

Yan Gao

The Art of Parody

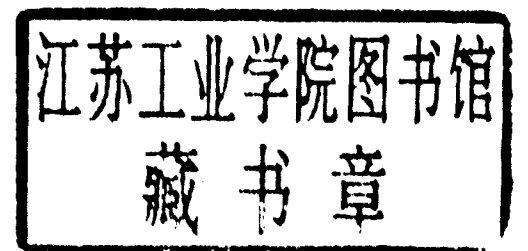
Maxine Hong Kingston's
Use of Chinese Sources



PETER LANG

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The Art of Parody



Many Voices
Ethnic Literatures of the Americas

Kathleen March
General Editor

Vol. 2



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Printed in the United States of America.

To my parents
Gao Fang and Xie Huigao

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these studies to the endnotes. This book, though overlapping on some points with the above works, distinguishes itself as an in-depth, systematic study of Kingston's employment of Chinese sources in all her books. I would like to share what I have found with readers who may have been similarly perplexed by Kingston's works. It will be rewarding if this book can help to make new things (Kingston's Chinese sources) familiar to Western readers, and familiar things new (Kingston's creativity in using these Chinese sources) to Eastern readers.

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Y.G.
Atlanta, Georgia

Introduction Searching/Exploring

Maxine Hong Kingston's artistic technique in portraying Chinese Americans' lives manifests a consistent use of Chinese myths or sources—including poetry, legends, folklore, family anecdotes, stories, and literary classics—in her major works *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *China Men* (1980) and *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989).¹ Kingston is an acclaimed Chinese American writer—her first book *The Woman Warrior* having won the 1976 National Book Award, having come to rank with the most widely-used texts in college level courses in literature, autobiography, culture, women's studies and ethnic studies, and having been excerpted in at least a dozen anthologies. However, the value of Kingston's strategic use of Chinese literary sources in the fabrication of the specifically American tales that pervade her entire works has been neither fully appreciated nor given any serious investigation. Kingston's technique seems to be viewed by many as confusing to the point of becoming problematic.

Confusion about the use of these myths in her three works crops up repeatedly among readers of diverse cultural backgrounds. Some commentators regard Kingston's Chinese myths in *The Woman Warrior* as irrelevant, exotic, remote from American reality, and to be savored chiefly for the element of decorative *otherness* they bring to essentially American scenery. For instance, Margaret Manning comments: "Mythic forces flood the book ... their own strange and brooding atmosphere inscrutably foreign, oriental." Barbara Burdick says: "No other people have remained so mysterious to Westerners as the inscrutable Chinese. Even the word China brings to mind ancient rituals, exotic teas, superstitions, silks and fire-breathing dragons" (Kingston 1982, 56).

Comment on *China Men* in this regard has been less charitable. While the above critics at least enjoy Kingston's myths—if not for their textual applicability, then for their "mystic" or "exotic" qualities—other critics fault Kingston for her use of myths on grounds that she has deviated impermissibly from the originals,

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All ethnic American writers blend their own cultural heritages into their works, such as Toni Morrison who composed African American blues into *The Bluest Eye* and Leslie Silko who revived the yellow woman and Kachina from Native American myth in her tales. Among these writers who create a new American voice with their diverse ethnic traditions, Maxine Hong Kingston, perhaps the best-known Asian American writer, is especially noted for consistently and quantitatively weaving Chinese sources into her works. This book is 'a study of Kingston's transplantation of Chinese sources, her metamorphosis of Chinese stories into American tales, and, above all, her art of parody.

When I first read Kingston's works, I was amazed as well as puzzled by the Chinese sources she employed, which seemed both familiar and eccentric. Between 1989 and 1990, I started the research, trying to find an answer to Kingston's intention and the significance of these Chinese sources in her works. Available then were only two books on Asian American literature—Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature* and Amy Ling's *Between Worlds*—and a few articles. After I completed my research, there came along several articles on Kingston's handling of Chinese sources: Sau-ling Wong's "Kingston's Handling of Traditional Chinese Sources," Gayle Sato's "Ghosts as Chinese-American Constructs in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," Shu-mei Shih's "Exile and Intertextuality in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*" and Qing-yun Wu's "A Chinese Reader's Response to Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*." Later on, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling's *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, Sau-ling Wong's *Reading American Literature*, King-Kok Cheung's *Articulate Silences* and TuSmith's *All My Relatives* were successively published, each having a focus or a chapter on Maxine Hong Kingston.

All the above-mentioned studies offer insightful interpretations of Kingston's works, but they all appeared too late for me to consult; therefore, I have added acknowledgments and some comments on

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having infused the Chinese material with non-Chinese elements. In his review "Chinese Ghost Story" Frederick Wakeman Jr., a sinologist, points out that Kingston's reconstructed myths in *China Men* are the most striking as well as the most perplexing. Some "are only remotely connected with the original Chinese legends they evoke" (42), and Kingston's "pieces of distant China lore often seem jejune and even inauthentic—especially to readers who know a little bit about the original high culture which Kingston claims as her birthright" (44).

As for *Tripmaster Monkey*, the complaints about Kingston's use of Chinese myth are even more pointed. For instance, Sybil Steinberg comments: "[M]any passages bog down in literary allusions, Wittman's often jejune introspection and the interminable scenes wherein the Monkey King holds center stage" (97). Ann Tyler in her review "Manic Monologue" complains: "The myths and sagas are particularly tiring. Wittman loves to tell lengthy stories that possess the grandiosity and the meandering formlessness common to folk legends." What induces the reader to stick with the larger narration, according to her, is "not the larger-than-life sagas that Wittman finds so compelling but the tiny, meticulously catalogued details that fill his quieter moments" (46).

If Kingston's technique is problematic for the American reader, is it less so for the Chinese reader? Not necessarily. To many Chinese readers, the exoticism in Kingston lies not in the materials employed but in the unexpected commingling of unrelated legends, such as those of Fa Mu Lan (a Chinese legendary heroine) and Yue Fei (a Chinese national hero in the twelfth century). What confuses the Chinese reader is not Kingston's reconstruction of Chinese myths, but her transplantation of the familiar stories into a foreign milieu; what bewilders them is not "the larger-than-life sagas" themselves, but the sagas being pressed into service to comment on the Vietnam War and other issues on the American scene. This confusion surfaces in the Chinese version of *China Men* (the only book among Kingston's works that has been completely translated), in which half of the myth sections, except the opening one, have been abridged. The translator's remarks in the afterword on the excised parts imply difficulties in understanding the book, even though the appreciation for Kingston is sure. The Chinese in mainland China, who claim Kingston by blood, consider Kingston a pioneer in delineating

Chinese life overseas, and her book a preeminent historical record of their blood and tears. Li Meihua's translation of *China Men*, according to the editor Huang Shejiao, fills a gap in the corpus of Chinese literature, which since 1949 has incorporated nothing bearing on Chinese life abroad. Kingston's delineation of Chinese laborers' grim experience not only confronts Anglo-Americans with the true dimensions of Chinese Americans' contribution to the construction of America, but also enables the elderly generation to review their bitter history in context and the young generation to reacquaint themselves with their roots and ancestors (1). What Chinese readers appreciate is the account of Chinese American experience; incorporation of Chinese myths detracts from this historical diminution.

Liu Shaoming's essay "From Tang Tingting to Amy Tan: A Debut of Chinese American Novel," expressing a view of Kingston among some Chinese in Taiwan, contends that readers of different cultural backgrounds bring different criteria to the judging of Kingston's works. According to him, Kingston is overvalued; Fa Mu Lan in *The Woman Warrior* is a malformed cultural embryo, and Tang Ao in *China Men* is indecipherable (74). He further devalues Kingston in praising Amy Tan as a better narrator, whose dialogues sound so real that they can even be heard; Tan, he says, does not sell *zasui*—chopped cooked entrails of sheep or oxen, a metaphor for negligible or trivial things in Chinese—in her works (75). What he implies is that Kingston in her works uses trivial Chinese substance as a treat to entice the Euro-American reader.

Kingston's employment of Chinese sources bewilders not only Chinese readers in mainland China and Taiwan, but also some Chinese scholars and students who teach and study in the United States. For instance, Qing-yun Wu is amused by Kingston's techniques and enjoys the parallels she draws between Chinese literary characters and Chinese Americans, but she admits: "Although I marveled at Kingston's comprehensive intertextuality, I did find her bold rewriting of some Chinese tales to be disturbing" (87). She further points out that Kingston's transplanting the stories of three Chinese historical figures—the role models of diligence in study—onto her own father 'loses the Chinese reader's trust in her family saga' (88).

Frank Chin, a Chinese American writer, expresses a similarly dismissive point of view towards Kingston's use of traditional Chinese materials. (He regards her reconstruction of Chinese myth as an active distortion of Chinese culture that misinforms Anglos about Chinese culture through playing to the mainstream reader. In his essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers," Chin asserts that Kingston and some other Chinese American writers "boldly fake the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history" (3). He describes Kingston's strategy as "simply a device for destroying history and literature" (3). A debate on this subject occurred in a panel discussion at a conference on American ethnic literature: Chinese scholars from both mainland China and Taiwan implied that Kingston's treatment of Chinese materials is somewhat disloyal to Chinese culture, whereas Chinese American scholars argued that Kingston's reconstructions actually preserve Chinese tradition.

The focus of the controversy—for the American, the Chinese, or the Chinese American critic—ultimately resolves into the issue of Kingston's use of Chinese myths from disparate cultural backgrounds. One faction deems Kingston's reworking of traditional myths irrelevant to American reality, while another scorns them as irrelevant to authentic Chinese myths. But both of these readings neglect Kingston's intention in using myths, and seem instead to see myths as *interference* rather than *inter-reference*. Much of Kingston's intention (allegorical or otherwise) often fails to penetrate to readers belonging solely to either culture; her double-voiced dialogue, carried out within her culturally-divided self, is not entirely comprehensible in the terms of either cultural norm. Before we pursue this distinction, two points need to be made clear. First, Kingston is an American writer who was born, grew up, has been living in America and describes her American life in her works; therefore her employment of Chinese materials should be explored with an American rather than Chinese point of view, and within the realm of American literature rather than Chinese literature. Second, since Kingston is a Chinese American writer who has never lived in China and whose Chinese heritage has been passed on to her through indirect contact, factual inaccuracies at times occur in her writings.² These are, however, minor flaws compared with Kingston's achievement.

Whatever factual inaccuracy and putative exotic inauthenticity are reflected in Kingston's myths, the far more important issue is the function she has designed into these admittedly altered Chinese myths and their significance in an American reality. The difficulty in fully understanding her is that the Chinese materials are used, in Mikhail M. Bakhtin's words, as "double-voiced discourse" arising from her double cultural backgrounds (324). A first-generation native-born American, Kingston is trapped in a very difficult situation. Being Chinese American, she is suspended between equidistant cultural polarities, unable to identify completely with either culture. In Euro-Americans' eyes she is Chinese; for instance, Joseph S. M. Lau's article "Kingston as Exorcist" is collected in *Modern Chinese Women Writers: Critical Appraisals*. In her mother's eyes she is a "ghost," having been born among "ghosts" and taught by "ghosts."³ The difficulty of communicating with her mother, who for Kingston embodies Chinese culture, impels her to escape from home. But ironically, she escapes only to find herself still homeless; the fact that she escapes from "the invisible world" her mother has built makes her invisible: mainstream Anglo culture is reluctant to accept her because of her race and gender. She is therefore caught in the dilemma of belonging to neither where she comes from nor where she lives. The urge to possess both cultural heritages and the simultaneous rejection by both goad her to struggle for a *true* self, to forge wholeness out of two sets of realities and myths.

Irritated by some critics' emphasis on her *Chineseness* and their application of the stereotyped word *inscrutable* to her works, Kingston retorts: "Another bothersome characteristic of the reviews is the ignorance of the fact that I am an American. I am an American writer, who, like other American writers, wants to write the great American novel" (1982, 57). And "critics do not ask whether Vonnegut is typical of German Americans; they do not ask whether J. P. Donleavy is typical of Irish Americans" (1982, 63). If books written by Americans of European ancestry are deemed "American" novels, should not books written by an American of Chinese ancestry likewise be regarded as "American" novels? She repeats: "*Because* I was born in Stockton, California, I *am* an American woman. I am also a Chinese American woman, but I am not a Chinese woman" (1982, 58).

While insisting on her *Americanness*—one-half of her heritage—as a bulwark against what she considers unjustly literal criticism, Kingston uses her idiosyncratically digested Chinese sources—the other half—to articulate a unique American voice. She digs into the stories that she heard from her mother—once so *other*, so confusing to her—not merely to repeat them, or to teach Chinese culture, but to use them in the pursuit of a meaning that spans past and present, myth and reality, that may (eventually) unify her split self. Her dual cultural heritages determine the complexity of her use of Chinese myth: she can interpret Chinese myth from a virtually non-Chinese perspective. On the one hand, she grew up with her mother's Chinese tales and the Chinese culture that is their source; on the other hand, those stories touch her in quite a different way than intended because of her life as an American: the original "moral of the story" has necessarily mutated. The reinvention of those Chinese stories is thus Kingston's need transmuted into technique.

Kingston's strategy is to parody Chinese materials for a metaphorical purpose, to transfer them to a parallel realm, with *parody* here adverting to its etymological base—*paraoidos*, meaning a song sung alongside another—and being more usefully understood as directed toward the establishment of a type of discourse than as a mocking monologue in imitation of a literary style. Parody, in Bakhtin's words, consists of double-voiced utterances that present two speakers' points of view. As Gary Morson defines parody in his summary of Bakhtin's theory, it must meet three criteria: it must evoke another utterance as its "target" or "object," must be antithetical to its target, and must represent a higher "semantic authority" than the target (110). In Kingston's case, her double consciousness gives rise to a bifocality that enables her to see things from double perspectives, and thereby to travel freely across cultural boundaries and select targets from either territory. To distinguish the two cultures informing the bicultural individual's consciousness, I use *mother culture* for the initial culture—first introduced through her mother and her *ghost stories* and the family environment—and *self culture* for the second, with which she grows up and lives. The *mother culture* inspires and nourishes Kingston's creative writing about her *self culture*. The complex intercultural relationship of *mother* versus *self* not only implies the conflict and reconciliation between the mother and the

daughter but also accords with Kingston's technique of reconstructing Chinese myths in the American setting. The Chinese sources she borrows from the *mother culture*, while challenging stereotypes in the *self culture*, help her create a new voice in her *self culture*. Very often Kingston picks her targets from the *mother culture* and rearranges them in various ways to fit the *self culture*; sometimes, she reverses the procedure. The process of this reconstruction itself—interweaving two sets of realities and traditions, reevaluating the stories she heard from her mother in her childhood from the American perspective, and then rearranging Chinese materials to support her American themes—represents the interaction of two cultural and ideological systems. This interaction of two cultural and ideological systems is the ground or source for a new semantic orientation that carries, in Bakhtin's sense, a higher authority than the traditional semantic orientation of either system by itself.

Since a writer—depending on her fluency in multiple cultural lexicons—can greatly enrich a work by taking advantage of the freedom to make use of literary forms such as parody or analogy to penetrate cultural frontiers, the competent reader of her works must, as when decoding a metaphor, decide which literary presentation of one cultural topos is to be read through the moral/cultural code of the other or others, and in what sequence. This process obliges the reader to keep the co-existence and the interactivity of both cultures in the piece constantly in view. In order to fully appreciate Kingston's works, we need to decode the construction of Kingston's Chinese myths. *Myth* is meant here to denote stories drawn from both oral and written traditions that have certain cultural values and morals; as defined by Vera M. Kutsinski, "[m]yths, in the broadest sense, are storehouses of cultural values and beliefs, which serve as paradigms for the interpretation of historical 'facts.' Myths, in short, are the foundations of a culture's identity" (5). These Chinese myths are *ghost stories* in the sense that they are foreign to the American norm. I will not attempt to interpret all of the numerous Chinese references found in Kingston's works in the form of one-line stories or name droppings, but will concentrate on those references to Chinese sources which are significantly associated with thematic matters and thereby contribute in important ways to an enlarged understanding of Kingston's literary

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achievement. Grounded in a cross-cultural perspective, this book will examine systematically the function of Kingston's use of Chinese myths within her thematic frame and the development of her metaphorical strategy in *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, and *Tripmaster Monkey*, to the end of explaining her art of parody, wherein lies her contribution as an Asian American writer to the corpus of contemporary American literature.

Chapter 1 Unraveling Mother's Stories: *The Woman Warrior*

Kingston's bewilderment at her Chinese heritage is exposed early in *The Woman Warrior*:

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? (6)

The longing for the ability to distinguish between the imposed stereotype and the inherent qualities of a Chinese legacy pinpoints the theme of identity, revealing a bewildered mind caught in a cross-cultural situation—a self split by its allegiance to two heritages. In order to unify the dissevered halves, the narrator has to figure out how “the invisible world the emigrants built” around her childhood “fits in solid America” (6).

“The invisible world” Kingston refers to is built upon immigrant parents' last hope of preserving their cultural heritage; due to nostalgia for their lost home in China and the sense of insecurity and alienation in the New World—intensified by the fear of losing their offspring to foreign “ghosts”—immigrant parents codify models through which to discipline their children and enforce family tradition and received culture. In Kingston's case, her mother, an embodiment of Chinese culture, fences her around with Chinese stories and legends. This effort, as is often portrayed in tales of immigrant parents and first-generation children, has a centrifugal rather than a centripetal effect, only widening the generational breach, as the parents want to maintain the wall protecting their last territory and the children want to break it down, both to clear the view to a larger world and to test their own selfhood.

The “invisible world”—invisible in the sense that Kingston the narrator had never been to China before the publication of her

book—is the context of her mother's tales; but having learned these stories in a different, almost inapposite cultural milieu, she finds that they as often as not confuse rather than guide her. Sandwiched between the confrontational zones of the invisible world and solid America, Kingston has to decipher Mother's puzzling stories in order to sort out a positive and applicable meaning to bridge the two worlds. Focusing on her approach in this unraveling process, I will examine how Kingston from an American point of view plays on Chinese traditions to draw new meanings to support her life, how she reforms the models provided by her mother to build up her central image of woman warrior from four figures from her mother's stories—the Chinese legendary heroine Fa Mu Lan (Hua Mu Lan), the *heroic woman* in the Chinese traditional concept, the heroine who exorcises the ghost, and a Chinese poetess named Ts'ai Yen (Cai Yan)—how she searches for self by integrating herself with these heroines, and how she finds her own voice by retelling Mother's stories.⁴

1.1 Fa Mu Lan the Woman Warrior: Deciphering a Fantasy

The Woman Warrior, the title of the book, serves as the central image threading through the whole work. It derives from the story of Fa Mu Lan, the well-known Amazon of Chinese legend. Fa Mu Lan is the heroine of the "The Song of Mu Lan," a literary ballad based on an oral tradition and composed by an anonymous sixth-century Chinese writer. Several suggestions are given on Fa Mu Lan's name and hometown. Her family name is suggested as *Wei*, *Zhu* and *Hua*. Some critics even suggest that *Mu Lan* is a family name rather than a given name. Her hometown is said to be in Qiaojun, Songzhou, Huangzhou or Shangqiu. Yet none has been supported with enough proof. According to the poem, Fa Mu Lan replaces her elderly father to battle against Tartars for twelve years disguised as a man. When the war is over, instead of taking an official rank offered to her as an honor and award, she returns home, resumes her girlhood, putting on her robe and make-up. Her female identity surprises her fellowmen, who travel with her for many a year without knowing that Mu Lan is a girl.⁵ A popular legendary heroine in China, Fa

Mu Lan is loved and admired for her diligence, intelligence, audacity and valiant spirit, her ability to do both women and men's work, as well as for her love for peace and the simple life.

The story of Fa Mu Lan confuses Kingston: "She [Mother] said I would grow up a wife and slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (24). While revealing her perplexity regarding women's position in China in an interview—"I can almost understand better how white people can enslave black people than how men can enslave women"⁶—Kingston decides to follow the example of Fa Mu Lan. In order to establish both coherency between these contradictory models and a connection between herself and the legendary heroine, Kingston creates a fantasy involving Fa Mu Lan, the swordswoman, and Kingston as the narrator, in which there is sometimes no clear distinction among the three. Some critics identify Fa Mu Lan with both the character of the swordswoman and the narrator; others, however, have objected to what is seen as Kingston's playing fast and loose with the original legend.⁷ With the former view, it is hard to detect Kingston's deliberate alteration of Fa Mu Lan; with the latter, it is easy to miss Kingston's intention. The story of Kingston's swordswoman does differ pointedly from Fa Mu Lan's, but Kingston does not intend a point-for-point identification; inspired by Fa Mu Lan, a heroine whose exploits and character are deeply rooted in her heart, Kingston creates purposely a composite fantasy figure, the swordswoman, through whom Kingston illustrates a young girl's (her own) fight against gender injustice. The details of this protean identity's construction emerge through the deciphering of the fantasy. In the dynamic relations among these three—the mythological figure of Fa Mu Lan, young Kingston as the narrator, and her dream figure of the swordswoman—the fantasy may be studied from three dimensions: as a means to defy the gender discrimination in a hostile environment, to balance the difficult mother-daughter relationship, and to lead from adolescence to maturity.

In the fantasy Kingston's defiance against injustice towards women is exposed through her rewriting of Fa Mu Lan, who serves Kingston as an inspiration for both her life and her work. To Kingston, reared in blatantly anti-feminine surroundings, Fa Mu Lan's valiance and her disguise as a man stand out as more striking,

and far more suggestive than do her other, more conventional virtues. Her success on the battlefield demonstrates women's equal capability in man's work; her transformation to a fighter in man's guise advertises her intelligence (and capacity for strategy) to a male-dominated society where a woman is only an *indoor/inside* person associated with housework and child care. Fa Mu Lan's challenge to this male-dominated society thus inspired young Kingston, setting up a paradigm for her life. This is probably why Kingston chose Fa Mu Lan as her model rather than two other Chinese woman warriors, Liang Hongyu and Mu Guiying, mentioned in her *Tripmaster Monkey*.⁸ Although more is depicted of the heroic deeds and military talent of these two woman warriors, they fight in their female identity; the gender transformation undertaken by Fa Mu Lan seems more fascinating and expressive to Kingston, providing as it does an image of woman at her best—capable of encompassing and mastering *natural* (i.e., biological) duality.

The essence of Fa Mu Lan's virtue lies in her fighting spirit as well as her perseverance, which are exemplified by her gender transformation; these are the characteristics transmitted into the swordswoman created by Kingston. The swordswoman in Kingston's fantasy is a conflation of Fa Mu Lan—a figure from the Chinese tradition she learns from her mother—with the swordswoman, a *Kongfu* movie stereotype Kingston sees in "the Confucius church" that she recalls from her childhood. Kingston's own explanation—"The White Tigers' is not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America, a sort of *Kongfu* movie parody"—distinguishes her re-creation from the original myth (1982, 57). Like Fa Mu Lan, the swordswoman fights in man's disguise, returns home after her battles are over, and is welcomed by her family. While her material is grounded in these fundamental similarities, Kingston makes several alterations: she recasts the swordswoman's story into the narrator's fantasy; adds passages concerning her martial training; inserts domestic episodes of a husband and a child (Fa Mu Lan is still a maid in the poem); fleshes out the swordswoman's adversaries and gives a description of each battle. Finally, Fa Mu Lan fights for reasons of filial piety, whereas the swordswoman pursues revenge on her enemies. Although the swordswoman retains filiality as a motivation, Kingston changes Fa

Mu Lan's filial piety as a daughter into a daughter-in-law's duty—taking care of parents-in-law and bearing more grandchildren.

Kingston's alterations derive from the need to elucidate the relationship of the swordswoman to herself as character and narrator. The distinguishable entities of Kingston as narrator—outside the frame—and as character—inside—demarcate the worlds of dream and reality, success and disappointment, glory and repression: the character *I* and the narrator *I* are distanced, but paralleled. The whole story of the swordswoman is young Maxine's fantasy, the pure product of her imagination. "I couldn't tell where the [mother's] stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep" (24). Mother's story is like a spark that lightens Kingston's imagination to complete her story.

Young Kingston's fantasy is closely related to her life experience of growing up as first girl-child and the way she is viewed and treated by her family and particularly by her mother. Instead of subsisting entirely within a separated inner world of imagination, the fantasy is used as "a powerful tool for reshaping lived experience beyond the repressions of personal daily life" (Frye 294). As Patricia Spacks observes in *The Female Imagination*, imagination creates a space for whatever possibility is denied its realization by society (241). For the adolescent Kingston, such a possibility takes form in the image of the swordswoman, who, as the vehicle of Fa Mu Lan's spirit, acts as young Kingston's *alter ego*. The swordswoman's story is presented by a first-person narrator; the character *I* and the narrator *I* necessarily mirror and interpenetrate each other.

"The severe opposition of fantasy and reality in this stage of life," observes Spacks, "derives partly from the adolescent's central problem: to find the proper balance between self and others" (114). The occasion for this conflict, in Kingston's case, arises from the traditional Chinese construction of female identity, the omnipresence of which in her Chinese American home life causes the narrator to suffer enormously. Kingston grows up with her ears full of misogynistic expressions such as "Feeding girls is feeding crows" and "When you raise girls, you are raising children for strangers" (54). Being a girl, she does not deserve a full-month party; her picture is not worth sending to grandparents; and, worst of all, she is left home when her great-uncle takes her brothers to play

outside. Her success at school is dismissed with the comment: "You can't eat straight A's" (54). With a child's limited comprehension of gender discrimination, she regrets her own gender and wants to be a boy. The adult narrator still remembers how in girlhood she threw tantrums at having humiliating tropes such as "bad girl" applied to her by her mother: "'I'm not a bad girl,' I would scream. 'I'm not a bad girl. I'm not a bad girl.' I might as well have said, 'I'm not a girl'" (55). The old country's moral mentality does not focus on distinctions between two adjectives—"good" or "bad," but between two nouns—"girl" or "boy." To resist this congenital misogyny, the narrator tries, in effect, to deny her femaleness by blatantly flouting as much as she can of the moral code for women: refusing to cook, breaking dishes, picking her nose while serving food, wearing wrinkled clothes. The humiliation to which she is subjected as a girl is ingrained so deeply in the narrator's consciousness that even the passage of time cannot erase it:

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 like 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. (56)

The desire to be treated as the equal of a boy, however, is at least imaginatively fulfilled through the swordswoman. Although the swordswoman is still a woman, she has a glorious time while clad in man's armor, performs heroically, and returns home to a welcome big enough for her parents to have "killed a chicken and steamed it whole as if they were welcoming home a son" (40); she also practices a son's filial piety by sending money home (on which her parents and the entire clan live happily) and by getting her parents' coffins ready (the last filial piety: preparing a good and secure ending for the elders). What the adolescent narrator has been denied in life is achieved through the swordswoman in the fantasy.

If achieving equality with men is one way to defy the gender injustice, protecting oneself by overcoming the youthful sense of insecurity through fantasy is another way, which can be found in the swordswoman's survival exercise of the hunger test. The explicit purpose of this ordeal, of course, is the need of the warrior to inure

himself or herself to privation in time of war when there is likely to be a desperate shortage of food. More obliquely, it may be related to young Kingston's anxiety about being sold, an all-too-common fate for girl-children during times of famine in China. Food assumes unusual importance in the Chinese conceptual frame, since China, as a predominantly agricultural country, has repeatedly endured famines induced by natural or human causes. The metaphors of food and situations related to food that frequently recur in Kingston's works are closely tied with women's lot. (Girls, for instance, are compared with maggots in the rice.) The swordswoman's first treat from the old couple is "bowls of rice and soup and a leafy branch of peaches" (25), and as recounted above, she is welcomed by her parents with a feast on her return from training. In contrast to the honor shown to the swordswoman, the narrator's aunt No Name Woman is punished by eating at the "outcast table":

In a commensal tradition, where food is precious, the powerful older people made wrongdoers eat alone. Instead of letting them start separate new lives like the Japanese, who could become samurais and geishas, the Chinese family, faces averted but eyes glowering sideways, hung on to the offenders and fed them leftovers. My aunt must have lived in the same house as my parents and eaten at an outcast table. (8)

Even after her death she still suffers: "Always hungry, always needing, she would have to beg food from other ghosts, snatch and steal it from those whose living descendants give them gifts" (18). The lack of food could render a woman's already straitened life even more miserable. "Adultery, perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the village needed food" (15). Many girls were sold in the street because of the lack of food at home; the narrator's own mother bought a girl slave with only fifty dollars. To learn to be tough in poverty, or to be able to endure hunger, can therefore be seen as the swordswoman's preparation to survive as a woman. If Kingston did not share the specifics of the swordswoman's worries, at least she felt great relief when she came to accept that she was *not* a waste of food: "When I visit the family now, I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl; I *am* worthy of eating the food" (62).

The direct defiance against gender injustice, in which we see the most important metaphorical parallel between the swordswoman and Kingston, is demonstrated on the battlefield: the swordswoman is a female avenger, interceding on behalf of a young Kingston who is disappointed in and depressed by life. Her battles against a giant and a baron are commensurately symbolic. Giants, for instance, are commonly encountered as the enemy in fairy tales; but in Kingston, the appearance of one suggests more. Compare the description of the swordswoman's opponents with that of Kingston's adversaries. The swordswoman:

My first opponent turned out to be a giant, so much bigger than the toy general I used to peep at.... Our eyes are locked until his height made me strain my neck looking up, my throat so vulnerable to the stroke of a knife that my eyes dropped to the secret death points on the huge body. (45)

And Kingston:

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. (57)

Thus the giant the swordswoman fights with symbolizes Kingston's racist bosses, who are powerful, not only socially and politically, but physically as well. The swordswoman's physical confrontation with the giant again transforms Kingston's relationship with her boss through fantasy: the swordswoman claps the giant down to size, whereas Kingston speaks to her boss in a "small-person's voice that makes no impact" (57). Kingston is not only figuratively small, in social and political position, but literally also—she is four feet, nine inches tall.⁹ Kingston's challenge to the boss who requires her to order "nigger yellow" paint in an art supply house falls ineffectually on dead ears; her refusal to type invitations to the restaurant protested against by CORE and NAACP leads to unemployment. However, the swordswoman, her alter ego, indeed avenges her.

The swordswoman's heroism reaches its climax in her liberation of Peiping. After defeating giants, genies, and barons in fairyland, the swordswoman suddenly enters history through the incidents of

the beheading of the emperor, the inauguration of peasants into the new reign, the touching of the stones at the Long Wall, and the freeing of woman prisoners. The swordswoman's heroic deed serves to dissipate young Kingston's anxiety about being sold into marital servitude, or worse: "And it was important that I do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China" (54).

The swordswoman's battle with the baron parallels Kingston's struggle against sex discrimination. The baron, an archetypal sexist, quotes the old sayings to defend himself: "'Girls are maggots in the rice.' 'It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters'" (51). In the imaginary world, the swordswoman—by killing the baron and freeing all the women locked in his home—avenges Kingston's victimization by the real world. The battle with the giant and the battle with the baron aim respectively at Kingston's racist and sexist patrimonies.

The sense of the swordswoman's heroism is reinforced by the chapter title "White Tigers," which may be related to the legend of White Tiger Hill, located in Lianyungang Port in Shandong Province, China. Once in ancient times, a man named Huang, who could fight off tigers with his treasure sword, lived near the East Sea. Learning that white tigers had come out to attack residents in the area where he lived, Huang came out to help. At the sight of his treasure sword, all but one white tiger fled; that one he stabbed, and its dead body turned into a grayish hill in the shape of a tiger—hence, White Tiger Hill. Apart from its well-scenery-stones mimicking all kinds of vivid animals, pavilions, and stone carvings from the tenth to the nineteenth centuries, there is on the north side of the hill a graveyard, where, it is said, thirty-six heroes of *Outlaws of the Marsh* were buried. Song Jiang, the head of one hundred and eight peasant insurgents, took thirty-five men on a raid, which began with a landing at White Tiger Hill. The government soldiers, hiding and waiting, cut off the raiders' escape route by burning their boats. Song Jiang and his fellows, outnumbered by the soldiers, fought brilliantly, but were all killed. Since they were buried at the foot of White Tiger Hill, local residents also called it Heroes' Graveyard. Arranging the swordswoman's training lessons and battles in White Tiger Hill is important in the sense that the two legends not only

accord with Kingston's fantasy mode, but also glorify the swordswoman's heroic spirit.

The fantasy may also serve as a means to balance the difficult mother-daughter relationship reflected in the attitude towards arranged marriages, another injustice towards women. In old China, women are married out so as to reduce the family burden. In Kingston's case, the misunderstanding exists between the mother and the daughter. Kingston, afraid that Mother may marry her out, intends to show her value and loyalty to the family. The swordswoman fantasy here functions to fight against gender discrimination in the domestic realm and to balance the mother-daughter relationship by releasing young Kingston from the pressure of her mother's expectations on the issue of marriage. Though Mother teaches young Kingston the song of Fa Mu Lan and she herself takes a career unusual to women in old China, she paradoxically expects Kingston to follow the traditional way of women: to be married out to be a wife. As a daughter Kingston has to obey her mother, but her personality and her life in America make her rebel to fulfill her own will. The best way to mediate this conflict and express herself is through fantasy, which is achieved through the contrast between the swordswoman and Kingston in the episodes relating to romantic love and childbearing, which are addenda to the story of Fa Mu Lan.

A daughter's marriage is, to some extent, viewed bluntly as a way of relieving the parental burden in the Chinese tradition: the literal translation of the Chinese idiom for the marriage of a woman is *to marry out* to another family; that for a man is *to take in* a wife. *In and out*, more than physical positions, indicate a social hierarchy. This traditional idea can be seen at one of the swordswoman's water-gourd scenes.

My whole family was visiting friends on the other side of the river. Everybody had on good clothes and was exchanging cakes. It was a wedding. My mother was talking to the hosts: "Thank you for taking our daughter. Wherever she is, she must be happy now. She will certainly come back if she is alive, and if she is a spirit, you have given her a descent line. We are so grateful." (37)

The young Kingston is represented by Kingston-as-author as fully aware of this topos: "So I discovered the next plan to get rid of us: marry us off here without waiting until China" (224).

In order to reveal her inwardness and her loyalty to the family, Kingston decides that she will never get married: "I did not plan ever to have a husband. I would show my mother and father and the nosey emigrant villagers that girls have no outward tendency" (56); in a quarrel with her mother over an arranged marriage, she retorts and swears: "I'm never getting married, never!" (235). By contrast, the swordswoman has a handsome husband, whom she chooses from her playmates in childhood. She marries for love rather than being *married out* as burden-relieving. This opposition of matrimonial conditions (and their precedent attitudes) illustrates the two sides of one psyche—the desire to be loved by the family and the desire to choose her marriage. Kingston wants to compel love by demonstrating her steadfast refusal to be severed from the family; the swordswoman elicits a natural, unobstructed love from her husband. If Kingston's decision to remain at home constitutes a protest against the misogynist tradition—girls only water others' gardens—then the swordswoman's free marriage is a complementary act of defiance against the convention of the arranged marriage, which Kingston feared might be imminent for her because she feared that Mother once wanted to marry her to a "hulk," a "gorilla-ape" who frequents their laundry. Such a solution is a sensible one in her mother's eyes, as she considers Kingston to be ugly, unmarriageable: "Who'd want to marry you anyway? Noisy. Talking like a duck. Disobedient. Messy" (235). The swordswoman's situation is different, however. She is a beauty in her true lover's eyes.

I opened the tent flap. And there in the sunlight stood my own husband with arms full of wild-flowers for me. "You are beautiful," he said, and meant it truly.... We were so pleased with each other, the childhood friend found at last, the childhood friend mysteriously grown up. (46)

Beauty is therefore not simply physical, but a more spiritual matter. The swordswoman's marriage for true love manifests the narrator's desired sense of liberation from parental demands and her mother's judgment that she is unmarriageable.

The feeling of freedom and empowerment is reinforced by the swordswoman's child-bearing episode, which, though it contrasts the young Kingston's physical situation, has its own significance in terms of gender issues. First, as Amy Ling has argued, Kingston "increases the woman's stature and asserts that the impossible *is* possible" by having her warrior bear a child while in the field—still fighting, still disguised as a man—rather than waiting to return home after the battles (159). Moreover, the augmentation of the woman's dignity can be also seen in the ritual of tying a baby boy's dry umbilical cord to the flagpole, the significance of which resonates through a Chinese pun. The Chinese words for *cord* and *flag* are homonyms, pronounced as *qi*. Therefore, for a woman to hold a flag high on the battlefield with a boy's dry cord on the pole serves to glorify women—the indispensable producers of men—and may also symbolize the battle against sexism: women can do not only what men can do, but also what man cannot do.¹⁰

Had the swordswoman borne a girl child, tying her cord to the flagpole would more directly exalt the female gender, and Kingston could be understood to be issuing a challenge, frontal and unambiguous, to the anti-female tradition, seeking thereby to *rectify* (the Confucian equivalent of *justify*) girls. But to the contrary, her swordswoman not only bears a boy, but wants to give her parents-in-law more sons as well. Since the fantasy is the product of a young girl's imagination as shaped by circumambient social reality, this seeming disjunction may be accounted for in the context of the urge for recognition in a patriarchal society. In old Chinese tradition, a woman belonged after marriage to the husband's family and was completely subject to the husband's authority. Her role was to bear male children to perpetuate the family name. If she did not fulfill this task, she could either be cast out of her husband's home, disgraced and socially ostracized, or be replaced by the husband's concubines, among whom those who bore sons would achieve power in domestic affairs. It was only in her function as a breeder that a woman attained her social status. Kingston, though she had not yet been to China, absorbed this traditional attitude from her home life. Therefore, in her fantasy young Kingston prudently secures the swordswoman's position by letting her produce more sons for her parents-in-law; she thus avoids the punishment for a *bad* daughter-

in-law told to Kingston by her own father—being smeared with honey and tied naked on top of an ant nest.

The yearning for recognition is disclosed through two other Chinese puns associated with a postpartum ritual. The narrator Kingston does not learn about the rituals for infants until she witnesses those conducted in celebration of her brother's birthday. Out of both curiosity and wounded self-love, she throws a chain of questions at her mother in an angry tone:

"Did you roll an egg on *my* face like that when I was born?" "Did you have a full-month party for *me*?" "Did you turn on all the lights?" "Did you send *my* picture to Grandmother?" "Why not?" "Because I'm a girl? Is that why not?" (55)

If Kingston, frustrated and angry, cannot do anything to ease the sting, the swordswoman can act as her surrogate and fulfill her wish for her by enacting the ritual at *her* baby's full-month ceremony. She and her husband dye two eggs red by boiling them with a flag, a convenient way to procure dye stuff during the scarcity of wartime. The swordswoman peels one egg and rolls it all over "the baby's head, his eyes, his lips, off his bump of a nose, his cheeks, his dear bald head and fontanel" (48). The action of rolling an egg in Chinese is called *gun dan*, which is a pun on the angry expression, *go away*. The egg routine is thus meant to clear all bad omens away and to welcome a new life with good fortune.¹¹ In another ritual, they baptize their new-born with water in which dried grapefruit peel has been boiled. Since the Chinese words for *tangerine* and *luck* are homonyms, to dab its water on the baby's forehead and hands is a blessing. Kingston substitutes grapefruit for tangerines, another instance in which the Chinese heritage and the Chinese American experience are fused in her reordering. Grafted on to the model of Fa Mu Lan, the swordswoman's marriage and childbirth on the one hand mirror Kingston's resistance to arranged marriage and the whole array of anti-female Chinese customs, and on the other, deepen the characterization of the swordswoman, "who is not a maid like Joan of Arc" (57). Joan of Arc is a pallid model, compared with the swordswoman; though she also fights in male armor, her chaste one-sidedness cannot meet Kingston's psychic and artistic needs.