was an expression of individual gratification that threatened the continuity of the system" (19). Maxine must conform to the unwritten behavioral codes of the community; if she will not, she too will be denied a place in the community and, more importantly, be denied her identity. So, scared of attracting the wrong kind of attention because of her mother's forewarning stories, Maxine "used to add 'brother' silently to boys' names. It hexed the boys, [. . .] and made them less scary and as familiar and deserving of benevolence as girls. But, of course, [she] hexed [herself] also – no dates" (18). For Maxine, not living up to her mother's expectations equals the risk of being expelled from her family, her home, and the Chinese community.

Maxine tries to counter her mother's message by rewriting the story in her novel. Because Brave Orchid tells her daughter only the necessary parts, still somewhat silenced by the taboo placed on the story by the family, Maxine is free to fill in the blanks as she chooses. She tries to escape her mother's standards by trying out No Name Woman as passive victim to No Name Woman as active seductress. No Name Woman becomes a role model to Maxine, a woman who tried to make the most of her situation, to live her life in a way that was not predetermined by the community:

perhaps my aunt, my forerunner, caught in a slow life, let dreams grow and fade and after some months or years went towards what persisted. Fear at the enormities of the forbidden kept her desires delicate. [. . .] It could very well have been, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but, a wild woman, kept rollicking company. (15-16)

No Name Woman's many possible storylines become a symbol of the "struggle toward a balance between self-actualization and social responsibility [. . .], [between] 'Necessity' and 'Extravagance'" ("Necessity" 5), as Wong describes it. Maxine identifies with her aunt because she ascribes the same dilemma between "doing as you are told" and "doing what you want" to her. However, even Maxine has to give in to the limitations of reality. Her version of No Name Woman boils down to a woman alone, expelled from community, so frightened by the realization that she is now on her own that she, when alone in the field in the dark, is paralyzed by a fear of the enormity of the empty space around her. No Name Woman hid in a pigsty to give birth to her baby: "It was good to have a fence enclosing her, a tribal person alone" (21). The narrator is extremely aware of the tight net of social relationships that enclose people; its advantages and its drawbacks. Being a part of the whole can provide a person with a feeling of protection and security, but when outside, the sudden loneliness may feel like isolation.

However, as harsh as the message “don’t humiliate us” may sound, Maxine observes that there is even more to the story. It is not just her mother’s emphasis on fitting in the community that makes her uneasy. She recognizes that it is not just a warning to maintain the family honor through self-control:

[No Name Woman] was the only daughter; her four brothers went with her father, husband, and uncles “out on the road” and for some years became western men. [Her parents] expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection. The heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning. (15)

The women are expected to remain decent and respectable daughters, mothers, and wives, self-fulfillment is only for the men. “What primarily distinguishes women from men in patriarchal culture,” Mary Zeiss Stange explains, “is that while men must strive [. . .] to achieve their identities, women have had their identities thrust upon them. [. . .] From the patriarchal point of view, women should be satisfied with ‘realizing’ themselves in the light of inherited models of femininity” (17). Maxine’s retelling of the story of No Name Woman shows how she tries to escape the social restrictions that affect a woman’s life.

Yet Maxine has to acknowledge the limitations of patriarchy. “My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil” (14). Maxine is unable to escape her mother’s culture, or her mother’s expectations. Even after rewriting, No Name Aunt remains a source of distress: “after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes. [However,] I do not always think she means me well. I am telling on her [. . .]” (22). Although Maxine is the only one who commemorates her aunt’s existence, her intentions are ambiguous. On the one hand, Shirley Geok-lin Lim argues, “the narrator’s

self-conscious “writing” is presented as a rescue of the ancestor from the punishment of silence. [However,] the rescue into memory through writing is after all a testimony to No Name Woman’s sins” (“Tradition” 261). Maxine is torn between her need to know her family’s history and the ban on exposing the family secret. Furthermore, Linda Hunt observes, Maxine’s “profound conflict about where her loyalty lies regarding the experience of this aunt she has never met serves to convey her own agonized indecision about what stance to take towards her own Chinese-American upbringing” (7). If Maxine conforms to the unwritten rules of her community, she will have to disregard her frustration with patriarchy, whereas if she chooses her own path, she will have to desert and tell on her family.

In the second chapter, “White Tigers,” Maxine retells the well-known “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan.” In China, this ballad is sung to children as often as parents in the Western world tell the story of Little Red Riding Hood. It is a story about a daughter who, in an ultimate example of filial piety, takes her father’s place in battle. Maxine fantasizes that it is she who, at the age of seven, is called by a bird and led to the house of an elderly couple. The couple asks Fa Mu Lan, or from then on, Maxine, if she is prepared to leave home to receive a training through which she will be able to revenge her parents for every wrong that has been done to them. If she agrees, the couple promises, she will “be remembered by the Han people for [her] dutifulness” (28). Maxine accepts the offer, and is trained in a number of martial arts. While she is away, her parents never cease to believe that she will return, and marry her to her childhood friend. After a traineeship of fifteen years, Maxine gathers an army and sets off into battle. To be able to lead the army, however, Maxine disguises herself as a man. Unexpectedly, her husband has joined the army. The couple lives together in secret, and Maxine even manages to become pregnant and give birth to a baby boy without anyone noticing. Her husband

takes the baby home, to his family, so Maxine can fulfill the task she is trained for. Indeed, Maxine triumphantly avenges not only her father, but the whole village.

The chapter appears to contain a recollection of a more positive story. Yet frustration with her mother's oppressive expectations and the patriarchal Chinese culture is also the basis of the second chapter. Sayings like "Girls are maggots in the rice" or "It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters" (45) infuriate Maxine, but Fa Mu Lan suggests there is a different possibility. The original ballad of Fa Mu Lan is also told by Brave Orchid to function as an example for her daughters growing up, and, as Hunt points out, Maxine uses it to counter the negative example of No Name Woman (7). Fa Mu Lan is the example through which the girls can get appreciation and respect, and through which Maxine can bond with her mother. Maxine recalls: "When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen" (25). It seems as if there is a possibility for Maxine to develop herself contrary to submissive, obedient image of women in a patriarchy. Kingston lets her protagonist fantasize that she is respected and, more importantly, appreciated by her family. Through the rewriting of the ballad, Maxine finds a way to fit in, and to receive recognition from her community, thereby adjusting herself to her mother's collective identity.

However, Maxine interprets Brave Orchid's message a bit too literally. As the modern Fa Mu Lan, Maxine would be able to improve her family's situation, protecting them from having to move their laundry because it has to make room for a parking lot: "From the fairy tales, I've learned exactly who the enemy are, I easily recognize them – business-suited in their modern American executive guise, each boss two feet taller than I am and impossible to meet eye to eye" (50). Yet Maxine is not even able to keep her boss from using the description "nigger yellow" at work, let alone stand up for her whole family (50). Wong points out that "As wish-fulfilling fantasy, Maxine's account of the

apprenticeship of Fa Mu Lan reflects her deepest psychological needs; by examining the arrangements she chooses for the legendary heroine, we can see what is unwelcome or lacking in her own life" ("Necessity" 18). When Fa Mu Lan returns from her training, she is welcomed home as a son. In reality, Maxine is angry with her parents for not celebrating the birth of her and her sisters like they did when her only brother was born (48). Fa Mu Lan pleases her parents through fighting for them. Maxine works equally hard for appreciation. She strives to be a boy, but the nearest she will ever come to being one, is by being a "bad girl": "Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?" (49).

The adult Maxine also shows her frustration with the patriarchal structure embedded in her mother's culture. She tries to stand up to the traditional role patterns behind the story of Fa Mu Lan, but also comments on the world outside of the story by letting her protagonist furiously assert that "No husband of mine will say, 'I could have been a drummer, but I had to think about the wife and kids. You know how it is.' Nobody supports me at the expense of his own adventure" (49). Maxine refuses to be forced into the role of the helpless housewife who needs to be taken care of.

Like the young Maxine fights her community's enemies in the "Ballad of Fa Mu Lan," so the narrator tries to combat her own foes through the rewriting of the ballad. By blending gender roles, the narrator shows that the binary opposition male – female that strengthens patriarchy need not be accepted passively. As the woman warrior Maxine becomes brave and tough, and her willpower becomes so strong that she develops complete control over her bodily functions. Here, the narrator appears to give in to the idea that the mind comes over the body, and that women, because they are supposed to be ruled by emotions and the flesh, are inferior. However, Maxine develops the strength to control her body, but never by disregarding the feminine. When Maxine asks her tutors if she can use her newly acquired self-restraint to stop her monthly bleeding, they forbid her to do so, because it is a natural process. The narrator shows that women can

be equally strong as men, but need not deny their femininity. Likewise, Kingston incorporates a myth with a male protagonist into the story of Fa Mu Lan. Before she is sent into battle, Maxine's parents ask her to take off her shirt, and carve a description of every wrong that has been done to them, into her back. In the essay "Personal Statement," Kingston explains: "I take the power I need from whatever myth. Thus Fa Mu Lan has the words cut into her back; in traditional story, it is the man, Ngak Fei the Patriot, whose parents cut vows on his back. I mean to take his power for women" (24). Kingston actively tries to empower her protagonist.

The rewriting of the story of Fa Mu Lan may seem to undermine the traditional division between genders, but it does not offer a complete escape from patriarchy. For example, Maxine's martial arts training makes her so strong that she can "control even the dilations of the pupils inside [her] irises" (29). These unusual skills, invented by Kingston, are not part of the actual ballad sung by Brave Orchid, which is very short and hardly contains any details. The control Maxine learns to have over her body again affirms Brave Orchid's insistence that for women, self-restraint is the key to acceptance by the community. "The folkloric intent of the tale is the strengthening of the institution of the family," Malini Schueller explains, "But the task of the swordswoman is similar to that of a wife: maintaining the family honor" (425). So although Maxine violates expectations by becoming a woman warrior, this does not mean she is allowed other liberties. As Fa Mu Lan, Maxine is still caught in traditional gender roles.

Another instance of the affirmation of traditional gender roles can be found when Maxine returns home from battle. Her husband may have taken care of the baby when she was away, but this equality between men and women exists only in the private sphere. During battle, Maxine has to disguise herself as a man, hiding her pregnancy by rearranging her armor. Not even her army is aware that their general is, in fact, a woman. Only when one of her enemies appeals to her "man to man" that "Everyone

takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them” (45), Maxine reveals herself. After the war, she returns to her family-in-law to serve as an obedient wife, thus returning to the place in the family she would traditionally fulfill. In spite of its feminist appearance, the story of Fa Mu Lan does not rebel against patriarchy. In Kingston’s essay “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers,” she points out that she deliberately “put [the chapter about Fa Mu Lan] at the beginning to show that the childish myth is past, not the climax we reach for” (57). Maxine tries to escape her mother’s uncompromising standards by countering the traditional stereotyping of men and women, but in “White Tigers,” she does not succeed in this.

In conclusion, the first two chapters of *The Woman Warrior* symbolize Maxine’s early attempts to come to terms with the collective identity Brave Orchid tries to pressurize her into. Both the protagonist and the narrator long for appreciation and approval, but are unable to obediently accept the position their womanhood comprises. Furthermore, the narrator also fails to escape from the patriarchal values which are embedded in traditional Chinese culture. Rewriting the stories of No Name Woman and Fa Mu Lan only makes Maxine more aware of the unfairness of her position. Maxine may have tried to settle the score by becoming a dutiful Fa Mu Lan, but she is, by definition, unable to ever satisfy her parents the way her brother can. Her obligation to her parents can be compared to the original sin of Eve, which influences many a Christian woman. Just as these women are unable to ever compensate for the mistake their predecessor has made, so Maxine feels she is unable ever to make up for the fact that she is a girl. “I am useless, one more girl who couldn’t be sold,” she thinks (53). So when her mother starts another telling of the “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan” with her “Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village” Maxine reacts by sighing: “I could not figure out what was my village” (47). She is unable to feel at home in a community, or

rather, a family, that does not unconditionally welcome her. Her life in America, however, allows her to experiment with a seemingly oppositional culture: the Western world.

American Individuality as an Escape from the Collective

Maxine's struggle with her heritage manifests itself primarily in the rewriting of Brave Orchid's stories, but it becomes particularly pressing when she steps into the outside world. Although she is born in the United States, during the first years of her life her mother is able to shield her from the influence of American culture. Brave Orchid instills a deep-rooted fear of Americans, or, in her words, "ghosts" (90), in her children. Maxine recalls: "Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe [. . .]" (90-91). The Kingston children play games imitating the ghosts they come in contact with, imagining they are "Newboy ghosts" (91), or "Garbage ghosts" (92). They have dehumanized Americans so, that when the "Garbage ghost" copies their Chinese they are shocked that he is able to imitate "human language" (92). Brave Orchid warns her children: "Now we know [. . .] the White Ghosts can hear Chinese. They have learned it. You mustn't talk in front of them again" (92). To Maxine, Americans are abstract creatures who are just as frightening as the tigers and dragons from her mother's fantastical stories.

Even friendly kindergarten teachers cannot counter Maxine's deeply embedded distrust: "When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent" (148). Whereas Maxine laughs, speaks, and even yells in the Chinese school she attends in the afternoons, in American school, she falls silent. She does not dare to speak out loud in front of the whole class, not even to read out loud. She is so silent, in fact, that the teachers are unable to form an opinion on Maxine: "in the first grade [I] had no IQ – a zero IQ" (164). What these teachers do not understand is that for Maxine, expressing herself freely means risking her family's safety. Maxine scares herself when she nearly reveals at school that her father is not a farmer, as her personal file states, but a gambler: "silence [even] in front of the most understanding teacher. There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose

telling could get us sent back to China” (164). In the first decades of Chinese American immigration, most Chinese depended on fraud to obtain the right to stay in America, and they continued to emphasize the importance of secrecy even after immigration legislation was liberalized. Therefore, although Brave Orchid’s children no longer have to fear deportation, they, too, live with the idea that in the English speaking world, silence is essential for survival.

What complicates expressing herself in English for Maxine is that she is expected to function as a spokeswoman for the Chinese relatives who only speak Chinese. Maxine feels she has to hold back around Americans because of the “immigration secrets,” but she is also not at ease around the Chinese: “You can’t entrust your voice to the Chinese, either; they want to capture your voice for their own use. They want to fix up your tongue to speak for them. ‘How much less can you sell it for?’ we have to say. Talk the Sales Ghosts down. Make them take a loss” (152). Her position as a spokesperson for her Chinese relatives confronts her with her own insufficient knowledge of Chinese culture. When, for example, her mother sends Maxine to the drugstore to punish the druggist for accidentally delivering the medicine for another Chinese family to them when no one in the family is sick, Maxine panics. She is unable to explain to the druggist that to Chinese such a delivery means bad luck, which can only be countered by giving the family sweets. Feeling “the weight and immensity of things impossible to explain to the druggist” (154), she can only ask for the sweets in an inaudible voice, softly muttering that “That is the way the Chinese do it” (154). Brave Orchid sends her eldest daughter to teach the druggist some manners, but she does not understand her daughter’s uneasiness. Whereas to her, Chinese traditions feel like natural truths, to the American-born Maxine, they are less self-evident; they are part of a world that exists only in her mother’s stories.

For Maxine, the difficulty she experiences when speaking up in English manifests itself quite concretely. She is obsessed with the story in which her mother tells her she has cut her fraenum. Brave Orchid explains that she did so to make her daughter's tongue "able to move in any language" (148). Maxine, however, feels that her mother's measure has worked out exactly the opposite way, as she feels tongue-tied even as an adult. Although she learns to speak up, to speak English in public, her tongue does not function as her mother intended it to: "A dumbness – a shame – still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say 'hello' casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter [. . .]. It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open" (148-49). Fear of the American authorities or Maxine's own insecurity regarding her heritage are not the only reasons for her silence, Brave Orchid's meddling with her daughter's voice is equally important. Ling effectively summarizes the symbolism behind the story of the cut fraenum: "The cut tongue becomes the symbol of the mother's overwhelming power over the daughter, in a sense, a castrating power" (127). In her attempt to protect her family, Brave Orchid has become an extension of the power she teaches her children to be afraid of. By breaking the silence, Maxine fights both her mother and Chinese immigration history.

However, the English language is not only associated with restrictions in *The Woman Warrior*. In Kingston's continuing play with binary oppositions, English does not only stand for a hostile world. It can also represent an escape from family or even ethnic obligations; the freedom of individuality. Many of the first generation Chinese immigrants were convinced that it was unnecessary to learn a new language. Brave Orchid calls Americans "barbarians" (59), she refuses to acknowledge that the United States has anything to offer besides a chance to make a living. Where to the Americans, "Chinese sounds [. . .] chingchong ugly," the Chinese in their turn, Maxine observes, "can't hear Americans at all; the language is too soft" (154). This attitude towards Americans and

their language opens up new possibilities for Maxine. She discovers that her knowledge of the English language can help not only the community, but herself too. In the confinement of her own family, for example, her mother “would not allow anybody to talk while eating. In some families the children worked out a sign language, but here the children spoke English, which their parents didn’t seem to hear” (114). This refusal to acknowledge the language of the Americans gives Maxine an opportunity to escape her mother’s restrictions and demands.

At home English, and the culture it represents, seems the tool with which to break away from a predefined identity; Maxine learns to associate English with freedom from her overpowering elders. In contrast to the complicated and ambiguous world of her parents, American society seems simple, and straightforward. On one of the first pages of the novel, Kingston explains that “the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America” (13). Brave Orchid may want to try to deny the overall existence of the United States and its inhabitants, but she overlooks the fact that for her children, America is their only reality. The world around the immigrants’ children is a lot more concrete for them than the China from the stories. America at least obeys the laws of science instead of the laws of tradition, and its reliability is just what the insecure Maxine needs: “I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation. I enjoy the simplicity. Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables” (182). To escape the artificially enforced loyalties towards the Chinese American community, Maxine goes to college. For her, this means being able to choose her friends by herself, instead of having to consider the possibility that “they were our enemies in China four thousand years ago” (180). Maxine is looking for a place of refuge in which, as Jeanne Barker-Nunn puts it, she can “seek an authentic self, to move from a received identity to an independent adult identity” (59).

Yet the self-proclaimed transition from the collective identity of her parents, to an individualistic American self does not free Maxine from her parents' immigration history. After all, a person's identity consists of more than a self-image. The concept "Self-Made Man" suggests that in America, a person can (re)create him- or herself from scratch, but in practice the idea refers only to building a career, not to building an image. American individuality, with its promise of self-determination, cannot rule out the reality of prejudice. Maxine recalls: "When my second grade class did a play, the whole class went to the auditorium except the Chinese girls. The teacher, lovely and Hawaiian, should have understood about us, but instead left us behind in the classroom" (150). The girls' parents, afraid to let their children take part of any public presentation because of their often illegal status, would "never [sign] anything unnecessary anyway" (150), the teacher decided. More importantly, all of the Chinese girls, not just Maxine, were so silent that the girls would never be able to take part in the play. Their voices were "too soft or nonexistent" (150). The difficulty Maxine experiences with expressing herself thus does not only stem from limitations within, her environment also labels her "voiceless." Holaday observes: "For Kingston, America also enforces stereotypical notions of behavior that inhibit her growth, a specially [sic] deleterious one being that of the silent Oriental" (20). As at home, Maxine is assigned an identity, and again, it is an identity that silences her.

However, Maxine assures the reader that the Chinese girls' silence in class is not caused by some inherent humility. The widespread conviction that Chinese women are soft and obedient could not be any further from the truth: "Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy" (155). The girls' silence is, in fact, caused by their eagerness to become like the relatively soft-voiced American women, Maxine explains. The girls impersonate American femininity so well, that their voices sound even softer than their American classmates (155). Like the immigrants' insistence on secrecy, and

Maxine's personal insecurity about her heritage, this artificial silence creates a tension inside Maxine. When one day after school, Maxine and some other girls stay in the schoolyard, her frustration reaches the boiling point. She has always been annoyed by the younger sister of her best friend, because the girl reminds her of herself: "I hated the [. . .] quiet one. I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team" (156). When the two of them end up in the bathroom together during a game of hide-and-seek, Maxine suddenly turns to the girl: "'You're going to talk,' I said, my voice steady and normal, as it is talking to the familiar, the weak, and the small. 'I am going to make you talk, you sissy-girl'" (158). In her accusations, Maxine's personal frustrations and fears become painfully clear: "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality" (162). Although Maxine does her best to force even the smallest sound out of the girl, the silent girl does not react, she only cries and remains silent. Afterwards, Maxine realizes she has crossed a line by venting her own frustration about her internal dividedness on the innocent girl.

For the young Maxine, a direct solution is not at hand, yet she is allowed to postpone solving her internal distress: "The world is sometimes just, and I spent the next eighteen months sick in bed with a mysterious illness. [. . .] I saw no one but my family, who took good care of me. I could have no visitors, no other relatives, no villagers" (163). Liberated from American teachers expecting her to socialize; to speak her mind, and from the villagers who expect her to play the part of the silent, obedient daughter, Maxine comes to rest. "It was the best year and a half of my life" (163). Brave Orchid eventually decides that Maxine's sabbatical has taken enough time, and Maxine returns at school. She meets the silent girl again, and sees that nothing has changed. Maxine realizes that she was wrong about the girl having to speak: "She was supported. She was protected by her family, as they would normally have done in China if they could have afforded it, not sent off to school with strangers, ghosts, boys" (164). The

experience makes Maxine realize that she is trying to live up to an American definition of what is considered “normal.” The silent girl does not need to be able to “speak right up in front of the boss” (162), to take part in a public world. Maxine attempted to be accepted by, and to gain recognition from her American teachers and classmates, but did not understand that, as Kennedy and Morse explain, “Re-cognition is [a] sign of a discourse’s power, a thinking-again in terms the discourse recognizes. (123). Articulating herself through bullying the girl is not the solution; she just repositions the problem, with herself now as executor instead of victim. By adjusting herself to American standards, she is once again living up to externally enforced ideals. Holaday summarizes: “living in America does not immediately liberate the author, as would be expected, from the ‘ghosts’ symbolizing the codes and restrictions of her heritage. Instead, it compounds her difficulties by presenting her with yet another set of ghosts and restrictions” (20). Though seemingly oppositional, America and China both represent a system of beliefs.

Kingston effectively symbolizes her protagonist’s confusion between the two cultures, the two social systems, in a battle with language. Not only does Maxine experience difficulty expressing herself in English, she also has trouble translating from one language into another. Maxine sighs:

I could not understand “I”. The Chinese “I” has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American “I”, assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness; “I” is a capital and “you” is a lower-case. (150)

The American “I” seems lonely compared to the complex Chinese ideograph. It seems thin, and almost nonexistent, and yet it is a proud capital. Translated into a comparison between American and Chinese identity, Maxine’s confusion concerns the self-

confidence of Americans, which seems to be based upon nothing but their self. From the Chinese perspective, this individualism seems shallow. The tight net of communal relationships in Chinese society may limit an individual's freedom, but it also provides an individual with clear-cut rules of conduct, and more importantly, with a strong social safety net. America, and the freedom of individuality it offers, does not provide Maxine with the basis she needs: next to "I," "The other troublesome word was 'here,' no strong consonant to hang on to, and so flat, when 'here' is two mountainous ideographs" (150). Frank Johnson explains: "The political accentuation of individual freedom and rights within some western communities is seen as a license for positive fulfillment, but also as a negative potential for the experience of isolation and frustration" (120). Johnson's explanation certainly applies to Maxine. Her discontent with the traditional Chinese's low regard for women makes that she tries to turn away from her Chinese background, but she is unable to keep herself from looking over her shoulder to the community she leaves behind: "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them" (53). Even as an adult, Maxine feels the need for appreciation from her family, and from the Chinese American community. She wants them to see that she, too, can be useful to the community, albeit by writing instead of by fighting. Yet *Brave Orchid* does not give her enough space to experiment how she will be able to fit in. Thus, before Maxine can solve her double struggle with identity, she must first deconstruct her mother's influence on her.

The Deconstruction of Silence

To counter the problems with her sense of self, it is necessary for Maxine to deconstruct the person that caused these problems first. Instead of rewriting her mother's stories to conform herself to her mother's ideals, halfway through the novel Maxine turns directly to the source of her struggle with identity: Brave Orchid herself. The third chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, "Shaman," concentrates on Brave Orchid's life before she came to America. Brave Orchid, alone in China for ten years already after her husband had left to find his fortune on the "Gold Mountain", decides to take matters into her own hands. Her husband has been sending her money, and, having "nobody to spend it on but herself" (60), she decides to go to medical school. This turns out to be a liberating experience: "Free from families, my mother would live for two years without servitude" (61). No longer does Brave Orchid have to take care of her demanding mother-in-law, she is able to focus on her own development. In school, she is trained in both Western and Chinese medicine, so she will be able to "bring science to the villages" (62). Brave Orchid indeed becomes a very successful doctor. Although she misses her husband, she lives a luxurious life; she is independent and able to provide for herself. Maxine's mother appears to be a strong woman: in medical school she is one of the most prominent students, both because of her excellent results and because of the ghost stories she tells her fellow students. It is also Brave Orchid who exorcises a "sitting ghost" (68) that haunts one of the rooms in the dormitory. Maxine looks up to her mother, as she never really seems to be afraid. Brave Orchid is, in fact, a Woman Warrior herself.

The beginning of "Shaman" seems to suggest that Brave Orchid is able to handle anything. However, the tone of admiration with which the chapter begins slowly changes into compassion and understanding. Robert G. Lee points out that "Taking up a struggle against a ghost in medical school, where [Brave Orchid] is otherwise immersed in Western science, is an act of resistance to the hegemonic discourse of Europeanization.

Her struggle with the ghost in medical school prefigures the struggle with ghosts in America” (60). When Brave Orchid’s husband finally asks his wife to join him in the United States, her position changes. Because her medical degree is not acknowledged, she joins her husband in the laundry-business. The work is physically demanding, and Brave Orchid is merely another low-paid and underappreciated immigrant. She is no longer automatically respected because of her profession, but has to face racist Americans, who treat her in degrading ways: “No tickee, no washee, mama-san?’ a ghost would say, so embarrassing” (98). Physically, she only grows stronger, as she “can carry a hundred pounds of Texas rice up- (sic) and downstairs” (97), and has “had six children after [she turned] forty-five” (98), but Brave Orchid feels dissatisfied: “You have no idea how much I’ve fallen coming to America” (74), Brave Orchid tells her daughter. She is tremendously disappointed by her new life, Wong points out, and she vents her frustration by blaming the United States (“Necessity” 16).

What is remarkable about the story about Brave Orchid is that, after two chapters, the image of the sturdy and uncompromising mother suddenly is contested. The revelation that Brave Orchid is not only the tyrannical, authoritarian figure that demands total obedience, but that she, too, is only human, opens up new possibilities. In medical school, the narrator lets Brave Orchid wonder: “How do we know that ghosts are the continuances of dead people? Couldn’t ghost be an entirely different species of creature? Perhaps human beings just die, and that’s the end. I don’t think I’d mind that too much. Which would you rather be? A ghost who is constantly wanting to be fed? Or nothing?” (64). This definitely is a strange question for a woman who follows the traditions of her culture so strictly. Brave Orchid takes the traditional honoring of ancestors so seriously, for example, that she puts a picture of herself and her husband up on the wall opposite to the children’s grandparents because “later the children would not have the sense to do it” (113), and yet she questions the principles behind it.

However, Brave Orchid not only seems to doubt the ideas she tries to raise her children with. She is also not very consistent in acting upon them. Instead of waiting passively for her husband to return from America, obediently taking care of her in-laws, Brave Orchid goes to medical school, and thus chooses for her personal development. She does not change her name: "Professional women have the right to use their maiden names if they like. Even when she emigrated, my mother kept Brave Orchid, adding no American name nor holding one in reserve for American emergencies" (74). She herself appears to be very emancipated, yet she teaches her daughters about the low position of girls in Chinese society: "Throughout childhood my younger sister said, 'When I grow up, I want to be a slave,' and my parents laughed, encouraging her" (78). Showing Brave Orchid's doubts and inconsistencies is the first step of the narrator's loosening herself from her mother's control.

In the forth, and next chapter that focuses on Brave Orchid, "At the Western Palace," the narrator continues to deconstruct her mother. Brave Orchid not only attempts to influence her children's lives, but also that of her younger sister Moon Orchid. Like Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid has been left behind in China while her husband traveled to America to become rich. She and her daughter have lived quite happily without their husband and father, because mother and daughter, although they missed him, were supported financially. Moon Orchid's husband even made sure their daughter went to college, "even though she's only a girl" (115). However, Brave Orchid does not agree with this state of affairs. First she makes her niece immigrate to the United States, through marrying her off to a Chinese man with American citizenship. The niece also becomes an American citizen, and this makes it easier for Moon Orchid to come to America. Several years later, Brave Orchid also succeeds in bringing her sister over. Brave Orchid of course wants her sister nearby, but more importantly, she wants Moon Orchid to confront her husband with his deeds. Although he continued to take

good care of Mood Orchid and their daughter financially, he has begun a new life in America as a brain surgeon, and even married another woman, his assistant. Brave Orchid urges her sister to reclaim her position as the “first wife” (117), the wife who comes before all other wives: “He’s living in Los Angeles with his second wife, and they have three children. Claim your rights. Those are *your* children. He’s got two sons. *You* have two sons” (115). Although Brave Orchid’s insistence that Moon Orchid claim her rights sounds emancipated, Brave Orchid, in fact, gives in to a tradition that only impairs the position of women in marriage.

Brave Orchid seems to have forgotten that, in contrast to the China she has left behind, in America, men are forbidden to have more than one wife. However, her mistake is not due to her old age, there is no indication that her mental skills are deteriorating. Brave Orchid appears to be living in the past, perhaps because it was in China that she lived the best parts of her life. In China she flourished; she was respected because of her medical degree. In America, however, she has lost her standing, and apparently also her strength to fight against the low position of women in traditional Chinese culture. The migration to America has caused Brave Orchid to hold on to her past, her community and her culture more than she would have, if she had stayed in China. In fact, Brave Orchid, too, would not appreciate it if her husband would marry another woman (144). However, as Wong points out, Brave Orchid’s discontent with her present situation causes her to insist on following the traditions of her past, even if this means conforming to patriarchy (“Necessity” 16). Her handling of the situation again illustrates her disappointment with her own life. After realizing that Brave Orchid does not only act upon tradition, but also upon her personal discontent, Maxine is able to question her mother’s authority.

In the chapters that are written from the mother’s perspective, the narrator adds another layer: feelings of frustration, alienation, and isolation are now accompanied by a

feeling of recognition. Through “Shaman” and “At the Western Palace” Maxine shows that she and her mother resemble each other more than they would like to admit. Brave Orchid, too, is trying to make the best out of her life, and she, too, is limited by her place in society. Frustration because of this causes both mother and daughter to try to force another woman to speak. Like the silent girl from Maxine’s class, Moon Orchid will not speak up against her husband, and Brave Orchid has to admit failure. Their violation of a silent, yet otherwise seemingly content woman illustrates the similarity between Brave Orchid and her daughter, Marjorie Lightfoot points out (61). However, where the silent girl remains relatively unharmed, Moon Orchid proves to be damaged by Brave Orchid’s pressure, and ends up in a mental hospital. Maxine afterwards realizes that silence need not be as problematic to everyone, and that she has no right forcing the girl to be something she is not. Brave Orchid, however, appears to have learned nothing from her sister’s downfall, and even overlooks her own role in the state of affairs. Joan Lidoff observes: “Instead of measuring every action by its distance from a single moral standard, Kingston recognizes the legitimacy of more than one point of view, more than one set of standards” (119). Maxine may be the youngest character in the book, but her position in between Chinese and American culture helps her to realize that there is more than one truth.

In the final chapter, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Kingston shows how exactly her protagonist’s awareness of the overall picture grows, and what event causes Maxine to finally become independent. The young Maxine has prepared a list of sins which she wants to confess to her mother: “If only I could let my mother know the list, she – and the world – would become more like me, and I would never be alone again” (177). Her intended confession is another manifestation of her need to improve the relationship between her mother and herself. Yet in her last attempt, she tries to alter her mother instead of herself. Maxine waits until the two of them are alone, and starts with

the most innocent sins. At first, Brave Orchid gives no reaction, so Maxine becomes confident and adds some more. However, Brave Orchid becomes mad and tells her daughter to stop it. Not because of the things her daughter tells her, but because Maxine disturbs her during the only time of the day that she is alone (179). Maxine feels relieved for not having to tell her mother her whole list, but she is frustrated as well, and not long after her mother's display of irritation, her frustration erupts in a "transmutation of sins into grievances" (Hunt 11). Instead of telling her mother another sin, she vents her anger about her mother's lack of appreciation: "I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I'm not, I'm not retarded" (179). Finally, Maxine dares to speak up to her mother, and with this deed, she breaks through the enforced silence.

The fight between Brave Orchid and Maxine not only releases the pressure between the two, it also helps Maxine to distance herself. She gives up trying to live up to her mother's standards, or to make her mother "become more like her," and becomes an independent individual. Mother and daughter finally speak their mind:

"You turned out so unusual" [Brave Orchid shouts.] "I fixed your tongue so you could say charming things. You don't even say hello to the villagers."

"They don't say hello to me."

"They don't have to answer children. When you get old, people will say hello to you."

"When I get to college, it won't matter if I'm not charming. And it doesn't matter if a person is ugly; she can still do schoolwork."

"I didn't say you were ugly."

"You say that all the time."

"That's what we're supposed to say. That's what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite." (181)

Maxine realizes: "It seemed to hurt her to tell me that" (182). It hurts Brave Orchid to see that her daughter is not the Chinese girl she intended her to be. Her daughter does not understand that the villagers' hesitation to greet is not unwillingness, but merely a manifestation of tradition. Nor does Maxine understand that her mother's negative remarks about her looks or her achievements at school are both a sign of humility, as it is considered impolite to boast, and an attempt to ward off bad luck. Brave Orchid may think she raises her children according to Chinese tradition, but she does not recognize her daughter's difficulties with her Chinese heritage; her problems conforming to a predefined identity. So at the end of the fight, Maxine realizes there is "No higher listener. No listener but myself" (182). Maxine has had to become aware of her mother's lack of understanding first, to be able to wrestle herself loose from her own need for appreciation. Brave Orchid and Maxine thus share their search for a self, but Maxine has outgrown her mother. The more she becomes aware of her mother's flaws and inconsistencies, the less she experiences her mother as the omniscient narrator of her life. The narrator, the adult Maxine, declares: "I mustn't feel bad that I haven't done as well as the swordswoman [Fa Mu Lan] 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. I dislike armies" (50-51). This relativism diminishes the mother's power over the daughter.

Maxine's discovery that her mother's truth need not be the only truth symbolizes a turning point in her life, so it is no wonder that the fight that brought about this insight is described at the end of the book. It marks the transition of the young, voiceless Maxine into the communicative narrator. Another example of this transition is that in the beginning of the fifth chapter, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," the narrator surprises the reader by confessing that she did not witness the events in the previous chapter. She based the story about Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid solely on the information she

received from her sister: “In fact, it wasn’t me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he’d told her” (147). To this confession, the adult Maxine adds that her brother’s “version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs” (147). However, *The Woman Warrior* itself contradicts the statement about the narrator’s brother’s version being the better one. Not only is “twisting” a story “into designs” Kingston’s characteristic style of writing, it is also the tool with which she deconstructs a too narrow worldview.

Whereas Maxine, in the beginning of the book, asserts that she “had been in the presence of great power, [her] mother talking-story” (25), in the end, her attitude towards Brave Orchid’s storytelling has changed. The stories still show Brave Orchid’s influence, but she is no longer the unquestionable authority behind the stories, she has become a character like any other. The narrator now dares to introduce a story herself: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also am a story-talker. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (184). The stories in *The Woman Warrior* sketch the protagonist’s search for a voice. When the narrator, in the end, actively takes control of the story, she demonstrates that she has, indeed, found this voice.

A Reconciliation

The Woman Warrior is the narrator's way of showing that she, like her mother, is a storyteller too. Yet because of her bicultural experience, Maxine does not blindly follow her mother's example. Mark Freeman explains: "The Self, and narratives about the self, are culturally and discursively 'situated' [. . .]. Simply put, 'my story' can never be wholly mine, alone, because I define and articulate my existence with and among others, through the various narrative models—including literary genres, plot structures, metaphoric themes, and so on—my culture provides" (287). Maxine's bicultural background almost inevitably manifests itself in her storytelling. This is equally true for the writer behind this narrator. By crossing the borders of literary genres, Patricia Lin Blinde states, Kingston is able to "write the dilemma of [. . .] her own life situation into the very structural fabric of [her] works" (56). More specifically, Kingston is able to reconcile Chinese and the American cultural elements in her identity through reinventing the genre of autobiography.

Most noticeable is Kingston's violation of the premise that an autobiography should only contain facts. The subtitle of *The Woman Warrior, Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, offers an early warning about the book's content, which clearly must differ from a more conventional memoir. The word "ghosts" prepares the reader for Brave Orchid's fabulous stories about the supernatural, and Maxine's childhood world of fantasy. Yet the metaphor also proves to be a useful symbol in the description of Maxine's reality. During her early youth, Maxine is terrified of Americans, because her mother calls them "ghosts," and makes clear these creatures cannot be trusted. Furthermore, the China her mother speaks about so often also appears to be a completely different world. Maxine confesses: "I did not want to go to China. In China my parents would sell my sisters and me. [. . .] I did not want to go where the ghosts took shapes nothing like our own" (93). China, its tradition and its inhabitants seem equally

frightening to Maxine. Most importantly, Maxine and her generation are also described as “ghosts” by the immigrants: they “had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were [themselves] half ghosts. [. . .] Ghosts are noisy and full of air” (165). The immigrants, too, signal that the second generation is in between; that they do not really belong to either the old or the new world. They are afloat, loose from solid ground, like ghosts float through the air. Kingston thus incorporates both fact and fiction in her autobiography to represent the second-generation’s experiences in between cultures.

For Maxine, the abstractness of the world around her, and the fact that she herself is seen as belonging to no world at all, diminishes the need for a clear-cut differentiation between fact and fiction. Blinde summarizes: “The irreconcilable schism that western thought has placed between the apprehension of the real and the supernatural [. . .] has little bearing on Kingston’s own perspective of life” (69). Maxine learns to compare Chinese and American worldviews to each other, instead of judging one from the rigid standpoint of the other. Johnson explains: “In the west [. . .] the acceptance of the mechanical and logical characteristics of a world of objects *also* constitutes a ‘belief system’ [which] may not be so different to ‘superstitious’ interpretations of reality” (125). An American, scientific approach to reality need not be accepted as more true than the traditional Chinese worldview in which there is also attention for the supernatural. By undermining the opposition fact/fiction, Kingston is able to deconstruct the opposition between Chinese and American culture, and to let the two merge in her autobiography.

Kingston’s attempts to incorporate both cultures do not mean she refrains from criticizing both, however. In contrast, the alterations to the genre of autobiography show Kingston’s critique of how cultures set a standard to which any individual must conform, if he or she wants to belong, influence a person’s identity. The openness with which the protagonist is constructed is another example of Kingston’s adaptation of the

autobiography to her personal narrative. In the retelling of the “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan,” for example, Kingston’s alter ego imagines herself as the traditional Chinese heroine Fa Mu Lan. Through Maxine’s retelling of the ballad, she herself becomes a mythical figure, a product of the imagination. Of course, Maxine, as the narrator and protagonist of this autobiography, is also a construction, and should not be equated with the actual writer. However, by pointing out to the reader that, even in an autobiography, both the narrator and the protagonist are created by the writer, Kingston emphasizes that the autobiography is the writer’s personal reflection on his or her self, or, more explicitly, that the autobiography involves a personal creation of the self. Instead of letting her identity be formed, Kingston actively constructs a self.

Kingston takes pains in criticizing the particular force that prevents her to accept her Chinese ethnicity in the first place: patriarchy. She uses the stories of the women in *The Woman Warrior* to protest externally assigned identities in general, but also to protest against the externally assigned identity of women in particular. Leslie Rabine points at the example of No Name Woman, through whose story Kingston violates the patriarchal descent line (484). Not the father, the husband or the son represent the family in this story, but the woman who gave birth to an illegitimate child. Instead of safeguarding the stories of the male bloodline, Kingston gives a voice to the women who usually remain voiceless in traditional families. Also, No Name Woman, Fa Mu Lan, Moon Orchid, and Brave Orchid herself symbolize the many different identities a woman can adopt as alternatives to the silent, submissive, but most importantly uniform image of women in a patriarchy. Chen Lok Chua describes the collection of women in *The Woman Warrior* as an alternative “paradigm of female identity” (65). The excessive attention for other characters besides the protagonist is, of course not a characteristic of the traditional autobiography. However, by portraying this group of women, Kingston

fights the patriarchal tradition which prevents her to feel at home in both traditional Chinese culture, and community.

In spite of Kingston's criticism of the pressure a culture can exercise over an individual, however, the need to belong to a collective remains. Therefore, she sustains the collective aspect of her mother's traditional culture in her autobiography by focusing on multiple characters instead of one central protagonist. Yet Kingston does not obediently follow Brave Orchid's definition of the community as a patriarchally directed collective, but gives her own, personal, individual twist to her story. Jerome Bruner asserts: "autobiography (like the novel) involves not only the construction of self, but also a construction of one's culture [. . .]" (35). Or, for Kingston, the genre involves the deconstruction of one's culture. *The Woman Warrior* challenges not only the patriarchal aspect of Brave Orchid's cultural identity, but also the obligation to conform to any assigned cultural identity to belong to a community. Zoltán Abádi-Nagy points out that "cultural identity" and "collective identity" do not need to be the same (175), and this is what Kingston shows with her autobiography, too. She lets go of the premise that, in order to belong to the community, or to the family, the individual must live up to culturally enforced norms. The rejection that a collective identity needs to be the same as a cultural identity opens up the possibility of feeling connected with a collective on the basis of other shared traits, definitions or experiences.

Foregrounding the stories of the female characters is Kingston's solution for her need to belong: next to a protest against the collective, it is also an affirmation of the collective. Kingston's attention for her protagonist's relationships with the other female characters emphasizes the collective aspect so much, that Lee even describes *The Woman Warrior* as a "collective autobiography" (57). The narrative challenges the premise that an autobiography should focus on one individual. The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* creates her characters, yet the characters' stories also form the

narrator. As Juhasz points out, “The stories that [Kingston] herself tells are not about ‘characters’ with herself as ‘author’: Kingston and her heroes share identities. As she defines them [. . .] they define her [. . .]” (232). It is no coincidence that Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid share their name with Fa Mu Lan, whose name translates “as Magnolia, or more literally Wood Orchid” (Lee 59). The narrator’s identity is formed by the stories of her relatives, which is an affirmation of the collective. By concentrating on Maxine’s relation with her real or imagined relatives, Kingston, in fact, creates her own community.

Each woman in *The Woman Warrior* in turn symbolizes a phase in the narrator’s development, as they all struggle with a predefined identity. Lightfoot points out that “the principle of arrangement is not chronological but psychological” (63). Where No Name Woman represents Maxine’s fears of being expelled from the community because of an inability to conform to its unwritten social rules, Fa Mu Lan stands for her need for recognition and appreciation. The stories show how the young Maxine becomes aware of the double standards for men and women, for the individual and the community, and how she tries to escape these by affiliating with the real or imagined characters from her mother’s stories. Yet Fa Mu Lan and No Name Woman prove to be unsatisfactory examples. It is necessary for Maxine to examine Brave Orchid’s life story to be able to loosen herself from her mother. The story of Brave Orchid shows the narrator’s growing awareness of the relativity of the cultural values her mother represents. Kingston violates the premise that an autobiography should focus on one individual. Kingston’s identity grows, as the group of women who symbolize her grows.

Through deliberately creating a collective that constructs the story of the individual, Kingston contests the individualism of American society. Yet she also contests the assigned identity of the Chinese collective through offering a self-constructed alternative. Autobiography, Kingston proves, need not be the individualistic genre it is often taken for, as she uses it to emphasize her connection to others. Nor is

storytelling, or “talk-story,” as Brave Orchid calls it, always used to support the construction of a community, it can also be employed to create an individual. Kingston herself asserts: “I’ am nothing but who ‘I’ am in relation to other people” (“Statement” 23). In sum, by incorporating a collective device such as “talk-story” in an individual genre such as the autobiography, Kingston reconciles the traditional Chinese collective identity with American individualism.

Conclusion

The Woman Warrior is both a story about the difficulties a Chinese American girl experiences in defining herself, and the tool with which the writer creates her self.

Through writing *The Woman Warrior* Maxine Hong Kingston cleverly reconciles the traditional collective identity of her Chinese mother with the American ideal of individualism.

The narrative, on the one hand, symbolizes the psychological maturation of the protagonist. Maxine, the main character, tries to escape from the identity her mother Brave Orchid tries to assign to her through storytelling. She does so through rewriting her mother's stories. However, altering the stories only results in a heightened awareness of the aspects of her mother's culture that prevent her from feeling part of the Chinese community: the repression of the individual and patriarchy. Nor does American culture or society offer Maxine an easy alternative for her developing identity. The stereotypical image of the Chinese, which is prevalent among many Americans, is not something Maxine can relate to. Furthermore, the feeling of living in-between cultures makes expressing herself difficult for Maxine. Although she tries to take possession of her voice in English by comparing American individuality with the Chinese emphasis on the collective aspect of a person's identity, Maxine remains silent. A deconstruction of her mother's power over her is necessary before she is able to speak. Through the discovery that Maxine can create herself the same way her mother attempted to create her, through storytelling, she frees herself from her mother's pressing expectations. This insight results in writing the autobiographical *The Woman Warrior*. By writing her own stories, Kingston is able to create her own identity, thereby making her own choices, instead of letting herself be forced by American or Chinese standards.

The Woman Warrior, as a whole, symbolizes the writer's coming to terms with her double heritage. Kingston chooses to incorporate her life story in an individual genre

such as the autobiography. Yet she adapts this genre to correctly present her experiences. Through incorporating fiction into her autobiography, Kingston is able to describe the feeling of living in between worlds those with a double cultural heritage experience. Likewise, she violates the expectation that an autobiography should focus on one individual. Through giving room to the stories of many women, instead of one, she succeeds in both revealing the frustrating aspects of belonging to the collective, and to satisfy her need for belonging at the same time. Kingston's now self-constructed identity thus combines aspects of the traditional Chinese collective identity with American individuality.

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