

**Unique Identity as a Chinese-American: A Critical Study of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior***

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**Abstract**

In this paper much discussion will be on the formation of a unique identity as a Chinese-American in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. This unique identity succeeds to link and bridge the two different cultures, the past and the present, the male and the female. It also has the capacity to encompass all sorts of differences and contradictions. The hybrid allusions, the hybrid genre, the blending of facts and fiction, the thematic decentralization, the shifting narrative point of views, the hybrid readers and the hybrid language employed in Kingston's writing all reflect on the erasure of boundaries between the East and the West, the past and the present, the male and the female. Instead of dichotomizing the world, the unique identity as a Chinese-American link and unite things altogether.

**Keywords:** Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, Chinese-American, Self, Cultures, Identity, Decentralization, Immigrants

Maxine Hong Kingston, born and raised in America, perceived the images of China only through the mass media and the memories of her parents. Since the images perceived are not first-hand materials, Kingston reconstruct her identity through the cultural imaginary. She has carved out a niche for herself as a chronicler of human experience. She is one among the few writers who believe that writers have extreme responsibility to the public and society. She firmly believes that the very purpose of her writing is to take people's perception and pave the way for the social change and enlightenment. Experimenting with new narrative forms, she has created a perfect combination of legend, myth, history, memoir, folktale, anecdote, autobiography into a genre of her own invention. Writing as a representative of South Asian American immigrants, she wrote the living experiences of womankind fantasizing their careers as nurses, teachers, mother and daughters. Claiming no specific influence on her writing, she always feels that she is a born writer.

At the intersecting point of inter-subjective and intra-subjective communication, the individual succeeds in identifying oneself through communicating with the others and within oneself, formulating a unified and complete self. Hence, the communication between self and the other, and the recollection process between the past and the present within oneself both contribute to the

formation of a unified self. People tend to generalize things into two dichotomies - the East and the West, the male and the female, the past and the present, the authors and the readers, which are in fact simplifying and essentializing things into two opposing camps.

At the age of 36, Kingston captured national attention with the publication of her first book *The Woman Warrior*. Appealing equally to general and academic readers, it has become the most frequently assigned text in high schools, colleges, and universities by a living American author. The appearance of *The Woman Warrior* on the literary landscape in 1976 caused nothing less than a revolution in Asian American literary and feminist studies. It was an immediate crossover hit winning several awards, and virtually guaranteeing Kingston a celebrated place as the undisputed sovereign of Asian American writing.

Locating in the crossroads of two cultures, Chinese-Americans have the advantage to experience both cultures and have the capacity to link the two different cultures together instead of separating them apart. Kingston, as a Chinese-American, interweaves different modes of cultural values and ideological assumptions together, contributing to the coexistence and interactivity of the oppositional forces. The loose tongue of Kingston symbolizes her freedom to move between the two cultures by speaking two languages and judging things from two different angles. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston admits, “Maybe that’s why my mother cut my tongue. She pushed my tongue up and sliced the fraenum” (147). Having a loose tongue symbolizes Kingston’s capacity to speak what she thinks and be able to “move in any language” (148). In the chapter “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” in *The Woman Warrior*, there is an episode in which Kingston curls up her tongue in front of the mirror. Mirror is a reflection on Kingston’s darker self. Through the mirror, she sees herself as the other and has the chance to look into her private self. At the same time, with her loose tongue, Kingston could voice out her private self and her public self without any limitations. In fact, it is agreed with Kingston’s deletion of the hyphen between the words “Chinese- Americans.” In “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers” Kingston says,

We ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese- American,’ because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight... Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American. (60)

Kingston advocates the deletion of the hyphen so that Chinese-Americans mean the type of Americans with Chinese cultural and ethnic heritage. Contrastively, it is perceived the term Chinese-Americans with reference to the inter-relationship between the two cultures. The hyphen should not be deleted since it marks the linkage between the two cultures, and therefore signifies the hybrid nature of the Chinese-Americans. It also exhibits the equal importance of the two cultures. Kingston can never minimize the impact of American ideas on her upbringing. Nor can she denounce her Chinese biological origin. Hence, both the Chinese and American selves are equally important to Kingston.

In fact, Kingston’s identity as a Chinese-American has the power to encompass all sorts of ambiguity and contradictions. The hybrid genre, the hybrid allusions, the decentralized theme, the

blending of facts and fiction, the shifting narrators, the hybrid readers and the hybrid language employed in her works all reflect the erasure of boundaries between opposites and dichotomies. Instead of dividing the world, this unique identity link and unite things altogether. It is therefore explainable that her works are marked by ambiguity. Ambiguity creates a blurred boundary between dichotomies and there are no fixed boundaries in terms of race, gender, and genre. Ambiguity also creates uncertainty and skepticism, which breaks down the long-existing binary opposition. In “Crossing Boundaries: The Revisionary Writing of Maxine Hong Kingston,” Sally Keenan states,

*The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, which are a mixture of autobiography and biography, history and myth, memory and tabulation... this mixing of forms... provides a means to tease out the multiple but interconnected threads of identity - of gender, ethnicity, class, culture and history. (75-91)

It is doubt, instead of certainty, that makes her works lively and powerful. It is also the ambiguity that creates a blurred boundary and allows the bridging of different ideas.

The ambiguity and fragmentation in Kingston’s works match well with the postmodern notion of not believing in human reason holding all the answers to life’s questions. Postmodernists do not need the world to make sense as modernity required. Logic has its place, but it is not the main focus. Postmodern thought is therefore multiple, contradictory and destabilizing. Truth is accessible only when we are observing the whole picture rather than the component parts. The voices of the other are put in front of the world, forming a complete picture of the world. Accordingly, the ambiguity in her works draws on the different things together, be it the different types of genre, the different types of readers, the different narrative angles, the different types of allusions, the different cultures, the real and the imaginary.

To begin with the genre of Kingston’s works, it is ambiguous and fragmented in nature. Amy Ling calls *The Woman Warrior* “a collage of genre” (“Maxine Hong Kingston”) and the book is named as both a fiction and nonfiction. *The Woman Warrior* is considered as both a biography and autobiography. On the one hand, the book is an autobiography in the sense that it records the spiritual growth and imaginations of Kingston, starting from her childhood to her adulthood. The title “memoirs” further suggests that it is an autobiography. On the other hand, the book is a biography of Kingston’s family. One may take it as a biography of Kingston’s mother and other female family members instead of the autobiography of Kingston’s herself. First of all, the title of book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of Girlhood* among Ghosts mentions nothing about the name of Kingston. Secondly, the book seems like a fiction with the abundance of imaginative and fictive elements. Even the title of the book is legendary when the name “The Woman Warrior” borrows from the Chinese legend of Fa Mu Lan. And the word “ghosts” further heightens the mysterious and fantastic elements of the book. Ghosts normally suggest something mysterious in contrast to the factual presentation mode in autobiography. In addition, the works of Kingston has a blending of facts and fiction, which destabilizes the traditional association of autobiography with facts and history. Kingston’s unconventional mixture of biographical and fictive narratives destabilizes the rigid definition of traditional autobiography and introduces another alternative to reality. At the same time,

it also reveals the inadequacies of the conventional presentation of facts in reflecting the interiority of individuals, which autobiography is supposed to capture.

In *The Woman Warrior*, the historical facts like foot-binding and wars are juxtaposed with the fictive elements like fairytales, talk stories and dreams in the narratives of China. In addition to the hybrid genre, the boundary between the East and the West is blurred as well. Through reading Kingston's writing, we realize the two cultures are not necessarily opposite from each other. In *The Woman Warrior*, Chinese women like Fa Mu Lan possess the American spirit of assertiveness, while some Americans can have a timid and silent personality. Furthermore, contradictory to the traditional depiction of the Chinese women as being superstitious and silent, Brave Orchid is an outspoken and practical woman. She is scientific enough to ignore other people's speculation on ghosts. Hence, the two cultures have the capacity to coexist and intercommunicate with one another. Kingston's unique identity as a Chinese-American thus succeeds in linking the two cultures together rather than splitting them into two opposites.

In terms of theme, there is no main plot in *The Woman Warrior*. There is no difference between the center and the margin in Kingston's literary world, which might be hinting that we should not place any race or gender in the center of the world. Accordingly, Kingston is no longer a marginalized Chinese in the eyes of the Americans, and she is no longer an American in the eyes of the Chinese. Instead of feeling belonging to nowhere, she is a Chinese-American, a unique identity erecting proudly in between two different cultures and contributing to the coexistence and interactivities of both cultures. At the same time, the fluid identity of the Chinese-Americans also turns down the traditional association of the Chinese as a static and unchanging culture. The Chinese-Americans are capable of undergoing changes.

Instead of worrying about the erasure of the yellow race, Chinese-Americans should actively define their own unique position in the multi-racial America. Hence, with the formation of a unique identity that transcends culture, time, race and geographical distance, the Chinese-Americans become the subjects to determine their own identities, but not the passive objects to be determined by the others. It is they who give themselves meanings and identities. There are two sides of a coin. Instead of feeling ashamed and inadequate of being the minority group in America, Kingston takes the positive side of this unique experience and finds out her position as a Chinese-American who benefits from both the Chinese and American cultures and experiences. Other than the theme, there is no central narrator in Kingston's writings as well. There is a shift of first-person, second-person and third-person narratives; a shift of male and female narratives; and a shift of Chinese and American narratives. The flux of narratives jostling together and indicate the ambiguity of the subject position in Kingston's works. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston narrates the story of Fa Mu Lan from a third-person narrative, but suddenly, she immerses herself into the story and imagines herself as Fa Mu Lan. The narration is then shifted to the first-person narration.

The unified identity as a Chinese-American has the capacity to encompass all sorts of ambiguity and contradictions. The mixed genre, the hybrid allusions, the decentralized theme, the blending of facts and fiction, the shifting narrators, the hybrid readers and the hybrid language all

reflect the blurred boundaries in her works. Instead of dichotomizing the world, Kingston succeeds to reconcile and bridge things altogether. The ambiguity and fragmentation in her works match well with the postmodern notion of not believing in human reason holding all the answers to life's questions. Postmodern thought is therefore multiple, contradictory and destabilizing. Truth is accessible only when we are observing the whole picture rather than the component parts. The voices of the other are put in front of the world, forming a complete picture of the world.

Hence, Kingston's writing is marked by ambiguity and multiplicity in terms of genre, theme, narrative point- of-views, readers and allusions. At the end of *The Woman Warrior*, she claims that she is similar to a "knot-maker" (147) that links different strings together, linking the past and the present, the male and the female, China and America, life and death, ghosts and the human beings, reality and fiction, the old and the young altogether.

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