Form Genre and Identity Formation
How I Become the Other in
The Woman Warrior

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On the central stage of 20th century American literature, there gradually appeared a group of new yellow faces who came to the fore by publishing their own personal life stories since the turn of the century: Yung Wing (1909), Leong Gor Yun (1936), Pardee Lowe (1943), Jade Snow Wong (1945, 1975), Virginia Lee (1963),
Chuang Hua (1968), Betty Lee Sung (1972), Maxine Hong Kingston (1976, 1980, 1989), Amy Tan (1989), to name just a few. Of all these so-called Chinese American, or what Amy Ling prefers “Chinamerican”, writers, Maxine Hong Kingston is certainly one of the most successful. As Kingston once proudly announced in an interview by Shelley Fisher Fishkin in 1991: “I think that it’s already a miracle that – I wrote The Woman Warrior about 13 or 14 years ago, and just now I found out that it made the 1989 trade paperback bestseller list. Given the way the world is in the twentieth century, a 14-year shelf life for a book is a miracle” (Fishkin 787). She did create a miracle in her fostered land: from 1976 up to 1991, over 450,000 copies of The Woman Warrior had already been sold out. When asked about the reason of the popularity of her autobiography in question and the great legacy it leaves to the posterity, Kingston herself provided an answer that attributes the book’s success to her wonderful ability of weaving at least “20 ‘how-to’ books into one”: “How to Live,” “How to be alive,” “How Not to Give Up,” “How to Understand One Another,” “How to Cut Through Silences,” “How to Break Through Blocks in People so that We Can Truly Communicate With One Another,” “How to Keep the Family Together” (Fishkin 787). The present study is also about “how-to”: How to find the narrative techniques employed by Kingston to achieve her “how-tos”, and more importantly, How to understand Kingston’s “how-tos” presented in The Woman Warrior. It is through this analysis of Kingston’s “how-tos” that this paper hopes to reveal the true means invoked by Kingston in forming her unique identity as an Chinese American, one that Frank Chin would like to label the
“Christian white racist imaginary 1”. The following analysis attempts to reveal that to achieve her goal of the above 20 “how-tos”, Kingston not only makes full use, and misuse in a sense, of the literary forms and genres but manipulates and appropriates certain Chinese myths and histories in the process of forming an identity of her own—a rebellious, non-silent, and struggling female warrior of Chinese descent that essentially belongs to the white America instead of the minority community of the so-called Chinatown in the United States.

The first question Kingston encounters in writing her first book to shape a new identity is the form. Though originally she planned to publish her work as a novel, yet upon the editor’s advice and decision, she at last changed her mind and published the work as a non-fiction that became a “miracle” ever since. The choice of autobiography as the final form of her work is no surprise to us at all. On the one hand, Kingston herself recognized Jade Snow Wong as the “Mother of Chinese American literature” and “the only Chinese American author she read before writing her own book.” She admitted that “I found Jade Snow Wong’s book (Fifth Chinese Daughter, 1945) myself in the library, and was flabbergasted, helped, inspired, affirmed, made possible as a writer—for the first time I saw a person who looked like me as a heroine of a book, as a maker of a book.” (Ling 120). On the other hand, Kingston as second generation of Chinese immigrants to America never really took herself as a Chinese. Instead she recognized and acknowledged her roots in the white America:

I never thought of myself as a Chinese writer. I feel that I descended
from Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Virginia Woolf, and then a Chinese man told me how much Tripmaster Monkey reminded him of the Red Chamber Dream—and so they showed me that I have my roots in Chinese writing. I think that’s good, that’s very nice, to have roots that spread all over the world. (Fishkin 790)

Once the form of writing is determined, then comes the question of genre for Kingston. Autobiography, just like most Western literary genres, is after all what Gilbert and Gubar once labeled as “essentially male – devised by male authors to tell male stories about the world” (67). To subvert this male dominated world and genre as well, Maxine Hong Kingston adopts a strategy of mixture: she deliberately blurs the generic distinctions between autobiography, history, myth and fiction by intertwining them all in one, the so-called “biomythography” (to borrow Andrade’s word).

To make her subversion of the Chinese culture she learnt from her childhood more forceful and thorough, Kingston even resorts to the strategy of re-“talking-story” of the old Chinese myths by means of free grafting of one part of a Chinese myth upon another. This unique strategy of free transplantation can be best seen in her mythical and imaginary invention of the Woman Warrior Fa Mu-lan which has indeed become a household word not only in Mainland China but in China Taiwan, Hong Kong District and the Chinese communities all over the world as well. However, a close reading of Kingston’s The Woman Warrior reveals that this Fa Mu-lan as depicted in her work is thousands of miles away from that traditional figure of Hua Mu-lan: the former did not simply joined the battle in place of her father; to complicate the matter, she continued her battle when back from the warring fronts to
liberate her village people from the oppression of a local landlord which forms a sharp contrast to the historical figure of the latter who retired after war to her own village and played her traditional role of “wife and slave” as ever before. Moreover, to make this Fa Mu-lan’s figure larger, fuller and more impressive than the traditional Hua Mu-lan, Maxine Hong Kingston also grafts the movingly bloody scene of Yue Fei’s Mother cutting words onto her son’s back into the new imaginative legendary tale of Fa Mu-lan:

My father first brushed the words in ink, and they fluttered down my back row after row. Then he began cutting; to make fine lines and points he used thin blades, for the stems, large blades.

My mother caught the blood and wiped the cuts with a cold towel soaked in wine. It hurt terribly – the cuts sharp; the air burning; the alcohol cold, then hot – pain so various. I gripped my knees. I released them. Neither tension nor relaxation helped. I wanted to cry. If not for the fifteen years of training, I would have writhed on the floor; I would have had to be held down. The list of grievances went on and on. If an enemy should flay me, the light would shine through my skin like lace. (34-35)

This act of arbitrary transplantation onto Fa Mu-lan of Yue Fei’s Mother slicing words of “Loyalty and Sacrifice for Motherland” into Yue Fei’s back that took place in Southern Song Dynasty is indeed both too bold and shocking for most Chinese readers. The effect thus achieved is no doubt great: by ingeniously grafting the originally male heroic behavior onto a female body, Kingston shows to the audience and herself as well that a female, just like a male, could also endure such pains and also be willing to sacrifice anything for the good of her Motherland and people. In this way
Kingston not only builds up a brand new image of a female Chinese woman warrior but more important, in so doing she implicitly means to refuse a predominantly male discourse and ideology of attributing such virtues as endurance, persistence, determination and sacrifice to men instead of women as embedded in the traditional myth of Yue Fei's Mother cutting words into her son's back.

To assist in her creation of a lovely brave woman warrior and, more importantly, a predominantly female discourse, Kingston employs yet another effective strategy — what I call the no-name technique. By “no-name” technique I mean all the characters in The Woman Warrior have no names except for such legendary or historical figures as Fa Mu-lan and Ts’ai Yen. Indeed, right from the very beginning, Kingston is determined to write an autobiography of no-name characters to which the title of the first chapter “No Name Woman” gives the best testimony. This clever no-name game by Kingston seems to serve at least two purposes: for one thing it serves as a revenge by the narrator I for her aunt the “no name woman” in the first chapter upon the Chinese community who attempts to obliterate her from the culture. For another, by making all real characters around her nameless (such names as “Brave Orchid”, “Moon Orchid” and “Lovely Orchid” are only symbolic and rarely appear in the text except in the chapter “At the Western Palace”), it foregrounds the legendary figures Fa Mu-lan and Ts’ai Yen with whom “I” apparently has become identified:

May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to

116
them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are “report a crime” and “report to five families.” The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words—“chink” words and “gook” words too—that they do not fit on my skin. (53, my emphasis)

Here, the narrator I’s identification with Fa Mu-lan is loud and clear, which shows the narrator’s determination to become another “Fu Mu-lan”, one that seeks revenge by means of words instead of physical battle. What is worthy of special note here is that this willing identification with the woman warrior Fa Mu-lan appears at the end of the second chapter entitled “White Tigers.” Thereafter “I” actually assumes the role of a new woman warrior who wages a verbal battle against the inhumaness and dehumanization of the chains imposed upon her girlhood among ghosts in the Chinese American community. Indeed, this verbal battle is so fierce that it sometimes becomes a solo of language as a weapon by the character “I”. The other identification takes place at the very end of the whole story—with Ts’ai Yen, to be exact. By identifying herself with Ts’ai Yen and her moving song “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” handed down generation after generation to “us” obviously including the narrator “I”, Kingston means to tell us readers loud and clear that “I” at last became to recognize herself as one member of the overseas Chinese community no matter how foreign and alien “I” has become in a foreign land. And in this sense the grown-up “I” departs much from the adolescent “I” among ghosts who aspired to become a relentless woman warrior as her dreamed Fa Mu-lan did—“I”, no doubt, despite a series of verbal battles against the old Chinese customs in
her girlhood, grows up to become the "other", one that finally strikes a harmonious chord with both cultures - the Chinese community where she was brought up at one end and the American environment where she received her schooling and became a citizen at the other end.

To sharpen the image of "I" as a woman warrior of words, or rather criticism, Kingston also makes ingenious use of narrative perspective on the level of discourse. As I mentioned earlier this morning in the question posed to Kingston herself, there appears an abrupt change of pronouns in the fourth chapter entitled "At the Western Palace": from the first person narration in the previous three chapters to that of the third person. This sudden change of persons in narration is of course pregnant with meaning. On the one hand, by moving from the first person to the third person narration, Kingston as the implied author successfully distances herself from the protagonist narrating "I" and more important, both Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid so as to talk story in a more impersonal and objective manner; on the other hand, through such a shift from the familiar and subjective first person to the unfamiliar and objective and detached third person, Kingston could also level her gun of words not only at the otherwise Mother figure of Brave Orchid, but at the Chinese tradition at large as epitomized in Brave Orchid. What's more, by adopting a third person narrative perspective instead of a first person, the author also inadvertently belies the truthfulness of the episode she described. The fictiveness of the episode in question as revealed by the third person pronoun is further testified to by "I's telling remarks in the very beginning of the ensuing chapter A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe": "What
my brother actually said was, ‘I drove Mom and Second Aunt to Los Angeles to see Aunt’s husband who’s to the other wife.’” (163; my emphasis) This, however, is not revealing enough as far as the fictiveness of the Moon-Orchid-came-to-live-with-her-husband-in-America episode is concerned. Immediately following the long dialog between “my brother and an unknown character is another revelation on the part of the talking “I” that belies her former statement once again: “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. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs.” (163) What is shocking to us readers is that the story the third person recounts in the previous chapter is but a talk-story twice told to me from my brother to my sister first then from my sister to me. Small wonder the author utilizes the third person instead of the first. This fictive telling of a story twice told within the confines of autobiography obviously follows the example of the famous African American autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings published just a few years earlier: in there Kingston’s contemporary Maya Angelou also recalls a similar scene in the third person with regard to her “Momma” having a heated row with a white dentist who refused to treat her granddaughter (Chapter 24, pp161-162).

All in all, by the choice of autobiography as its final form of writing, Maxine Hong Kingston employs various means to present an “I” that is larger than life, one that desires to be a woman warrior like Fa Mu-lan at first but finally becomes an “Other” that strikes a balance between the West and the East cultures. However, it is through weaving a new “reality” out of myths, a new personal
history by means of wild imagination that Kingston succeeds in achieving her end of both gender and generic disruptions. By ingeniously mixing myths, histories and personal dreams into her autobiographical writing, Kingston invents a totally new form of life writing: “biomythography” (to borrow Andrade’s term). This is something Kingston took pride in. In a 1989 radio interview with Frank Abe on Seattle all-news station KIRO, Kingston proudly announced:

And I think to write true biography means you have to tell people’s dreams. You have to tell what they imagine. You have to tell their vision. And, in that sense, I think I have developed a new way of telling a life story. (qtd. in Frank Chin’s “Come All Ye Asian American Writers”, 29)

And in so doing, Kingston has not only broken the traditional rigid generic dividing line of autobiography/history/myth, but also creates a new identity for her own turning the otherwise traditional ethnic “I” into the private “Other”. Furthermore, through the invention of a form and mixture of genres in the writing, Kingston also creates a new female discourse for herself (or the Chinese American females at large?) which in turn shapes a new female identity as against the one designed and shaped in a predominantly patriarchal discourse in a predominantly patriarchal society.

Despite the strenuous efforts on the part of Kingston as a Chinese American writer, the choice of the form of autobiography in shaping her own identity as a woman warrior, is, nevertheless, itself problematic and questionable. For one thing, autobiography, just as Frank Chin points out, is “not a Chinese form”. It is mainly a western invention, a tool of Christian conversion which can at
least be traced back to St Augustine’s *Confessions*. This largely western tool, however, has unfortunately become the “sole Chinese American form of writing, with Yung Wing’s mission-schoolboy-makes-good Gunga Din licking up white fantasy in the first Chinese American autobiography *My Life in China and America*” (Chin 11). Indeed, as a means of Christian salvation, the urge to adopt this western form of writing in China had begun since Dr. Sun Yat Sen’s Revolution in 1911. The great Chinese scholar Hu Shih was just a case in point. In his *Autobiography of a Man at Thirty*, he claimed: “Writing my autobiography makes me feel very Christian” (qtd. In Chin 11). Just as the editors of *The Big AllIEEEEEEE* scornfully point out, “Every Chinese American book ever published in the United States of America by a major publisher has been a Christian autobiography or autobiographical novel. … the China and Chinese America portrayed in these works are the products of white racist imagination, not fact, not Chinese culture, and not Chinese or Chinese American literature” (Chan, et al. “Introduction” xii). The same is also true of Kingston’s first work *The Woman Warrior* published in 1975. In reflecting upon her success of *The Woman Warrior* among the trade paperback “how-to” bestsellers, Kingston, in an interview with Shelley Fisher Fishkin, claims:

> And I think it’s because I do write about “how to” – my books are “how-to” books … I guess maybe my books will last to the twenty-first century, because you can get 20 “how-to” books in one” (Fishkin 787).

> Probably not, I think. If there were truly one reason that could account for Kingston’s successful writing of *The Woman Warrior*,

121
that reason would be the exotic and alien and thrillingly brutal Chinese cultures as exposed by Kingston in this book which smell of death and decay that catch and haunt the minds of American people at large who are so interested in this enigmatic alien culture and the people living upon it. No “how-to”s any more. And this is not a new phenomenon either. Look at the American National Book Awards or Pulitzer Prize winner books by Chinese Americans or the films that are either critically acclaimed or have won numerous western big prizes such as Oscar best films in a foreign language made in China Hong Kong, China Taiwan or Mainland China, all expose or reveal the ugly facets of Chinese culture in one way or another that cater to the tastes of the west rather than to those of their own people and land. In this sense, Kingston’s success as a writer of Chinese descent is a product and direct result of colonialism or post-colonialism whose lasting success as a bestseller signals a continuation of the process of colonization and encroachment of Western cultures upon Eastern cultures. In this sense, we may say from our Chinese point of view the success of Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior in the United States is a curse instead of blessing of the real Chinese culture that is ever lasting and ever changing in a quick-developing world.

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