

BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S THE WOMAN WARRIOR

Andreea Iliescu, Junior Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova

*Abstract: The paper focuses on illustrating the striking balance between a real dimension and a mythical one, both integrated by *The Woman Warrior*, an account of lived experience blended with a series of talk-stories that combine history, myths, and unshakeable beliefs. Maxine Hong Kingston offers a glimpse into cultural displacement and alienation, her work encapsulating genuine feelings and emotions as well as well-articulated reflections. Moreover, the paper incorporates insights into the ways the author manages to exploit the traditional material, creating an entirely new fantasy. Her complex and quasi-fictional narrative stands for a mixture of voices and styles, often contradictory, displaying techniques like ambiguity, incoherence, pluralism, and irony.*

Keywords: *myths, cultural adjustment, finding a voice*

1. Maxine Hong Kingston, a Pioneering Chinese American Writer

Beginning with her debut, *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston has enjoyed a high level of critical appreciation as well as a consistently wide popular readership. Blending autobiographical and nonfiction prose with fiction, oral histories and folktales, Kingston's writing fiercely challenges the idea that Asian Americans have two essentially separate identities -the "ethnic" and the "American"- and testifies to the damaging effects such a notion can inflict on both the individual and community levels. She has also written extensively about the "silencing" of Chinese and Chinese American women, in both nations.

Maxine was the first of six children. Her parents, Tom Hong and Chew Ling Yan, were both born and formally educated in China. Tom had been a literary scholar before he immigrated to the United States in 1924 and began to work in a New York laundry. For the next 15 years, Tom regularly sent part of his salary to his wife in China, enabling her to study medicine and midwifery until she came to the United States in 1939, and also went to work in the laundry. After he was tricked out of his share in the laundry business by unscrupulous partners, Tom and his wife settled in Stockton, California, where Maxine was born on October 27, 1940.

Though she was very quiet as a child- she failed kindergarten because she refused to talk out loud in class- Maxine Hong soon demonstrated a talent for writing, and by the age of nine was composing poems in English, her second language after Cantonese. Upon graduating from high school, she was awarded 11 academic scholarships. She attended the University of California, Berkeley, from which she received a B.A. in English in 1962, and in that same year married Earl Kingston, an actor and fellow Berkeley graduate. Their son Joseph was born in 1964, and in 1965 Maxine Hong Kingston began teaching high school math and English in Hayward, California.

Frustrated by America's political direction during the Vietnam era, the Kingstons planned to move to Japan in the late 1960s but settled instead in Oahu, Hawaii, where they both taught school. By the early 1970s Kingston was writing the short pieces that would eventually make up *The Woman Warrior*, and began publishing them to wide acclaim in various magazines and newspapers including the *New York Times*. When Knopf published *The Woman Warrior* as the first volume of a projected two-book set, critical response was

overwhelmingly positive. *The Woman Warrior* won several awards including the National Book Critics Circle's General Nonfiction Award for 1976; *Time* magazine named it one of the top 10 nonfiction works of the decade. The attention the book received allowed Kingston the freedom to write full time. (Oh, 2007: 152)

2. "*The Woman Warrior*": *Born to Be a Writer*

What lies at the heart of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*? In my opinion, the fact that writing is thought of as an urge to assert one's identity, to be defiant when confronted with others' unfair expectations, to gain a voice, to strive to reach beyond one's circumstances, departing from stereotypes and discrimination: "Maxine began to write when she was around eight years old. Kingston insists that she is a 'born writer,' meaning that she is someone who simply *has* to write- it is as important and basic and essential to her as eating and breathing are. As she said in an interview with Kay Bonetti in 1986, 'I feel like I'm a born writer- then when you're celebrating, you put it into words, and when you're mourning, you put it into words. There's this desire always to find the words for life and for the invisible and for the visible and for the imagination.'" (Abrams, 2009:35)

Writing is also depicted as a way to reconcile Chinese culture with American background. Having spent most of her childhood and adolescence, immersed into a world imbued with her Chinese mother's talk-stories, Maxine Hong Kingston embodies an aspiring writer, compelled to unveil how much her beliefs, knowledge, feelings, her life outlook will last when facing the blank paper: "Writing¹ is an act of self-assertion, self-revelation, and self-preservation. One writes out of a delight in one's storytelling powers, out of a need to reveal and explain oneself, or from the desire to record and preserve experience. However, for women brought up in the old Chinese tradition that for eighteen hundred years codified their obedience and submission to the men in their lives- father, husband, son- a tradition that stressed female chastity, modesty, and restraint; that broke girls' toes and bound their feet as an ideal of beauty; that sold daughters into slavery in times of hardship; that encouraged and honored widow suicides –any writing at all was unusual, even an act of rebellion." (Bloom, 2009: 63)

It has taken her two years to have *The Woman Warrior* completed on paper, yet more than 20 years to envision it, allowing all her experiences to permeate the book: "This was a book² that I started to write when I was ten years old, but I didn't have the words. Twenty-five years later I was able to do it. In 1973, Earl and I took a vacation on Lanai- it's a very small pineapple island with one hotel and *just twelve* rooms. One night we were expecting to watch a movie, but the hotel's projector broke down! I had nothing to do – so I wrote out a two-page outline for the book, in pencil! At first I thought I could do it all in one volume, the men and the women, but the men's stories didn't fit in with the women's stories. The mythology is so different- the men's stories were in *conflict* with the women's stories. So I decided that the men's book would be a companion volume." (Wong, 1999:178)

Her book draws heavily on Chinese folklore, family narrative, talk-stories to the point where life and fantasy mingle, all clear barriers being erased. After finding the blessed words to encapsulate what she felt and thought, when subject to a demanding bicultural milieu, Maxine Hong Kingston's fictionalized autobiography finally surfaces to restore a sense of much-longed for balance like an emotional bridge over the chasm created between her Chinese ancestry and her process of assimilating into the American mainstream society.

Chinese by biological descent and American by birth, Maxine Hong Kingston portrays her search for comprehension, acceptance and support within a misogynistic society:

*My American life has been such a disappointment.
"I got straight A's, Mama."*

“Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village.”

I could not figure out what was my village. 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. In China, there were solutions for what to do with little girls who ate up food and threw tantrums. You can't eat straight A's.

Part of the narrator/daughter's impatience with her mother in *The Woman Warrior* is due to the mother's insistence on inappropriately following Cantonese beliefs and superstitions in the United States. The major belief protested against in this feminist text is the Chinese tradition of valuing sons above daughters. “Feeding geese is better than feeding girls,” the traditional Chinese thinking goes, because girls grow up to marry into another family. They then belong to their husband's family; their responsibility and duty is to serve the husband and his parents. When the parents die, the parents' spirits are invoked by their sons and daughters-in-law to intercede with the gods to bring good fortune to their children on earth.

In reciprocal manner, the sons are to burn incense and paper money and bring food to the parents' graves in order to care for them in the spirit world. This practice is known as ancestor worship. Furthermore, sons carry on the family name, ensuring a long life for the clan. Thus, the birth of a daughter is called a “small happiness” while the birth of a son is a “great happiness.” Under severe conditions, such as a famine, when a family has too many mouths to feed, a daughter may be sold as a servant or slave to a wealthy family or a female infant may be killed at birth.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston expresses her annoyance that girls are constantly reminded of their lack of worth, through the common misogynist sayings her parents quoted. Instead of receiving the story of the No Name aunt as a warning, as her mother, speaking for the patriarchy, intended, Kingston seeks in this rejected aunt a model for her own rebellious nature and elaborates extensively on her mother's terse narrative. In thus embroidering on the aunt's story, Kingston shows her own ability to talk-story, Hawaiian pidgin for storytelling, a way to display her power³.

When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, “Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds,” I would trash on the floor and scream so hard I couldn't talk. I couldn't stop.

“What's the matter with her?”

“I don't know. Bad, I guess. You know how girls are. ‘There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls.’ ”

“I would hit her if she were mine. But then there's no use wasting all that discipline on a girl. ‘When you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers.’ ”

“Stop that crying!” my mother would yell. “I'm going to hit you if you don't stop. Bad girl! Stop!” I'm going to remember never to hit or to scold my children for crying, I thought, because then they will only cry more.

“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.”⁴

Where does reality finish in her book? Where do myths begin? Delineating these two orders of events, circumscribing their dynamics to precise temporal and special coordinates is essentially useless as both go hand in hand throughout Kingston's fictionalized autobiography.

Imagination is where *reality* takes a more significant shape and where *it* confronts its limitations along with its disequilibrium. Therefore, redeeming reality through imaginative

recreation comes across as one of Maxine Hong Kingston's primary attempts: " 'I wanted to be a writer⁵ since I was nine years old,' she says, methodically cutting up the chicken. 'When I was a child, I was writing book-length things. Writing was like breathing, but I never thought about making a living from it.' She sighs, 'Berkeley was such a giant; there was so little contact between the students and the teachers. Maybe there wouldn't have been all those riots if there'd been more contact. I was homesick all the time at Berkeley. I couldn't figure out the day-to-day practical things like washing my clothes. I couldn't do anything. And majoring in English interfered with my writing. It was all I could do to write those formal papers on literary criticism. I felt that if I stayed to get a master's degree it would *destroy* the writing. Formal literary criticism made me look at my own writing too critically. I would tear the page apart before I created it.' " (Wong, 1999:177)

She played a pioneering role in the establishment of an Asian American literary canon with her famous book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, the genre of which generated a great deal of discussion as well as criticism by both mainstream and Asian American, especially male critics. The book is catalogued as an autobiography, but there are obvious elements of fantasy and fiction, admixed with folktales as well as historical and familial stories.

The Woman Warrior defies genre categorization. Fiction and nonfiction in *The Woman Warrior* sometimes are hardly distinguishable- the novel and the autobiography seem to blend well.

The author attempts to record the life of a young Chinese American girl who lives in a ghostly world, stuck between reality and fantasy, and who tries but often fails to fend off the evils of racism and sexism in America. She dreams of becoming a fearless woman warrior like the celebrated Chinese legendary heroine FA Mu Lan (Hua Mulan), who avenges her family by killing the baron and beheading the emperor. But this militaristic course of action is achievable only by a swordswoman in a fantasized land; the more realistic and realizable dream is to be another sort of warrior, like Ts'ai Yen, the ancient Chinese woman poet who expressed feelings of alienation and oppression through writing poems. Hence the narrator becomes a woman warrior in the intellectual sense. (Huang, 2006: 131)

Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, storytelling is shown to have been a tool for the perpetuation of women's subordinate status; legends, family anecdotes, jokes, and aphorisms passed down through generations, frequently characterize women as weak and unintelligent. But by rewriting ancient stories and creating new ones, the narrator rejects those characterizations, demonstrating literature's potential to resist and subvert gender stereotypes.

In many ways, the book's most memorable character, Brave Orchid is a strong-willed woman whose words and actions contradict the stereotype of the subservient Asian wife; aside from the narrator's, it is Brave Orchid's commanding voice we hear most frequently throughout the text.

However, despite her insistence that her children grow to be independent, Brave Orchid is equally determined that they will not become "Americanized" and thus lose touch with their Chinese heritage. The narrator and her brother and sisters therefore feel a constant tension between an America whose dominant racial culture they can never be a part of, and a China whose history they know only through harrowing stories of violence and the punishment of women who transgress social taboos.

The Woman Warrior is composed of five sections: "No Name Woman," "White Tigers," "Shaman," "At the Western Palace," and "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe." Each is a blend of realistic and nonrealistic (or "fantastic") narrative styles, allowing Kingston to slip easily between the world of everyday experience and the worlds of memory, myth, or

legend. Often the female characters in the present-day sections, set in 1970s California, find themselves haunted by ghosts or ancient supernatural entities who threaten to render them powerless against oppressive forces. Conversely, “White Tigers,” a retelling of the life of the legendary Chinese female warrior, Fa Mu Lan told in the first person, is written in a spare, unsentimental style that lends a modern and contemporary feel to a very old tale of honor and retribution. (Oh, 2007: 315-6)

3. *Negotiating One’s Identity as a Chinese American Storyteller*

Undoubtedly, it is true that “*The Woman Warrior* represents a hybrid form, comprised of autobiography, biography, myths and legends, historical reconstruction. In each of the five sections of the narrative, there is offered a feminine character or a feminine role (daughter, student, warrior, writer) which offers a model of feminine identity; but the effect of this multiplicity of roles is not to clarify but to render identity mysterious. The form of the narrative seeks to articulate the forces, and the disjunctions—between China and America, past and present, mythic and mundane, real and recollected- that have shaped Maxine’s identity. She tries to find a voice with which to express her relationship with her mother, especially, and so reach an understanding of how women can relate to each other within the terms of a brutally misogynistic Chinese culture and an American culture comprised of conflicting gender values.” (Madsen, 2000: 235)

Approaching the topic of Maxine Hong Kingston’s book breaking away from genre categorization, we may take a further glimpse of the matter, by finding out what the writer herself thinks about it:

S.B.: “Listen, Maxine,” I say a few moments later, “do you consider ‘*The Woman Warrior*’ to be fiction or nonfiction? The reviewers seem confused. It’s a memoir, but it’s very artful.”

M.H.K.: “The bookstores seem confused too,” she giggles. “I’ve seen it placed in the anthropology section. Oh, I guess I do think it’s closer to fiction, but whatever sells...” She lets the sentence trail off. We agree that the title (not her first choice) is mildly deceiving, since it bespeaks of battles and militance while the book is a mystical evocation of her childhood spent among the “ghosts” of her mother’s ancestors and the “ghosts” that are the white people with foreign ways that she must get used to in Stockton, California, while she washes and irons in the family laundry.

(Wong, 1999:175)

As for the title, readers could come up with any number of suggestions, entailed by it: “The title of the narrative points to the importance of the theme of resistance and rebellion. Various rebellions are interrelated in the text; such as Kingston’s rebellion against conventional literary forms that are inadequate to express her cross-cultural position, her rebellion against her powerful mother; and her rebellion against the Chinese cultural influences to which she is subject as her inheritance. Hers is a rebellion against imposed racial and gender identities. These imposed identities are represented in part by the imagery of ghosts that recur throughout the narrative. The text is subtitled ‘Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts’. Ghosts threaten Chinese traditions by drawing people away from Chinese culture, such as Taxi Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Grocery Ghosts, or by subverting traditional culture, which is the crime committed by the No Name Aunt who drowns herself and her child in the village well so that she might haunt her persecutors. Threats to traditional culture are rendered void, deprived of reality, when they are represented as ghosts. The most terrifying ghosts Maxine encounters are the dead and tortured Chinese images that her mother conjures up and which haunt her dreams.” (Madsen, 2000: 237-8)

Ghosts are probably the most frequently recurring motif in *The Woman Warrior* and also the most difficult to pin down. Ghosts refer to both American and Chinese, humans and animals, the living and the dead. Referring to *ghosts*, to their semantic multiplicity, Maxine Hong Kingston claims that: "I guess for the first five years of my life I never saw any white people unless they came as a milkman ghost or welfare ghost. And as long as you don't know the true humanity of a person, they're just a ghost. That's a translation of the Chinese." (Abrams, 2009:32)

Furthermore, if we are to understand the motif in its entirety, then, according to Dennis Abrams, "To young Maxine and her family, white people, in all their 'otherness,' were like ghosts - strange creatures, not easily understood. But more than that - these 'ghosts' were likely to pull them away from their traditional life, from their very 'Chinanness,' into a new, different life as Americans." (Abrams, 2009:32)

There are malevolent ghosts that do harm, such as the "sitting ghost"; ancestral ghosts that look after the living; and everyday ghosts that do what everyday ghosts do, such as the "newsboy ghost." It is the very elusiveness of ghosts that make them so powerful in the memoir. Kingston grew up listening so many of her mother's talk-stories that, in writing the memoir, she can no longer tell what is real from what is imagined.

An important facet of ghosts in the story is that they change depending on the point of view. To Brave Orchid, everyone in America who is not Chinese is a ghost; the most important world is the world of emigrant Chinese around her. But to Americans or Chinese Americans, it is often the Chinese who are ghosts.

Talk-stories, which draw on both Chinese myths and lived experience, give structure to *The Woman Warrior*. There is at least one talk-story in every chapter, most often told by Brave Orchid to Kingston when she is a little girl. Furthermore, the memoir begins and ends with important talk-stories, one about No-Name Woman and another about Ts'ai Yen. Most often, Brave Orchid tells talk-stories in order to teach her family about important life lessons or Chinese traditions, or to make them behave in a certain way.

Kingston herself, in *The Woman Warrior*, sought to come to an understanding of her own youth and upbringing, beset by conflicting standards of behaviour: the independence and self-fulfillment promised to American children versus the self-sacrificial filial obligations demanded of Chinese girls. *Filial piety* refers to the respect that Chinese children are expected to pay their parents and everyone in older generations. How was she to fit the Chinese ghost stories and legends her mother funneled into her imagination with the American world of neon and plastic in which she was growing up? How was she to find her own voice and realize her worth with a mother who claimed to have cut her daughter's frenum and in a society that devalued daughters? How was she to develop her own storytelling powers when faced with a mother whose own storytelling power and domineering spirit were so formidable, even threatening? (Leonard, 2005:388)

Though she is frequently upset by her mother's talk-stories, at the end of the memoir she tells Brave Orchid with pride that she tells talk-stories too. In a symbolic gesture of reconciliation, the memoir ends with a talk-story that is half Kingston's and half her mother's.

The Woman Warrior focuses on the stories of five women- Kingston's long-dead aunt, "No Name Woman"; a mythical female warrior, Fa Mu Lan; Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid; Kingston's aunt, Moon Orchid; and finally, Kingston herself- told in five chapters. The chapters integrate Kingston's lived experience with a series of talk-stories- spoken stories that combine Chinese history, myths, and beliefs- her mother tells her.

The first chapter, "No-Name Woman," begins with one such talk-story about an aunt Kingston never knew she had. Because this aunt had brought disgrace upon her family by

having an illegitimate child, she killed herself and her baby by jumping into the family well in China. After hearing the story, which is told to her as a warning, Kingston is never allowed to mention her aunt aloud again, so she decides to create a history of her aunt in her memoir. She imagines the ways that her aunt attracted a suitor, comparing her aunt's actions of quiet rebellion against the community to her own rebellion. Kingston also recreates her aunt's horrible experience of giving birth in a pigsty and imagines her aunt's ghost walking around with no one to give it gifts, as was Chinese custom. In the end, Kingston is unsure whether she is doing justice to her aunt's memory or just serving her own needs.

"White Tigers" is based on another talk-story, one about the mythical female warrior, Fa Mu Lan. Fa Mu Lan, whose story is told through Kingston's first-person narrative, trains to become a warrior from the time she is seven years old, then leads an army of men- even pretending to be a man herself- against the forces of a corrupt baron and emperor. After her battles are over, she returns to be a wife and mother. The story of Fa Mu Lan is contrasted sharply with Kingston's own life in America, in which she can barely stand up to her racist bosses. Kingston realizes, however, that her weapons are her words.

"Shaman" focuses on Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, and her old life back in China. Brave Orchid was a powerful doctor, midwife, and, according to the talk-story, destroyer of ghosts back in her village. To a young Kingston, Brave Orchid's past is as astounding as it is terrifying, and many of the images from her mother's talk-story -Chinese babies left to die, slave girls being bought and sold, a woman stoned to death by her villagers- haunt Kingston's dreams for years to come. At the end of the chapter, Maxine visits her mother after being away for many years. The two arrive at some kind of understanding after many years of disagreement and conflict, and Brave Orchid is warm and affectionate towards her daughter for the first time in the memoir.

The title of "At the Western Palace" refers to another of Brave Orchid's talk-stories, about an emperor who had four wives. It is an analogy for her sister, Moon Orchid's situation: Moon Orchid's husband, now a successful Los Angeles doctor, had left her behind in China and remarried in America. Brave Orchid urges her sister into a disastrous confrontation with the man to demand her due as his wife. As a result, Moon Orchid, who does not speak a word of English, is left to fend for herself in America. She eventually goes crazy and dies in a California state mental asylum.

The final chapter of the memoir, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," is about Kingston herself. This section focuses mainly on her childhood and teenage years, depicting her anger and frustration in trying to express herself and attempting to please an unappreciative mother. There are a number of characters whose personalities highlight many of her Kingston's own characteristics, including a silent Chinese girl whom Kingston torments as a little girl. In a pivotal moment in the chapter, Kingston, after unsuccessfully trying to express her feelings one at a time, erupts at her mother with a torrent of complaints and criticisms. Later in her life, however, Kingston comes to appreciate her mother's talk-stories. At the end of the chapter, she even tells one herself: the story of Ts'ai Yen, a warrior poetess captured by barbarians, who returns to the Chinese with songs from another land. It is a fitting conclusion to a text in which Kingston combines very different worlds and cultures and creates a harmony of her own.

4. Fa Mu Lan's Myth: In Pursuit of One's Heart-Felt Duty

The warrior motif is an extremely important part of Kingston's memoir, referring as it does to Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid, and Kingston herself. Much of the *Woman Warrior* is a struggle- between mother and daughter, daughter and society, and so on- making the warrior motif especially appropriate. Fa Mu Lan, the true warrior becomes the standard by which

Kingston measures herself: “The swordswoman and I are not dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs.”(Kingston: *The Woman Warrior*)

Though in some ways Kingston comes up wanting to compare herself to the mythical female warrior, she discovers that the very act of writing is both a battle and a victory: “She dreams of becoming a fearless woman warrior like the celebrated Chinese legendary heroine Fa Mu Lan (Hua Mulan), who avenges her family by killing the baron and beheading the emperor. But this militaristic course of action is achievable only by a swordswoman in a fantasized land; the more realistic and realizable dream is to be another sort of warrior, like Ts’ai Yen, the ancient Chinese woman poet who expressed feelings of alienation and oppression through writing poems. Hence the narrator becomes a woman warrior in the intellectual sense.” (Huang, 2006:131)

Brave Orchid is at times a warrior, at times an inspiration to her daughter, and at times a bitter enemy. She is clearly the most forceful and free-willed woman in the memoir, especially in comparison to her sister, Moon Orchid.

Much of Kingston’s memoir is about trying to find a way to fight back: in “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” she actually shows some fighting spirit herself in a vitriolic outburst against her mother. It is significant, however, that the chapter ends with Ts’ai Yen, who is both a warrior and a poetess. As much as Kingston might want to be a fierce warrior, she knows that her true power is in her word and song.

In mixing ancient Chinese stories with her own imagination, Kingston⁷ has created a new woman warrior who actually challenges old and new. This warrior, Kingston herself, is bold, daring, and rebellious. She reveals what should be kept secret in the old world; at the same time, she points out how her new life in the free world seems so uninteresting, haunted by “ghosts,” newsboys and garbage collectors. She must break away from both worlds, use her own words as swords to avenge wrongs, to fight, and to build. (Wong, 1999: 19)

Even with material that tempts with its air of certainty, the protagonist finds it necessary to tailor-make meanings from altered details. Thus she spurns the simplistic lesson of the traditional Fa Mu Lan tale⁸, creating instead a potentially subversive woman warrior to whom even traditions yield. While the heroine of “Mulan Shi” sees herself merely as a second-best substitute for an aged father (there being no elder son to take his place), the little girl in “White Tigers” is a chosen one, destined to be called away by “immortals.” Martial artists typically pass on their skills to sons or male disciples; the old couple in the mountains, in contrast, devote years exclusively to her training. For the traditional Mulan, the campaigns are but a detour; at the end of the poem, the erstwhile general puts on makeup, ready to resume her interrupted feminine life. Kingston’s Fa Mu Lan chooses wifedom and motherhood in the midst of battle. Her fellow villagers know of her identity before her triumphant return from battle; their relinquishment of their precious sons to her army is thus an affirmation of faith in her female power. (Wong, 1999:45)

Kingston has received some criticism for purporting to represent the “typical” experience of Chinese Americans, and in other cases for taking traditional material and changing it to suit her own needs. One source of the latter criticism is the story of Fa Mu Lan, a traditional Chinese myth about a girl who took the place of her father in battle: “[...] prepared for battle, this cross-dressing heroine takes her father’s place and leads a peasant army against the emperor and his representatives.” (Adams, 2008: 89)

For her part, Kingston claims that she never intended such stories to be rather representative or accurate. Furthermore, we must keep in mind that *The Woman Warrior* is not a chronicle of Chinese culture or traditions, but simply a reflection of the experience of

one Chinese American, far removed from the culture and traditions about which she is writing.

5. Conclusion

The Woman Warrior comes across as a vivid narrative, with words seemingly tamed to suit the author's long-harbored queries. Maxine Hong Kingston evokes a heavily emotional past through the lens of an artful reworking of myths for reconciliation's sake, meaning her deep-rooted ancestry concerns with family dilemmas and a fierce rebellion against societal prejudice.

Infused with history and myths, the reality of Maxine Hong Kingston's book has fueled many debates as to its authenticity. Half facts, half fantasy, *The Woman Warrior* translates the author's constant preoccupation with unveiling her writing self and asserting her own voice, much too often unheard, all this while dispelling family's misjudgments.

Primarily nurtured by talk-stories, *The Woman Warrior* has gained structure over time to finally emerge as a fictionalized autobiography where the author does not claim the entire stage at all. On the contrary, we perceive that by not projecting the narrative *I* in the spotlight throughout the book, Maxine Hong Kingston genuinely succeeds in articulating her uniqueness.

Acknowledgements

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NOTES

¹Amy Ling. *Chinese American Women Writers: The Tradition Behind Maxine Hong Kingston*. In: *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Asian-American Writers. New Edition*, editor Harold Bloom. New York, NY: Infobase Publishing, 2009, p. 63

²Susan Brownmiller. *Susan Brownmiller Talks with Maxine Hong Kingston, Author of The Woman Warrior*. In: *Maxine Hong Kingston. The Woman Warrior. A Casebook.*, editor Sau-ling Cynthia Wong. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 178

³Amy Ling and Patricia P. Chu. *Maxine Hong Kingston*. In: *The Asian Pacific American heritage: A Companion to Literature and Arts*, editor George J. Leonard. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2005, p. 389

⁴<http://bookzz.org/book/1669286/ce57f3>, Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, retrieved January 7, 2015. All references in the text are to this edition.

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⁶*Ibidem*, p. 175

⁷Ya-Jie Zhang. *A Chinese Woman's Response to Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior*. In: *Maxine Hong Kingston. The Woman Warrior. A Casebook.*, editor Sau-ling Cynthia Wong. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 19

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