

***LOOKING AT KINGSTON'S THE WOMAN WARRIOR AND CHINA MEN
THROUGH NEW HISTORICIST LENSES***

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Abstract: As the title suggests, this paper brings to the fore aspects related to power relations seen from the perspective of both traditional Chinese and modern American ideologies, in this way presenting not only feminine, but also masculine views on literature and culture. This paper is also intended to illustrate and analyze instances that bring to light issues of mythical and cultural difference in this way contributing to the construction of mythology and history by re-interpreting stories related to Chinese cultural background. Intended to elucidate Kingston's unique interpretation of Chinese mythology and American history, this study also highlights the cultural practice of storytelling, as it represents an important part of the Asian tradition.

Keywords: new historicism, ethnicity, femininity /vs/ masculinity, power, storytelling

As the title suggests, the aim of this paper is to analyze Kingston's two memoirs from a new historicist perspective, in this way exposing power relations that function in the contemporary Chinese American society. Because this paper is intended to focus on more than one discipline, it will integrate personal history, as well as elements related to both Chinese and American cultures. It should be added that the present paper suggests that, although in society race and gender play crucial parts in discussions regarding culture, family structure and also social activities are closely tied in order to construct roles of femininity and masculinity in the cultures that are embraced in Kingston's work. If *The Woman Warrior: Memories of a Girlhood among Ghosts* introduces female characters and exposes the narrator as being not only disobedient towards her family duties, but also dreaming of social integration into the American system, *China Men* concentrates on men, this time, and on a difficult father-daughter relationship as it implies uncommunicative relationships. Her aim, as Kingston said, was to "claim America" for Chinese Americans, as they cleared the lands, built the railroads and created fertile farmland out of dessert and swamp¹. To put it differently, both memoirs have as core idea the bond between Chinese characters and the power of surpassing critical moments in life through storytelling. Therefore, one could easily agree that the Chinese cultural practice of telling stories is central to both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, in this way revealing a kind of power that could be viewed from both cultural and new historical perspectives. On the one hand, there is the power of a storyteller over his/her own stories, while on the other one should speak of the power a society has over marginalized groups. Thus, through her memoirs Kingston succeeded in exposing critical moments of oppression and discrimination of the American society over Chinese immigrants.

To give a clearer perspective on Kingston's work, one should first briefly present theoretical issues related to new historicism, ethnicity and gender identity, as they prepare the reader for analyzing how and why such concepts are reflected in her writings. **New historicism** is a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt who in 1982 claimed that it is a critical practice which "challenges the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between 'literary foreground'

¹Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004. p. 790.

and ‘political background’, or, more generally between artistic production and other kinds of social production”². In other words, any work of literature could be viewed as a public representation and, hence, satisfy the criteria imposed by this definition. But new historicism is more than literal representations of political issues; it focuses on all kinds of texts which could help in drawing attention towards power relations. Moreover, new historicism puts emphasis on representations of marginalized groups and ‘odd’ behaviors, thus constituting perfect examples for the need of power, because one can only know the history of the past by taking a look at the present and its concerns. Hence, each need of expressing oneself is clearly embedded in the material conditions of a particular culture. However, starting with 1988 Stephen Greenblatt expresses his preference for the term **cultural poetics** and defines it as the “study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among these practices”³. Starting from this definition, it would be sensible to reflect on certain actions that help in understanding cultural practices: first and foremost, one needs a practitioner to talk about practices in a culture, then the practitioner needs to explain how cultural practices were formed due to a collective effort, and only after that the practitioner needs to make connections with other practices that belong to other cultures, he/she needs to discuss the differences between them. In his article entitled “Ethnicity, Race, Class and Nation”, Thomas Eriksen stated that the term **ethnicity** refers to the “relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive”⁴. One should further argue that ethnicity is different from race, because it refers to a particular ethnic group, whereas race refers to people in general. The last key term that will make itself useful for the present analysis is **gender identity**, a concept that is specifically concerned with hierarchical oppositions between a man and a woman, while it usually refers to how masculine or feminine a person could be. If one were to take a short look at Rabine’s article “No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston”, that he/she would immediately conclude that the masculine usually posits itself as the primary term, while it represents the other term, the feminine, as an opposite⁵. Taking these key concepts into consideration, one should agree that Kingston’s memoirs could be analyzed from a new historicist, ethnic and, at the same time, feminine/masculine perspective, in this way proving that there are many scenes which focus on the oppression of societies and institutions over weak or “odd” individuals. One could further argue that Kingston’s works reveal injustices exercised upon immigrants to a wide audience, in this way presenting past political events in the spectrum of contemporaneity. For these reasons, it should be added that, in itself, *The Woman Warrior* represents an act of rebellion, a public revealing of secrets because it begins with “You must not tell anyone [...] what I am about to tell you”⁶. This immediately opens the theme of writing about topics one

²Greenblatt, Stephen. “Introduction. The Forms of Power”. *Genre* 7 (1982): p. 5.

³Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. p. 5.

⁴Eriksen, Thomas. “Ethnicity, Race, Class and Nation.” *Ethnicity*. Eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 28.

⁵Rabine, Leslie W. “No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston.” *Signs* 12.3 (1987): p. 472.

⁶Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memories of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. p. 3. All further references are to this edition only.

cannot speak about publicly. The character who opens the novel is the narrator's mother, Brave Orchid. She is telling her daughter about her husband's sister, who had an illegitimate child and eventually killed herself and the baby. In other words, for the No Name Aunt, a woman who breaks the rules, silence is unbreakable, and it becomes the narrator's mission to give voice to this aunt's life. Moreover, the story focuses on the unwritten laws that must be strictly respected. The mother tells her daughter this story for a reason: one must act properly in order to conform to the old traditions and, of course, their social control. The facts are clear – the No Name Aunt committed adultery and “adultery is extravagance”⁷. However, the mother does not want her husband to find out that the narrator is familiar with this “ended and forsaken” part of their lives: “Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her [...] Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born”⁸. In other words, this first story “introduces the unidentified aunt who represents the fate of transgressive women in traditional China”⁹, providing a context for the narrator's account of discovering herself by contesting the unwritten rules that she is expected to obey.

As the story develops, the readers figure out that the narrator searches possible justifications regarding her aunt's actions. One scenario involves the aunt's obedience and silence which led to a possible rape. Another one includes the decision of keeping her inseminator's name for herself, so that he could not be punished with her. What is interesting though lies within the last pages of the story; even after decades, the narrator must also participate in her aunt's punishment, meaning not mentioning her at all: “But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have”¹⁰. Even though the No Name Aunt was married, she still had to obey her inseminator because “she always did as she was told”¹¹. In addition, the narrator clearly explains that her aunt “could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex” because “women in old China did not choose”¹². Thinking about married women, the narrator claims with regret that no one supports her: “I am not loved enough to be supported. That I am not a burden has to compensate for the sad envy when I look at women loved enough to be supported. Even now China wraps double binds around my feet”¹³. As a child who is both Chinese and American, she learns about the woman warrior and about the oppressive culture that commands women to be docile, while as a grown woman she understands that she must construct her own identity out of the fragments of her heritage. Hence, Kingston's memoir is clearly a work about power struggles.

In a similar way, *China Men* is also about claims to authority, and it reveals numerous scenes in which the narrator's ancestors are oppressed and humiliated by representatives of the American society. A first example could be easily observed in the first pages of the book in which the vignette entitled “On Discovery” describes Tang Ao's transformation in the Land of Women. Looking for the Gold Mountain, he crossed the ocean and came upon this unknown land where he was captured by ladies and eventually forced to become one of them.

⁷ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p.6.

⁸ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p.5.

⁹ Huntley, E. D. *Maxine Hong Kingston. A Critical Companion*. London: Greenwood Press, 2001. p.77.

¹⁰ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p.16.

¹¹ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p.6.

¹² Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p.6.

¹³ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p.48.

The only plausible reason for this transformation was that he was supposed to meet the queen: “‘We have to prepare you to meet the queen,’ the women said”¹⁴. The last paragraph of the vignette reveals that the Land of Women was mythically identified with North America and according to E. D. Huntley, Chinese immigrants underwent the process of womanization by hard labor, physical exhaustion and pain in the service of the family and eventual success¹⁵. These men experience, for the first time in their lives, the cultural practices that limit women’s lives: enforced silence, lack of control and, of course, invisibility. Furthermore, one could add that as a man, the experience of being oppressed is tremendously shameful, not only because they are confined to kitchens and washrooms, but also because they are condemned to receive orders from women of another race. For these reasons, Tang Ao’s story is considered to be a border crossing tale in which the narrator “reduce[s] the tensions inherent in the male-female social dichotomy”¹⁶. The narrator also manages to point out the complexity of real experiences and also the binary oppositions between masculine and feminine characteristics.

However, the central issue of *China Men* circles around BaBa, the narrator’s father, whose story focuses on his birth, education and emigration to the Gold Mountain as well as on the betrayal of his friends in New York. Here the narrator tries to imagine and then re-create the essential events of her father’s life. Moreover, through her prose, she gives voice to the silent man who dominated her childhood: “As she attempts to excavate her father’s buried history and to understand this man whose life has most indelibly shaped her own, Kingston experiments with discovering the right words, finding the appropriate voice for narrating her father’s history”¹⁷. Unlike the mother whose “talk-stories” dominate the landscape of the narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, her father, BaBa, is depicted as a silent subject in *China Men*. In order to fill out the missing gaps, the narrator imaginatively rewrites her father’s history by testing the various plausible ways of his entry into the Gold Mountain. At the same time, BaBa becomes a mythic figure symbolizing all the early Chinese immigrants in America. As the daughter re-tells her father’s story, she seeks him out and invites him to participate: “I’ll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I’m mistaken. You’ll just have to speak up with the real stories if I’ve got you wrong”¹⁸. In other words, one could think that the narrator disagrees with her father’s behavior, and hence tries to give life to his side of the story by exposing elements the way she understands them. The memoir is, then, a representation of the authority of a father over her daughter, and vice versa.

Authority and, implicitly, power can be also depicted when thinking about the mother-daughter relationship from *The Woman Warrior*. Because the most noticeable part of the memoir seems to be the narrator’s search for her own salvation, she tries to gain power by escaping her fate and denying her gender. If we were to accept Lan’s commentary on “the fate

¹⁴ Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men*. New York: Vintage International, 1989. p. 3. All further references are to this edition only.

¹⁵ Huntley, E.D. Ibidem. p. 148.

¹⁶ Cook, Rufus. “Cross-Cultural Wordplay in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior*” MELUS 22.4 (1997): p. 145.

¹⁷ Huntley, E.D. Ibidem. p.123.

¹⁸ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. P. 15.

of the majority of women in feudal China”, than we could agree that the narrator is indeed the embodiment of a “woman warrior” who is capable of protecting and controlling her own life¹⁹. This issue is mainly emphasized in the last chapter of the memoir, entitled “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”, in which the narrator looks directly at her parents and screams that she does not want to get married and become a slave. More importantly, she states that she is extremely clever, an argument which in feudal China would not have been accepted. What is surprising, though, is the claim that the narrator makes towards her mother: “You lie with stories. You won’t tell me a story and then say, ‘This is a true story.’ [...] I don’t even know what your real names are. I can’t tell what’s real and what you make up”²⁰. Here, in one way or another, the narrator could refer to the fact that she does not know if her mother’s stories are true. In essence, story-telling implies the teller’s own interpretation and own additions to the original one. Also, the delimitation between dream and reality is clearly insubstantial because every night Brave Orchid talks story until her children fall asleep, and the narrator basically grows up unable to distinguish the stories from the dreams: “I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began”²¹. One could claim that the narrator no longer accepts Brave Orchid’s stories and wishes to (re)turn to normality, thus rebelling against elements connected to the country of her ancestral origin. On the other hand, the narrator’s claim could be viewed as acknowledging, in a strange manner, Chinese practices, as Brave Orchid’s voice becomes the voices of heroines in in the narrator’s dreams.

Nevertheless, these examples show that the narrator is virtually homeless; she is a stranger to China and yet, she does not completely belong to America. Clearly, she is not of Brave Orchid’s world, and because of her ethnicity, she does not really fit into the county of her birth. Moreover, she constantly oscillates between the two traditions with which she has grown up, between two national narratives and two sets of cultural myths. She wants to integrate the identities that she has been given. To put this differently, she will try to incorporate elements of both Chinese and American cultures into her identity, in this way learning to mediate between her parents’ culture and the culture into which she was born. Furthermore, the narrator is conscious of this performance because she is an outsider who is trying to settle in. However, to the American children, this performance seems natural; they are probably not aware of the way their everyday actions construct gender. The culturally constructed ethnicity and expectations are also revealed in the conflicts between the Chinese and American cultures. For example, eye contact is considered rude in Chinese culture, but it is necessary to succeed in American business culture. When thinking about the changes that must be made in order to integrate into the American system, the narrator claims that: “Most emigrants learn the barbarians’ directness – how to gather themselves and stare rudely into talking faces as if trying to catch lies”²². Even the narrator recognizes that her own mother tried to adapt to the norms and values imposed by the New World’s society, as she compares photographs taken both in China and America.

¹⁹Lan, Feng. “The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston’s Woman Warrior”. *Comparative Literature*. 55.3 (2003): p.237.

²⁰ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p. 202.

²¹ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p. 19.

²² Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p. 59.

Such distinctions can also be encountered in *China Men*, where, this time, BaBa does not respond directly to the narrator, thus making her feel frustrated because he would not let her know anything about his earlier life: “No stories. No past. No China”²³. However, the narrator imagines episodes in her father’s life, before leaving China stating that as a scholar, BaBa’s silence was broken and his identity as father and scholar poet was reclaimed as some of his students were disobedient. The narrator thinks that although in China men have the power to control children, women and society, BaBa was not respected as a teacher, which could immediately link to his silence. In other words, according to the narrator, he was deprived of his identity as a man even before his immigration.

In contrast with BaBa’s voluntary silence comes BakGoong’s idea of expressing anger and frustration as he constantly coughs to disguise his speech. One crucial scene involves the narrator’s great-grandfather digging a hole so that he and other workers can shout into the earth the words that describe their pain: “Take – that – white – demon. Take – that. Fall – to – the – ground – demon. Cut – you – into – pieces. Chop – off – your – legs. Die – snake. Chop – you – down – stinky – demon”²⁴. To the white supervisors, this is so inexplicable that they hide in fear of the China Men who were “so riled up, who knows what they were up to?”²⁵. Being oppressors, the supervisors do not understand this new practice which actually helps the Chinese men overcome their humiliation, in this way being able to continue their miserable life. At the same time, through his violent act, BakGoong also claims possession of the land by putting an emphasis on this new ritual: “‘That wasn’t a custom,’ said BakGoong. ‘We made it up. We can make up customs because we’re the founding ancestors of this place’”²⁶. Even they acknowledge the fact that as immigrants in a totally foreign country, they will need to invent and follow rules and customs in order to have a purpose for survival. Hence, immigrants feel empowered as they have managed to create customs that belong to them, in this way proving that power can also be seen from the immigrant perspective, not only from the American one.

However, a rather different view on power relations can be encountered in *The Woman Warrior* because the narrator is well aware of the fact that in order to succeed in the American society, she must act as other American girls do if she wants to fit in and be accepted. She must dress, talk, and act like them, essentially imitating their performance of gender roles and cultural expectations. Hence, if in *China Men* the male characters thought about creating their own customs in the American space, in *The Woman Warrior* the narrator is willing to dispose of her Chinese identity. Nevertheless, another important character from the same memoir, Moon Orchid (Brave Orchid’s Sister), seems to be unable to distinguish between Chinese and Americans and, more importantly, unable to fit in the Western space. The section entitled “At the Western Palace” revolves around the narrator’s aunt sailing to America in search of her husband and clearly marks out the cultural differences between these two countries, as Moon Orchid claims that: “‘So this is the United States,’ [...] ‘It certainly looks different from China. I’m glad to see the Americans talk like us.’ Brave Orchid was again startled at her

²³ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. p. 14.

²⁴ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. p. 114.

²⁵ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. p. 118.

²⁶ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. p. 118.

sister's denseness. 'These aren't Americans. These are the overseas Chinese'"²⁷. One could say that Moon Orchid expects Americans to look, act and talk like her. This could be the main reason why she will never manage to have a life of her own and, more importantly, make her husband return to her.

If Moon Orchid is an obedient docile woman, her sister's behavior is often depicted as being violent. When attempting to reunite her sister with her Americanized husband, Brave Orchid fantasizes about hitting the man. A short discussion between sisters brings to the fore Brave Orchid's woman warrior spirit: "What if he hits me?' 'I'll hit *him*. I'll protect you. I'll hit him back. The two of us will knock him down and make him listen'"²⁸. Although from a new historical point of view, violence is not perceived as being equivalent to power, the above selected quote reveals aspects of obedience and disobedience of women towards patriarchy. If Moon Orchid is assigned to an inferior position in society, Brave Orchid aspires to superiority, thus detaching herself from the socially imposed gender roles. If we were to take into account Huntley's explanation of violence, which states that: "violence keeps women aware of their precarious existence, ensuring that they know they are perpetually vulnerable and in need of protection"²⁹, than we should also keep in mind that violence also empowers women, in this way revealing their strength and willingness to take action. For instance, Brave Orchid is again associated with violence while she is a student in China and defeats the Sitting Ghost by threatening to burn it. As a village doctor, she assists at the birth of babies and during World War II she takes charge of a hospital. In the United States violence continues to shape Brave Orchid's life in a more symbolic way. She talks story to the narrator about having "pushed [the narrator's] tongue up and sliced the frenum"³⁰, a tale of physical violence that absorbs the narrator's attention throughout her entire childhood. Hence, violence could be viewed as an outcome of someone being empowered.

It is also relevant for the present paper to comment upon Brave Orchid's woman warrior faded spirit, because she admits to herself and to her daughter that she is now "a sad bear; a great ship in a wool shawl"³¹, she is no longer the woman warrior who was a physician, who crossed the ocean, who bore and raised six American children. In fact, she has managed to free herself from her Chinese identity, and yet she has never managed to have a true American self. She no longer saves money for a trip back to China; instead, she and her husband have purchased furniture, rugs, curtains, even an automobile; in other words, these are the emblems of an American life that prove cultural adaptation to a consumerist market. The same could be said about BaBa and his friends from *China Men*, who gradually begin to behave in American ways: they spend their earnings on suits, motorcycles and automobiles and more than that, they dance with blondes who compliment them on speaking English well. Their Americanization might actually be the reason why BaBa's friends eventually betray him and he is forced to move to another state where he can make a living, raise a large family, purchase a house and own a business, instead of returning to China. In other words, the narrator's parents are seen as the representatives of ethnic groups in America who are

²⁷ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p. 136

²⁸ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p. 145.

²⁹ Huntley, E.D. *Ibidem*. p. 112.

³⁰ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p. 164.

³¹ Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. p. 100.

unknowingly being controlled in such a way that they no longer wish to return to their countries, and instead “independently” choose to remain and work for the host country. They do not reject the American society anymore, and consequently they do not wish to return home. They now get acquainted with and accept “foreign” aspects that circle around themselves simply because they no longer perceive them as being foreign.

When thinking about power of an individual over another one, it should be noted that silence and obedience are the most expected disciplinary results, although they are not always the first reactions, as it has been shown above. Nevertheless, Kingston’s second memoir brings to light the legend of Tu Tzu-chun, who was reborn four times. His only task was to keep silent, not to scream or cry, no matter the situation, in order for the human race to achieve immortality. However, he emerged as a deaf-mute woman the fourth time and her husband, Lu, killed their child because he was tired of her silence. In an instant, the female Tu cried with despair and, thus, destroyed any hope of immortality. Another vignette that shows the man’s desire for an immortal life presents Maui the Trickster, who was nearly successful in stealing immortality from Hina, by entering her body through her vagina and tacking possession of her heart. However, as he emerges, a bird laughs aloud and awakens Hina who tightens and contracts her pelvic muscles, killing Maui. Again, men are portrayed as oppressors, thieves and insidious beings, as they try to gain power in society and over women in coward manners. Judging by these re-written legends, it would be sensible to agree that the narrator seems to focus on stories about characters who in one way or another “[cross] over the boundary into the other gender”³². On the one hand, Tu is an iconic figure for women in China as they are forced to obey their husbands and families and are not allowed to speak or show any emotion no matter the gravity of the situation while, Maui is the embodiment of all the “no name men” who exercised power over women in the narrator’s stories. More importantly, Tu’s legend could be associated with the power of patriarchy over women, whereas Maui’s points to the importance and strength of a woman’s body.

If Tu and even Tang Ao’s legends bring to the fore the issue of unwillingly becoming women and, at the same time, suffering injustices, *The Woman Warrior* introduces the mythical character Fa Mu Lan, who deliberately chose to take her father’s place into battle and bring justice to her village. Fa Mu Lan’s crossing of gender boundaries involves her dressing as a man in order to join the army, which could mean that she initially admitted to being a “worthless female”. She chooses to transform herself into a valuable fighter; in this manner she “is contesting the cultural scripts that have dictated the behaviors and identities of men and women in feudal China”³³. Through her military bravery she proves that women have the ability to excel in military activities traditionally considered too difficult for women, and she also proves that women can have both domestic and public lives. Apart from spending fifteen years in wilderness and training in order to become an avenger, the mythical Fa Mu Lan has to endure a painful ritual before getting into battle. One should take into consideration Deborah Madsen’s article entitled “(Dis)figuration: The Body as Icon in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston”, in which she rightfully considers that “even more central to

³²Rabine, Leslie W. “No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston” *Signs*. 12.3. (1987): p. 145.

³³ Huntley, E. D. *Ibidem*. p. 81.

Kingston's work [...] is the exploration of the ways in which individuals are led to identify with the interests of the ruling patriarchy"³⁴. Hence, the transgression of borders and boundaries is frequently mentioned because the lines between fact and fantasy, between dream and reality, between autobiography and fiction, seem to be in a frequent fluctuation in Kingston's memoirs.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memories of a Girlhood among Ghosts* goes so deeply into female experience that it is difficult to imagine what a man's life in the same cultural location might be. The reader can only understand that it would be unimaginably different. Currier writes that *The Woman Warrior* is a personal narrative that represents Kingston's effort "to reconcile American Chinese female identities"³⁵. Additionally, the book captures the texture of life as a Chinese-American woman who constantly "plays" with cultural expectations and roles. Through this memoir, Kingston is able to narrate the events of her life, thus shaping and recreating herself as the heroine of a story that is told and retold.

In *China Men*, she questions the validity of existing historical records by rewriting the Chinese legend of Tang Ao into new Chinese American forms. In the revised myth of Tang Ao, Kingston highlights the ability to change cultural tales by combining two date references to the myth. Madsen states that the narrator disrupts the conventions of Chinese American autobiography using the idea of racial difference as the memoir informs us about the birth of the narrator's artistic self³⁶. Moreover, she re-writes the American history and gives voice to the Chinese men, who are emasculated, feminized, and relegated to powerless individuals in America.

Thus, this paper has demonstrated that the selected memoirs focus not only on the cultural differences that define the individual as a part of a certain society, but also on the portrayal of gender roles in terms of both femininity and masculinity, or better put, power relations between genders. It also proved that power can not only be perceived as physical, but also psychological and verbal, as the main purpose of this paper was to reflect on new historicist interpretations of Chinese influences into the American context.

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³⁶ Madsen, Deborah. *Ibidem*. p. 270.

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