

## ANALYSIS

*The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976)



Maxine Hong Kingston

(1940- )

“California-born author, resident in Hawaii as a schoolteacher, wrote *The Woman Warrior* (1976), a partly fictional work about her girlhood as it was affected by the beliefs of her Chinese family, and *China Men* (1980), again blending family history and legendary in treating the lives of men in her family who left their Oriental culture to live and work in the U.S.”

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 401

“Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) could be termed a female version of Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*, a nonfictional counterpart of ‘growing up,’ in which a personal memoir uses nearly every device of postwar fiction.

The narrator is the girl ‘among ghosts,’ and she controls her story. The narrative depends on the various roles she must play: in her imagination, as she fits herself into the ghosts of her parents’ background, and in the reality of her life as a Chinese American, caught between two cultures. Her mother offers ghosts, and American life offers only actuality. Trapped between the ‘warrior’ status of her cultural past and the ‘student’ status of her present, she must grow up, a girl in a society that places little value on its girls. As a swordswoman and heroine of her people—that is, a warrior, she would count for much; but as a student, she must insist on her identity at every turn. And her mother, despite her medical training, insists on a Chinese culture completely antithetical to science and to the narrator’s childhood.

Forward movement depends on a young girl growing up and trying to find her identity; but her test comes, not in her ability to make A’s in school or to achieve anything, but in her ability to overcome the ghosts of the past. Despite the mother’s own achievement as a medical student, she stresses the dysfunction of girls, the lack of value placed on them and on women. From birth, a girl-child was virtually doomed. ‘I hope,’ says the narrator, ‘this holeless baby [born without an anus] proves that my mother did not prepare a box of clean ashes beside the birth bed in case of a girl.’ For midwives or relatives would turn the face of

the newborn girl-child into the ashes. There is always the suspicion that her mother was no different, and that the survival of the narrator resulted from her birth in America, not in the China of her mother's past.

Such ghosts may kill as well as entertain, bind as well as exorcise the present. The ghost stories have great charm, especially the early one about the swordswoman who sets forth to save her people from the evil landlords; but these stories also fix the past as a prison. A Chinese-American girl must not only negotiate the infinite varieties of the American present; she must somehow blend with that past as expected of her by her parents. If we compare her with the Mexican girls in Oscar Lewis's studies, we see how Mexicans move into the present, with few restraints, even religion, whereas the Chinese girl must straddle cultures: present one face to the past (Chinese culture, history, parents, ancestors), the other to herself, her own future.

A sixteen-year-old slave girl, purchased by the narrator's mother for \$180—twenty dollars less than doctor and hospital fees at the narrator's birth—has been trained as a nurse, although she could have been kept as a slave. The narrator senses: 'My mother's enthusiasm for me is duller than for the slave girl.... Throughout childhood my young sister said, 'When I grow up, I want to be a slave,' and my parents laughed, encouraging her. Spells, ghosts, phantoms, shamans: these control the narrator's mother, who sees the cultural past as missing pieces in a puzzle, without which her world would disintegrate. Her scientific background is grafted on, never integrated. Against this, the young narrator must emerge as her parents' child and as her own person.

The emergence of the youthful girl is, then, the subject of the memoir, one steeped in images and metaphors of life and death. For those ghosts must not be minimized; they are forces for life, although for the American girl they may seem more matters of death. Yet she dedicates her book to her mother and father, indicating that her college years at Berkeley and her marriage to a Caucasian have not completely exorcised the ghosts. For the non-Chinese reader, those images of the past cannot be written off as charming or culturally enriching. Many of our critics, especially when speaking of Jews, sometimes of Italians, describe the growing-up period with nostalgia, arguing that life is strengthened through hard work and commitment to principle. What the critics neglect—and what novelists provide (Philip Roth, especially, or Malamud)—is a recognition of how individually devastating such 'charm' or 'enrichment' can be. Kingston's life could easily have been destroyed by the cultural past.

The narrator's loss of voice, precisely the image Jerzy Kosinski used in *The Painted Bird*, emblemizes her traumatization. Her vocal cords damaged by her mother, she speaks in barely a whisper, even worse, in squeaks and quacks—a Peking duck. Cultivating either silence or a voice less than human, she melts into the woodwork at school, and only one other girl, who refuses to utter any sound, carries silence further. In one of the most moving scenes in the book, the narrator corners the silent girl in a washroom and batters her, to induce an utterance; but the girl remains silent until her sister rescues her. That use of silence, which gives the narrator a 'zero IQ' in the first grade, is both a weapon and a devastating trauma. Her outlook turned to silent observation, her language neither English nor Chinese, the narrator must deal with ghosts in a way not perceived by those who find the past culturally charming.

The book is ingeniously organized, so that the main part of the young girl's observations come in early childhood, or seem to. Although the ultimate voice is that of the grown woman, a retrospect, the narrative involves mainly stories she heard as a child. She begins to emerge quite late in the book, and then only in glimpses and brief sequences, except with the silent girl at school. One of the loveliest passages comes when she is still very young—she is born in the middle of World War II—and she perceives America as full of ghosts, the ghosts of her mother's tales transferred to these shores. 'But America,' she observes, 'has been full of machines and ghosts—Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts. Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe; I could hardly walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts and their cars. There were Black Ghosts too, but they were open eyed and full of laughter, more distinct than White Ghosts.

But these ghosts are only the beginning. What frightens her most is the Newsboy Ghosts: 'Carrying a newspaper pouch instead of a baby brother, he walked right out in the middle of the street without his

parents. He shouted ghost words to the empty streets. His voice reached children inside the houses, reached inside the children's chests. They would come running out of their yards with their dimes.' She and her sister pretended they were Newsboy Ghosts and collected old Chinese newspapers and shouted around their yard that they had papers for sale. When the real newsboy arrived, they would hide under the stairs or in cellars.

The ghosts carried everywhere. In the supermarket, she had to traffic with the Grocery Ghost and ghost customers. There were the Milk Ghost, who delivered without being seen; the Mail Ghost, Garbage Ghost, Social Worker Ghost, Nurse Ghost, even 'two Jesus Ghosts who had formerly worked in China.' The enumeration only reinforces her sense of America as a ghost-land, with people performing ghost functions, slipping in and out of our lives unobserved. Most jobs we take for granted are ghost jobs, roles without a performer. For the narrator to achieve herself, she must sort out these ghosts, not only of the recent past, but of her present, of her life.

*The Woman Warrior* is so successful, and so nearly erases boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, because Kingston has been able to find images (ghosts, silence, loss of voice, the weight of a discordant cultural past) which help to define her narrator. She can define her life only with her emerging brain, achieving A's at school, learning to write English well (even while not speaking), catching the eyes of her teachers. And yet all the while she is defining the way in which she can emerge and escape, her mother is preparing her for a different role, even to matching her with a mentally retarded young man who seems rich. From her mother's point of view, she is fit only for this young man; if he is a suitor, then she might think of accepting. He comes to the laundry and brings gifts, toys, devotion. His presence causes the narrator to find her voice and express her emerging self: 'my throat burst open. I stood up, talking and burbling.... You think you can give me away to freaks.... I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I'm not, I'm not retarded. There's nothing wrong with my brain.... I'm smart. I can do all kind of things. I know how to get A's, and they say I could be a scientist or a mathematician if I want. I can make a living.'

How similar to this is the ranting Philip Roth protagonist, who screams out his independence from the cultural past in, usually, self-destructive acts; or Henry Roth's David Shearl, who prefers death and transfiguration to home. Kingston protests, but as a Chinese girl, she is not full of hateful rebellion. She seeks herself, not the destruction of what the past means for others. Once she recovers her tongue, words are all she needs. She can already write; now she can speak. She has broken free, liberated to pursue her own ghosts. The liberation is her version of the sixties generational break...

When, earlier in the book, we see her return home, a grown woman, she can barely stand her mother's ways. She develops a splitting midday headache, she has the makings of a cold, her health begins to go. Her illnesses are her response to the roles her mother's talk-story had insisted on, from her aunt who kills herself after giving birth to a bastard child to the 'woman warrior' who wanted to use magic to overturn the emperor. All these 'roles' are implicit in her mother's presence, and they evoke not only the magic of the past but its inappropriateness. Her weapon for response is illness, the signal to her of how she can deal with her mother's world: suffer for it, and yet reject it totally, without rejecting her mother. A 'woman warrior,' she supports all necessary roles."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 564-66

"When I write most deeply, fly the highest, reach the furthest, I write like a diarist,' asserts Maxine Hong Kingston, as though to remind us that writing begins for her as a private act. 'My audience is myself,' she says. 'I dare to write anything because I can burn my papers at any moment.' Using her own life and the lives of her family, Kingston addresses not the experience of being Chinese in America but the experience of being a Chinese-American. Her work demands an understanding of three cultures—American, Chinese, and Chinese-American. 'Some readers,' she says, 'will just have to do some background reading.' At the same time, she continues to believe both in 'the timelessness and universality of individual vision' and in the 'miracle' of being understood.

Of *The Woman Warrior* (1976)...she says that it is not merely 'a family book or an American book or a woman's book but a world book, and, at the same moment, my book'.... Given the autobiographical focus of Kingston's fiction, it is fitting that one of her major concerns revolves around the relation between fiction and nonfiction. 'My characters are story tellers,' she says, 'and I suspect that some of them are telling me fiction. So when I write their lives down is it fiction or nonfiction?' The answer, she believes, lies in perspective. Rather than depend solely on verifiable 'facts,' she also explores impressions, emotions, and interpretations, both her own and those of her characters. At the same time, she carefully delineates the sources on which she has drawn so that her readers can in turn devise interpretations of their own. 'When I tell...all those versions,' she says, 'I'm actually giving the culture of these people in a very accurate way. You can see where the people makeup these fictions about themselves, and it's not just for fun. It's a terrible necessity.' Writing of herself and the mixed world that forms a backdrop for her experiences, Kingston creates a truth that transcends literary and ethnic categories."

David Minter  
*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 2678-79

"In her books, Maxine Hong Kingston speaks not only for herself and Chinese immigrants but for all marginal groups who have not yet found their own voice in an alien or oppressive culture.... In her books she attempts to reconcile the two heritages and out of them forge her own identity.... On the one hand, her mother encouraged her to remain essentially Chinese, accepting the subordinate female role in the traditional Chinese family. On the other hand, her mother related stories of mythic Chinese women who were brave, daring, and strong.... Unable to win battles as the mythic woman warrior did, Kingston's victories were her grades....

Kingston's first book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, won for her the National Book Critics Circle Award for general nonfiction. Blending autobiography, history, and myth, Kingston describes her struggle to create her own identity out of the conflicting American and Chinese cultures. The book, without a plot in the conventional sense, presents portraits of Chinese women, real and mythic, as they react to their culture, the real generally responding in silence, or being silenced, and the mythic finding a voice that speaks not only for themselves but also for the others who are mute.

The first section, 'No Name Woman,' relates the tale of Kingston's aunt, her father's sister, who disgraced the family by having an illegitimate child. On the night of the child's birth, after the villagers destroyed the family compound, she committed suicide and infanticide by flinging herself and her baby into a well. Kingston imagines the life of her aunt: her obedience in marrying the man selected by her elders, her reaction when her husband left for the United States the day after the wedding, her acquiescence when forced by a fellow villager into a sexual liaison, her acceptance of the villagers' contempt, her refusal to name the father of her child, and her final desire to end the life that disgraced her family, who never again mentioned her name. Not only is Kingston telling the story that the aunt could not, she is, in a sense, avenging her. In Chinese, the ideograph for 'avenge' also means 'to report a crime.'

Other sections of *The Woman Warrior* draw on legend and myth. In 'White Tigers' the tale of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan is related. Adopted by a supernatural couple, she was groomed to be a great warrior. When her tutelage was completed, she, dressed as a man, led her soldiers to avenge the peasants who had been mistreated by the landlords. Her fame grew with each daring exploit. Kingston, as a young girl, dreamed of becoming another Fa Mu Lan. In the final section, 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' Kingston recounts a Chinese tale about the legendary poetess Ts'ai Yung, who, kidnapped by barbarians, was forced to wed one of the chiefs, bearing him two children who rejected her Chinese language and culture. Her loneliness and longing were expressed in her poems. These she sang one night. The barbarians, though unable to understand the words, nevertheless understood the emotion, and they allowed her to return to China. Kingston, after contending with and finally conquering the ghosts of her childhood, becomes both the warrior and the poetess. As warrior she is avenging or reporting the crimes committed; as poet, she is telling the story for those who have been silenced.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston speaks for her female ancestors; in her next book, *China Men*, she provides a voice for her male relatives. Early in *China Men*, she addresses her father, asking why he was

silent, why he refused to tell her his stories. Because of his reluctance to talk about the past, Kingston speaks for him and for her other male relatives, creating what she does not know. Kingston relates the experiences of her father in two sections. The first of these, 'The Father from China,' is about his accomplishments as a scholar in his Chinese village and his early success in New York, when his laundry business was prospering. This father, light-hearted and popular, Kingston never knew. In 'The American Father,' Kingston presents a later period when her father's life was burdened with the responsibility for a large family. He grew quiet, depressed, and stern. This was the father Kingston knew.

The stories of other male ancestors are told. In 'The Great Grandfather of Sandlewood Mountains,' Kingston tells of two of her great grandfathers who planted sugar cane in Hawaii. In 'The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains,' Kingston relates her father's adventures in the United States. Three times he traveled to the United States. The first time he worked on the California railroad, but the last time he became a vagrant, returning to China only with the financial support of his relatives. It was, however, through him that his family was able to claim American citizenship. To the authorities, he had argued, convincingly but falsely, that the documents proving his citizenship were destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake. There is the story of an uncle who abruptly left a comfortable life in the United States in order to escort his mother's ghost back to her grave in China and the story of Kingston's brother, who served in Vietnam. Blended with these biographical sketches are historical records pertaining to the Chinese and tales of mythic Chinese figures. Like *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men* is a testament to survival; it is about forging an identity in an alien culture....

Her work, well received by critics as well as by the public, has been selected for various awards. She is praised for her intense poetic prose and for her masterful blending of legend, history, autobiography, and myth. In her recording of her own experiences, Kingston speaks not only for herself but also for any member of a marginal group. She supplies a voice to those who have been silenced by their culture."

Barbara Wiedemann  
*Cyclopedia of World Authors II*, Vol. 3  
ed. Frank N. Magill  
(Salem 1989) 846-48

"Born in Stockton, California in 1940, Maxine Ting Ting Hong is the eldest of six surviving children of Tom Hong (scholar, laundry man, and manager of a gambling house) and Ying Lan Chew (midwife, laundress, field hand). She earned a B.A. degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 1962 and a teaching certificate in 1965. She has lived and worked both in California and in Honolulu, Hawaii. She is married to Earl Kingston, an actor, and has one son, Joseph Lawrence Chung Mei. Author of two award-winning books, *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), Maxine Hong Kingston is undoubtedly the best recognized Asian-American writer today, with her work attracting a great deal of attention from many arenas: Chinese-Americans, feminist scholars, literary critics, and the media....

*The Woman Warrior* received the National Book Critics Award for the best book of nonfiction in 1976 and was proclaimed one of the top ten nonfiction works of the decade by *Time* magazine. However, it is more accurately a collage of fiction and fact, memory and imagination, a hybrid genre of Kingston's own devising. Through the Chinese legends and family stories that have marked her childhood and the mysterious Old World customs that her mother enforced but did not explain, through Kingston's own experiences and her imaginative and poetic flights, *The Woman Warrior* details the complexities and difficulties in Kingston's development as a woman and as a Chinese-American. It protests the sexism of traditional Chinese culture, exemplified in such misogynist sayings as 'It is better to feed geese than girls' and in such acts as the binding of girls' feet and the selling of girl slaves. At the same time, the author is sensitive to the racism of America, and objects to her employer's calling for 'nigger yellow' paint. The book shows the power of stories to shape characters and behavior, and it demonstrates the triumph of becoming a shaper of stories by finding one's voice, embracing one's past, and asserting one's self.

As *The Woman Warrior*, with its focus on women, is informed by a difficult and ultimately rewarding mother/daughter relationship, Kingston's second book, *China Men* is focused on men and shaped by a rather uncommunicative father/daughter relationship. Thus, it depends heavily on family history, American

laws, and imaginative projections based loosely on historical fact. Its purpose, as the author has stated, is to 'claim America' for Chinese-Americans by showing how indebted America is to the labor of China men, her great-grandfathers and the grandfathers, who cleared jungle for the sugar plantations in Hawaii, who split rock and hammered steel to build the railroads in the United States, who created fertile farm lands out of swamp and desert and yet faced fierce discrimination and persecution. In this text too, Kingston blends myth and fact, autobiography and fiction, so that the usual dividing lines are invisible.

In her most recent book, her first novel *Tripmaster Monkey* again blends Chinese myth with American reality. She combines allusions to a Chinese classic, *Monkey* or *Journey to the West*, the story of a magical, mischievous monkey who accompanies a monk to India for the sacred books of Buddhism, with the life of a 1960s Berkeley beatnik playwright."

Amy Ling  
*The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2*  
(D.C. Heath 1990) 2094-95

"*The Woman Warrior* is a complex, highly inventive, historically embedded work. It is part biography, part autobiography, part history, part fantasy, part fiction, part myth, and wholly multilayered, multivocal, and organic.... *The Woman Warrior*, as figured in the organizing trope, is a transgressive work because it locates itself in the intersections of sexual, racial, and genre identities. As Kingston has said in defense of the work against criticism that it is not an authentic account of Chinese culture, *The Woman Warrior* originates in and addresses not the high culture of China but its low culture, more specifically a transplanted oral culture, of the Say Yup (Cantonese) immigrants in California....

Kingston calls the language in *The Woman Warrior* 'stilted and complicated...because I was trying to find a language for a very complicated story.' While her goal in *China Men* was 'to have a very lucid language,' in the novel she uses 'another voice...very modern, very slangy, a hip 1960s language.' In the same interview, Kingston describes her increasing confidence. In writing *The Woman Warrior*, 'I didn't think I could write a long book, so I did five interlocking pieces and each one was like a short story or an essay.' In *China Men*, 'I would have a myth, and then a modern story and then a myth.' She describes her novel as having 'a coherent long, long structure.' Kingston calls *The Woman Warrior* 'an "I" book, it is the voices that I hear inside myself; whereas in [the novel] it is the voices that I hear around me'."

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, ed.  
*Approaches to Teaching Kingston's The Woman Warrior*  
(MLA 1991) x, 5

"*The Woman Warrior* is indeed a distinctly American book (by now an American classic, some believe).... However, many non-Chinese American readers have been blinkered by the stereotype that Chinese Americans, even those several generations removed from their ancestral land, are unassimilable aliens with some mystical genetic hotline to China's great traditions. As a result, they tend to focus disproportionately on the 'Chinese' parts of the book, in particular 'White Tigers,' the chapter on the young girl's fantasized adventures as a woman warrior.... There is certainly enough material of 'universal' appeal to have made *The Woman Warrior* a fixture on reading lists in many disciplines....

What this specific Chinese American narrator does to validate her own life matters much more than what the 'Chinese Chinese' in general really do or don't do: anthropological accuracy is not the issue.... The issue of Kingston's infidelity to her Chinese sources has been at the heart of a long-standing controversy within the Chinese American community; some critics have accused Kingston of promoting a 'fake' Chinese American culture by mutilating traditional material beyond recognition (see S. C. Wong, 'Autobiography'). For these reasons, it would not do simply to tell students to stop asking whether the Chinese 'really do that'.... Kingston's divergences from the originals bear on central themes in the book. Once they recognize these themes, students are less likely to be distracted by questions of detail based on the erroneous assumption that traditional Chinese culture is 'brought over' by immigrants much like a steamer trunk is: it can be opened or kept closed, preserved or thrown out, but never *transformed* into something different by the experience of living in America.

As even a cursory comparison with the traditional 'Ballad of Mulan' shows, Kingston's version in 'White Tigers' is a retelling only in the loosest possible sense: numerous details have been added, some from sources far removed historically from the 'Ballad'.... Although the 'Ballad of Mulan' is the most common and likely means by which modern Chinese children learn about the heroine, it is by no means the only extant literary work on her life. The Fa Mu Lan story has attained the status of a topos in Chinese literature, so that a number of versions exist in various genres, with authors fabricating episodes and secondary characters as they see fit. There are versions of the Mulan story in the Tang, Ming, and Qing dynasties as well as the modern period, in genres ranging from the ballad, the novel, and the opera libretto to the...vernacular play; during China's war of resistance against Japanese invaders (1936-45), the Mulan story was frequently staged in patriotic propaganda plays.... If even the historical existence of Fa Mu Lan is impossible to ascertain, she should be regarded simply as a folk heroine. The debate should not be couched in terms of how Kingston's version deviates from a 'definitive' one chronicling the life of a 'real' Fa Mu Lan....

The 'White Tigers' segment on the woman warrior is meant to be read as a fantasy, not historical reconstruction, and it is meant to be read in an American context—the narrator's life as a female child in a Chinese American immigrant family. The nonnaturalistic status of the narrative can be brought out by highlighting textual clues in the first part of the chapter (e.g., the conditional subjunctive in 'The call would come from a bird.... The bird would cross the sun' and the improbability of some of the narrated events (e.g., the woman warrior going through pregnancy and childbirth undetected by fellow soldiers)....

Ambiguity has made for conflicting interpretations of the 'Ballad' [of Mulan] among Chinese scholars. Some consider the story an inspiring exemplar of filial piety, about a dutiful daughter who undergoes extremities to spare her aging father from conscription... Others read it as anti-patriarchal and anti-Confucian, arguing that so unconventional a heroine can only be of northern nomadic origin. The same ambiguity, greatly magnified because of elaborations, can be seen in Kingston's rendition. As is typical in wish-fulfillment fantasies, the narrator tries to eat her cake and have it too: her glorious subversion of patriarchy ends in reconciliation with it. The class can explore the narrator's simultaneous revolt against, and subscription to, sexist ideas about women and through the exploration arrive at some understanding of the artistic resolution attempted in *The Woman Warrior*....

Taoist influences are strong (as is the notion of self-cultivation to attain immortality, exemplified by the old couple who become the narrator's teachers and surrogate parents in the fantasy. Typical plots interweave an archetypal struggle between good and evil (those who use their superhuman martial skills to uphold righteous values versus those who misuse them for self-aggrandizement); an arduous quest (for the right master, for magic elixirs or antidotes, for a secret instruction book, etc.) and attendant trials; years of endurance and tireless practice; revenge (avenging the murder of loved ones or domination by foreign invaders); and dramatic showdowns. Most of these structural elements can be seen in Kingston's version. Likewise, the most colorful, marvelous details of 'White Tigers' (for which I suspect many non-Chinese reviewers credit solely Kingston's imagination) are conventional and derivative....

A second major, and highly controversial, alteration to the Fa Mu Lan story is the tattooing episode. The episode is based on another well-known traditional story, that of Ngai Fei (Yue Fei), a historical hero whose mother is said to have carved four characters on his back exhorting him to serve his country with loyalty and honor. Furthermore, the four-character maxim has turned into an entire page of reminders of revenge (again a physical improbability).... The traditional woman warrior reveals her gender in a final moment of glory, surprising her comrades-in-arms; Kingston's, after her triumphant return from the mountains, has more work to do. She has to assemble a peasant army, fight her way to the capital, behead the evil emperor, and inaugurate a new one—a male peasant under whom she gladly serves as a general. (Note again the ambivalence toward patriarchy: her rebellion is far from radical.)....

It should be noted that Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid are named as if they were sisters of Fa Mu Lan, whose given name, Mu Lan, if translated literally character by character, would be Sylvan Orchid.... Kingston ends *The Woman Warrior* with a version of the story of Ts'ai Yen, author of 'Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' the long poem from which the title of the final chapter...is derived.... Unlike

Fa Mu Lan, Ts'ai Yen was definitely a historical figure. The standard source on her life is *Hou Han Shu* (History of the Latter Han Dynasty), compiled in the mid-fifth century...

Ts'ai Yen was born about AD 177, daughter of a scholar-statesman, Ts'ai Yung (Cai Yong), who had a rough career in officialdom and died in prison. (Kingston's description of 'princess' is not to be taken literally.) Ts'ai Yen was known for being a superb scholar, speaker, and musician. Widowed at a young age, she was captured from her parents' home by raiding Southern Hsiung-nu (Xiongnu) horsemen (identical to the Huns who later invaded Europe) in the year 195. During her twelve years' sojourn in barbarian lands, she was made the wife of a commander and had two children by him. In the meantime, in Han (ethnic Chinese) land, the Han dynasty fell... Ts'ao Ts'ao sent envoys with ransom gifts to the Southern Hsiung-nu and secured Ts'ai's Yen's return. She was married a third time. Three poems have been attributed to her: two entitled 'Lamentation' (in different verse form...) and 'Eighteen Stanzas'....

The liberty that Kingston has taken with the Ts'ai Yen story is a matter of selective focus rather than sustained embellishment on a scant narrative frame. She has added some details; at the same time, she has left out a great deal that seems important in the Chinese versions. She has also taken advantage of the symbolist's license to concentrate in the person of Ts'ai Yen two different predicaments: that of the immigrant generation and that of the American-born. In insisting on regarding China as 'home' even after twelve years with the Southern Hsiung-nu, in feeling alienated from the uncivilized barbarians among whom she must live, the speaker in 'Eighteen Stanzas' is like the narrator's parents in *The Woman Warrior*. 'Whenever my parents said "home," they suspended America.' Though not abducted like Ts'ai Yen, the immigrant parents do feel a sense of involuntariness: they have had to leave their ancestral land to seek a better life among American 'barbarians'....

If... 'cherished ideas' are typical of the tradition-minded 'Chinese Chinese,' they obviously have little to offer an American-born Chinese; indeed, they create demands that are quite impossible to fulfill. Because of their nativity and upbringing, the descendants of immigrants are destined to lost touch eventually with the Chinese civilization deemed so superior by their elders; emotionally it is difficult to summon loyalty toward an ancestral family and state one has never seen; and, if for their sanity alone, the American-born cannot believe that the different ways of life they encounter daily are irreconcilable....

The Chinese language is denigrated as 'chingchong ugly' by white Americans and...second-generation children have so internalized this view that they fall silent. The issue of language shift in the immigrant family can be raised in connection with 'silence' and 'voice' as a recurrent theme in American literatures by people of color.... For the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*...the new moment of glory or validation occurs when one breaks out of silence into song: through song a new center is created right there in the desert, at the winter campfires 'ringed by barbarians.' The American-born Chinese, Kingston seems to imply, must create their own art....

Has Kingston succeeded in creating a song that 'translate[s] well'? There is as yet no consensus on the subject. Undeniably part of *The Woman Warrior's* popularity has been fueled by a misplaced fascination with traditional Chinese culture, which may mean that the endeavor to produce a 'translatable' Chinese American literature is destined to be undermined by stereotyping and Orientalism."

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong  
"Kingston's Handling of Traditional Chinese Sources"  
*Approaches* (1991) 26-35

"Kingston's work is the best known of a significant and growing body of writing by emerging Asian and Asian American women authors. To read Kingston deeply is to acknowledge this new voice in the context of Asian and Western traditions.... *The Woman Warrior* may be taught as a recasting, if not a recent flowering, of a three-thousand-year-old literary tradition. The classic *Book of Songs*, traditionally attributed to Confucius, was completed around 600 BC, but the earliest parts probably extend back to the Chou dynasty, 1122 BC. This ancient collection embraces love songs, folk songs of peasant women perhaps not unlike Kingston's No Name Aunt; it also offers the warrior song of Lady Mu, an avatar of Kingston's legendary swordswoman Fa Mu Lan. While *The Woman Warrior* is generally understood as a work that



challenges and redefines boundaries of culture, gender, and genre by transgressing them, it also appropriates and extends an Asian complex of traditions....

In China, self is largely a function of one's social identity (shaped by the Confucian values of duty, filial obligation, and piety). Confucianism, Taoism (China's indigenous religion), and Buddhism share the central belief that 'self-cultivation involves the development of selflessness, and therein lies the perfection of the self.' The individualistic self and its desires and attachments are distortions ('ghosts') to be transcended. Kingston struggles with this ancient philosophical tradition, which includes belief in the overriding duty to family and in the inferiority of women. [There are] three qualities of the Chinese communal self: divisibility, simultaneity, and dream reality. Mind and spirit can separate; the spirit can travel, as in the case of Fa Mu Lan. From this follows simultaneous existence as spiritual and material being. Dream reality involves the notion that fantasies or dreams are meaningful in waking life....

Traditionally, as *The Woman Warrior* shows, girls were not allowed in schools. For a woman to become a writer was to break the interdiction against education for women... Still, the image of warrior woman and poet is ancient in China... The concluding chapter in *The Woman Warrior*, 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' about Ts'ai Yen, is distinctly heroic as told by Kingston. It is important for students to know (though Kingston does not mention it) that Ts'ai Yen was the first great women poet of China. The conciseness of Chinese ideographs also affects Kingston's style.... Kingston transforms ideographs into vivid landscapes evoking inspiration, nobility, passion, and enlightenment. In the journey to the mystical mountain in the 'White Tigers' chapter, the al comes from a bird that 'looks like the ideograph for 'human,' two black wings. The bird would cross the sun and life into the mountains (which look like the ideograph 'mountain'), there parting the mist....

The correspondence of reality and ideograph, sign and thing, is central to the Taoist belief in nature as pattern and ultimate reality. In the magical mountain realm, Fa Mu Lan learns the harmony of nature and the oneness of inner and outer. Kingston refers to the story as braided, but the braids of the story are to be understood as natural and, as it were, Taoist. The description of the hut's floor illustrates this harmony.... Each chapter displays the Asian inheritance at work. The first chapter, 'No Name Woman,' foregrounds the low status of women in China.... The concept of the divisible spirit self underlies a subplot that begins with 'No Name Woman' and thickens near the end of the second chapter, 'White Tigers,' when a medium tells the narrator that a girl who died in a far country follows her wherever she goes. 'This spirit can help me if I acknowledge her,' the narrator is told. The book is, on one level about the way the narrator finds the power to acknowledge the No Name Aunt by reconstructing a composite female self from the lives of other women, chapter by chapter, the end finally expressing Kingston's new identity and simultaneously redeeming her aunt.

In 'White Tigers' the narrator's 'divisible' Chinese self, or imaginative spirit, lives Fa Mu Lan's vivid adventures. For women in legend there were only two alternatives: to be 'wives or slaves' or 'heroines, swordswomen.' The No Name Aunt had been a wife and a slave; to avenge her, a swordswoman is needed. In Chinese opera, which is mentioned throughout Kingston's book, the pure, beautiful, invincible swordswoman is a favorite heroine, inhabiting a world of artistic language, song, dance, acrobatics, costume, and mystical, mountainous painted landscape. The traditional Chinese symbols crowding the dreamlike adventure narrative function simultaneously as heroic and ironic signs.

The knowledgeable Asian reader smiles at the cartoonlike symbolic overkill; the naïve Western reader is impressed with the exotic symbolism. The cranes that lead the swordswoman symbolize longevity; the white of the tigers is the color associated with death and funerals; tigers symbolize yin and evil spirits who could harm the dead such as the No Name Aunt; tigers are traditionally depicted on tombs and tombstones in China. The white tigers protect the No Name Aunt within the landscape of the book. The first chapter is a marked grave: entrance to it, via understanding, is effected only by passing by the white tigers as one reads the book. The 'White Tigers' chapter draws heavily on themes from popular culture and folklore, especially for Fa Mu Lan's mystical Taoist training and swordswomanship....

There are several points to stress in this context. (1) The numerous versions of talk-story in *The Woman Warrior* partly derive from the many versions of the oral histories and legends. (2) The existence of many

versions, some diametrically opposed, allowed Kingston aesthetic and psychological freedom. Like the ancient Greek playwrights or storytellers from oral societies generally, she was empowered by the existence of a rich and varied legendary past. (3) Because she could rely on knowledge in at least some of her readers, her choice of versions and her presentation of them were meaningful....

One East Asian reader familiar with Buddhism would certainly grasp the significance of the rabbit in 'White Tigers.' In a famous anecdote, the Buddha is hungry in the wilderness. All the forest animals bring him food offerings except for the selfless rabbit, who leaps into a fire to sacrifice himself. From this the Buddha teaches that he who forgets himself shall reach enlightenment. In *The Woman Warrior* a rabbit similarly leaps into the fire to provide food for Fa Mu Lan. The episode shows that she has reached the state of Buddha-hood, or enlightenment, after her many years of spiritual training. Immediately after she eats the rabbit, she sees an epiphany in which the cosmos reveals itself as two golden people 'dancing the earth's dances.'

This image of yin and yang united as female and male dancers is pan-Asian... The unity of seeming dualism is the essence of the vision that sustains Fa Mu Lan. It informs Kingston's novel, as well, which delineates differences of gender, genre, and culture, but ultimately transcends them through aesthetic design (Kingston's image of the braid is a spatial analogue of this cosmic dance). Only after this vision is Fa Mu Lan ready for her final 'dragon' lessons, in which she learns to make enlightenment a permanent quality of mind: 'I learned to make my mind large...so that there is room for paradoxes.' Enlightenment involves widening the field to accommodate contradictory cultural and gender codes. Enacting the dragon of the Tao, Fa Mu Lan rights the imbalance of all the oppressed. Singing between battles, she leads her army straight to the capital city, led by 'Kuan Kung, the god of war and literature.' In a sense, each chapter is one of her songs.

The third chapter, 'Shaman,' stresses the mother's heroism, scholarship (in the long, detailed description of the mother's diploma), and power as a role model. The scholarly mother bests 'hairy beasts whether flesh or ghost because she could eat them.' 'Big eaters win,' the narrator explains, citing famous ancient ghost-eating scholars. The mother learned modern medicine in the ancient Chinese way, by rote-chanting memorization and her memory is the source of much of *The Woman Warrior*. Yet this fearless woman, one of only 37 graduates out of an entering class of 112, feels inadequate because she cannot remember as well as her husband, who, trained in classical literature, could recite whole poems. Memory itself was a male preserve that Kingston's warrior woman appropriates, with words from the past—names and injustices—carved on her back.

The warrior woman may be seen as the immortal spirit of literature—upright, carved like a stele with words, inarguable, historic, and victorious. History is a war in which truth, the past, must always be recreated, lest it vanish into evil, shape-shifting, ghostlike fragments. Only a big eater, like the mother and the narrator, can survive in this war. To do so they must be able 'to eat bitter' (a Chinese phrase meaning to be disciplined and able to withstand hardship). The scholar-midwife mother can face the 'were-people, the apes' that dropped out of trees, rose 'out of bridge water,' or came 'out of cervixes.' Kingston's persona must gain strength from this shaman of a mother without being harmed by her—as Moon Orchid, her aunt, is harmed.

'At the Western Palace,' the fourth chapter, dramatizes the dangers the daughter faced. A cautionary sequel to 'Shaman,' it suggests the mental illness that might have awaited the narrator had she been weak-minded like Moon Orchid. Culture shock and inability to assimilate were typically manifested in the emotional disturbance so prevalent among Kingston's Chinese immigrant women. The chapter poetically recalls the myth "Goddess Chang Ascends to the Moon," told during the Mid-Autumn Harvest Festival, during which moon cakes are traditionally made (Kingston uses the round moon cakes to evoke the Chinese worldview in 'No Name Woman.') The legend of the moon goddess has inspired Chinese women writers for thousands of years; it weaves together the idea of renewal (the elixir of eternal life), the yin symbol of the moon, and the theme of a woman's eternal separation from her husband. The legend tells how Chang E lost her husband, Hou Yi, a great archer who used magical bow and arrows to save the scorched earth from drought by shooting down nine extra suns.

According to one version, the Queen Mother of the West, embodying yin, rewarded him with the pill of immortality, but Chang E ignorantly swallowed the pill and instantly became able to fly. She fled to the moon, where she still lives. Her husband lives in a palace on the sun, from which he shoots arrows at her. They are said to symbolize the two cosmic forces of moon and sun, yin and yang. The moon (foundation of calendrical time, agriculture, and human culture) was honored on the day of the festival itself with a moonrise ceremony conducted entirely by women. The festival tied rebirth (the lunar cycle) to the separated woman, who, like the carefully named Moon Orchid, merely lives a life of reflected light, dependent on her absent husband. Kingston's work intertextually links Moon Orchid with the pregnant No Name Aunt, whose fertility causes a chaotic lantern-lit attack that parodies the traditional lantern-lit Mid-Autumn Harvest Festival.

The five chapters of Kingston's book parallel the five different fruit offerings of the Mid-Autumn Festival: each chapter embodies a different woman in the Hong family, each, as it were, brought forward to make the offering of her life story and thus to exemplify phases of yin, the female principle of the moon. The author's chapter comes last, not only because she has needed the 'ancestral help' of her older female relatives in order to construct her identity, but also because in the ritual offerings to the moon around which *The Woman Warrior* seems loosely structured, the rebirth of the female identity is a culmination. The submerged ceremonial narrative structure underscores the work's profound femininity, for the book itself is an offering (like a moon cake) to woman.

Though Kingston's narrative inexorably moves from Asia to the West, it inscribes the cycle of death and rebirth within acculturation. The stages of the cycle are suggested in the naming of the chapters after phases in a cosmic drama. 'No Name Woman' dies unrecognized, therefore wronged and unavenged. 'White Tigers' recounts the stage of preparation and spiritual training. 'Shaman' depicts a ghost-fighting woman at the peak of her powers. 'At the Western Palace' suggests pilgrimage to the realm of yin (feminine) spirits. 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Flute' begins a new ritual and seasonal cycle with images of rebirth and song, for Ts'ai Yen is ransomed from the barbarians. Through her gift of poetry, she creates cross-cultural songs that speak for all women and move individuals from many different cultures. Because the book ends with the figure of Ts'ai Yen, the ceremonial cycle of the feminine is complete and a new phase is begun. This is one meaning of the narrator's statement that her mother began her story that she, the narrator is completing.

The same idea is expressed in the second chapter, when, after avenging her family and liberating the oppressed with her army, which wears the red of the New Year celebration, Fa Mu Lan initiates the new order with a calendrical reference by announcing, 'This is a New Year...the year one.' While Fa Mu Lan overthrows the corrupt emperor as the popularly acclaimed leader of a peasant uprising, Kingston's book overthrows patriarchy, installing a discourse that merges women's lives into an enlightened, inclusive text, residing in the timeless moment of the cosmic dance.

Kingston's works as a whole do justice to male and female principles. The three major festivals of the year were also used for the literal settling of accounts. These were the Spring, or Brightness, Festival (associated with the legend of the victimized White Lady), the Dragon Boat Festival of Mid-Summer (evoked in *China Men* and associated with Ch'u Yuan), and the Mid-Autumn Harvest Festival, sacred to the Moon Goddess Chang E. The ceremonial substructure of *The Woman Warrior* parallels the theme of settling accounts, in order to begin anew. Ch'u Yuan (340-278 BC), China's Homer, is the subject of the last legend in *China Men*; syntagmatically he is equivalent to Ts'ai Yen. Together they are the cosmic male and female dancers, the first man and woman of poetry, both Han patriots, victims and—through their immortal writings—avengers, progenitors of rebirth....

*The Woman Warrior* shares a profound affinity with the earliest autobiographical literature by Asian women, including *The Tale of Genji*, possibly the greatest Japanese novel. One mark of a work's distinction is its thematic density: *The Woman Warrior* not only dramatizes the finding of a woman's voice, it touches on virtually every important issue in recent Asian or Asian American women's writing. Desire for education and freedom conflicts with abiding loyalty to family... *The Woman Warrior* is an archetypal expression of the Asian response to the contemporary United States as well. Mystical, pure mountains and a remote, all-powerful father are associated with an Asian childhood and an Asian source of strength..."

“When *The Woman Warrior* was first published, it was much praised in the mainstream press as a representative and authoritative artifact—that is, as an ethnography. In contrast, a number of Asian American critics, most prominent among them the playwright and essayist Frank Chin, have taken *The Woman Warrior* to task on the grounds that it is insufficiently rooted in the historical experience of the Chinese in America; that it distorts the traditional myths and legends on which it relies; and that, as a result, it exoticizes the Chinese aspect of the Chinese American experience, thereby catering to the Orientalist prejudices of its white audience. Chin has written that *The Woman Warrior* is a ‘fake’ book, an autobiography of Christian conversion that serves the totalitarian art of a racist state. Indeed, it is safe to say that the argument over *The Woman Warrior* is the most heated debate in Asian American studies circles.... While Frank Chin may have succeeded in stripping away the liberal veneer of assimilation to reveal its Orientalist core, it is Maxine Hong Kingston who finally stands Orientalism on its head. The reconstruction of Chinese American history premised on an ‘authenticity’ in the form of an idealized heroic past simply recapitulates the male domination at the center of Orientalism....

The silence that *The Woman Warrior* confronts is a product not only of Orientalism but of the historical evolution of patriarchal capitalism in Chinese society. From the twelfth century onward, China developed a two-tier political economy to which the tension between the traditional tributary economy of the Confucian state and the emergence of a new petty capitalist mode of production based on the extended family was contained by neo-Confucian ideology.... Chinese women in the United States became pawns in the struggle between the white labor movement and capitalists over the issue of Chinese immigration. As Lucie Cheng has observed, the scarcity of women in California before the 1870s made the importation of Chinese women as willing or unwilling prostitutes a highly profitable enterprise.... Over fifty laws and ordinances aimed at Chinese and other Asian immigrants sharply limited the number of Chinese women in America until the 1960s. At the turn of the century there were only 8,217 Chinese women in the United States, compared with a population of 89,863 Chinese men. In 1940, only 12 percent of Chinese males in the United States had wives in this country....

Kingston must question the silences about Chinese women in both Chinese and in American histories. *The Woman Warrior* thus takes the form of a collective autobiography, with Kingston at once the listener and the reporter of the stories of her female relatives, actual and legendary. Kingston’s authorial ‘I’ is necessarily decentered and unstable. Instead of establishing authority over a history in which she is not the visible subject, the narrator holds open space for heretofore unheard voices. Kingston’s narrator simultaneously interrogates, resists, and appropriates the stories of her real and mythical kinfolk. The decentered ‘I’ of *The Woman Warrior* is a child who asks, ‘What is Chinese tradition and what is the moves?’ The question reminds us that a naïve narrator is fundamentally a radical, whose real or professed ignorance forces a confrontation with established authority and requires us to revise our understanding not only of the historical event but of the way it is framed. In opening itself to many voices and by subverting its own claim to authority, the autobiography relinquishes its power to paper over the contradictions of Chinese American history and instead enters into an open-ended, interrogative, or dialogic relationship to them.

Kingston begins by breaking the historical silence imposed on her father’s sister. The story of her aunt’s suicide and subsequent erasure from her family’s public history is part of the secret history that ‘[y]ou must not tell anyone’ but must be passed on by mother to daughter as a cautionary tale.... Kingston reverses the cautionary purpose of the tale to explore the possibilities of resistance. In the mid-nineteenth century, tens of thousands of women from all over China joined the Taiping rebellion, with its militarized gender egalitarianism; in the later part of the century, thousands of women in the Canton delta resisted marriage by delaying for years taking up residence in their husband’s households, by buying substitutes for marriage, or by joining sworn spinsterhoods and convents. Perhaps her aunt resisted her marriage in this smaller, personal way....

Fa Mu Lan is a legendary relative; her given name, Mu Lan, may be translated as Magnolia, or more literally Wood Orchid. With Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, and her aunt, Moon Orchid, she shares the generational name of the women of the narrator's family. However, before Fa Mu Lan can be a source of ancestral help, Kingston must radically revise her story. The written version of the original folk poem celebrates the filial daughter who marches off to war in her father's stead. In her own woman warrior legend, Kingston's swordswoman borrows elements from a number of popular heroic characters including Li Nojia, the boy warrior armed with Taoist magical bangles, and Ts'ai Yen (Cai Yan in pinyin), whose story of exile ends in her return to a desolated home village.

Kingston's woman warrior is not in service to the emperor for her father's sake. Her mission is her own. She takes revenge against an evil baron for having drafted her brother into his army and for having stolen her childhood. In the final confrontation with the baron, Kingston's swordswoman loses her Taoist amulets but instead is armed with stories of the injustices done to her family carved on her back. She achieves victory over the baron only in that moment in which he is startled to discover that she is both a woman and the bearer of history.... The legend of Fa Mu Lan, even revised, provides little support for the voice Kingston needs in her battle against racism. Because its original text is so rooted in Confucian patriarchy, in order to draw strength from it at all, Kingston must first 'get out of hating range' of her family before she can rework the story into her own weapon. The secret weapon of Kingston's swordswoman is not Taoist magic but personal history. Unable to dismantle the system of oppression, her revenge is confined to reporting. History itself becomes the medium of resistance; writing is an act of war and revenge....

Kingston envisions her mother as a shaman whose strategy for dealing with oppressors is to turn them into ghosts. Brave Orchid derives charismatic power from her ability to tell stories, to manipulate language, legend, and history. She tells her schoolmates that ghosts are nightmares or, at the very least, 'an entirely different species of creature.' Taking up a struggle against a ghost in medical school, where she is otherwise immersed in Western science, is an act of resistance to the hegemonic discourse of Europeanization. Her struggle with the ghost in medical school prefigures the struggle with ghosts in America. In the United States the ghost is the commanding metaphor for white people—Japanese, Filipino, Mexican ghosts also appear but '[s]ometimes ghosts put on such mundane disguises, they aren't particularly interesting.' It is the White Ghost whose presence is most constantly and oppressively felt. Ghosts are reduced to their immediate function—the Mail Ghost, the Newspaper Ghosts, the Teacher Ghost, all without memory or culture. Unlike Chinese ghosts, however, White Ghosts cannot be defeated by resorting to tradition or reason. 'This is terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away.... I didn't need muscles in China,' says Brave Orchid, who can now 'carry a hundred pounds of Texas rice up and downstairs.' In order to 'assert brute survival' in America, you need muscles.

In America, Chinese can become ghosts too, silenced people bereft of history and culture. The story of Brave Orchid's sister, Moon Orchid, is the experience of a God Mountain 'widow,' one of the thousands of women left behind in emigrant villages in Guangdong. After three decades of separation, Moon Orchid arrives in America to claim her new life. Moon Orchid's husband, succumbing to the lure of assimilation, has adjusted to life in the United States and accommodated to racism. Indeed, he recognizes that his success as a professional depends on his ability to efface his own identity as an immigrant Chinese. Moon Orchid's arrival threatens that success.

In a scene that recapitulates a thousand Angel Island interrogations, Moon Orchid's husband takes the part of the hostile immigration official: 'He looked directly at Moon Orchid the way the savages looked, looking for lies. "What do you want?" he asked. She shrank from his stare; it silenced her crying.' Moon Orchid, her voice stifled by her husband's American gaze, recognizes that the system of racial oppression is not confined within America's borders but reaches out to incorporate the emigrant communities of south China. Neither she nor her husband has been sheltered from its harm."

Robert G. Lee

*"The Woman Warrior as an Intervention in Asian American Historiography"*  
*Approaches* (1991) 52, 56-62

“[Postmodernist] tendencies, when embodied in literature, form a cluster of what [Ihab] Hassan calls ‘indeterminacies’—that is, expressions of openness, pluralism, marginality, difference, discontinuity, incoherence, fragmentation, absence, skepticism, irony, playfulness, ambiguity, chance, popular culture, heterogeneity, circularity, and ‘polymorphous’ diffusion, in contrast to their opposites (closed systems, single authority, centeredness, sameness, continuity, coherence, wholeness, presence, certainty, sincerity, seriousness, design, high culture, hierarchy, and ‘phallic’ linearity). This dichotomy, by no means exhaustive or universal, helps to differentiate the likes of Maxine Hong Kingston, John Barth, John Fowles, E. L. Doctorow, and Thomas Pynchon from their Modernist predecessors (for example, Katherine Anne Porter and Ernest Hemingway) as well as from their contemporaries more solidly anchored in the canon stretching from Modernism back to Romanticism....

[*The Woman Warrior*]...is marked by a decentering of the author as protagonist and by the mediating effects of framing narratives, it is informed by an aesthetics of artifice and ambiguity, and, ultimately, it presents an exemplum of possibility. Consider Kingston’s use of tales, ballads, legends, and maternal talk-story as framing mechanisms for the author’s personal narrative. Kingston tells her story through the stories of others—mother, aunts, mythical women from Chinese poetry and legend. These stories bear a relationship to the writer as a girl and as young woman in that they incarnate various negative and positive possibilities leading either to mental illness and/or suicide, or to more felicitous forms of self-expression....

The first, a cautionary tale told by her mother when Kingston began to menstruate, concerns No Name Woman, an aunt in China who killed herself and her illegitimate baby following humiliation at the hands of the villagers. The story of the nameless aunt gives voice to the author’s most deep-rooted fears: cruelty and injustice inflicted on women, terror in the face of pregnancy and childbirth, especially out of wedlock; the intermingling of birth, death, and potential madness. The aunt whose name cannot even be pronounced because of the shame she has brought to the family becomes a negative role model in her niece’s sense of identity. Yet she cannot simply be abandoned; Kingston assumes responsibility for restoring her aunt’s memory, for giving her symbolically the decent line she will never have.

The story of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan, a legendary character in Chinese literature, provides an alternative image for self-definition. In the original ballad, Fa Mu Lan goes off to fight for the emperor as a replacement for her father; then she returns home to take up the domestic life of a pious daughter. Kingston turns this daughterly figure into a modern, militant heroine—a strong and dangerous swordswoman, a visionary sensitive to ecological concerns, an athlete unaffected by her menstrual days, a feminist wife and mother, a female avenger, the fierce enemy of sexism, racism, and all other forms of injustice. Though Kingston’s heroine shares with her literary ancestor the act of replacing the father as conscript during ten years of battle, she is essentially the creation of a twentieth-century Chinese American woman’s imagination, a wish-fulfillment fantasy designed to counter the image of the victimized aunt.

The chant of Fa Mu Lan that the narrator had sung with her mother, the book pictures and movie images of dangerous Chinese swordswomen she had seen as a child, fuse into a personal scenario, with herself in the leading role. Narrative begetting narrative, lived experience subsuming myth and subsequently becoming myth in its own right, folktales transformed into the personal fictions of childhood, refashioned to adulthood and subsequently subject to the judgment of an authorial ‘I’—these techniques lead to the confusion felt by many of Kingston’s readers. How are we to understand the juxtaposition of different time frames, linguistic modes, and story lines? Do the stories interpenetrate and affect one another? Traditional autobiography does not pose such problems. Typically it offers a one-plane, chronological account of the author’s life history, commencing with birth and ending in middle or old age; the story line follows the evolution of the author-narrator-protagonist as the central character in search of him- or herself.

The reader looking for Kingston in her memoirs will encounter her at first only indirectly, through the framing mechanism of the tale within the tale, each bearing a psychological relationship to the narrator that becomes apparent only in the context of the entire work. The initial chapters produce a sense of disquieting distance, because the author has ‘decentered’ herself and substituted in her place contradictory alter egos. Moreover, their stories are further removed by the overarching presence of Kingston’s mother, who relayed them to her daughter in the first place. Various intermediary levels are thus established between the authorial self and her textual incarnations, unlike traditional autobiography, in which the author of the text

is squarely the protagonist in the text. Kingston has to be found obliquely, in the interstices, in relation to the female figures that people her work....

Most central and most pervasive is the figure of the author's mother, clearly the source of the daughter's contradictory self-images. Mother is the link between Chinese and American culture, the transmitter of myth, the storyteller, the shuttle between dream and reality. 'Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began.' From her tales of a prewar China, Mother assumes in her daughter's mind the larger-than-life dimensions of a shrewd and dignified doctor whose patients all get well. But how is the daughter to merge that vision with the reality of her mother as laundry worker in Stockton, California? And how can she combine her mother's stories and proverbs conveying female worthlessness? ('Better to raise geese than girls') with the legends of female courage and the 'great power' she perceives in her 'mother talking-story'?

Following the pivotal third chapter, devoted to her mother, *Brave Orchid*, Kingston turns to the story of her maternal aunt Moon Orchid, the delicate sister who comes to visit from Hong Kong. Unlike *Brave Orchid*, the tough and fearless, Moon Orchid is a complete misfit in America, ineffectual even in her attempts to communicate with her nieces and nephews or to fold towels in the family laundry. She is pushed over the border into madness by her sister's insistence that she try to recoup the wayward husband, now in Los Angeles, who had abandoned her decades earlier.

Moon Orchid's story, one of the funniest and most pathetic in the book, is also the most overtly realistic. We leave behind a mythical China and encounter a contemporary California processed through the author's eyes and imagination. Although the story is still that of another—Moon Orchid—the narrator seems closer to us because she is no longer distanced by time, space, and a frame tale. The characters in this chapter seem to correspond to Kingston's living kin, flesh-and-blood people we might encounter in the streets of Stockton or Los Angeles. Yet elsewhere the narrative warns us that characters in a text are never the duplication of living persons: they partake of the freedom to change and be changed that is fundamental to storytelling....

The last chapter, 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' brings us back to the ambiguous overlap between art and life. The captive poet Ts'ai Yen, singing of China to her barbarian captors, offers Kingston a consummate model of self-realization. Like her revered ancestor, she too will translate an alien culture to the 'barbarians' (Americans) and thereby transcend the obstacles of language, sex, and station. The final narrative strategy is nothing less than brilliant. 'Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk-story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine.' Kingston collapses the mother's oral tradition, the poetry of Ts'ai Yen, and her own written craft. Once again the reader is reminded that this representation of reality is structured by the language and forms it invokes. As Gaggi puts it, postmodernism is 'art that openly declares its artifice'....

*The Woman Warrior* plays with time segments, juxtaposing age-old tales with twentieth-century experiences and producing the scattered effect of arbitrary diffusion. Some critics have singled out the diffuse, disjunctive, fragmentary nature of women's autobiography as its predominant stylistic mode. I disagree with this position, for in the history of women's autobiography one finds linear, hierarchical, 'phallic' writing, as well as diffuse, discontinuous, 'polymorphous' texts, and sometimes both styles in one. The disjunctive effect of *The Woman Warrior* is, to my mind, less a result of Kingston's gender than of a postmodern aesthetics that foregrounds its stylistic devices and makes them an integral part of the work's contents....

Kingston's skepticism regarding the value of fixed endings and final truths, her delight in ironic twists and unforeseen peripeteia, are expressions of a distinctively postmodern sensibility.... To claim America as her own requires the courage and cunning of *Brave Orchid*, recast as literary iconoclast. There is a blow against chronological time and the illusion of causality! There is a thrust against the dual pretense of objectivity and universality! There is a parry to deflate the lofty seriousness of high culture and its clichéd fabrications! There is a lunge against masculine hegemony! Much that disturbs, disorders, and debunks finds its way into Kingston's art."

Marilyn Yalom

“Kingston credits the final story to her mother: ‘The beginning is hers, the ending, mine.’ Indeed, her eloquent conquering of silence to tell her story both renounces and uses her mother’s storytelling and claims both the continuity and the discontinuity of her story with her mother’s. In the course of the book, the figure of her mother changes. As the daughter abandons her fantasy that her mother is a godlike perfect listener who will keep her from existential aloneness, the mother modulates from a heroic fighter of ghosts and a doctor in China to a life-size, cranky old woman whom the narrator loves when she’s out of hating distance. Giving up this fantasy of her mother lets Kingston acknowledge[n]o listener but myself.’ That recognition enables her to speak.

The multiplicity of Kingston’s narrative (multiple central characters, points of view, levels of reality) frames her story as a complex, compassionate, intelligent, and innovative autobiography. In her work, the self-voice is both displaced and enlarged through the telling of others’ stories (biographical, legendary, mythic). Kingston’s story is all the more powerful for its indirectness. She frames her sadness and anger and the complexity of her struggle from silence to eloquent speech with an acknowledgment of beauty, strengths, and success—her own and those of others. The story she tells is finally both highly individual and broadly cultural, personal and general, unique and shared.

*The Woman Warrior* demonstrates the strengths of multiplicity as a narrative stance. A difficult story of cultural displacement and immigrant socialization, which could easily have been a tale of mother blaming, instead becomes in Kingston’s hands a re-creation of Chinese and Chinese American culture, of both the mother’s and the daughter’s realities, and of the complex expectations and interactions between the two—from both points of view. Kingston lets us know her pain as well as her triumph but not by blaming her mother. The complexity of experience that emerges from the multiple points of view is one of Kingston’s human triumphs. Her literary triumph is the invention of a narrative style that incorporates many truth dimensions and individual points of view. She makes exemplary use of fantasy, giving it credence as an important reality but not confusing reality with fantasy. She represents fantasy as fantasy even as it widens our definition of reality. The distinction is particularly unusual in portraits of mothers, where an almost universal confusion of fantasy with reality pervades.”

Joan Lidoff  
“Autobiography in a Different Voice: *The Women Warrior* and the Question of Genre”  
*Approaches* (1991) 120

“Few writers have voiced female aspirations more forcefully than Maxine Hong Kingston. In *The Woman Warrior* she deftly displays the magnitude of Chinese culture as well as her own unmistakable ambivalence toward it. She chronicles her sometimes painful flight from her patriarchal culture, her reluctant but inexorable reconciliation with much of her past, and the course of her inner journey of self-discovery.... In my courses Ethnic America and Learning History through Immigrant and Ethnic literature, I have been captivated by the common themes running through the literature of female ethnic writers, particularly the assertion of personal independence accompanied by eventual cultural conciliation. In the writings of many female writers there appears a Declaration of Independence scene....

No Name Woman betrayed her trust. To make herself enticing, different from other married women, she ‘often worked at herself in the mirror’ and ‘combed individuality into her bob.’ Years after the departure of her day-long husband, she became pregnant, and her husband’s family exiled her in disgrace to her family’s home. The villagers raided her home, destroying the family’s belongings to chastise her for ‘acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them.’ The morning after giving birth to her child in the pigsty, she walked to the well and drowned herself and her child, ‘probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boy’....

In fifty-five magic pages, she tells the story of Brave Orchid’s reunion with her sister, Moon Orchid, just arrived from China after a separation of thirty years. Subsequently, Moon Orchid is unable to endure the transplantation to the United States. Her mental health deteriorates until she spends her final months confined to an institution. The distance from one world to another, from one page to another, from one



culture to another is too foreboding for her nonmigratory soul. The chapter is a funny, tragic tour de force of the unsuspected and unbridgeable immensities between East and West. It also reveals the magnetism of culture, both to those unconsciously caught in its force, like Moon Orchid, and to those, like Kingston, who are attempting to break free of it....

Women ethnic writers like Kingston...(one might also consult Zora Neale Hurston's poetic *Their Eyes Are Watching God*) capture both macro- and micro-historical truths about the female experience. They provide insight into their culture and into their ambiguous relationship with the roles and limitations it imposes on them. But one's heritage is not easily transcended, and the attempt often produces guilt and uneasiness. To my knowledge, no historian of women in the United States or of immigration examines these ambiguous topics with nearly the richness and complexity of the novelists and memoirists. The demands of historical documentation deny access to the minds of those who have lived the ethnic experience....

The environment of the United States boldly invites exploration and self-discovery by breaking down ethnic customs and by encouraging confrontation with traditional authority. America's bewitching promise of the right to pursue personal happiness and its sustained faith in individualism beckon all immigrants, male and female alike, to discover, even to create, their own personalities."

Paul W. McBride  
"The Woman Warrior in the History Classroom"  
*Approaches* (1991) 96, 98-100

"The theme of *The Woman Warrior* concerns the pursuit of identity as woman, as writer, as Asian American. It is in portraying her protagonist's search for self that Kingston uses a recurrent motif—that of the West—which synthesizes, in a unique manner, disparate Asian and American cultural resonances. In American mythic imagination, the West stands for the virgin land of opportunity, the frontier of freedom and adventure where Horace Greeley beckons and where the Jims and Huckleberry Finns of every generation light out for the territory ahead. In the popular Chinese mythic imagination, the Chinese equivalent of the West is a Western Paradise in the direction of Central Asia and India....

At the beginning of *The Woman Warrior*, the West that makes its presence felt is the American West, ambiguously portrayed in the book's opening episode, whose subject is Kingston's aunt in China. In their Chinese village, the American West (California) is also perceived as the mythical territory for opportunity. No Name Woman's husband leaves China to seek his fortune on the 'Gold Mountain,' the Chinese colloquial term for America. But when the China man lights out for the land of opportunity, his family is left behind. In her husband's absence, No Name Woman falls prey to a seducer, bears an illegitimate child, becomes alienated from family, society, and nature, and drowns the infant and herself in the family well in defiant despair. 'But the rare urge west had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space.' The westering urge has helped reduce this woman to a nonentity in the family annals.

The West also figures subtly in the book's second episode, 'White Tigers,' which re-creates the mythic life of the eponymous woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan, the Chinese Joan of Arc figure, who contrasts in identity with the anonymous No Name Woman. The 'White Tiger' is one of four mythic beasts symbolizing geomantic power, each one dominating a quadrant of the Chinese compass and representing an element. As with most myths, there are varying accounts of these beasts. One identifies all the beasts as tigers, albeit of different colors—red, black, blue, and white. In another account, the beasts are different animals of different colors—namely, the vermilion phoenix, the black turtle, the azure dragon, and the white tiger; a one-sentence allusion to this in *China Men* indicates that Kingston is familiar with the latter version. In both versions, the White Tiger, of Kingston's chapter, reigns in the West and over metals—a useful element for warriors, women or men—and is also a likely protector of gold prospectors in the Sierras. It is in this mythic, mountainous region that Fa Mu Lan spends fourteen years, training to assume her role as liberator—warrior and realizing her archetypal identity.

Both Fa Mu Lan and No Name Woman are models of identity constructed by Kingston's protagonist from hearsay and legend, from figures envisioned from a distance. The next two episodes of the book, 'Shaman' and 'At the Western Palace,' contrast two role models from real life, Kingston's strong-willed

mother (Brave Orchid) and irresolute aunt (Moon Orchid). On both of them the American West exerts a decisive influence. Both women came to California in search of their husbands, who had been lured Westward by the dream of success and prosperity. These women's search is also a quest for identity as wife and matriarch.

In 'Shaman' the strong Brave Orchid gains mythic stature by becoming a figurative shaman, a human with more than ordinary powers of communication with the supernatural and the dead. First she overcomes her sorrow at the death of her two children, an experience that, for a woman, is often the initial step in becoming a shaman. Moreover, Brave Orchid exorcises ghosts by smoking them out with burning alcohol and oil, a customary shamanistic ritual. Kingston combines these Chinese mythic powers with those Brave Orchid gains by attending a Western-run school of midwifery, which, in turn, confers on her the power to assist at births or infanticides. Consistent with these powers, Brave Orchid traverses oceans to claim her neglectful husband in America and succeeds in rebuilding her family, bearing six children after the age of forty-five.

Brave Orchid's weaker sister, Moon Orchid, suffers a different outcome in confronting her husband. He is living a version of the American dream as a wealthy neurosurgeon, bigamously married to a new American wife. The confrontation of Moon Orchid and her husband, in the chapter 'At the Western Palace,' occurs in Los Angeles, the westernmost American metropolis. In the shadow of the high-rise glass and plastic palace of her husband's clinic, an epitome of Western high tech, Moon Orchid's struggle echoes the legendary yin-yank conflict for influence over the Chinese Emperor that the Empress of the East (here Moon Orchid) must wage against the Empress of the West (the American wife). In this struggle, Moon Orchid is defeated, loses her husband, her family identity, and, eventually, her mind. (It is ironic that a neurosurgeon's wife dies in a lunatic asylum.) In this episode, then, Kingston has synthesized a Chinese folk legend involving the West with the Horace Greeleyesque dream of the American West, and has elevated the drama and irony of an immigrant woman's search for family and identity to an archetypal plane.

The final episode of the book, 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' focuses on Kingston's growth into assertive, creative Asian American womanhood in California. In doing so, Kingston draws parallels between her life and the legendary experience of one of China's earliest women poets, Ts'ai Yen. Ts'ai Yen was kidnapped by the Hsiung-nu (or Hun) marauders, regarded as barbarians by the Chinese. She is taken to Hsiung-nu territory west of China, where she is forced to marry and bear children to a Hun chieftain. After many years she is ransomed back to China, perforce leaving her Hun children, in order to start a Chinese family. Her powerful poems tell how she must synthesize the experience of family, love, and parting in the West beyond China to her similar experiences in China. In the same fashion, Kingston must relate the myths and experience of her youth in the American West to those of her family and ancestors in East Asia. By using both the Chinese and the American West as a recurrent motif, Kingston has integrated these elements into a mythic frontier of experience, at once Asian and American, a frontier where new identities must be sought and may be destroyed or remade.

Kingston's mythopoeic quality is perceptible not only in her use of motif but also in the texture of her narrative. To illustrate this, we may return to the chapter 'White Tigers.' Here, the narrator imaginatively relives the career of Fa Mu Lan. Kingston opens the chapter by situating us firmly in a prosaic mise-en-scene in a Chinatown home in Stockton, California, with her mother telling a tale. As the girl's imagination awakens, we move subtly into a world in which art and imagination fuse into eternal and archetypal reality. Kingston's protagonist projects herself into the life of a seven-year-old girl of the Six Dynasties Period of China, by a meditative technique like the Christian 'Composition of Place' of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. She thus walks into an inkwash painting with black-winged birds, a river winding between misty mountains, and rocks of charcoal rubbings. In this world, Kingston is Fa Mu Lan, and the legend becomes life.

But this Asian legend is interpenetrated by a common Western experience. Fa Mu Lan's education into heroism starts at age seven (about the age at which many Americans enter grade school) and ends at age twenty-two (when many Americans graduate from college). We notice, too, that Fa Mu Lan is educated in a wilderness, reminiscent of the wilderness in which Jesus, a second Adam, engages in his first combat with the devil, thereby establishing his identity and regaining Paradise for humanity. Indeed, through Fa

Mu Lan's education, Kingston seems to place her heroine's power in the ability to see humanity as a unity, to experience humanity and nature as a whole, and to attain a mythopoeic imagination enabling her to *feel* ecologically the phenomena of the universe, not merely to measure them.

To begin with, the old couple who oversee Fa Mu Lan's education live in a home that metaphorizes the ecological union of humanity and nature. There, indoors is like outdoors: for a carpet, '[p]ine needles covered the floor in thick patterns.' Their dining table is a 'rock [which] grew in the middle of the house.... The benches were fallen trees'; instead of wallpaper, this earth household has '[f]erns and shade flowers [growing] out of one wall, the mountainside itself.' (Indeed, Kingston's imagery reminds us that our word *ecology* derives from the Greek *oikos* 'house.') Fa Mu Lan, whose name means Magnolia Flower, learns to blend into nature, maintaining a Taoist 'quiet...rooted to the earth.'

Attaining fourteen and puberty, she takes an initiation test in a 'dead land' resembling the medieval Grail Knight's wasteland. She journeys to a wooded region where the tree 'branches *cross* out everything' (emphasis mine). While watching these crossing branches, she attains a vision of existence as an alchemic cosmic dance—'Chinese lion dancers, African lion dancers... Hindu Indian, American Indian.' This universal dance, suggesting the destroying and creating dance of the Hindu Siva or the agony of the dying and resurrecting Christ, also recalls the Taoist rhythm of yin-yang, female-male, dark-light: 'one of the dancers is always Christ, also recalls the Taoist rhythm of yin-yang, female-male, dark-light: 'one of the dancers is always a man and the other a woman'; 'working and hoeing are dancing...killing and falling are dancing too.'

Another eight years complete Fa Mu Lan's education. She learns 'dragon ways' by which she metaphorizes the universe, seeing dragons in mountains, 'in quarries...the dragon's veins and muscles; the minerals, its teeth and bones.' This cosmogenic visualizing is a mythopoesis and, no less so than a cognitive science, a way of grasping nature and the universe, enabling Fa Mu Lan to use imagination rather than empirical reason to understand the world in its spiritual dimensions.

This, then, is Kingston's portrayal of the *enfance* of her woman warrior Fa Mu Lan, who joins imaginative identity with Kingston's protagonist and shares psychological kinship with Kingston the woman writer. It is a portrayal uniquely Asian and Western; it compounds Asian *and* Western archetypes that fuse mythopoeically into a union of the varieties of human experience, and it leads to a view of humanity and nature as a whole. We see, then, that a distinctive feature of Kingston's method of composition in *The Woman Warrior* is a mythopoeic synthesis of Asian and American cultures, producing a unique identity and imagination that throws an Asian slant of light on American realities."

Cheng Lok Chua  
"Mythopoesis East and West in *The Woman Warrior*"  
*Approaches* (1991) 146-50

"The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* admits, in the last chapter, to being an 'outlaw knot-maker,' twisting common material into singular designs and favoring intricate patterns that would leave the make blind. This admission usually draws unanimous agreement from students, many of whom remain baffled by the narrator's larger designs. They have little trouble appreciating individual talk-stories, but falter when trying to relate them conceptually....

Behind the child's observation that all whites are indistinguishable lurks a to-familiar question: Whose perspective determined that 'all Asians look alike'? The narrator further undermines the notion of racial hegemony by observing that 'black' is 'more distinct' than 'white.' We can recall that Kingston's blackened kindergarten paintings were misinterpreted by the teachers who were blind to the child's fertile imagination. Nor is the narrator replacing one color hierarchy with another, for in the chapter 'White Tigers,' white also designates, like the black of Kingston's paintings, the power of imagination. In fact, the scenes of 'White Tigers' are flooded with color, like the Cantonese operas the young narrator imagines behind the 'black curtains' of her paintings. In short, the passage about ghosts not only constitutes 'ghost' specifically as 'white people' but builds on color symbolism to introduce inverse concepts of cultural invisibility (color blindness) and multicultural perspectives. The paragraph introduces the fact that 'ghost' is a multiple signifier representing both concrete phenomena and abstractions....

Identified by a phrase whose meaning is inaccessible to her, enraged by the subjugation and denigration of women in Chinese culture, the narrator comes to identify with her nameless, outcast kinswoman. She tries relocating to the 'ghost-free' world of white America... The narrator has liberated herself into a sterile world. A central paradox of *The Woman Warrior* is that the very 'ghosts' that drive the narrator from home bring her back, for she realizes that banishing them all means banishing all poetry and magic too, including the legend of Fa Mu Lan....

From the list of 'ghosts' we can reconsider those that are obviously beneficial of benign. For instance, the narrator is refreshed by ghost stories and feels affection for the lingering spirits of Chinese bachelor laborers. Most important, the ghost of No Name Woman has given the narrator 'ancestral help' to become a word warrior: 'My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes' ('origami' is actually a Japanese word for the art of folding squares of paper into various objects). Here the narrator equates her writing about the suicide aunt, on the surface a subversive, unfilial act, with the traditional filial act of burning paper symbols in memory of the dead. To understand this analogy, we can turn to the conclusion of the episode of Fa Mu Lan, where we are told that the woman warrior's exploits compose a legend about [her] perfect filiality.' Here, 'filiality' is redefined by the narrator so that she can claim Chinese American identity while repudiating antifemale teachings and practices rooted in Chinese Confucian tradition and rehearsed in her own house. The narrator is able to incorporate feminism into a new definition of 'filiality' by recognizing a link between Fa Mu Lan and Brave Orchid as lessons in paradox.

The narrator interprets the culmination of Fa Mu Lan's training as 'learn[ing] to make [her] mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.' The specific paradox that Fa Mu Lan's disguise as a male warrior encodes is that Chinese women are potentially and actually powerful regardless of what Chinese culture teaches. Of course, the narrator is quick to admit that she cannot storm across America or China like a modern-day incarnation of Fa Mu Lan to recover her parents' stolen property. She must adapt Fa Mu Lan's behavior to her particular situation, and she discovers how to do so through the example of her mother. Student, midwife, healer, wife, mother, laundry worker, farm laborer, and indefatigable immigrant, Brave Orchid is nothing if not a contradiction of her own pronouncements on the unworthiness of females. The eternally compelling paradox embodied by Fa Mu Lan—that a fearless transgressor can also be a daughter, can rebel, and repudiate yet return home—is validated by the contrast between what Brave Orchid says about women and what she actually accomplishes.

Brave Orchid's and Fa Mu Lan's contradictory lives enable a crucial adjustment to the 'ghost' metaphor, one that connects 'ghost' with 'woman warrior.' Namely, 'ghosthood' can be a self-imposed, willingly embraced, rewarding experience of alienation. In this revision, 'ghosthood' still means loss of identity through separation from one's primary social unit (e.g., family), but such loss yields a renewed sense of affiliation and identity. Fa Mu Lan, who furnished the paradigm, becomes a 'ghost' when separated from her family to undergo rigorous training. The first phase develops her ability to survive human isolation and concludes with a visionary experience of complete 'ghosthood,' or loss of human identity. The second phase, which trains the mind to entertain paradoxes, can also be considered a supreme lesson in 'ghosthood' if we interpret paradox broadly as the absence of single, stable meaning. This combined 'tiger' and 'dragon' training then culminates in feats summarized by the narrator as 'perfect filiality' opens the way for the narrator to emulate the woman warrior. The lesson she seems to extract from the tale is that self-imposed exile from normal human association—the deliberate adoption of 'ghosthood'—empowers the self to return from exile with a greater capacity for life and knowledge of human connectedness.

Again, Brave Orchid's particular 'imitation' of Fa Mu Lan converts this revised version of self-imposed 'ghosthood' from theory into practice. Brave Orchid's battle with Sitting Ghost teaches the narrator how to risk being haunted or temporarily isolated. According to the narrator's imaginative recreation of this episode, Brave Orchid has begun to feel the pressure of aging and long separation from her husband. She fears that the death of their children in China might undermine his commitment to return or send for her. She risks encountering a 'ghost' as means of controlling these fears of failure and abandonment, and, as if to embody her psychological burdens, Sitting Ghost's weapon is suffocating, paralyzing weight. But Brave Orchid wins through sheer determination, expressed through a steady stream of words. She talks Sitting

Ghost out of existence, then celebrates her reconnectedness to the world by narrating the event and by letting classmates chant her safely back home.

Following Brave Orchid's example, the narrator confronts her own ghost adversary—the spirit of No Name Woman. The narrator, too, fights through words by 'unghosting' or telling about the suicide aunt. But by valorizing the aunt's life of 'extravagance' and writing her back into family history, the narrator asserts her own right to extravagance (living the nonpractical life of a writer) and consumption of communal resources: 'I *am* worthy of eating the food.' Through 'pages of paper,' therefore, the narrator 'unghosts' both herself and the nameless aunt. It is a victory of legendary proportions in two senses. Ancestors claimed and remembered by living descendants can 'act like gods, not ghosts,' and this filial gesture of remembrance is inspired by Fa Mu Lan's legend of 'perfect filiality.' Through 'pages of paper,' in other words, the aunt's 'ghost' becomes ancestral 'god,' and the narrator redeems the status of daughters by tracing their spiritual descent from Fa Mu Lan. Through such acts, then narrator finds the terms of woman warriorhood in 'a girlhood among ghosts.'

By the end of *The Woman Warrior*, 'ghost' has developed into a capacious literary metaphor through a process reminiscent of the narrator's meditations on 'invisibility' in *Invisible Man*. In Ralph Ellison's novel, the protagonist is in the process of converting a painful education in 'invisibility' into life-generating strategies, beginning with his practical and symbolic act of stealing electricity from 'Monopolated Light & Power.' In a similar way, the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* discovers a regenerative potential in 'ghosthood' after experiencing and witnessing its negative forms of denial, death, misrepresentation, and voicelessness. When reinterpreted as self-empowering isolation, 'ghosthood' becomes the means of cultivating physical stamina, self-reliance, and mental agility (Fa Mu Lan undergoing training-in-exile), of exorcising debilitating insecurity while renewing self-confidence (Brave Orchid challenging Sitting Ghost), of reconstructing needed ties to family and tradition (the narrator invoking her aunt's ghost), and of forging kinship across cultures (No Name Woman keeping silence, like Hester Prynne, to honor 'extravagance'; Ts'ai Yen finding voice in captivity through 'barbarian' language; the spirit of Virginia Woolf visiting Brave Orchid and her classmates in 'a room of their own'.')

Gayle K. Fujita Sato  
"The Woman Warrior as a Search for Ghosts"  
*Approaches* (1991) 138-42

"In their initial encounter with *The Woman Warrior*, undergraduate students frequently have trouble adjusting to Kingston's improvisations, in a way that parallels the passage toward the end of the book in which the narrator says to her mother, 'You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story'.... The work is partly autobiography, partly biography, and partly memoir. While some students assume that all three forms of personal narrative are nonfiction, and that consequently any deviation from the most factual detail is dishonest, others see little difference between the story of Kingston's childhood and the fiction they may have read in other classes.... That the author has named William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain* as a primary source, makes clear that even Kingston is not willing to be definite about the book's genre....

Students have trouble initially in understanding who is talking in *The Woman Warrior* and whose story is being related. The traditional autobiography doesn't occur until halfway through the book with the words 'I was born in the middle of World War II'... That 'White Tigers' partakes of myth and legend and feels like a fairy tale allows students to incorporate the story of Fa Mu Lan into the ongoing story of Kingston's childhood, especially since the story ends with a modern narrator playing on the difference between her actual life and that of the woman warrior. However, with 'Shaman' serious questions about the truthfulness of the whole book often emerge.... When, toward the end of the chapter, distinctions between dreaming and talking start to blur, followed by the revelation (or nonrevelation) that the mother's papers are probably 'wrong' and that her name and age, as well as the number and order of her children, are not necessarily accurate, the complications in sorting out narrative truth become evident.

While 'At the Western Palace' seems straightforward enough, when students reach the last chapter, 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe' and discover not only that Kingston was not actually present during the events described in the previous chapter but that she only heard them secondhand, they often express

doubts about her truthfulness, especially since she admits that she has ‘twisted’ the story into ‘designs’ worthy of an ‘outlaw knot-maker’.... That all autobiographers are unreliable narrators [is] not difficult...for most students to accept. But for some students *The Woman Warrior* is inauthentic because it is a memoir, which by definition calls for clearer warnings about the degree of fiction and of fact.... When the timid, silent narrator becomes a bully, teetering on the edge of insanity, suddenly the whole legend of the woman warrior begins to evoke doubts again....

For some students the confusion becomes overwhelming; nothing seems completely true. The narrator has explained that she is Chinese American, not Chinese, and yet she mentions that her parents always advise others, ‘Lie to Americans,’ as though she and her siblings were not Americans. She informs us early on that her mother’s words are not to be taken at face value: ‘She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman,’ and yet she seems surprised, toward the end of the book, when she reports Brave Orchid’s remark: ‘That’s what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite.’ While declaring to her mother that she cannot understand ‘what’s real and what you make up,’ the narrator has of course adopted this very style throughout the book, even joining her mother, toward the end, in a talk-story built on a talk-story, although the narrator has earlier mentioned that she is ‘mad at the Chinese for lying so much’....

Because of the exclusion laws applied only to the Chinese, it is not surprising that, for Chinese Americans, stories about entering American frequently include deliberate ambiguities as to the authenticity of names, ages, dates. To Chinese Americans false papers and forged documents seem as accurate as anything else... Because she had not been to China when she wrote her autobiographical books, she had to rely, literally, on a photographic memory to make sense of the contradictory stories her mother told her and the contradictory way in which she told them.... The precise generic classification of *The Woman Warrior* is less important than the standards of truth brought to the text by the class and its teacher.”

Timothy Dow Adams  
“Talking Stories/Telling Lies in *The Woman Warrior*”  
*Approaches* (1991) 151-57

“*The Woman Warrior* lays out the difficulties and rewards of being a writer as graphically as any writing text: making inferences, learning to see, dealing with multiple versions of a single incident, locating oneself within a tradition, developing style, appealing to an audience, and dealing with misunderstanding. Individual passages of *The Woman Warrior*, so elaborate in texture and color, and valuable not just as models for imitation but as ways of showing where an individual vision and style can lead. Kingston has also been generous with comments and interviews on her own writing process. In a helpful ‘Postscript on Process’ for *The Bedford Reader*, Kingston invites students to learn from her experience as a writer....

As they begin they book, readers often express frustration at the heavily detailed and seemingly contradictory stories. But gradually they see that their experience as readers parallels Kingston’s as a young girl trying to make sense of talk-story. Kingston’s first problem as she views her subject matter is to find out what is true.... Students are often troubled by the presence of so many different versions of a supposedly factual story: isn’t it a writer’s responsibility to point out the one true version? Kingston presents several variations on the story of the drowned aunt, two different stories of the Sitting Ghost (both told by Bravo Orchid), two versions of Moon Orchid’s meeting with her husband (Kingston’s and her brother’s). Which is real? Which is best? Students generally agree that the best version of the drowned aunt’s story would be the one that gave ‘ancestral help’: Kingston is trying to make a cautionary tale more palpable to herself.... Brave Orchid often chides her daughter for believing talk-story, taking one version for fact. Kingston says that, finally, it is not necessary to decide on a single correct version....

Kingston portrays her struggle to establish realities, to ‘infer’ her mother’s attitudes and her Chinese roots from bits and pieces of stories and customs. The old couple training Fa Mu Lan tell her, ‘You have to infer the whole dragon from the parts you can see and touch’.... Part of the strength of Kingston’s writing lies in the bold use of metaphor. Statements comparing the attacking villagers to ‘a great saw’ and peasant women to ‘great sea snails’ make the stories more vivid. Repetition of traditional metaphors—cliches like ‘Girls are maggots in the rice’—focuses the young narrator’s anger and distress.... Kingston explores the

connections between herself and the woman warrior and, in this play on words, between herself and the wife-slaves: 'Even now China wraps double binds around my feet'."

Kathleen A. Boardman  
"Voice and Vision: *The Woman Warrior* In the Writing Class"  
*Approaches* (1991) 87-90

"Chinese women, for their part, faced a condition of double alienation—alienation from mainstream American culture because of race and from their own communities because of the traditional Chinese practice of marginalizing women. It is this double-edged social displacement that should be considered in reading *The Woman Warrior*.... *The Woman Warrior* is replete with reminders of the low status of girls and women among the Chinese. This heavily socialized attitude is internalized by Chinese women, who must justify their very existences through some form of service to the community as a whole. Thus, in turn, self-sacrifice and self-denigration are seen to justify the Chinese woman's secondary position in society.... There are either 'good' women, who are obedient and self-abnegating, or 'bad' ones, who are ostracized from polite society.

As Kingston's work shows, the choice to become a heroine, or woman warrior, is made by only a few, whose pathways are fraught with real and chimeral perils. The polarity between traditional Chinese and American values is felt with particular keenness by American-born Chinese women. Unlike their mothers, such women face conflicting demands from two opposing cultures. While American-born daughters are familiar with the cultural nuances of Chinese life, their dilemmas frequently stem from having to vacillate between 'Chinese-ness' and 'American-ness'.... The economic, political, and social ostracism that Chinese Americans faced formed the backdrop against which Kingston's own family struggled to survive between the 1930s and the 1960s. Kingston's mother, a qualified doctor in China, for instance, was unable to practice medicine in America and had to find employment in one of the few occupations allowed the Chinese—that of a laundry worker....

Representations of Chinese American worklife are available on a number of films and videocassettes. For instance, *Eight-Pound Livelihood*, Yuet-Fung Ho's film on Chinese laundry workers, documents the historical, occupational, and political restrictions against the Chinese while providing insights into both the resourcefulness and toughness of Chinese immigrants in the face of prejudice. The film is a useful accompaniment to *The Woman Warrior*, whose third chapter, 'Shaman,' focuses on Kingston's mother [as] a former physician who never even had to 'hang up her own clothes' in China but who is destined in America to '[work] her life away' in a laundry.... Two films in which mother-daughter dialogues closely parallel those between Kingston and her mother in *The Woman Warrior* are Wayne Wang's *Dim Sum* and Genny Lim's *Only Language She Knows*. In both movies, as in Kingston's work, the conflicts hinge on the differences with which Chinese born mothers and American-born daughters view every aspect of daily life."

Patricia Lin  
"Use of Media and Other Resources to Situate *The Woman Warrior*"  
*Approaches* (1991) 37-42

"Maxine Hong Kingston's compelling autobiography, *The Woman Warrior*, is a natural choice for a text in the women's studies classroom, reflecting as it does the rigid roles of women in traditional Chinese society.... The Western concept of the individual is foreign to cultures with such 'communal traditions'.... Particularly for middle-class, privileged students, her ethnic upbringing in the ghetto portrays a woman's experience that contrasts starkly with their own comfortable backgrounds....

As the daughter of a Chinese family living in California, the narrator is imbued with the misogynist legacy of her ancestry, a legacy that reaches back to traditional China but still echoes in her Chinese American environment.... Living with the legacy of 'China,' Kingston was terrorized by the feudal life in the family's homeland. She schemed to make herself unattractive, so that she couldn't be married off or sold if her family returned. 'I did not plan ever to have a husband'....

In the chapter 'White Tigers' Kingston reinterprets her mother's talk-story, creating a powerful fantasy that becomes the identity crux of the book. Her mother told her she would grow up to be a wife, and thus a

slave, but she also taught the young girl the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. For Kingston this meant that she 'would have to grow up a warrior woman.' In retelling the story of Fa Mu Lan, she contrasts her fantasy of being a feared and revered warrior woman with the painful everyday reality of her girlhood, in which her mother, father, and uncles endlessly repeat the litany about girls: 'Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds'; 'There's no profit in raising girls'; 'When you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers'; 'When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls'.... In addition to such atrocities as foot-binding, the culture encouraged widespread practices against females such as infanticide....

In 'Shaman' and 'At the Western Palace' the narrator portrays the two distinct faces of her mother: the independent woman who became a doctor in China before coming to the United States, and the traditional Chinese wife, a strong-willed woman who bore six children in her later years and spent fifteen-hour days running the laundry. Although both figures are women of strength, the doctor stands out against the traditional patterns for women in the Chinese culture, while the matriarch continues to adhere to patriarchal traditions, at least superficially. These portrayals of Brace Orchid exemplify the contradictions of Chinese views of women.... Kingston's touching portrayal of her No Name Aunt and her account of the mad woman stoned by the villagers because they believe her to be responsible for the Japanese bombings clearly depict the devastations of outcast women....

Kingston's characterization of herself throughout the book, but especially in the last chapter, 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' hinges on her tenacity to make herself different—that is, to see herself as an individual, to speak in the first person.... Despite the ongoing messages Kingston receives telling her that as a woman she is worthless, she pursues her independent identity. She is determined to grow up to be somebody—not a slave, a castoff, a crazy.... Ultimately, it is Kingston's ability to find her voice, to tell her story, that defines her identity."

Judith M. Melton  
"The Woman Warrior in the Women's Studies Classroom"  
*Approaches* (1991) 74-79

"Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is 'a totally different book,' one of my students told me. 'I've never read anything like it.' Although this comment highlights the tour de force quality of Kingston's narrative style, it also underlines the difficulties students encounter in reading *The Woman Warrior*. Another typical student remark is: 'A lot of the book was written in a confusing manner [because] the author was unclear in her writing.' A less negative but equally typical version of this comment is: 'I had trouble determining whether a particular story line was truth or fantasy'....

Twenty-three of the respondents found Kingston's narrative montage and pastiche devices, the juxtaposition of past and present or reality and fantasy—methods some literary critics might call postmodern or metafictional—confusing. One student complained, 'The book did not have a natural flow.' In fact, several expressly blamed Kingston for this problem... 'The author didn't make it very clear what was real or imagined....'; 'I found it difficult to understand what Kingston was saying about women....'; '[It] made me a little nauseat[ed]'.... The most difficult aspect of reading the work is to try 'to figure out some cohesive meaning to the stories.... The novel seemed disjointed, and it didn't seem to come to a conclusion or resolution at the end'....

The most pressing problem students have with *The Woman Warrior* is obviously to apprehend and pierce through the narrative complexities of the text. Suzanne Juhasz has argued that *The Woman Warrior* is 'messy' insofar as its narrative patterns are several and intertwined.... Clearly, then, to be baffled by the narrative is similarly to be excluded from the central character conflict in the story; at least two respondents voiced this frustration: 'Since the story wasn't in chronological order and her mother was viewed in so many different lights, it was hard to figure out the author's attitude toward the mother'...."

Vicente F. Gotera  
"I've Never Read Anything like It': Student Responses to *The Woman Warrior*"  
*Approaches* (1991) 64, 67, 70



“What they resent is not that they are being given a fiction but that the narrator does not warn them of the transition. Again, the sense that they are not in control, that the work is moving in directions they are not prepared for, often leads to a feeling of alienation.... As one Chinese American student has pointed out, ‘A person shaped by Chinese culture doesn’t see herself as having been silenced until she has looked at the culture from the outside’.”

Marilyn Peterson and Deirdre Lashgari  
“Teaching *The Woman Warrior* to High School and Community College Students”  
*Approaches* (1991) 102, 106

“The first time I read *The Woman Warrior*, I was teaching English at the Air Force Academy and always on the watch for literary writing on military themes. The book’s title led me to expect something more in the martial spirit than what I found, so I was not surprised to learn recently that Maxine Hong Kingston has had her own misgivings about the title. In a 1986 audiotaped interview, she mentions that it was her editor who first suggested that she call the book *The Woman Warrior*. When he pointed out a year later, ‘You know that that’s you,’ Kingston says that her reaction was ‘very negative’ to the suggestion that she as a writer is, like Fa Mu Lan, a warrior. ‘I don’t feel that she’s me.... I wish I had not had a metaphor of a warrior person who uses weapons and goes to war’....

I can understand Kingston’s discomfort with the title of *The Woman Warrior*, for pacifism is an important theme in all her books. Her editor’s view that she as the author is a metaphorical warrior is hardly farfetched, however. Kingston concludes the ‘White Tigers’ chapter with a paragraph whose autobiographical-sounding narrator almost insists that we regard her as a warrior and her words as a metaphorical sword.... As the enemy of Kingston’s sword words is tall, white, and male, it would be almost perverse not to view the assertive Kingston as a warrior in some metaphorical conflict.... The warrior women in the book bring about social changes that lead to harmony, to peaceable ends that require warlike means. Violence is further justified—not glorified—because warfare in the book is a metaphor for social conflict, often between genders and cultures, and the woman warrior is a metaphorical agent for resolution of social conflict—that is to say, a peacemaker.... So the title of *The Woman Warrior* celebrates not military heroism but instead, metaphorically, the self as artist and the artist as social reformer....

I have found cadets generally quite willing to read antimilitary literature with approval. Most of them like *Catch-22* or *A Farewell to Arms*, for example, but many of my 1987 students—of both sexes—seemed to dislike *The Woman Warrior*; I believe that they were responding to the way that Kingston’s book subverts deeply embedded cultural assumptions about sex and gender, assumptions that are less susceptible to critique than assumptions about war. If negative reactions by cadets to the book were indeed responses to Kingston’s feminism more than to anything else, civilian college teachers should expect similar reactions, for their students’ attitudes also have been shaped within the patriarchal norms of American culture. I was less surprised over male resistance to *The Woman Warrior* than I was to find that female students, too, thought Kingston ‘complained too much,’ as one put it. The women tended to like *The Woman Warrior* more than the men, but they were not at all eager to pick up the feminist banner.”

James R. Aubrey  
“Woman Warrior and Military Students”  
*Approaches* (1991) 80-81, 83, 85

Michael Hollister (2014)

